



ARI Thematic Study:
Arab Securitocracies
And Security Sector Reform

June 2011

Private Security, not a Business Like any Other

Virginie Collombier

This paper is part of a multi-country research project and policy dialogues on the challenges of security sector reform in the Arab World.

Whereas researchers have paid much attention to the activities of private military and security companies (PMSCs) in Iraq since 2003, they have largely ignored the emergence and development of a commercialized security sector in other Arab countries. To date, there has been no systematic attempt to collect data and analyze security privatization in the region.

Being the result of a study conducted in the United Arab Emirates (more specifically in Dubai), Jordan and Lebanon in January 2011, this article must be considered as a first attempt to outline the main features of security privatization in Arab countries and consider the political significance of the phenomenon.

Virginie Collombier shows that in countries where security institutions play a central role, security privatization has not only been a means for making profit in a liberalizing economic environment.

Not a business like any other, it has had an impact on the very functioning of Arab regimes. While these have mainly relied on security apparatuses to ensure and retain their grip on political power over the last decades, the emergence of a commercial security sector has provided them with new tools to be used for the same aim. Be it in Dubai, Jordan or Lebanon, regimes – or specific groups or individuals within the regime – have been very quick to adapt to this phenomenon and take advantage from it.

Despite the central role played by security institutions in Arab countries, there is an increasing trend for states to share the monopoly of the use of force – willingly or not – with a range of non-state actors. The phenomenon is the result of two concomitant evolutions: while armed non-state actors such as rebel opposition groups, insurgents and militias are challenging the state's authority in several countries (Sudan, Iraq, Yemen,

Lebanon...), states themselves have started outsourcing security – and more rarely military – related tasks to private firms providing goods and services for profit. Under these circumstances, the security sector *de facto* extends beyond the sole public institutions in charge of security (army, police, intelligence...): it also comprises private actors, be they non-statutory forces or commercial firms.

Surprisingly, whereas much attention has been paid to the activities of private military and security companies (PMSCs) in Iraq since 2003¹, the emergence and development of a commercialized security sector have raised little interest in other Arab countries. To date, there has been no systematic attempt to collect data and analyze security privatization in the region. A few hypotheses can be put forward to explain this gap. The well-known sensitivity of security matters in the region has undoubtedly made it difficult to conduct research on this topic. But it has also been largely assumed that Arab regimes were keeping close tabs on their security apparatuses and were unlikely to encourage the privatization of a sector so critical for their survival². Yet, over the past decade, Arab countries have not been immune to a phenomenon closely linked to globalization and internationalization: in many areas, private guards have been put in charge of securing malls, hotels, banks, residential compounds or official buildings. Like it had happened in Latin America and in Africa, the privatization / commercialization of security has become a reality in the Arab world, even though it has taken different forms and scopes. The varied economic and financial conditions, as much as the political context, certainly largely account for the differences that have characterized private security developments in Arab countries. Beyond this mere observation, further analysis is needed, however. First, it is necessary to draw a clearer picture of

¹ For a good review of existing literature on the subject, see Emily Speers Mears, *Security privatisation in the Middle East*, Working Papers Series, no. 10, November 2010, Global Consortium on Security Transformation (GCST). Available at: http://www.securitytransformation.org/gc_publications.php.

² See for instance David Isenberg, « Challenges of Security Privatisation in Iraq », in Alan Bryden and Marina Caparini, *Private actors and Security Governance*, Geneva, DCAF & LIT Verlag, 2007.

the varied forms privatization of security has taken in the region. Second, it is important to consider whether these developments have had an impact on the functioning of security systems, and hence of regimes themselves.

This article is a first step – necessarily limited – in this direction. As such, it must be considered as an attempt to outline the main features of security privatization in Arab countries and consider the political significance of the phenomenon. Being the result of a study conducted in the United Arab Emirates (more specifically in Dubai), Jordan and Lebanon in January 2011, the article shows that in addition to being a means for making profit in a liberalized or liberalizing environment – the security business is very lucrative – private companies have often been used as political tools by regimes or various groups and individuals within the regime.

