



# Military westernization and state repression in the post-Cold War era



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## ABSTRACT

The waves of unrest that have shaken the Arab world since December 2010 have highlighted significant differences in the readiness of the military to intervene in political unrest by forcefully suppressing dissent. We suggest that in the post-Cold War period, this readiness is inversely associated with the level of military westernization, which is a product of the acquisition of arms from western countries. We identify two mechanisms linking the acquisition of arms from western countries to less repressive responses: dependence and conditionality; and a longer-term diffusion of ideologies regarding the proper form of civil-military relations. Empirical support for our hypothesis is found in an analysis of 2523 cases of government response to political unrest in 138 countries in the 1996–2005 period. We find that military westernization mitigates state repression in general, with more pronounced effects in the poorest countries. However, we also identify substantial differences between the pre- and post-9/11 periods.

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## 1. Introduction

The waves of demonstrations, uprisings and revolts that have shaken the Arab world since December 2010<sup>1</sup> have highlighted significant differences in the readiness of the military to intervene in political unrest. In particular, one can contrast the military's refusal to take sides in the initial uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, thereby allowing citizens to overrun the governments' internal security forces, with its more forceful attempts to suppress dissent in Libya and Syria, resulting in civil war. These distinct paths confirm that in a context of widespread political unrest, as represented in the Arab Spring, and with the collapse of the police and parallel security forces (e.g. presidential guards), the military's decision about whether to become part of the state's repressive apparatus is a primary determinant of how events unfold (Andrzejewski, 1954:71; Lutterbeck, 2013).

This observation raises two related questions. Why does the military choose to defend an existing government in one state but not in another? And where the military does choose to become part of the state's repressive apparatus, how far will it go to defend an existing government from popular political unrest?

Our central argument in this paper, which is specific to the post-Cold War era, is that senior military leaders' decision to defend an existing government by suppressing dissent is inversely correlated with the level of *military westernization*. This claim, tantamount to saying that military westernization can have a positive political impact, lies in obvious tension with a more critical literature that spotlights the dark history of western collaboration with human rights violators. Much of that literature—for example, on the School of the Americas—anticipates critiques of the more recent “Global War on Terror”

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of efficacy in this paper we refer to these events as the “Arab Spring”.

(GWOT) (e.g., Chomsky and Herman, 1979; Grimmitt and Sullivan, 2001; McCoy, 2005; Nelson-Pallmeyer, 1997). Yet, as we argue below, the end of the Cold War transformed the context in which military ideas were transmitted, making possible a more positive effect. This was especially true prior to September, 2001.

Our initial argument builds on Huntington (1957), Janowitz (1964) and Barany (2012), in that we conceive of military westernization as being constituted by two discrete types of professionalization. One is narrowly technical and centers on soldiers' abilities and skill-sets, and the general military division of labor, bureaucracy, and technology. The other, more politically profound, centers on civil-military relations as formulated in the literature on democracy and state repression (Henderson, 1991; Davenport, 2007; Davenport and Inman, 2012). It involves an ideological shift in which military leaders come to believe in the separation of political and military roles and spheres of authority within the state, or at least behave as if they believe in that separation.

Complementing each of these arguments is the body of literature on the effect of international relations on the outcome of revolutions (Skocpol, 1979, 1994), the impact of ties with the West on regimes' democratization (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Whitehead, 2001), and in particular how post-Cold War ties between the West and variably called "illiberal democracies" or "competitive authoritarian" regimes have affected the outcome of non-violent revolution (Ritter, 2015). Our arguments also intersect with those of Nepstad (2011: 10), who emphasizes both the importance of "regime strategy" and "undermining the state's sanctioning power" (on the latter point, also see Schock, 2004). We point to a particular way in which military westernization can change both of these dimensions, over and above any effect of citizens nonviolently subverting a regime.

This is our main contribution in this paper. Rather than treat the acquisition of certain types of western military hardware as a product of military westernization, we flip the causal direction, arguing that the acquisition of certain types of military hardware from western countries helps *drive* military westernization. In our account, two mechanisms are at play. First, the acquisition of this hardware allows states that supply it a measure of influence on states that acquire it, particularly where, as detailed below, the hardware is central and irreplaceable in anticipated military operations. This is analogous to the influence that arises from economic dependence (Hirschman, 1980) or "second-generation" conditionality in overseas development aid (Stokke, 1995). It means that in the post-Cold War era, leaders of a country that is dependent on the West for core and complex military equipment have a more limited ability to use the military in order to violently suppress popular dissent than their less western-oriented counterparts.

Second, the acquisition of complex military hardware facilitates the diffusion of western ideologies regarding the role of the military in the state, and regarding when, how and against whom state-sponsored military activity can legitimately be used. This is a longer-term, cultural influence. It is reminiscent of both microsociological mechanisms that underlie theories of world polity (Boli and Thomas, 1997; Meyer, 1980; Meyer et al., 1997a), institutionalized diffusion (Colyvas and Jonsson, 2011) and of liberal vs. realist debates about "complex interdependence," (Keohane and Nye, 1987), that is, how asymmetries in power and dependence across discrete dimensions generate less predictable patterns of influence and cooperation. It, too, suggests that the dampening effect of military westernization on repressive tendencies is not only a product of rhetorical commitment to Western political ideals. Rather, military westernization actually brings about an ideological shift in which military leaders come to believe in the separation of political and military roles and spheres of authority within the state.

We now fill out this argument, clarifying the mechanisms through which the sale of sophisticated weapon systems affects dependence and the diffusion of ideas about the military's role in domestic politics. Military westernization is framed as a particular case where those sellers are from leading liberal democracies. Initial empirical support for our hypothesis regarding the mitigating effect of military westernization in the post-Cold War era on state repression is sought in a description of pre-2011 military ties in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, four countries at the heart of the "Arab Spring". More comprehensive empirical tests are then specified using a sample of 2523 cases of political unrest in 138 countries in the 1996–2005 period. Results confirm that net of national income, prior political traditions, and *past* levels of political violence, militarily westernized countries respond less violently to political unrest, and these effects are more pronounced in poorest countries. We also document significant differences in the strength of these effects after the initiation of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the US-led initiative that followed the 9/11 attacks. Overall, therefore, our analysis raises or, more accurately, revives questions about the liberalizing potential of certain types of military-to-military contact, while specifying a new mechanism for minimizing the bloodiest instances of repression: the sale or transfer of complex military hardware by western countries.

## 2. Arms sales and the diffusion of ideas about military-state relations

### 2.1. Arms sales and buyers' dependency

World system and world polity theories have revealed the deep connections among states and institutions across the globe, highlighting both hierarchical relations between core and periphery, but also actors' codependence and receptiveness to outside influence throughout coercion, diffusion, modeling, and coordination (Boli and Thomas, 1997; Dobbin et al., 2007; Elkins and Simmons, 2005; Halliday and Osinsky, 2006; Meyer, 1980). The role of the military in this global system has not been neglected. The military has been identified as an agent of socialization and change (Biddle and Long, 2004; Gheciu, 2005; Janowitz, 1964; Mann, 1986; McNeill, 1982; Tilly, 1992). Likewise, the political stand of the military has proved to be a crucial factor in civil-military relations (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1964; Kamrava, 2000; Ritter, 2012).

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