SECRET SERVICES IN THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD: VECTORS OF POLITICAL CHANGE?

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February 7th, 2020. Patrick Zaky, 27-year-old Egyptian student is arrested at the Cairo airport, upon arrival from Bologna, where he is pursuing a Master's in LGBT and Gender Studies. He is arrested by the NSA (National Security Agency), following a warrant issued in September 2019, accusing him of subversive acts and use of social media as a means of destabilization of political power. The date of his process is set to the 22nd of February 2020. Until today he is retained in a prison, where human rights activists believe Zaky is being tortured.

February 21st, 2020. Abbas Kamel, chief of the GIS (Egyptian General Intelligence Agency), held an unspecified number of secret meetings in different North African countries. In the meanwhile, the 22nd and 23rd of February 2020, the Cairo's Arab Intelligence Forum is held, in which the great majority of Arab intelligence services' chiefs participated. The official objective: to define a common line in the fight against terrorism in the region.

The unofficial objective: discussing foreign intervention in regional affairs, with regard to Turkey.

What do these two very different facts have in common? Nothing, apparently. They reveal, nevertheless, some particular aspects of Arab-Muslim intelligence services, their priorities, means and role in the political game and international arena.

Talking about intelligence services, or secret services, implies understanding their place and freedom of action within a specific political system. For this reason, it is highly inappropriate to talk about intelligence services in the Arab-Muslim world. Nevertheless, although each national intelligence service is embedded in the national political game, some common tendencies can be identified in the region, where intelligence services play a prominent role. In order to understand the main common traits of the Arab-Muslim security and secret services, and their differences within the national and international political system, it is fundamental to look at the historical path that led to the birth and reinforcement of the intelligence authority, as we try to understand it today.

A historical approach to Arab-Muslim intelligence services

Intelligence, or secret, services constitute the backbone of political systems: for this reason, the question of intelligence services, with their functioning, roles, means and relevance, shall be raised together with the question of political systems and organizations within a group or a state. Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that, unlike what we may often believe, the success of an intelligence service is not defined by its rate of accomplished missions, but rather by the efficient fulfilling of the role that a specific service is given within a state-society complex.

When talking about intelligence services of the Arab-Muslim world, we can exploit the new-forged term of *securitocracy*: this word

allows to emphasize the securitarian dimension of intelligence services in the Arab-Muslim region, by suggesting that the work of these services is embedded in the security and securitization of political systems. The tendency defined by this approach suggests that intelligence services in the Arab-Muslim world should rather be called security services, since they tend to compensate their lack of data and information analysis with a stronger coercive power, thus ensuring the survival and reinforcement of the political power to whom they are subjected – or of whom they are the leaders.

There are intelligence services without a state, as it is the case for Hamas secret services, the Palestinian authority and its intelligence units, the IS and Hezbollah, and states without secret services, as it may be the case for the Vatican State. To sum up, it is impossible to understand an intelligence service without placing it in the context of its State – or the lack of it.

Different models of colonization of the majority of the Ottoman provinces after the fall of the Empire deeply influenced the organization of intelligence services in the different states of the region. While the post-independence political systems were slowly forging a more political or security identity, thus according different powers to their new-born intelligence services, the birth of the State of Israel accelerated the process of definition of these services and strengthened their role in the national game and in the regional context.

The legitimacy of the Arab-Muslim intelligence services is built on these two specific events, the independences and the subsequent political belonging to the Arab world and the Arab-Muslim community, and the birth of the State of Israel: from this moment, the action and role of the intelligence services will be deeply linked to the identitarian approach of the Arab-Muslim states towards international relations, national policies and regional interactions. While asserting their national identity, the Arab-Muslim states

define their foreign policy through the values of independence and solidarity with the Palestinian people. And while defining such foreign policy, the political power shapes the role of intelligence services, oriented towards the protection and survival of the political powers in place after the independence, together with the prioritization of national and Arab-Muslim causes on the international scene, in an endless fight to be part of an Arab-Muslim community.

It is during the Cold War period that secret services, by accepting the US influence in the region, become the privileged means to assert the stability of political power: this implies a greater involvement in internal stability, thus the survival of the political structure and élites, as it was the case for Nasser in Egypt or the Baath party in Syria.