Making money and controlling society: how private security has helped Dubai rulers comforting their power

In Arab countries like in other areas of the world, the development of security markets is but one manifestation of the general spread of neo-liberal ideologies and practices. Most of the time, there is a close correlation between the levels of economic growth, urbanization, industrialization and the number of private security firms: the higher the former, the higher the latter. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Dubai in the first place – which has emerged as a “global city” and a business hub over the last thirty years – provide a good illustration of this. They have certainly gone further than any country of the region in privatizing security, or at least some parts of their security sector.

Beyond the financial considerations attached to an expanding lucrative sector³,

³ As stated by the business news website AME in January 2011, “private security has become a global

the use of private security firms in the UAE has come as an answer to several priorities and constraints. In the emirates in general but even more in Dubai, security is a priority: it is indispensable to ensure the continuation of the emirate's economic success. As clearly stated by Dubai police strategy,

“UAE is one of the safest countries in the world, and Dubai is the most secure city in the world. Our strategic planning aims for safety, security and justice to go hand in hand with our economic and social growth paths (...); safety and security and justice are to be available for country and individuals alike”⁴.

The emirate's status of “open-city” and its reputation of safety are fundamental elements of its economic success. Since business and tourism, together with real estate and financial services, account for the largest part of the emirate's revenues, it is particularly important that the image of Dubai is not tarnished by any security failure – from street crime to terrorist attacks – that would restrain the free movement of persons and business activities. At the same time, and for the same reason – the necessity to preserve the emirate's reputation – security must not be heavy (i.e. not too visible).

With a total population that reached 1.87 million in October 2010⁵ but of whom

industry in itself, with estimated revenues of approximately USD 150 billion”. See <http://www.ameinfo.com/254629.html>.

⁴ See « Our strategy for Dubai police from 2008 to 2015 », foreword by H. H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktum. Available at: <http://www.dubaipolice.gov.ae/dp/english/centers.jsp?Page=A26&Id=3475&num=1251&num2=1251&mainlayid=1251&ItemType=4>.

⁵ According to Dubai Statistics Center. Available at:

about 85 % are foreigners, Dubai has only limited resources to rely on in terms of national manpower. The Dubai Police, which was created in 1956 and comes under the direction of H. H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid al-Maktum, vice-President and Prime minister of the UAE and ruler of Dubai, is made up of 15,000 personnel⁶, most of whom are non-nationals, at least for the lower positions and at the lower grades. Hence complementary – and adapted – means are needed in order to ensure security and public order in the emirate. The liberal economic policies implemented in the UAE, coupled with significant financial capacities, have opened the way for the private sector to rush into the security business and play a central role in the security structure in general.

Mainly because of Dubai's position as an international hub, notably for financial services and transportation, many global private security firms – such as Good Harbor⁷, Kroll (Tom Everett Heath)⁸, Olive Group⁹, Control Risks¹⁰ – set up regional

[http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/Dubai's population up 7 per cent in nine months/43044.htm](http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/Dubai%20s%20population%20up%207%20per%20cent%20in%20nine%20months/43044.htm).

⁶ As for Abu Dhabi's police, it comprises 12,500 frontline staff.

⁷ Founded in 2002 by former White House counterterrorism adviser Richard Clarke, Good Harbor Consulting originally focused on risk management in the US homeland security market. From 2005, the firm expanded to provide risk and vulnerability consulting services for overseas clients. In November 2010, for instance, Good Harbor Consulting won a major contract for the initial phase of the UAE's planned 1,500 km rail network.

⁸ Kroll is the world's leading risk consulting company.

⁹ Olive Group is a British company providing security services to a number of US agencies and corporations. It works with Shell, GE, Boeing, USAID, UN CH2M Hill and the European Union. It has won a number of contracts with Bechtel to provide security services for the company in Iraq and in Mississippi in the aftermath of hurricane

headquarters in Dubai. As a rule, the growth of activity in the sector has been tremendous over the last decade. According to Colonel Ahmed al-Hantoobi, director of the Private Security Business Department of the UAE Ministry of Interior (MoI), the number of security guards went up from 2,500 in 2002 to close to 10,000 in 2008, in Abu Dhabi only. The murder of Hamas leader Mahmud al-Mabhuh in Dubai in February 2010 apparently even further boosted the sector¹¹. In January 2011, there were 40 MoI-licenced companies with 50,000 private security guards in the emirates¹², which amounted to more than the total police staff of the federation. Even though the majority of private guards are non-nationals (like the police agents), 80 % of the private firms operating in the emirates are local companies, sometimes completely owned by the state. Only 20 % are foreign – the most important being G4S and Securitas – and have been selected because of their international reputation.

