

TAMING THE MILITIAS: BUILDING NATIONAL GUARDS IN FRACTURED ARAB STATES

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Since the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011, centralized military power has broken down in North Africa, the Levant, and Yemen, and several weak Arab states have turned to local militias to help defend regimes. While these pro-government militias can play important security roles, they have limited military capacity and reliability. Transitioning militia fighters into national guard forces with formal ties to the national command structure can overcome some of these limitations, but the shift must be accompanied by a wider commitment to security sector reform and political power sharing.

The Growing Role of Militias

- Some militias are tied to ruling parties and draw fighters directly from regime supporters. Others are made up of former rebel factions or defectors from terrorist and insurgent groups, and they often seek to retain their autonomy even as they avow loyalty and service to the state.
- In many Arab countries, including Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, militias play an important role in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations.
- Militias are often cheaper and more flexible than regular security forces, and they have greater local knowledge, allowing them to operate effectively in areas where regular security forces cannot.
- Militias often lack professionalism and can commit violence against civilian populations while allowing regimes plausible deniability and immunity from international censure for human rights violations.
- Reliance on militias is risky. Militias may refuse orders or turn against their state sponsors. Even if militias are loyal, they often lack training and equipment necessary to confront stronger enemies. And their proliferation risks further fracturing the state's monopoly over the use of force.

How National Guards Can Help Ensure Stability

National guards can provide formal and legal linkages between local militia fighters and the state.

Organizing national guards along provincial or municipal lines can help to maximize local support while at the same time tethering local forces to a national command structure.

The new corps can only be effective if they are launched as part of broader security sector reforms.

Successful integration of national guards will require adjustments in the culture and training of the main security organs in order to reduce distrust and interservice competition.

National guard programs must be launched in concert with political reform and power sharing.

National guards can bolster federal arrangements that allow for regional autonomy while helping to guarantee fighters' loyalty to the state and strengthening political cohesion. But military devolution alone is not a substitute for political accommodation between the central government and ethnosectarian or regional minorities.

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