The Middle East Institute
Policy Brief

How the New Arab Media Challenges the Arab Militaries: The Case of the War between Israel and Hizbullah in 2006

By Assaf David and Oren Barak

Executive Summary

Public criticism of the Arab militaries is as old as their military debacles. However, in recent years Arabs in the Middle East have begun to use the "New Arab Media" (satellite TV channels, the blogosphere, and Internet forums and chats) to speak their minds on sensitive issues, including the performance and roles of their militaries. Focusing on the debates waged in the New Arab Media during the Israel-Hizbullah War (July-August 2006), this Policy Brief shows how the conflict and its manifestations — most notably Hizbullah's ability to withstand Israel's massive military campaign for 34 days and launch unremitting salvos of rockets at Israel's territory — opened the door for the harshest wave of public criticism of the Arab militaries in decades. As we demonstrate, Hizbullah's ability to "resist" Israel, the regional power, not only enabled Arab observers to criticize the "passivity" and "helplessness" of the Arab militaries whether explicitly or implicitly but also prompted them to demand more transparency and accountability from their militaries — and, ultimately, from their regimes — and to call for a significant reduction in Arab military expenditures and for clear limitations on the militaries' domestic roles. Our discussion also suggests that contrary to the widely held view among Middle East specialists, research on the Arab militaries, which play a critical role in the preservation of the partially democratic or non-democratic Arab regimes, is both feasible and worthwhile.

How the New Arab Media Challenges the Arab Militaries

One, Two / the Arab army where are you? /

The Arab army where are you?

The Egyptian Arab Army / resides in an-Nasr [victory] compound

Wakes up in the afternoon / to drink its tea

The Gulf Arab army / can do absolutely nothing

"Strategic silence" indeed / "cut us some slack, man!"

The Tunisian Arab army / is green like parsley

But 'Aziza loves Yunis / the wars can wait

The Sudanese Arab army / I can hear its clamor in my ears

"Damn it! Am I alone in battle?!" / "come on, Abu Hussein, let's leave!"

One, Two / the Arab army where are you?

The Arab army was humiliated / when the Afghans were attacked

By its long silence in Bosnia / and when it started deepening the public debt…

The satirical poem *One, Two — the Arab Army Where Are You?* by Egyptian poet Muhammad Bahjat, which was aired on the popular TV show "10 O'clock at Night" during the apex of the war between Israel and Hizbullah in July-August 2006, became an instant hit in the Arab public sphere.[1] Numerous postings of the poem on *YouTube* received tens of thousands of hits and elicited passionate comments from many Arab viewers. The cult status of this poem can be inferred from the fact that nearly two years after its initial broadcast, hundreds of student supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the major opposition group to the regime, chanted the poem enthusiastically during a festival that they held in Zagazig University.[2]

The poem *One, Two - the Arab Army Where Are You?* and its marked popularity suggest that the Arab militaries and the other agencies that form part of the security sector in the Arab states are facing a new kind of challenge. This challenge is manifested not on the battlefield, from which, according to the poem, the Arab militaries have been absent for years, but, rather, in what is generally referred to as the "New Arab Media:" Arab satellite TV channels, the blogosphere, and Internet forums and chat rooms. Indeed, in contrast to the state-controlled media in most Arab states (except Lebanon and some Gulf monarchies), which extols the performance of the Arab militaries, the New Arab Media provides fresh opportunities for criticizing these institutions, which for decades were considered a taboo subject in the Arab public sphere.

This *Policy Brief* focuses on the new kinds of challenges that face the Arab militar-

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1. "*Wahad, Tnen, al-Gesh al-'Arabi Fen*" ["One, Two, the Arab Army Where Are You"], at http://www.youtube.com/watch?y=8mrnYxr7xds&NR=1.

2. "*Al-Gesh al-'Arabi Fen!!*" ["The Arab Army Where Are You"], at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6LeOgNDmWE&.

ies in the New Arab Media and attempts to assess their impact. While the criticism leveled at the Arab militaries in the New Arab Media tends to appear mainly during periods of crisis in the Middle East and is far from endangering their privileged position in their respective states, it does suggest that the Arab militaries are forced to engage in a constant struggle to preserve their reputation and legitimacy and that at least some of them know when it is better to swallow their pride. The debates waged during these periods of regional crisis over the management of military issues in the Arab states also reveal the extent of the public's alienation from the military, a factor that Arab regimes may find difficult to ignore, especially in the long term.

Our discussion proceeds as follows: We begin by surveying the major developments in the study of the Arab militaries in recent decades and then discuss the New Arab Media and its manifestations. We then present an in-depth study of the challenge posed to the Arab militaries by the New Arab Media during the war between Israel and Hizbullah in 2006, from which we draw several conclusions regarding the changes that are taking place in the relationship between the state, society, and the military in Arab states. We conclude by suggesting that paying more attention to the New Arab Media can help revive scholarly interest in the Arab militaries. However, the prerequisites for employing it successfully cannot be overlooked.