These figures should not be misinterpreted: the governing powers of the police remain the exclusive prerogative of the state. As a rule, missions outsourced to the private security sector relate to a range of specific areas: securing private places open to the

public such as malls, banks, hotels, hospitals, airports; conveying funds; securing big events and protecting very important personalities when the state is not responsible for it. In principle, the distribution of roles is relatively clear. According to Dr Mustafa Alani, head of the Gulf Research Center, based in Dubai:

“The private sector does play a role, but there is no ‘partnership’ between private firms and the government. The relationship looks more like a contract. The government itself does not use private companies to fulfill certain tasks. For instance, public places or buildings are under the full control of the government. There is no subcontracting, the government has full capacity”¹³.

Yet officials regularly insist on the complementary role played by private firms in the field of public security: both “the MoI and private security businesses (work) towards ensuring a safe, secure and peaceful environment in the UAE”¹⁴. For instance, it is a government authority, the Critical National Infrastructure Authority (CNIA) based in Abu Dhabi, which is officially tasked with handling the protection and security of the emirate’s vital assets and infrastructure. Yet the agency’s mission statement underlines that it works “using integrated security strategies and the sharing of best practices through public-private partnerships”¹⁵.

Katrina. Olive Group also worked with the CPA to train Iraqi Port Authority guards in 2004.

¹⁰ A British company, Control Risks provides a variety of security and intelligence analysis, ranging from political and security risk analysis to travel security and supply chain and executive security, as well as security management, discreet armed protection, and information support. In Iraq, Control Risks works with government and corporate clients.

¹¹ See “Mabhuh’s murder beefs up companies’ profit”, in *Al-Arabiyya*, 18 January 2011, available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/01/18/134018.html>.

¹² See Abu Dhabi Police website, <http://www.adpolice.gov.ae/en/news/security.spacialist.aspx>.

¹³ Interview with Dr Mustafa Alani, Dubai, January 23, 2011.

¹⁴ See “SCCI teams up with Ministry of Interior to host forum on importance of private security”, in *Al Bawaba*, 24 January 2011, <http://www1.albawaba.com/scci-teams-ministry-interior-host-forum-importance-private-security>.

¹⁵ See Abu Dhabi government website, <http://www.abudhabi.ae/egovPoolPortal WAR/app>

Hence, while the outer entrances of critical sites are protected by the CNIA, security inside the sites is often provided by private guards. The CNIA also hires consultancy firms and works on a regular basis with analysts coming from the private sector, many of them being foreigners.

What is insisted on is the role the private sector as a whole has to play in ensuring its own security. During a forum held in Sharjah in January 2011, Colonel al-Hantoobi pointed out that “one of the most critical aspects of the partnership (between the community and the public sector) is the private internal security of companies working in trade, tourism, industry and other private fields”¹⁶. Concretely, in order to get their licenses, hotels or shopping malls – for instance – have to prove their security needs are covered. There are specific requirements to get licensed by the department of Economic Development, followed by inspections, and records are kept. Dr Alani explains that

“every institution has to employ its own security guards – this is compulsory. And security is really heavy. Here for instance, just for the Gulf Research Center, ten security people are employed. And it is the same in my home residence. In residential blocks, doors do not open for outsiders; there are cameras everywhere, even in car parks. This is standard security. In shopping malls too, private companies are in charge of monitoring security. Security is invisible, but very effective. Of course, we also have plain clothed policemen, marked and

unmarked cars, etc... But as a rule, there is no interference; only when it is really necessary do the police intervene.¹⁷”

