Egyptian and Syrian Civil-Military Relations

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GLEN SEGELL, JUL 18 2013

Egypt and Syria are only 800 km apart, separated by Israel, and indeed on three occasions in 1948, 1967 and 1973 they unsuccessfully attempted to achieve a common border by destroying Israel. One can only imagine the regional situation if they had become neighbors given their current domestic conflicts. Indeed today in 2013 both Egypt and Syria are embroiled in domestic turmoil and although their circumstances couldn't be further apart there are similarities. In both cases the incumbent government is not acceptable to the majority of the population. In both countries there are a diverse and wide range of opponents to the government who are struggling to attain supremacy and control the state. In both cases the military has a predominantly domestic role and not defense of the sovereign state against an external state enemy. This is not to say that Egypt and Syria don't have enemies in the form of other states. It is to say that the conflict is being waged by non-state actors within their territories in a proxy fashion. Iran and Saudi Arabia are respectively supporting Shiite and Sunni forces in Syria while Egypt is confronted with secular verse Islamist struggles. In both states the role of the military and civil-military relations are the crucial determining element of the outcome of the domestic strife. A brief look at the civil-military relations in each country helps explains this and the expected outcome after the domestic strife ends.

In Syria the military has granted almost 100% loyalties to President Assad despite the alleged large number of civilian casualties; because the military serves the state and Assad is head of state. In Syria the military are portraying an abstract professionalism; they regard their role strictly in military terms and conservative in social values, beliefs and attitudes, and appear to remain a politically neutral arm of government and thus amenable to political direction and control. The Syrian Army focuses on the science of war, a pure military space, and the technical aspects of war using violence to achieve victory. Should the leadership change in Syria, then it is apt to assume that the Syrian military will tag on to the new leadership in the same professional manner. This generates a semblance of continuity. Once Assad leaves power there will still be a Syrian military willing to work with the new government. This is the type of civil-military relations described by Samuel Huntington (1957) The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations.

However it is a tragedy. The Syrian military's loyalty to Assad has created the world's worst contemporary humanitarian disaster that has left 93,000 dead, displaced 4.25 million and forced 1.6 million to leave the country. The world only talks about the alleged use of chemical weapons by more than one side in Syria, yet doesn't do anything to prevent any further use. The influx of Al-Qaeda and other radical groups has led the US Congress to block Presidents Obama's plan to arm Syrian rebels without which there is little hope of ousting the Russian armed Assad clan. Diplomatic efforts are unlikely to gain momentum as there appears to be little interest by anyone in attending the constantly proposed Geneva peace talks. The tragedy is that removing Assad is no longer the main objective or cause for concern. Now into the third year of a civil war there appears to be no dominant social movement, political party, ideological faction or individual who is capable of ending the civil war or in leading the whole of Syria after Assad's rule. Only the military appear to be likely to survive into the next regime, whoever leads it.

 On the other hand in Egypt, President Morsi after facing an ultimatum by the military to resolve his differences and serve the people was ousted by the army; for the military claim they serve the people and not the elected state leadership. In Egypt the military institution portrays itself as deeply embedded in society and dependent on it to effectively perform its responsibilities. What this means is that the armed forces can be adaptive to external change;

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for better or for worse. Control of the armed forces is based on the military values being embedded in those of its society and is expected to change according to transformations occurring therein. The real danger is not knowing if the military are secular or Islamist or if they are only for themselves. The Egyptian military are thus becoming an unknown quantity that generates a semblance of uncertainty for the prospects of democracy. This is the type of civil-military relations described by Morris Janowitz, (1960). The professional soldier: A social and political portrait.

This would be a comedy if it were not for the human suffering that has ensued. The carefully crafted ousting of Presidents Mubarek and Morsi shows that successful revolutionaries rarely achieve thriving governance. It took weeks to gather the signatures for the petition of those opposing Morsi while the conspirators considered the best means to transfer power; not dissimilar to the process that ousted his predecessor Mubarek. There is a farce of law and order because more people have been killed by the army ousting Morsi that were in ousting Mubarek yet Mubarek and not the new President Monsour has been tried for conspiring in the killing of protestors, and for corruption. In June 2012 Mubarek was sentenced to life imprisonment for conspiring in the killing of protestors, but found not guilt of corruption. The people have spoken, the people have been heard, the Army has acted. However in the aftermath of 30 months of various Presidential Palace squatters there appears to be no dominant social movement, political party, ideological faction or individual who is capable of leading Egypt out of economic and political woes; other than the army who claim they want no place in government. With the rapid turnover of Presidents, Parliaments and Constitutions it is apparent that the only true power wielders are the military yet they are not willing to take leadership of the state and instill stability.

The solutions for Egypt and Syria are for the military of each to observe the lessons of each other. Egypt and Syria will continue to face domestic strife until their civil-military relations are resolved. In the case of Syria the army needs to absolve its loyalty for Assad and offer it to the Syrian population and a new government that represents the will of the people. In doing so the military institution will survive as a unitary and professional actor and the civil-war will end. In the case of Egypt the army needs to end its vacillation of supporting alternate minority elements of the disgruntled population toppling Presidents as if they were pieces on a chess-board. The process of democratization takes a long time to establish lasting and effective institutions of governance. One of these institutions is the military who can only survive as a professional entity of they let elected government evolve and are subservient to those elected. Ultimately then it is civil-military relations that helps explains and that will determine the manner in which domestic strife ends in both Egypt and Syria.

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