HOW THE ARAB MILITARIES BECAME A NEGLECTED RESEARCH TOPIC

In recent decades, studies on the Arab militaries have become somewhat of an endangered species in the scholarly literature on the Middle East. The meager scholarly attention dedicated to the Arab Security Sector since the beginning of the 1990s has been unequally divided between the non-Arab states of the Middle East (Israel, Turkey, and Iran), which received the most attention, and the militarily or economically potent Arab states like Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and the Gulf countries, which received the least. The smaller and weaker Arab militaries received little or no attention at all.[3] This scholarly neglect stands in contrast to the vast literature published during the 1950s and 1960s on civil-military relations in the "revolutionary" Arab states (particularly Egypt, Syria, and Iraq)[4] and on the roles played by the Arab militaries in the state, society, and economy during the 1970s. It should be added, however, that the focus in these past decades was also on the larger and more powerful Arab states.[5]

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Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Middle East specialists have nearly abandoned the Arab militaries in favor of other, more attractive research topics. These included, first and foremost, the processes of economic and political liberalization in the Arab states. Great emphasis has been placed, for example, on Arab civil society, which was seen as the main force working *for* democracy, and on radical Islamic movements, which were seen as a major *obstacle* to democratization. However, despite their critical role in preserving the non-democratic and partially democratic Arab regimes, Arab militaries received little scholarly attention throughout this period.[6] Indeed, apart from a few works that challenged the premise that patterns of civil-military relations in the Arab states have remained basically unchanged,[7] the Arab militaries were mentioned only in two contexts: first, as part of the

3. For details, see: Oren Barak and Assaf David, "Why the Security Sector in the Arab States is Understudied and What Can Be Done About It," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Montréal, Quebéc, November 2007.

4. Dankwart Rustow, *The Military in Middle Eastern Society and Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1963); Sydney Fisher, ed., *The Military in the Middle East* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1963); J.C. Hurewitz, *Middle East Politics: The Military Dimension* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

5. Gabriel Ben-Dor, *State, Society and Military Elites in the Middle East* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1984); Elizabeth Picard, "Arab Military in Politics: From Revolutionary Plot to Authoritarian State," in Giacomo Luciani, ed., *The Arab State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 189-219; Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: Tauris, 1995).

6. Eva Bellin, "Coercive Institutions and Coercive Leaders," in *Marsha Posusney and Michele Angrist, eds., Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005), pp. 21-42

7. Roger Owen, *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000); Yezid Sayigh, *Security Sector Reform in the Arab Region* (Arab Reform Initiative Thematic Papers, 2007).

general discussion of the causes of the decline of military coups in the Arab states;[8] second, in analyses of the armed conflicts and strategic balance in the Middle East.[9] The impact of the military on the processes of liberalization and democratization in the Middle East, and especially in Arab states, was only rarely tackled.[10]

Middle East specialists generally explain the paucity of research on the Arab militaries by pointing out the difficulties in obtaining reliable data on the security sector in states where national security still trumps openness.[11] While we acknowledge the existence of "objective" difficulties facing students of the Arab militaries, we do suggest that important insights can be gleaned from ostensibly "trivial" material that is found in the Arab media, and especially in the New Arab Media which is only rarely tapped by the literature.[12] As we shall demonstrate below, the New Arab Media is particularly useful when trying to comprehend how Arab publics perceive their militaries and to identify change and continuity in this regard.

THE NEW ARAB MEDIA

As mentioned earlier, the New Arab Media includes Arab satellite TV channels, the blogosphere, and Internet forums and chat rooms that are accessed by many Arabs and which, unlike the state-controlled Arab media, enjoy a relatively autonomous position *vis-à-vis* regimes. Many popular Arabic news websites adopt very liberal talk-back policies and thus offer a glimpse of the Arab public sphere. However, it is the independent and influential Islamic websites (like Islamonline and Ikhwan.net) and especially the flourishing Arab blogosphere and myriad forums and chat rooms (like Maktoob) that make up the freest outlets for Arab citizens with Internet access to express themselves.[13] The emergence of the New Arab Media has elicited considerable attention from Middle East specialists.[14] Some argue that the New Arab Media is an important gauge of public trends in the Arab states, while others posit that it *stimulates* the creation of a new Arab (and arguably Pan-Arab) public sphere, i.e. that it is an agent of political and social change.[15]

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In the next two sections we discuss the perception of the Arab militaries in the

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8. James Quinlivan, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East." *International Security*, Vol. 24 (1999), pp. 131-65; Steven Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). This observation seems debatable in light of official apprehensions regarding Iraq's vulnerability to praetorian rule or even military coup. See the interview of the Iraqi Vice President on *Al-Arabiyya*, September 8, 2008 and the ensuing debate in *al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), September 28 and October 2, 2008. Egypt, too, has recently witnessed a relatively low-key but nonetheless significant debate regarding a possible military coup. See the following pieces in *al-Quds al-Arabi*: Hasanen Kroum, "Qandil Calls the Police to Quit Saving Regime Security; Tal'aat as-Sadat Advocates Military Intervention In Case Mubarak Does Not Move to Stop Corruption," July 8, 2008; Hasanen Kroum, "An Attack on Advocates of Military Intervention to Take Away the Regime," July 23, 2008; and Hasanen Kroum, "A Refusal to Use the Army to Take Down the Mubarak Regime," October 6, 2008.