One of the characteristics of the system implemented by Dubai authorities is that it is heavily based on high technology, with a reduced reliance on manpower. The reduced size of the national workforce and the necessity to ensure a low visibility of the security forces largely explain this choice. Hence, arriving at Dubai international airport, for instance, you will not feel like coming into a highly securitized area: no policemen or military in uniform, no area for controls... Walking around the biggest malls in the city, you will not have to go through metal detectors nor will your bag be searched. And yet security disposals are everywhere, without you knowing or feeling it. As stated by Dr Alani,

“The government is investing a lot in security. Security is mostly based on the use of the latest state of the art electronic systems, as was recently illustrated by the Mabhuh affair. Cameras are everywhere. High tech is essential, especially smart cameras, which are very expensive but require very few people to monitor what is going on. Such a system comes at a price, but it has been successful during the last 20 years: the crime rate is very low in Dubai.”

Private security guards are not allowed to carry arms; they work in close coordination with the police, which is able to deploy rapid response units in case of necessity, and which also exert a tight

manager/ADeGP/Citizen?nfpb=true&pageLabel=p_citizen_departments&lang=en&did=87374.

¹⁶ See “SCCI teams up with Ministry of Interior to host forum on importance of private security”, art. cit.

¹⁷ Interview cited.

control over private firms. As a result, the government does have the upper hand on security matters:

“Contrary to other Arab countries, we have a very effective monitoring system. (...) There are rules of behaviors for private firms, it is clear how they must operate”¹⁸.

The UAE have played a pioneering role to date in regulating activities of private security businesses. In January 2003, Abu Dhabi passed the first Emirati Regulation on private security legislation in the UAE, which specifically regulated private security companies, cash in transit companies and security guards. This was accompanied by imposing government training standards through the newly formed Private Security Authority, now known as the Private Security Business Department (PSBD) of the UAE. In 2009, as a consequence of the first regulations enforced to control the sector, the number of companies offering security services in Abu Dhabi dropped from 182 to 11¹⁹. According to Professor Peter Darcy, CEO of the National Security Institute (NSI) of the MoI,

“Regulations have destroyed harmful market forces in the sector that provided sub-standard services. These companies were not closed down but they simply fell off the wagon because they could not meet the set conditions. Regulations made it mandatory for companies to

¹⁸ Dr Alani, interview cited.

¹⁹ Figures cited in “Conference addresses role of private security sector”, Gulfnews.com. Available at: <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/government/conference-addresses-role-of-private-security-sector-1.45166>.

get their staff licensed. In order to do this they (had) to send trainers to the NSI for training and they in turn would train the company's staff and prepare them. (...) Companies began hiring better educated people because if they failed the licensing exam, it would be a financial loss for them”²⁰.

With the Federal Private Security Law n° 37 of 2006, which came into force at the beginning of 2009, the same standards are now being applied in Abu Dhabi and all the other emirates. According to Dr Alani, in the city-state of Dubai,

“the government takes the lead, there are no cut corners, be it for international or local companies. The government is not softer with local firms. (...) Contrary to other countries of the region – where the system is neither organized nor comprehensive – the system in Dubai is integrated, comprehensive”²¹.

Dubai authorities are very attentive to the image of their police, which is presented as the most modern and progressive of all Arab security forces. This is expected to contribute to the general reputation of the emirate. Hence the Dubai police website states:

“We use excellent performance standards and have highly defined descriptions of our tasks, duties and jurisdictions. (...) We are proud to say that we are the first Arab Police Force to apply

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ Dr Alani, interview cited.

DNA testing in criminal investigations, the first to use electronic finger printing, and the first Arab department to know and implement the paperless department concept. Many prizes, even first prizes, have been won in recognition of these achievements, both locally and internationally. (...) Another first was the adoption of the Community Policing program, as well as being the first Police Force to establish a Human Rights Department. We stay one step ahead being the first to apply electronic services, particularly in the Arab world, so that now anyone can renew their registration from anywhere in the world. We are unlike any other Police Force in the world”²².

