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Would the U. S. Military Repress Protesters?
Lessons from the Arab Spring

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In early June, President Donald Trump threatened to unleash active-duty troops on American citizens protesting the killing of George Floyd. As he put it on June 1, if governors do not “dominate the streets,” he “will deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem.” Some of his top supporters, such as Sen. Tom Cotton, strongly encouraged him, arguing that deploying the military was essential “for an overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter lawbreakers.” At one point, Trump appears to have considered sending as many as 10,000 active-duty military personnel into the streets. As the secretary of the Army put it, “We came right up to the edge of bringing active-duty troops here.”

Usually we hear stories about militaries being asked to repress protests in dictatorships — not in countries with long-standing democratic traditions like the United States. Yet, it appears that Trump had been willing to order the U.S. military to help police citizens and potentially, if circumstances
arose, use force against them. Americans were put in the remarkable position of wondering whether the U.S. military would follow through on the threat. As one journalist put it, “Will they protect us, or will they shoot us?”

To answer this question, we look to lessons from cases around the world in which militaries are more regularly asked to repress mass protests. Specifically, we draw on our expertise studying military responses to protests during the Arab Spring of 2011, especially those of the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries.

In those cases, training, professionalism, the composition and cohesion of the armed forces, and the military’s reputation were key factors in the handling of mass protests. Obviously, the United States is not Egypt or Tunisia in 2011. Nonetheless, those examples offer important insight into the factors that might drive the U.S. military’s response if it were ordered by the president to confront protests in cities across the country.

Lessons from Abroad

In early 2011, millions of people took to the streets across the Arab world to protest police brutality, income inequality, corruption, and dictatorship. With the police overwhelmed, militaries were deployed in six countries, and had to choose whether to forcefully repress these mass protests.

In Egypt and Tunisia, militaries chose not to use force in 2011, although the Egyptian military has done so many times since, and the Tunisian military has also done so historically. Other militaries responded differently. Some, such as Syria and Bahrain, used force to disperse protesters. Other militaries like those in Libya and Yemen fractured, with parts of the military supporting the government and repressing protesters, and others defecting from it. Scholars have spent significant time studying the factors that guided these militaries’ responses to the early 2011 protests.

To be sure, there are many important differences, with respect to the law, norms, and traditions between the American military and these militaries. None of these countries were democracies, and the United States has a long tradition of the military staying out of domestic politics. Unlike these militaries, the United States also maintains and adheres to a complex set of laws and procedures governing deployments of National Guard and federal forces.

In addition, the pathway through which the regular military might be sent to the streets contains many steps and contingencies. The secretary of defense likely would have to authorize the deployment of active forces, and rules of engagement for federal troops would have to be distributed. In addition, if a local commander issued a clearly illegal order to troops deployed to a protest area, military personnel would likely disobey it. It would be incumbent on them to do so.

Still, the possibility that regular military forces would be put in a situation in which they were given legal orders to disperse protests or assist police in a violent episode caused significant angst among retired military leaders during the first week of June. In addition, given that the president and some of his supporters pushed for an aggressive response to protests and to deploy active-duty troops, it is a scenario worth considering.
Drawing on the lessons of the Arab Spring, we outline how five considerations — training, professionalism, composition, cohesion, and reputation — might shape the U.S. military’s response to mass protests.

Training
The training of the military is one important factor that might affect whether or not the U.S. military would assist in repressing protests. Some military units, particularly in the Military Police and National Guard, are trained to handle civil disturbances. Many others, such as the infantry battalion that had been deployed to bases outside of Washington, D.C., have not had that experience. In addition, the preparation that Army units receive might not include how to use non-lethal methods, leaving them unprepared to deal with the current crisis.

Notably, retired military leaders were especially alarmed by the use of regular military troops because of the lack of training for domestic roles — a sentiment that was echoed by servicemembers themselves. As one Army staff sergeant told Military Times, “my troops are not trained in crowd control tactics, they are trained to meet and defeat with deadly force any enemy of the U.S. who is attacking us. My troops do not have the mind set to just allow someone to throw things at them.”