9. See especially Anthony Cordesman, *The Military Balance in the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004); Shlomo Broom and Yittah Shapir, *The Middle East Military Balance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002). See also Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

10. Bellin, "Coercive Institutions," pp. 21-42

11. See e.g. Owen, *State, Power & Politics*, p. 217; Robert Springborg, *Military Elites and the Polity in Arab States* (Development Associates Occasional Paper 2, September 1998).

12. For a telling example of the lack of a systematic critique of "Arab militarism," see: Shaker an-Nabulsi, *Su'ud al-Mujtama' al-A'skari al-A'rabi fi Misr wa Bilad ash-Sham* [*The Rise of the Arab Militarist Society in Egypt and the States of the Fertile Crescent*] (Beirut: al-Mua'ssasah al-'Arabia lil-dirasat wan-nashr, 2003).

13. On the Arab blogosphere see Marc Lynch, "Blogging the New Arab Public: Arab Blogs' Political Influence Will Grow," *World Politics Review*, April 10, 2007, http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=694.

14. Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson, eds., *New Media in the Muslim World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Marc Lynch, Voices *of the New Arab Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Jakob Feldt and Peter Seedberg, eds., *New Media in the Middle East* (Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark, 2006); Naomi Sakr, ed., *Arab Media and Political Renewal* (London: Tauris, 2007).

15. This increased scholarly attention is manifest in new academic journals such as *Arab Media & Society* and *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

Arab states both generally and during the Israel-Hizbullah War in 2006. As we will show, the New Arab Media is significant not only because it is a valuable *resource* for studying Arab public attitudes towards the Arab militaries, but also since it has prompted some of the latter to *respond* to the challenges that it poses.

THE PERCEPTION OF THE ARAB MILITARIES IN THE ARAB STATES

Public criticism of the Arab militaries in the Arab states is as old as their defeats by Israel. But it was the Arab military debacle in the Israeli-Arab War in 1967 that elicited the most criticism. Together with other important factors, this criticism led to a certain retreat of some Arab militaries (especially in Egypt and Syria) from the political system and to their increased professionalization, which, in turn, led to their more successful performance in the Arab-Israel War of 1973.

The emergence of radical Islamic movements in the Arab states in the late 1970s and 1980s fostered an unwritten pact of "curbing revolutionary Islam in return for popular acquiescence" between the Arab militaries (less so the other security apparatuses), on the one hand, and some elite and counter-elite circles in the Arab states, on the other hand. According to the terms of this unwritten pact, the Arab militaries were to stand "above" the Arab political discourse, and their repressive measures against the "special threat" posed by radical Islamic movements would not result in the loss of their domestic legitimacy or their international support.[16]

However, the military successes of several radical Islamic movements, most notably Hizbullah and Hamas, against Israel, heralded a significant change in the Arab public sphere, including in its perception of the Arab militaries. Following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 under Hizbullah's pressure and its "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip in 2005, in the wake of deadly Palestinian attacks, many Arab citizens wondered — as they had after the 1967 War — whether the "popular resistance" and *not* the Arab militaries could realize Arab national goals.

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In June 2002, the website al-'Asr invited its readers to post comments on the question of whether the "practically unnoticed" Arab militaries have cleared the way for the resistance.[17] Shortly after the US-led invasion of Iraq, newspaper articles called for "sending the Arab armies home." At a time when the land and the people of Iraq are torn apart, one article contended, the Arab militaries, which exhaust the Arab financial resources "allegedly for the purchase of weapons to defend it," actually defend the rulers alone. Interestingly, even the Arab militaries' alleged contributions to their societies' welfare (e.g., in agricultural projects and relief operations) were scorned as evidence of their incompetence. The conclusion was that the Arab militaries not only should be discharged, but also that they should be declared enemies of the nation.[18]

Similar questions and suggestions, still relatively few in number but growing steadily after the fall of Baghdad in 2003, were posted in Internet forums by Arabs who wondered what their armies were good for other than making money out of corrupt arms deals with the Arab nation's enemies.[19] Notably, the allocation of huge budgets for purchasing weapons that could not be used anyway, at the expense of the basic needs of Arab citizens seemed to occupy Arab bloggers and posters even more than their militaries' ineffectiveness.[20] At the same time, some Arab posters took

16. Bellin, "Coercive Institutions," pp. 34-35. Egyptian author and playwright 'Ali Salem relates to this "pact" in his book *Rihla Ila Israi'l* [*A Journey to Israel*] (Cairo, 1994). Some civil society actors in Egypt do criticize its security sector for inflating the Islamic threat. See especially the popular film *al-Irhab wa al-Kebab* [*Terror and Kebab*].