The issue of human rights, in particular, has been a central part of the authorities’ efforts in this regard. A number of measures were taken to train the police with respect to human rights issues, such as the creation, in 2004, of Human Rights Care Departments in all Dubai emirate police stations. These departments are mandated to protect the human rights of both victims and perpetrators of crimes and to prevent illegal law enforcement practices that might be used against crime suspects²³. As stated by Dr Alani,

“There is a human rights

department in every police station where people are held. They also spend a huge amount of money on interpreters. If you encounter a problem with private security guards, you can address your complaints to a specific department of Dubai Police, and you will get an answer within 72 hours. I experienced this, and it worked. (...) The head of the police himself spends a huge time touring; he intervenes personally, which is one of the reasons why he is the second most popular person in the emirate. (...) In this system, you can complain. Private guards are closely controlled, and the police also are under monitoring.”²⁴

This tight system of monitoring and control in which the private and public sectors closely articulate and complement each other is justified by the absolute imperative of ensuring security in the emirate: “In Dubai, you *have to* have security”²⁵. Hence, over the years, the private sector has come to play a critical role in the comprehensive system established by public authorities. Today, it appears as one major instrument thanks to which the government is able to exert its “heavy hand” on security issues. While the image of the police is dealt with as a priority²⁶, it is clearly stated that security overcomes privacy:

²² http://www.dubaipolice.gov.ae/dp/english/e_services.jsp?Page=A26&Id=13511&num2=NWS&mainlayid=195&itemId=13512.

²³ See “United Arab Emirates”, US State department - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 28, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41734.htm>. Dubai police also organizes law enforcement training seminars focusing on human rights protection, including crime victim protection.

²⁴ Dr Alani, interview cited.

²⁵ Idem.

²⁶ Dubai Police also established a Public Relations Department early on. Its stated objective is to “win the confidence of the people and enhancing the level of awareness in the police work”. In 1984, it was affiliated to the General Directorate of Planning and Moral Guidance.

“privacy is not an issue when it comes to security; (...) the legal system will offer no protection to anyone who is not going to cooperate with the police”²⁷.

In such a context, private security companies constitute one of the central workings of a security system that looks very sophisticated and organized. Since business needs security and reciprocally, ruling elites, deeply involved in both, also benefit from both. Commercial firms, which are both very profitable and very useful as complements for the public security sector, have ultimately contributed to comfort Dubai rulers influence and uncontested power.

Now, even though the development of private security has followed similar patterns in other Arab countries (with private guards being almost everywhere in charge of securing different types of buildings open to the public or residential compounds, for instance), nowhere has the system elaborated in the UAE grown so structured and organized.

Promoting a new security model: how Jordanian security elites may be accelerating the fragmentation of the state

In Jordan like everywhere else, economic considerations have played a major role in the development of private security. According to a local researcher, the roots of the phenomenon can be traced back to the 1980's, when a deal was supposedly concluded between the police (*al-aman al-'aâm / al-shurta*) and banks. The latter were asked to pay for projects conceived for monitoring their surveillance. They were almost blackmailed so that they accepted to finance an early alarm system amounting to 2 to 3 JOD millions intended

to ensure their security²⁸. At that time – in 1984 – the first private security firm – Middle East Defense and Security Agency (MEDSA) – was created in the country. It was then clearly stated that the company, which was presented as “primarily concerned with the provision and training of security guards”, had been formed “in response to the growing demand in Jordan for commercially available security services”²⁹. Now, MEDSA's site goes even further in justifying the creation of the company, stating that

“although State Security provides adequately for the general public, it was never designed to cater for institutions or private individuals who, for one reason or another, feel the need for greater protection”³⁰.

In the 1990's, while market-oriented policies were progressively implemented in the country, the opportunity for making profit with security became obvious: the sector was seen as a lucrative market as new companies were established in Jordan and needed protection. The two wars in Iraq – in 1990/1991 and in 2003 – notably had a major impact on the economy, since many rich Jordanian nationals came back and settled in Jordan, followed by a great number of Iraqis. Economic growth was fuelled by this influx of capital as well as by the privatization policies that were implemented almost concomitantly. The development of touristic projects and the creation of new malls and hotels induced increased security needs. The evolution of the regional context in turn had a profound impact on the sector, especially after the Amman hotel bombings of November

²⁷ Dr Alani, interview cited.

²⁸ Interview with M.A.M., Amman, January 18, 2011.

²⁹ See MEDSA homepage, <http://www.1stjordan.net/medsajo1/index.html>.

³⁰ Idem.