Such training was also an important determinant of how the military responded to protesters in the Arab Spring cases. Although different in the details, Tunisia also has a national guard to reinforce the police and it was deployed before the military in 2011. But Tunisia's military units had also been given occasional training in civil disturbances since the 1990s, especially as part of their involvement in U.N. peacekeeping operations. As a result, when they were sent into the streets in 2011, they were better able to de-escalate confrontations with protesters than other militaries in the region. The absence of sufficient training or experience in managing civil disturbances in the United States could inflame tensions and lead to disastrous outcomes if active forces are asked to intervene in protests.

Professionalism
The military’s level of professionalism and loyalty to the state, rather than the president, can also be an important factor, as some scholars argued it was in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. In the United States, senior officers have invoked this professional allegiance to push back on the idea that the military should be involved in illegally repressing U.S. citizens. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley observed that, “Every member of the U.S. military swears an oath to support and defend the Constitution and the values embedded within it,” a sentiment later echoed by the chief of the National Guard Bureau. As retired Gen. and former Secretary of Defense James Mattis put it, “Never did I dream that troops taking that same oath would be ordered under any circumstance to violate the Constitutional rights of their fellow citizens.” Both retired Gen. Martin Dempsey and retired Adm. Mike Mullen concurred: “Our fellow citizens are not the enemy.”

The situation, however, is more complicated for enlisted military personnel who, in addition to pledging to support the Constitution, also pledge to obey the orders of the president. In addition, since it might be difficult to make a split-second decision about the legality of an order, most troops can be expected to obey. Training and socialization also instill discipline and subordination to authority into military forces so that they follow orders. This can be good news if those orders require forbearance — that is if rules of engagement require that troops deployed exercise significant restraint, or act strictly
in a behind-the-scenes supportive capacity. More worrisome would be the outcome if legal orders nonetheless encourage escalation. Military forces might be asked to assist in clearing a particular area, bringing them into contact with peaceful protesters. Alternatively, a protester might act aggressively and elicit a response by police that escalates quickly into a broader confrontation, drawing troops into the chaos. There is also the possibility that some military personnel would decide on their own to confront protesters — something that has occurred with some police provoking and attacking protesters this past week.

In these latter scenarios, two things are likely to determine how military personnel respond.

Composition and Cohesion
The first is the composition of the military and what is sometimes referred to as the “social distance” between protesters and military personnel. When soldiers and protesters largely come from different ethnic or sectarian groups, as in Syria or Bahrain in 2011, soldiers are much more likely to repress the “out-group.” But when soldiers identify with the people they are ordered to repress, they are more likely to demonstrate forbearance. This occurred in Egypt in 2011 when some junior officers, sympathizing with the demands of the protesters, threw down their rifles and joined them in protest. Protesters can also directly highlight their similarities and fraternize with the soldiers, as Egyptians also did. These are proven techniques of non-violent resistance. The Tennessee National Guard laid down its riot shields when protesters calmly asked them to, in tactics evocative of what Arab activists used in 2011.

How much do military units in the United States identify with today’s protesters? On the one hand, the officer corps of the U.S. military is largely white and Republican. In 2016, 72 percent of active-duty Army officers identified as white, as did 80 percent of Army National Guard officers. Surveys since the 1970s have also shown a growing partisan skew, with a 2009 survey by Heidi Urben of over 4,000 Army officers showing that 60 percent identified as Republican, and only nine percent as Democrat. The partisan bias in favor of Republicans might render them more receptive to Trump’s call to aggressively confront protesters and perhaps, in some cases, less sympathetic to the protestors’ concerns about racial justice.

On the other hand, there is a sizable minority, especially among the Army’s enlisted ranks, that may identify with protesters. In 2016, 47 percent of active-duty Army soldiers identified as Black, Hispanic, Asian or Other, as did 32 percent of Army national guard soldiers. This matters, because even if officers order their soldiers to confront protesters, they cannot be sure that all of them will follow. Some soldiers may very well refuse, desert, or even attempt to defend protesters. That fear of splitting the ranks may lead senior officers to prefer not to put the military into such a situation at all. Similarly, concerns over cohesion were one reason why some military leaders during the Arab Spring protests of 2011 refrained from ordering their troops to fire. However, the senior leadership could also selectively choose units without many people of color to maximize social distance with protesters.