17. "*Hall Intaha 'Ahd al-Juyush al-'Arabiyyah Li-Hisab al-Muqawamah ash-Sh'abiyyah*" ["Has the Era of the Arab Militaries Cleared the Way for the Popular Resistance"], June 23, 2002, http://www.alasr.ws/index.cfm?method=home.con&contentID=2542.

18. Hani al-Saba'i, "The Popular Need to Discharge the Arab Armies," *al-Shaa'b* (Egypt), March 21, 2003.

19. See, e.g., the exchange in the following Internet forums: http://www.alsakher.com/vb2/showthread.php?t=57747; http://www.alfikralarabi.org/vb/showthread.php?p=7655; http://www.alquma.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-56448.html; and http://72.35.80.79/vb/showthread.php?t=9357.

20. See, e.g., *al-'Asr*'s web forum on "Arab Arms Procurement: Deals or Ordeals?" July 25, 2005, http://www.alasr.ws/index.cfm?method=home.

pleasure in pointing out the similarities and differences between Arab soccer teams and Arab militaries: the teams train to win while the armies train but never win; the teams may win while the armies never do; and the teams attack and defend while the armies can do neither. All agreed, however, that Arab soccer teams and the Arab militaries were similar in "the intensive external interference with their makeup; the likelihood of their defeat; the coach being a foreigner; and the fact that both deserve red cards".[21]

Gradually, criticism of the Arab militaries began to appear in more established media outlets as well. In an article in *al-Quds al-Arabi*, a newspaper with one of the highest circulations in the Arab world, a veteran Palestinian politician mourned the transformation of the Arab militaries from courageous, nationalist forces to defeatist ones, following their acceptance of peaceful settlements with Israel. Unfortunately, he argued, the Arab militaries have given up on any strategic military option *vis-à-vis* Israel and have become totally dependent on Western arms. Moreover, the Arab militaries have turned their guns against their compatriots, assumed politically oppressive or economic roles, and joined other corrupted institutions. This Palestinian ex-politician, who attended the Arab summit in Baghdad in 1999, recalled that he faced immense pressures after suggesting to his interlocutors that a joint Arab security council should be established.[22]

In sum, the helplessness of the Arab militaries during the crises in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon since 2000, in contrast to the successful "resistance" waged by non-state armed factions against foreign invasion and occupation of Arab (and Islamic) lands, led many observers both inside and outside the Arab states to conclude that the Arab militaries are utterly ineffective and should become, at the very least, more transparent and accountable to their societies.

> **Indeed, by extolling the victories of the "resistance," Arab observers could openly criticize their own militaries without risking punishment.**

Yet this interesting development went practically unnoticed by students of the Middle East. No attempt has been made to explore the changes in the public perceptions of the Arab militaries and the linkage between the mounting public criticism of these institutions, on the one hand, and the growing popularity of the Islamic "resistance," on the other. In order to encourage a more systematic discussion of these issues, we will now focus on one case, the Israel-Hizbullah War in July-August 2006, and employ the New Arab Media and more "conventional" resources such as readers' letters, op-eds published in Arab newspapers, and journalistic reports.

THE ARAB MILITARIES AND THE ISRAEL-HIZBULLAH WAR IN 2006

The Israel-Hizbullah War in 2006 opened the door for the harshest wave of public criticism of the Arab militaries in decades, manifest, first and foremost, in the New Arab Media.

For many Arab citizens, including both professional commentators and laymen, Hizbullah, which presided over a small but well-trained guerrilla force, not only inflicted heavy losses and considerable material damage on Israel, the regional power, but also humiliated it and generated a perception of an "existential threat" in Israeli society. For many Arab citizens, these achievements of the "resistance" stood in stark contrast to the failures of the Arab militaries in *their* wars with Israel and highlighted their present uselessness. Indeed, by extolling the victories of the "resistance," Arab observers could openly criticize their own militaries without risking punishment.

