Is the Deep State the main obstacle to the Nahda?

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Abstract

The article will interpret implications of the concept of "deep state" in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. This concept comes from Kemalist Turkey where it is called "*derin devlet*."[2] We will show how numerous Arab regimes built deep states to lead a systematic war against their own people. Further, to conceptualize some aspects of these regimes we will use the "Mamluk paradigm," as outlined by Jean-Pierre Filiu, to underline how modern "security systems" were established and empowered. The article will try to demonstrate that Middle East countries and the Arab world generally need more democracy, not less – contrary to what a lot of Western voices may be advocating at the moment. The Arab world does not have to decide between dictatorships and Islamist fundamentalists, but that there is a third way which it is worth fighting for.

Keywords: revolution; deep state; Mamluk paradigm, security system; Nahda

Introduction

The political upheaval that reverberated throughout the Arab world from 2010 onwards caught many scholars of the Middle East off guard. Until that point, much of the scholarship on Middle Eastern politics had concentrated on the durability of authoritarianism, notwithstanding what could be described as something of an "Arab spring," or a prelude to it, in early 2005. In this later period, which served as a dress rehearsal for the events that transpired in 2011, Iraqis went to the polls for the first time since the fall of Saddam, Syria withdrew from Lebanon after mass protests in downtown Beirut, Saudi Arabia staged municipal elections, and determined opposition by Egyptian

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[2] *Dawla amiqa* in Arabic.

activists forced President Hosni Mubarak to give meaning and substance, albeit temporarily, to his promises of reforms. Nevertheless, authoritarianism persisted unabated for another five years (Kamrava, 2014: 2).

It has been already six years since Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid sparked a wave of popular protests against the Arab regimes (Filiu, 2015a: ix). From Tunisia to Yemen, Egypt, and Libya, Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes that ruled for decades have been swept away by the winds of radical political change. For a while the outcome of these quickly unfolding processes was still largely unpredictable. Most newly emerging political actors declared allegiance to "democracy." However, as 2017 begins, we can only note that Arab revolutions have been foiled and democracy did not take root – apart from Tunisia. Recent events have shown that the enthusiasm for democratic opening can quickly be followed by backsliding into various forms of the deep state, where formally pluralist elections mask *de facto* authoritarian regimes. Even though pluralistic competition is established, unelected actors such as the military or the clergy may continue to yield tutelary power over elected officials, and authoritarian incumbents can entrench their positions of power by limiting or distorting competition.

Notwithstanding, we believe that the events known as the "Arab Spring" are the continuation of a long-term process known as the Arab renaissance or "*nahda*". The purpose of this article is to advance our understanding of these revolutions by bringing two important literatures into conversation with each other:

1. The *nahda* concept: Why the Arab world did not have the opportunity to complete its enlightening revolution as Europeans did in the 18th Century.

2. The deep state and its constitutive elements: the Arab regimes are leading a systematic war against their own people, and in order to describe it we will analyze the concept of deep state (*dawla amiqa*) imported from Kemalist Turkey. Furthermore to deepen the conceptualization of the Arab regimes we will use the "Mamluk paradigm" to underline how modern "security systems" were established and empowered.

The *nahda* concept

In the beginning of the 18th Century there was no such thing as an Arab nation. It is by the *nahda* that Arab people started conceiving of themselves as belonging to the same community. The "Egyptian expedition" led by General Bonaparte from 1798 to 2001 was the founding event of the *nahda*. This expedition was as much a colonial aggression as

much as a cultural undertaking – yet according to Arab historians this campaign (*hamla*) marked the beginning of the *nahda* (Filiu, 2015b, 175).

This Arab renaissance, seen by some as the equivalent of the European Lumières, had three main centers of gravity: the power of a modernizing state in Egypt, the legitimacy of a constitutional construction in Tunisia, and the dynamism of an intellectual effervescence in the Levant (Filiu, 2015b: 210). At that time the term "Arab" pointed mostly to the Bedouins who were the nomadic people of the region. The term "Moor" in North Africa or "child of the country" in Egypt were used to distinguish the local population from the Turkified elite. There was a double challenge for the awakening Arab nation: getting out of the Ottoman domination as well as containing Western expansion. This emancipation movement, which was both individual and collective, took roots with the French shock of 1798-1801. The movement developed all along the 19th Century but was crushed by the great bargains made by the Western powers after the First World War. Therefore, the Arab people, hitherto under the tutelage of the Ottoman Empire, relapsed into the hands of colonial powers. It would take several decades and much blood spilt to get their national independence.