In that vein, there do appear to be some soldiers who may be receptive to repression. White supremacist views appear to be more widespread in the military than in the general U.S. population. Research by Tatishe Nteta and Melinda Tarsi finds that “white veterans express more negative views of blacks relative to white civilians,” especially in the all-volunteer force generation. Although not
scientific, a 2019 Military Times poll likewise showed that 36 percent of troops said they’ve seen evidence of white supremacist and racist ideologies in the military, with 53 percent of the minorities surveyed reporting racism. As observers have recently noted, military bases and monuments still commemorate Confederate generals. Only in 2020 did the Marines ban troops from having Confederate paraphernalia or displaying the Confederate flag, with the other services yet to follow suit.

Even if not white supremacist, some service members may still be willing to participate in repressing Black Lives Matter activists, given that some commentators have likened them to terrorists. Some may simply view the protests as wholly unjustified and thus may be willing to support aggressive actions taken by police against protesters. While many Americans are sympathetic to the protesters’ cause, a sizable minority of Americans believe either the cause or methods of the protesters are unjustified. The latest Morning Consult poll, conducted June 3–5, found that 42 percent would support calling in the military, including 71 percent of Republicans. The president has also been tweeting about the need for “Law and Order,” a concept that historically has strong racial overtones. This could shape how troops sent to help manage protests react in the event of a clash between police and participants, or an unprovoked attack by the police. Once again, it is not difficult to conceive of such a scenario, given that there have been incidents of this kind during the George Floyd protests.

Reputation
A final factor that might affect the willingness to repress U.S. citizens is the military’s reputation. Both the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries’ concerns about their reputations were important factors in their decisions not to repress mass protests in 2011. Similar considerations could matter for the American armed forces. Since at least the 1990s, the military has been the most trusted public institution in the United States, with 83 percent of respondents in 2019 having confidence in the military “to act in the best interests of the public.” This is a remarkable accomplishment, especially given the low rankings Americans give other institutions, and something to which military leaders are attuned. Even if the military plays a supporting role and there are few confrontations between civilians and police, it only takes one incident gone wrong to incite anger directed at the military. Protesters may not necessarily be able to differentiate the actions of the military from the police. Troops might be implicated in the eyes of many Americans even if they are not directly participating in police brutality.

There are already indications that some military personnel harbor these concerns. An active-duty Army captain told Military Times, “I believe the president is deploying the military for political reasons and our reputation will be irreparably damaged by the association.” A National Guard non-commissioned officer concurred: “Cracking down with authoritarianism does nothing but further politicize the military and erode the trust the public has in us.” Retired Gen. John Allen has likewise observed that “descending on American citizens … could wreck the high regard Americans have for their military.” Fears of losing that social standing may be one reason that military leaders appear to have resisted Trump’s desire to use them against protesters.

On the other hand, the military’s positive reputation may also help to avoid any confrontation altogether. While the police have faced the direct ire of the protesters, contributing to an escalation toward clashes, the military may be viewed more respectfully. In both Tunisia and Egypt in 2011,
protesters reacted to military forces much more favorably than they did police, who were known for their indiscriminate repression of the countries’ citizens.

Alternatively, protesters might view active-duty forces with more wariness, while those forces would be in unfamiliar surroundings. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dempsey has observed, members of the National Guard are drawn from local communities and their presence may have a stabilizing presence for that reason. Active forces would be drawn from around the United States and not know much about the communities to which they have been sent. That lack of familiarity could increase stress and uncertainty among the troops, compounding tensions if they face off against protesters.

The Worst- and Best-Case Scenarios

How the troops respond to a hypothetical order to repress protesters in the United States could involve similar factors to those that shaped military behavior during the Arab Spring: levels of professionalism, training, composition, cohesion, and reputation. How those factors might combine to shape military behavior in a domestic protest is uncertain. Indeed, if deployed and given authorization to use repressive tactics to confront protesters, much could depend on the particular unit and how its partisan and racial composition interact with that of the protesters in that locality. It may even come down to the discipline (or lack thereof) of a single soldier reacting in an unfamiliar, acutely stressful environment.

The worst-case scenario — a clash involving the military in which a peaceful protester is killed — would have disastrous effects on the U.S. public’s relationship with the military. This has happened before. In May 1970, four Ohio National Guardsmen fired into a crowd of demonstrators at Kent State University. Four were killed and nine were wounded, sparking student strikes across the country.

The best-case scenario if the active-duty military were ordered into the streets is this: its members acquit themselves well and act to protect American citizens exercising their First Amendment rights. That is, military personnel stay true to the oath they took to uphold the Constitution.

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