One of the most popular pieces published during the war which echoed this view was a fictitious "breaking news" report, which recounted an imaginary full-scale invasion of Israel by all Arab militaries with the goal of rescuing the Palestinian people. Backed by all Muslim states (with the notable exception of Iran), which played every card in their

con&contentID=7306.
21. http://www.shathaaya.com/vb/showthread.php?t=24775.
22. Abdullah al-Hourani, "The Arab Armies and the End of their National and Pan-Arab Role," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, October 11, 2004.

possession (e.g., Arab oil, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal), the Arab armies practically forced the West to come to terms with their swift victory over Israel and to absorb all Israeli Jews back into their native Western countries. This piece, which was quoted verbatim in more than 200 Arab blogs and Internet websites, concluded: "I woke up realizing that I have been dreaming the dream of unity of this nation. Will it materialize or will we remain as submissive as we are?"[23]

Even more popular was the satirical poem *One, Two — the Arab Army Where Are You?* which, as mentioned above, became an overnight hit in the Arab states.[24] Soon, other Arab poets followed suit with their own derogatory poems about the Arab militaries, some of them take-offs on classic Arab poems. An illustrative example is al-Jawahiri's poem *The Nap of the Hungry Men*, which was recast as *The Nap of the Arab Armies*.[25]

The rage of Arab commentators against their rulers and militaries only intensified following official statements made by Arab leaders, which were seen to epitomize their helplessness. A controversial statement made by Egyptian President Husni Mubarak is a case in point. Responding to the criticism of his refusal to mobilize his army to defend Lebanon, Mubarak argued that his decision "emanated from my responsibility towards the Egyptian people to defend its national security and its territory" and that "decisions on war and peace are too serious to be taken by any political leadership" (!). He also explained that "the Arab joint defence agreement has not been activated or completely institutionalized since 1951."[26] It is unlikely, however, that resorting to such rhetoric could have appeased Arab feelings of rage and frustration.

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The contempt aimed at the Arab militaries that virtually swept the Arab public sphere during the war continued for several months. In view of the difficulty in challenging the Arab militaries directly and openly via the state-controlled media, Arab citizens resorted to alternative outlets — to the New Arab Media. There, they could freely bash at the Arab militaries and their high-ranking officers and chiefs of staff, whose ranks were "similar to women's make-up."[27] Criticized for being no more than a "security valve" for Israel and for the incumbent Arab regimes, the Arab militaries were openly called upon to revolt against their rulers.[28] Arab bloggers wondered, for instance, what their expensive but futile militaries were needed for in the first place and exchanged video clips of embarrassing episodes from their drills. According to them, the "fat and lazy generals" should be immediately executed.[29] Scornful cartoons depicted the Arab armies defending vacant golden chairs (symbolizing the Arab rulers) or turning their backs to the battlefront and marching bravely towards the homeland. Some satirists even suggested that it is the Arab militaries — and not Hizbullah — that should be disarmed.[30]

23. "*Ajel: al-Juyush al-'Arabiyyah Takhul al-Aradhi al-Filastiniyyah min kull al-Ittijahat*" ["Breaking News: The Arab Armies Invade the Palestinian Territories from all Directions"], http://otmanot.maktoobblog.com/?post=61015.

24. For a sample of the popular transcript (more than 10,000 quotes) of this song, see: http://fathalla.blogspot.com/2006/08/blog-post.html. For its impact on Arab public opinion, see also: Muhammad Arafa, "The Egyptians to the Arab Leaders: Viva for Arab Venezuela / You will Suffer a Heavy Blow," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 5, 2006.

25. Muhammad Hadi al-Halawaji's "The Nap of Arab Armies," August 7, 2006, http://alwaqt.com/print.php?aid=11104.

26. President Mubarak to *October* (Egypt), August 1,, 2006.

27. Anonymous female Libyan reader, July 19, 2006, http://www.thenewlibya.com/July2006/arabarmy.htm.

28. Dr. Muhammad Fuad al-Maghazi, "The Arab Armies are a Security Valve for Israel and for the Arab Rulers who are Agents of the US Administration," July 22, 2006, http://old.amin.org/views/uncat/2006/july/july22-7.html.

29. See e.g. Abdellah Boufoula (Algerian blogger) "The Arab Armies: Equip Yourselves or Go the Hell," August 16, 2006, http://abdellah-boufoula.maktoobblog.com/?post=75784; Isam Hamoud (Algerian blogger), "Who Needs the Arab Armies," July 15, 2006, http://www.hamoudstudio.com/?p=186; Abdullah Ibrahim al-Mashwakhi (Jordanian blogger), "An Urgent Call for the Arab Army Commanders," July 12, 2007, http://mashwakhi.maktoobblog.com/?post=59025; "Say with me the Funeral Prayer on the Arab and Islamic Armies," forum discussion, July 16, 2006, http://www.adma1.com/vb/showthread.php?t=5135. See also the movie clip sarcastically titled "the expertise of Arab armies," May 18, 2007, http://www.alqasr.net/vb/showthread.php?t=22374.

30. http://fun.aarabiah.net/video-open/cartoon-92, November 28, 2006; http://img.photobucket.com/albums/v472/saqer/kh111.gif, July 2007; Issam Kamel, editor of *al-ahrar* Islamic weekly (Egypt), August 17, 2006.