However this independence was unaccomplished because it was hijacked by the multiple dictatorial regimes which were, and still are, ruling the MENA area. What was called the "Arab spring" was eventually a revolutionary crisis which contained all the desires and yearnings of the *nahda*. The failure of the so-called Arab spring should not mark the end of aspirations for *nahda* – the next activist generation will have learned the hardest way possible how to confront ruthless adversaries (Filiu, 2015a: 253). The following sections of this article will try to demonstrate how these Mamluk regimes managed to cling on to power and scuttle democratic reforms.

The notion of deep state

The notion of the deep state became fashionable in the media coverage of Egypt in 2011. As Filiu points out in his book "From deep state to Islamic State", the term originated in Turkey, where it connoted not merely the secretive apparatuses of the state such as the police and intelligence services but above all the shady nexus between them, certain politicians and organized crime. The main argument is that the Deep State is beyond the law: its members see themselves as custodians of the higher interests of the nation and believe this authorizes them to take what would otherwise be unavowable action, not only working with criminal elements but even engaging in what would otherwise be regarded

as criminal acts. The sense that they have an unqualified right to do whatever they choose, is premised on a patrimonial view of the state and a paternalistic view of the people, both of these in turn determined by the collective self-interest of the deep state actors themselves (Roberts, 2015: 5).

It should be emphasized that the state and the deep state are not two different parts but the two sides of the same coin. This system works in the so-called democracies as well as in dictatorships. Filiu argues that until the Arab uprisings of 2011, the concept of the deep state was irrelevant to the Arab world since the ruling regimes were already dictatorial – both the one-party systems of Syria or Iraq (before 2003), and the military-dominated regimes of Egypt and Algeria. In the post-uprisings period, however, the hope for democracy in many of those countries has been smashed by the return of the old ruling clique to power through anti-democratic counter-revolution (Elitsoy, 2016).

The Mamluk paradigm

Originally, the Mamluks were the slave soldiers employed by the Abbasid dynasty by the late ninth century onwards. The caliphs sometimes opted to recruit Turkish slaves into their personal guards, so their loyalty as absolute outsiders would be less questionable during local power struggles. This system became an institution in the last part of the twelfth century (Filiu, 2015a: 45). Eventually this strategy backfired. Because the military profession was reserved to Mamluks, some of them rose to positions of great power and transcended their original 'slave' status. A Mamluk elite eventually emerged. In 1250, it seized power in Egypt and Syria and established the Mamluk Sultanate, with its capital in Cairo. Later, the Ottomans would recycle and refine this recruitment strategy with the *devshirme*, the "harvest" of young boys from Christian families in the Balkans and southern Russia, who would be taken to Istanbul, converted to Islam and trained for careers in the army (as Janissaries), the palace or the bureaucracy. The key principle was that the army should not be recruited from the free-born Muslim population (Roberts, 2015, 7).

The Mamluk world was working as a counter-society, with its own codes and rites, alienated from local Arab societies. The classical Islamic divide between the ruling elite or "*khassa*" (the special ones) and the masses of the "*amma*" (the ordinary ones) reached unprecedented depth (Filiu, 2015a: 47). The parallel with the modern Arab militarized state emerges: just as the original Mamluks, once in power, pretended to be serving the caliph, and thus secured legitimation for their rule, so today's Mamluks pretend to be

serving the people, securing a dubious legitimation via rigged elections and plebiscites. The modern Mamluks, like their medieval predecessors, lacked the legitimacy of century-long dynasties, but compensated for this shortcoming with their strong belief that might was right (Filiu, 2015a: 48). We will even go further and offer the radical view that the Mamluks were crude usurpers of the original national revolutions, which they hijacked at independence. This may have been the case in Algeria, and may also be the case in Egypt, Syria and Yemen.[3]

From military enclaves to security mafias

In Turkey the military ethos was celebrated as the supreme moral code (Filiu, 2015a: 115). It was adopted to fulfill the "progressive" promises of the nationalist revolution. As time went by, this military anthem became a whitewashing device for all excesses of the new masters. Constitutional guarantees and legal restraints were good enough for the "masses." However the new rulers were not above the law, for they were the law. "Military enclaves" (Cook, 2007: 14) emerged as a counter-society, preserved and alienated from the rest of their fellow countrymen. Hafez al-Assad in Syria and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen are amongst those who climbed their way to the top thanks to the military fast-track.

When this new military elite had consolidated its powers, these military enclaves became even more exclusive. First they locked the gate to social promotion (for example through lack of opportunities for university graduates) but most importantly they cemented a two-tiered army where the conscripts were barely treated better than the "mere" civilians. These military enclaves became a "secluded oasis" monopolizing all national resources. This implied that social endogamy became the norm and political marriages were set up with the sons and daughters of the moguls of liberalization (Filiu, 2015a: 116).This cemented the bond uniting the military clique, and when they perceived that their core interests were attacked they defended the "regime" with the utmost obstinacy.