2005. All this proved especially propitious for the development of a private security market. As explained by retired Major General Bataineh,

“now security is very important for hotels, for instance. Since international rating is crucial for them, they need to ensure a high level of security in their establishments; they must be able to highlight the specific measures they are taking. Hence they do not have the choice: they need to pay for security³¹.”

Despite early prospects of financial gains in this sector however, the development of the sector initially remained rather limited: in 1999, only 3 or 4 companies were reportedly established in the country³². Today, even though their number and importance have undoubtedly increased, it remains very difficult to give figures for the number of private security companies operating in Jordan – all the more that there are no clear rules or legal framework regulating the sector. One explanation for this situation is certainly to be found in the central role the formal security apparatus – the army, but even more the intelligence – has played in the development of the Jordanian private security sector.

From the early emergence of the first private firms to the current functioning and management of the sector, security officials have played a crucial role. Even though formally “private”, the commercialized security sector has been largely monopolized by military and intelligence elites, often in close relation to the King himself. Two reasons are often highlighted to explain the creation of private security firms in Jordan: first, that security was a very good market and,

³¹ Interview with Major General Ahmed Bataineh (retired), Amman, January 17, 2011.

³² Idem.

second, that there were too many retired officers looking for a new income to earn after retirement. Officers usually retire around 42 to 45 years of age, after 16 years in service³³. For them, private security provided “a horizon for new careers”³⁴. For instance, retired Major General Ahmed Bataineh, general manager of Al-Salam firm specialized in “security and protection”, states that his own company currently employs 108 persons, of whom 80 % are former army personnel. He also insists on the fact that the chairman has military background and experience³⁵. Similarly, MEDSA’s website explains:

“Experience has proved that those from a military or police background are best suited to the profession; (...) all of the Company's staff are retired servicemen, many of whom have served with elite corps in the Jordan Armed Forces such as the Royal Guard and Special Forces”³⁶.

Even though ex-security personnel have generally formed the bulk of private companies’ staff all over the world, be it in Latin America, Africa, the United States or Europe, the military’s grip on the sector does appear particularly strong in Jordan. The process of registration of companies illustrates this. According to Major General Bataineh,

“there are no regulations for the sector. You apply to the ministry of Commerce for a license. There you have to detail the missions your company will deal with. Then your application is

³³ Interview with M.A.M., cited; interview with Major General (ret.) Ahmed Bataineh, cited.

³⁴ Interview with M.A.M., cited.

³⁵ Interview cited.

³⁶ See MEDSA homepage, cited.

sent to the ministry of Interior. Three official letters are sent to the General Intelligence Department (GID), the Public Security Directorate (PSD) and the Military Intelligence. Within no more than two weeks, the application is back to the ministry of Commerce.”

Hence security officials are the ones who process applications. The short delays required to screen applications suggest that existing connections with applicants determine the result of the process. As confirmed by an Amman-based lawyer,

“The ministry of Interior insists on major shareholders being retired staff from the military, which means connections are essential. A condition is also that more than 50 % of shareholders must not be foreigners”³⁷.

In reality, the whole process seems to take place within one and the same community, strongmen within the army and the intelligence giving their approval for the inclusion of new players into the restricted circle of private security. Three years ago, this selection process was a little refined, with the definition of at least one precise criterion to be met by applicants: they now have to provide a guarantee of 50,000 JOD – a rule perceived by some as a way to exclude more easily those who are not wanted into the business. As a consequence, the arbitrary nature of the licensing process and the absence of clear rules regulating the sector have started prompting criticism on the part of private security entrepreneurs themselves. Major General Bataineh thus states that:

“Since 6 or 7 years, we (managers of private firms) have been asking for the creation of a

commission to regulate security business. There is a real need for a commission made up of professionals to organize the sector. This should not be left to Parliament, as some favor. We need to know who our boss is on these matters, who the person in charge is when there is a problem. (...) More generally, there is a need to change attitudes. Private security is not just posting guards in front of buildings; it is not manpower only. We must expand our activities to risk analysis and assessment. Now, for such activities, you need a budget, this is expensive”³⁸.