Eventually, even the more conservative Arab press could not keep away from the heated debate, and newspaper readers were given room to criticize the luxurious lives and poor training of Arab military commanders, and even to curse them openly. These readers' letters were popular particularly in the high-circulation London-based Arab newspapers, but even the official newspapers in some Arab states published them.[31]

Arab intellectuals, partly leading this campaign and partly jumping on the bandwagon, openly blamed their militaries for "being in a state of sleep for more than thirty years" and for producing only "splendid media analysts" (referring to the role of several retired Arab officers as media commentators during the war). Some writers even suggested that the Arab militaries choose between "handing their weapons over to Hamas and Hizbullah and retiring next to women and children," or embarking on ambitious initiatives of military buildup. Other Arab observers demanded more information and control over military affairs and expenditures.[32] 'Amr Khalid, one of the most famous and popular preachers in the Arab world, echoed these claims when he wrote on his personal website:

> We were expecting to see the Arab armies, airplanes and missiles stop the [Israeli] offence on the Arab soil. If they do not move, what do we need them for? And when will they move if not now?[33]

Although the public campaign against the Arab militaries dwindled towards mid-2007, the issues that it raised continued to reverberate in the Arab public sphere. Dr. Faysal al-Qassim, the host of a well-known talk show on *al-Jazeera*, wrote a cynical op-ed for *al-Quds al-Arabi* that sarcastically spoke of the Arab militaries' "glaring competence" in dealing with the Arab citizens compared to their utter uselessness in wars against their external enemies.[34] A few weeks later, *al-'Aalam* satellite TV channel aired a discussion among three Arab intellectuals, one of them a former high-ranking pilot in the Kuwaiti air force, under the provocative title "The Arab Armies: A Liability or a Must?" The moderator opened the discussion by stating that:

> [T]he role of the Arab armies is currently subject to a wide-ranging Arab debate. These armies are synonymous with defeat and losses; is there a need, then, to leave them as a bulldozer? And a bulldozer aimed at whom? At the poor people who lost the ability to speak or even to free their minds? The question is whether these armies belong to the regimes or to the homelands, to their commanders or to the people?

The participants in the discussion, though not explicitly calling for the total disbanding of the Arab armies, nonetheless agreed that the high levels of military expenditures in the Arab states were unjustified both in light of

Arab intellectuals, partly leading this campaign and partly jumping on the bandwagon, openly blamed their militaries for "being in a state of sleep for more than thirty years" and for producing only "splendid media analysts."

31. Muhammad Ali Hadi, *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 4, 2006; Abd al-Nasser al-Badrani, *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 29, 2006; Ubaid Hussein Said, *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 15, 2006; D'wai' al-Mahadin, *al-Ghadd* (Jordan), July 14, 2007.

32. Naji Qarqar on the TV show *ma'a al-hadath* [*Current Affairs*], July 22, 2006, http://www.alalam.ir/site/mokhtarat/Maalhadas/Maalhadas82.htm; Abd al-Wahhab al-Afandi, "A Disarmed and Unresolved Nation's Aspirations for an Overcoming," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 18, 2006; Muhammad abd al-Hakam Dhiab, "Back to the 'Check-book Diplomacy' to Liquidate the Resistance and Disarm Hizbullah," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 27, 2006; Muhammad abd al-Hakam Dhiab, "The Circumstances for Distancing the Egyptian Military from the Needed Combat Missions Domestically and Arab-wise," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 19, 2006; Hakam al-Baba, "The Analysts of Arab Wars on TV: from Wedding Singers to Restaurant Waiters," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 31, 2006; Huwaida Taha, "The Stand towards the Egyptian Army and the Characteristics of the Successful Political Party: two Issues at the Egyptian Scene Highlighted by the Resistance of Hizbullah," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 15, 2006; Muhannad al-Samawi, "Kingdom of Fear: the Madness of the Saudi Defence Expenses," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 19, 2006; Ahmad al-Haj A'li, "When will we Begin Asking the Hard Questions," *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, No. 1663 (September 4, 2006).

33. "'Amr Khaled Wonders where the Arab Armies Are," http://www.i3tesam.com/forums/lofiversion/index.php/t32416.html. Khaled's harsh words elicited criticism from 'Adel Imam, the famous Arab movie star, who suggested that Khaled concentrate on religion "since he is not the commander of the Arab armies." "Adel Imam Discredited for Downgrading Veiled Women and Amr Khaled," July 31, 2006, http://www.adwforums.com/showthread.php?t=78353.