This role is reinforced after the 9/11 attacks, when the intelligence services became the center of the surveillance of the population and internal dissidence, backed by the "anti-terrorist" and "anti-Islamist" discourse. It is notably during this period that the intelligence and security services become more and more fundamental to the political power, needing to assert its security and "anti-terrorist" values within the international community, while using the securitarian argument to keep the political power in place and avoid any democratization process.

The role taken by the intelligence services in the state-society complex can be summed up in two major circles, representing the spheres of influence and decision of the intelligence services.

The first playground for intelligence services in the Arab-Muslim world is the protection of the political power in place, of its structure and leading personality: this protection is ensured both against internal threats – surveillance of the population, neutralization and repression of the opponents, control of the diaspora – and against external threats – counter-spying and

alliances. It is particularly interesting to notice that the survival of the political power is not only linked to the internal approval of its leader and functioning, but also by the international recognition of this power as legitimate and in conformity with the western standards and dictates. The international fight among Arab-Muslim secret services can be well exemplified by the choice of the Director of La Grande Mosquée de Paris. The leader of this Mosque, for its geostrategic and political importance, is chosen by the intelligence services and constitutes a victory for the service that achieves to place its country's figure as its leader. It is clearly the case of Shems-Eddine Hafiz, the Director of the Mosque since January 2020: embedded in the Algerian political and diplomatic game, this controversial figure embodies the powerfulness of Algerian intelligence services in placing one of their loyal actors in such a place of power.

The protection of the political complex against external threats is deeply linked to another role played by the intelligence services, meaning the promotion of regional ambitions. This role is declined through the defence of Panarabism, the Palestinian cause, and other relevant national causes. The means of the achievement of these regional objectives are both classical - propaganda, social media and fake news - and unconventional or illegal, such as interference in neighbor's affairs or destabilization of other political power, through direct action or use of transnational terrorist groups. It is the case of the terrorist attack in Morocco, 1994, led by Algeria, the killing of Harari father, and the constant manipulation of Palestinian groups by Syria and Iraq.

It is in 2011 that the certainties derived from this analysis come to be questioned: the fall of regimes, the fight for democratization, the denunciation of the longevity of political power and dictatorship have, partly, led to huge changes in the Arab-Muslim political arena. What are the implications of these changes for the intelligence and security services? Are 2011 and its achievements the symbol of the failure of Arab-Muslim intelligence services in

preserving the political power, its structure and élites, against internal and external threats?

Intelligence services and power in Arab-Muslim countries today

The so-called Arab Springs and their fight for the respect and institution of the rule of law in the Arab-Muslim world pushed towards the adoption of new constitutions and the reconnaissance of the sovereignty of the people, notably in Tunisia, and to a lesser extent in Morocco and Egypt. Although the regime changes in the whole region have been notable since 2011, the intelligence services' roles and priorities seem to remain unchanged. It is in Tunisia that we are, today, witnessing a progressive change towards a greater control of the work of the intelligence services. The recent arrests in Algeria and the protests that led to them may as well suggest that the *securitarian* state par excellence is aspiring to reform its services, at least with regard to its leading personalities.

Indeed, the questions only multiply today: without the intelligence services being able to take the initiative of a democratization process, can they accompany today's changes within Arab-Muslim political systems? Will they oppose this process, as a threat to their freedom of action?

The increasing number of meetings held between Arab-Muslim secret services tend to suggest that cooperation amongst them will constitute the new trend for the years to come. While an increased cooperation could be the motor of greater control over intelligence services in the Arab world, it is certain that, until the political power in Arab-countries will limit the internal power of the intelligence and security services, choosing indirectly to give up its security and internal stability, it will be unlikely for the secret services to become part of a truly democratic system. But is this also the case in democratic countries? Aren't the intelligence

services around the world, in the most democratic countries too, operating in a place outside the democratic game? It is probably part of their nature to be allowed to play in the dark corners of political systems.

It is in this complex context that both Patrick Zaky's arrest and the Cairo's Arab Intelligence Forum shall be analyzed: both as a reflection of political systems wishing to control their internal opposition and affirm their regional ambitions. In this game, the intelligence services seem to be a fundamental controlled player, to which no specific rules are imposed.