As stakes, notably financial ones, are increasing, professionals from the sector find it more and more difficult not to have clear rules on which to rely. This may be all the more the case as big companies having close ties with the state and the King himself have taken the lion’s share in a business that has become particularly lucrative. In this context, political considerations are brought to the fore and questions raised about the objectives pursued by high-ranking officials within the regime. In 1984 already, when MEDSA was founded, the fact that it was created by Abd al-Hadi al-Majali soon generated debate. Chief of staff of the Jordanian army from 1979 to 1981, al-Majali served as ambassador to the United States between 1981 and 1983. In 1985, he became the director of the Public Security Directorate (PSD), a function he assumed until 1989. Since 1990, he has been deeply involved in politics, as the head of the pro-regime Jordanian Covenant Party (*Hizb al-Ahd al-Urduni*) formed in 1990, and as the speaker of the House of Delegates since 1997. Hence, according to M.A.M.,

³⁷ Interview with S.O., Amman, January 17, 2011.

³⁸ Interview cited.

“in 1988/89, when al-Sharq al-Awsat company (MEDSA) was created, there were two trends. The first one was saying they were only stupid businessmen, that there was a market for this in Jordan, that they will fill the gap with the police. The second one was stressing that al-Majali was establishing his own private army”³⁹.

Now the nature of relationships that link the biggest firms to the state and the highest ruling circles have also raised questions. The Jordan International Security Company (JoSecure) established in 2004 has become a market leader in security industry in the country, for instance⁴⁰. Over the last few years, it won several major contracts with leading organizations such as Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, the National Jordanian Customs, the Public Security Directorate, the General Intelligence Directorate, Greater Amman Municipality, Jordan Petroleum Refinery Company or the Jordanian Atomic Energy commission... Headed by Major General (retired) Noran Maaytah, JoSecure is a commercial entity fully owned by the King Abdullah II Design and Development Bureau (KADDB). Itself established by royal decree in 1999, KADDB is presented on the company’s website as:

“an independent governmental military-civilian agency existing within the Jordan Armed Forces (...), financed through the defense (budget) vote as well as by income earned from the sale of technology, product and services; (...) (established) to provide an indigenous capability

³⁹ Interview cited.

⁴⁰ See the company’s website: <http://www.josecure.com>.

for the supply of independent, high-quality, efficient and cost-effective scientific and technical services to the Jordan Armed Forces. (Its services are also to be used by) the civilian and military export markets elsewhere in the Middle East”⁴¹.

The creation of such hybrid structures has contributed to blur the boundaries between the public and private spheres of security in Jordan. The direct involvement of King Abdullah II in projects such as a training center for special forces inaugurated in Amman in 2009 –King Abdullah Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC)⁴² – has added to this confusion, since he is also the commander-in-chief of the Jordanian armed forces. The result of a joint Jordanian/U.S. project, KASOTC uses the expertise of several American organizations, including the Special Operations Command Central, the U.S. Army Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation, and private design and construction contractors such as Stanley Consultants and American International Contractors Inc./Syska/Archirodon. According to KASOTC’s website, the center’s leadership is with “Major General G. L. Harrell (retired), who leads a group of diverse and hand-selected instructors and supports staff drawn from the world’s most elite special operations units”.

M.A.M. underlines the problems such a structure raises within the Jordanian security system. According to him,

⁴¹ See the company’s website: http://www.kadddb.com/public/English.aspx?Page_ID=606&Menu_ID2=32&Menu_ID=31.

⁴² The special operations training center is a state-of-the-art training center for special operations and security forces from Jordan, the United States and regional allies. See KASOTC’s website: <http://www.kasotc.com/Home.html>.

“the majority of KASOTC’s manpower comes from the Jordanian army. People get their salaries from the army budget, while the product of their work goes to the accounts of the company. Some of them do not even get more than their usual salaries. (...) There is something like 25 companies working under this umbrella, in the fields of training, consultancy, protection, maintenance... The King himself is KASOTC’s salesperson abroad. Some of his advisers are from the army. Indeed, everybody is working for the King, who is the head of both the army and the company. This is a new kind of feudalism”⁴³.

Because of the involvement of King Abdullah himself in the realm of private security – and also because of the deep interest he has shown for companies such as Blackwater⁴⁴ – some have come to wonder what kind of security model he might favor. It is widely considered that the recent developments in the sector have undermined the idea of public security. According to M.A.M., this is all the more

⁴³ Interview cited.