34. Faisal al-Qassem, "The Arab Armies: Lions in Home, Ostriches in the Battlefield," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 26, 2007.

their past experience and their security needs; that the Arab militaries ought to concentrate on defending their states' borders and not on regime survival; and that the fact that the Arabs procure their weapons from the same Western countries that supply arms to Israel is a major strategic predicament for the Arab states.[35]

Although the Arab militaries were aware of this rising public tide against them, their response was, by and large, low-key and ineffective. Several retired army generals in some Arab states capitalized on the opportunity to blame the political leadership for the insufficient equipment supplied to the Arab militaries and to blame the Western states for equipping them with obsolete weapons.[36] These retired officers contended, moreover, that the Arab militaries were no more than "armies of a single shot" so long as they did not posses their own military industry and were entirely dependent on Western manufacturers who "set the place and the time for wars."[37] Retired Egyptian generals, for example, publicly admitted that the Arab militaries have become more of a liability than an asset for their peoples; that they cannot be entrusted with defending the holy places of Islam; and that the most effective solution for their current predicament would be to topple the current Arab regimes.[38]

A number of acting military officials were also disturbed by this new tide. Interestingly, some of their reactions reflected acceptance, rather than denial, of the criticism leveled at their armies. The Head of the Directorate of Morale Guidance of the Jordanian Armed Forces, for example, publicly lamented the growing appeal of "the popular resistance, which is based on Islamic thought," at the expense of the fragmented Arab regimes.[39] Such extraordinary statements suggest that the Arab militaries experienced a genuine crisis of legitimacy in 2006. In fact, some Arab political and military observers did not rule out the possibility that the humiliated Arab militaries would emulate the "resistance" and, perhaps, even stage a coup to restore their legitimacy.[40]

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although public criticism of the Arab militaries is hardly new,[41] their negative image in the eyes of the Arab public seemed to have reached an unprecedented nadir during the Israel-Hizbullah War of 2006. Many Arab observers used all available means, especially those provided by the New Arab Media, to express their utter repugnance of their militaries as well as their enthusiastic support for the "resistance." To be sure, some observers were highly critical of Hizbullah's behavior in the early stages of the conflict. But Israel's massive retaliation and Hizbullah's ability to respond with salvos of rockets against Israel's territory — a feat that almost no Arab military had been capable of performing in decades — boosted the popularity of the "resistance" in the Arab public sphere, especially when compared to the ineffectiveness of the Arab militaries.

The crisis of legitimacy witnessed by the Arab militaries had several implications. On the all-Arab level, some efforts were subsequently made to reform the Joint Arab Defence treaty and establish an inter-Arab Security Council

35. For the transcript of the show, broadcast on July 23, 2007, see: http://www.alalam.ir/site/mokhtarat/tahtalremad/tahtalremad27.htm.

36. Muhammad al-Husaini Ismai'l, *Islam and the West: Confrontation and Solution* (Cairo, al-Wahba, 2004), Ch. 4; "Ex-General Amin Hutait: The Lebanese Army has Only Motivation," *al-Haqiqa al-Duwaliyya* (Jordan), March 14, 2007.

37. Bassam Qaqish to *al-Dustour* (Jordan), August 5, 2006.

38. "Do Arab Armies Have a Role in Defending the Islamic Holy Places?" *al-Muthaqqaf* (Egypt), October 3, 2006.

39. Ahmad I'd al-Masarwah, "The Role of the Nation/the State, Pan Arabism and Military Might in Achieving the Nation's Higher Interests: The Arab Case," *ad-Dustour*, October 11, 2006.

40. Hiyam Darbak, "Observers Expect 'Revolution' Against the Regimes From Within the Military and the Political Establishment," *al-Haqiqa al-Duwaliyya*, August 23, 2006.

41. In the film *Naji al-Ali* (1991), named after the Palestinian cartoonist assassinated in 1987, the main character, who witnesses Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, asks his friend "Do you think the Arab armies will come?" and his friend responds: "They are not available," to which the main character replies: "Why? Are they fighting elsewhere?"

within the Arab League (although it is worth noting that the single joint activity that the Arab militaries have engaged in thus far is their first-ever wrestling championship).[42] At the same time, the crisis reaffirmed the need for projects such as the "Arab Reform Initiative," launched a month before the war, which aimed at achieving comprehensive Security Sector Reform (SSR) in the Arab states and redrawing their civil-military relations.[43] But in individual Arab states, too, certain lessons have been drawn. The Lebanese Army, for example, began to post official responses to critical media reports, including those by independent websites, on its official website.[44] The Jordanian army, for its part, published a detailed and documented article in its bulletin to refute the accusations made in the highly popular satellite-TV drama "King Farouk" regarding Jordan's role in the 1948 War.[45] These brief examples suggest that in the eyes of some Arab militaries, the New Arab Media, like the more traditional means of public communication, is an important arena wherein their legitimacy is challenged and must therefore be upheld.