A fault-line appeared between the Turkish elite military and the Arab Mamluks in the 1990s. According to Filiu "the deep state developed in Turkey as an antidote against the progressive empowerment of the civilian politicians, but it ultimately failed to thwart the AKP [*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party] victory in 2002;

[3] We have to distinguish between modern Mamluks that organize multiple plebiscites from totalitarian regimes like Kadhafi's Jamahiriya which was hostile to any kind of election.

the subsequent scandals involving the deep state were therefore manifestations of its irreversible weakening, not of its resilience" (Filiu, 2015a: 117). On the other hand the Algerian rulers showed an alternative to the Arab Mamluks. The "*décideurs*" (those making the key decisions, in French) managed to impose their rule at the cost of 10,000 civilian lives. They chose an original path to survive – having seven different heads of states in five years, and therefore not ruling as a fully-fledged military junta. The Algerian Mamluks succeeded in clinging to power without risk of public exposure (Filiu, 2015a: 117). But this "leading-from-behind strategy" suited much better a shadow state than the deep state. Eventually they had to provide a new narrative, centred on a "domestic enemy." This "fifth column" provides the deep state with its mission and resources: the counter-insurgency against Kurdish PKK reinforced the networks of the deep state in Turkey just like the war against Islamist terrorists does in Algeria.

Financing the deep state

Charles Tilly stated that "war makes states" (Tilly, 1985: 170). We can go one step further with the Arab Mamluk paradigm: "civil wars make and strengthen deep states" (Filiu, 2015a: 118). It means that the issue of financing is also a key factor to Arab civil wars and the repressive apparatus that they have fed and magnified. As Lynch points out, this financing dimension took great significance during and after the "Arab Spring." The surviving regimes used the strategy of "survive and advance."

"To survive, they mobilized every resource at their disposal, from financial promises and media propaganda to government shuffles and invitations to political dialogue. If that required violence, then so be it. To advance, they moved aggressively into the transitional and failed states to shape the emerging political orders. They cultivated local allies, offered huge financial aid packages, and when appropriate supplied weapons and military training" (Lynch, 2016: 32).

Therefore we should emphasize that the endless series of Arab domestic conflicts cannot be understood without a proper perception of the income financing them, in a war economy or a "civil war economy," that at times seems to be these regimes' ultimate objective. As Filiu puts it: "The military cliques have morphed into multi-faceted protection networks, far beyond the realm of security concerns" (2015a: 118). Lynch and Filiu agree that the "oil bounty" has been one of the main assets to promote the repressive structures through civil wars. Furthermore the geopolitical income (from US, other

Western (e.g. EU), and Arab donors) also played a key role in keeping Mamluk regimes in power.

Conclusion

The resurgence of the Deep State in the MENA area during the course of recent events in the region has created new, less stable and more violent forms of Arab autocracy. As Marc Lynch concludes, "none of the popular grievances which drove the Arab uprisings have been addressed, and most of these problems have gone worse (Lynch, 2016: 105). The crisis that shook the Arab world is a revolutionary type of crisis, which was generated by the refusal of any kind of reforms by these authoritarian regimes. They monopolized by force all the dividends earned during the fight for independence. We can only conclude that this crisis is the continuation of the fight for self-determination which began in the 19th century.

As I have described it earlier, the deep states (at least in part) created their own "fifth column" in order to generate more power, raising money and even winning support for their political causes. But as we watch the events in Syria, we have to realize that these Mamluk regimes are not able to control the jihadist forces that they have unleashed. Notwithstanding, dictators and jihadists share a common cause: the refusal of the people's sovereignty as a source of political legitimacy. As Filiu rightly points out, acknowledgement of this refusal of the notion of people's, or popular, sovereignty appears to be a much more precise reading of the current events than the typical dichotomy of an assumed conflict between "secular forces" and "fundamentalists" (in Filiu, 2015c)

There are two variables that should be taken into consideration if we want to somehow alter the trajectory of this tragedy. First, the fall of oil prices by 2014 by more than 40% could hit very hard the deep states' stream of income. Oil revenues have been critical in fueling the violence unleashed by the Arab "Mamluks" against their own people, whether the source was domestic (Algeria, Yemen) or derived from foreign patrons (Syria, Egypt) [Filiu, 2015a: 253]. Although cheaper oil could alleviate the pressure on civil society and polities, it will not imply a return to stability. The Arab uprisings of 2011 were only one episode in a generational challenge to a failed political order (Lynch, 2016: 106). The retrenchment strategy began by US president Obama is the second variable that could be a game-changer.

Be it likely or unlikely, the new Trump administration should seek to continue this policy and invest its support not in the Mamluk regimes but in those Arabs seeking a more democratic future.

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