The public rage against the Arab militaries in the summer of 2006 was a passing phenomenon, not least because of later events in Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon that drew away the attention of the Arab media, both "old" and new. Consequently, the Arab militaries ceased to be a hot topic for public debate and criticism. However, as new crises involving Arab or Muslim armies erupted — the military coup in Mauritania and the political crisis in Pakistan, to name the most salient ones — the Arab militaries again came under the spotlight and public discussions of their role raised the same critical themes.[46]

It can thus be concluded that the Arab militaries elicit little, if any, public attention in "normal" times, but draw negative attention, and, at times, severe criticism, in periods of regional crisis in the Middle East. When examining the *content* of the criticism leveled at them in these turbulent periods, several interesting conclusions can be drawn: First, while Arab observers generally accept that for practical reasons the Arab militaries cannot be disbanded or lead to an all-encompassing revolution,[47] they do expect these institutions to become more transparent and accountable to their societies. Second, there seems to be a broad consensus that as long as the Arab militaries remain highly dependent on the West, and especially on the US, they cannot be expected to wage a war against Israel. Accordingly, there is an acknowledgement that the regular armed forces are hopelessly passive and ineffective, in sharp contrast with non-state armed factions — the "resistance" movements.

Remarkable (and very rare) evidence for this line of thought was apparent in the words of a former Jordanian general, who recently expressed his wish that the Arab militaries take advantage of a potential future war between Israel and Iran by logistically and morally supporting thousands of armed guerillas who would invade Israel and wipe it off the map. Interestingly, the Arab armies had no active role to play in this scenario.[48] No less remarkable is the fact that prominent leaders of "resistance" movements such as Khalid Meshʻal of Hamas and Hassan Nasrallah of Hizbul-

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42. "Arab Support for the Saudi Proposal to Establish A Pan-Arab Security Council," *Ad-Dustour*, March 26, 2007; "Arab Armies' Wrestling Championship Opens," *Tishreen* (Syria), July 5, 2007.

43. "The Arab Reform Initiative: the First Workshop on Security Sector Reform in the Arab Region, 12-13 June 2006, Amman, Jordan," June 20, 2006, http://www.arab-reform.net/spip.php?page=article_ar&lang=ar&id_article=361; *al-Arab al-Yawm* (Jordanian daily), April 20, 2007.

44. See: http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb.

45. "Justice Prevails: The Jordanian Arab Army, Jerusalem and Palestine," *Al-Aqsa*, December 2007.

46. See e.g. *al-Jazeera's* talk show on "The Relationship Between the Military Establishments and the Regimes" following the coup in Mauritania, August 26, 2008, http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/D96AC7A4-3513-4385-BBE0-9563F7BBF41D.htm. See also the short but relatively popular poem "the Arab Armies' Working Days," circulated around that time. According to the poem, "[b]ecause of the many victories that our Arab armies have achieved, the president of the republic declared all the days of the week as official days off for them permanently," http://dr-subhi.maktoobblog.com/1181164. By contrast, the Lebanese Army, which launched a military campaign against the Fateh al-Islam faction in Nahr al-Bared in 2007, was met with public, domestic, and even regional support, not least because it acted against a target that many deemed legitimate.

47. See, e.g. ʻAbd al-Halim Qandil, "We Need a Revolution of Free Men rather than of Free Officers," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, January 21, 2008.

48. Rakan al-Majali, "The War: Between Optimism and Pessimism," *ad-Dustour*, June 24, 2008.

lah echo the same logic. Playing their cards cleverly, these leaders have requested that the Arab regimes *not* assist the "resistance," but merely keep quiet while *it* does the job.[49]

Let us conclude by mentioning some of the problems that may face those who wish to study the Arab militaries through the New Arab Media. First, and most important, determining public trends based on such resources only can be done systematically and not on the basis of anecdotal evidence. This task cannot be achieved without a deep knowledge of Arab popular culture and the subtleties of the spoken Arabic language. Second, research on civil-security relations in the Arab Middle East should tap not only the New Arab Media but also more "conventional" sources, especially the militaries' bulletins, Arab newspapers, memoirs and biographies, and government publications. Third, in view of the wide differences of perception among Arab citizens with regard to their military establishments and the desired level of civilian control over them,[50] students should not only look for regional similarities but also be attentive to national particularities. Finally, it is worth remembering that evaluating public trends via the New Arab Media might be more worthwhile in those Arab states whose citizens enjoy unfettered access to the Internet.

Khalid Mesh'al of Hamas and Hassan Nasrallah of Hizbullah echo the same logic. Playing their cards cleverly, these leaders have requested that the Arab regimes *not* assist the "resistance," but merely keep quiet while *it* does the job.

49. See Mesh'al's speech in *al-Jazeera*, December 8, 2006, and Nasrallah's interview in *al-Jazeera*, July 22, 2006, where he said: "I am objective and realistic, so today we deem it acceptable if the Arab regimes are neutral ... [W]e expect them only to sit on the fence."

50. Pew Global Attitudes Project survey, "World Publics Welcome Global Trade —But Not Immigration," April 10, 2007, http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=258.