⁴⁴ In a book dedicated to Blackwater, Jeremy Scahill mentions the company’s « special relationship with Jordan and its king ». In 2004, when King Abdullah decided to create a 5,000 men special operations counter-terrorism aviation unit, Jordan hired Blackwater to conduct the training for the elite force. The King Abdullah Special Operations Training Center inaugurated in Jordan in 2009 was modeled after Blackwater’s Moyock training compound. In April 2010, five officials of Xe (the new name of Blackwater), including its former president, were indicted under felony weapons charges. The indictments alleged that officials falsified documents to hide gifts of weapons to King Abdullah II. For more details, see *Blackwater: the rise of the world’s most powerful mercenary army*, pp.413-414; « Ex-Blackwater president indicted on firearms charges », in *BBC News*, April 16, 2010.

the case that there is a growing perception within the Jordanian society that the state is not able anymore to enforce law; Jordanians are feeling more and more insecure⁴⁵. At the same time, the number of clashes between various tribal segments of the population has increased over the last three years. Fuelled by vendetta logic, they risk being endless. M.A.M. thus explains that

“local state representatives have gradually lost their authority. At the local level, the relationship between tribes and governors has deteriorated a lot. Confronted to numerous conflicts and permanent pressure on the part of local tribesmen, representatives of the state have been in priority cautious not to create enemies. Hence they came to the point where they were unable to make any decisions for fear they might provoke local people’s anger. In these circumstances, the idea of state building has lost its force”.

Hence there is a risk of increased fragmentation of society, with people going back to their original identities – Transjordanian for one part, Palestinian for the other – and deciding to rely either on their own weapons or on private companies to ensure their security. Referring to the model of Latin American countries such as Honduras or Mexico, M.A.M. believes that persistent tensions between communities might result into a huge development of the private security market in the coming years. Such a development would stem from both main components of Jordanian society and from various small groups formed at the local level, as part of new security strategies. According to him,

⁴⁵ According to M.A.M., recent polls stated that a third of Jordanians felt insecure.

“Transjordanians, who are the majority within the army, now find that they are not so well-off. The regime might think of doing them a favor by allowing them to get involved in the sector of private security. For their part, Palestinians, who form the bulk of the business elite, enjoy a better economic situation. Since Transjordanians are already largely equipped with guns and weapons, Palestinians might in turn choose to rely on private means to ensure their security”.

Hence, in the current context, the perception that society and the state are gradually disintegrated is reinforced – and encouraged – by the changes that occur in the security sector. Public authorities have recently sent signals that outsourcing is possible, as long as there is close coordination with official security services. Based on the assumption that the regime is in full control of the latter and can rely on the army, the idea seems to be that a fragmented society will pose no threat to its authority.

Private security firms in Lebanon: an instrument to be used by political parties in their battle for power?

In Lebanon, private security has developed in a particular context characterized by the fragmentation of the society and the polity at the end of the civil war. Like everywhere else however, economic considerations have played a crucial role in the emergence of the phenomenon. The first commercial security firms were created in the country at the turn of the 1990’s. In 1995, they were only four firms: two of them – Future Security Company

(FSC)⁴⁶ and Securitas⁴⁷ – were the subsidiaries of foreign companies, whereas the other two – Security Control and Protection (SCAP)⁴⁸ and Zod Security Group⁴⁹ – were founded by nationals. According to a Lebanese former army general,

“those companies were formed for purely commercial and economic reasons, in accordance with the needs of the Lebanese market. Their owners had noticed the sector was developing in Europe and in America, and they tried to do the same in Lebanon. 90 % of their work consisted in selling security equipments or services: providing non-armed guards to private companies – essentially banks, but also buildings or houses owned by rich or important people. They also provided bodyguards for VIP convoys.”⁵⁰

Moreover, the post-civil war reconstruction was managed with a strong focus on security issues, and played a critical role in

⁴⁶ FSC, established in Lebanon in 1992, was affiliated to Integrated Security Group from England. It was specialized in bodyguard services, premises security services, money transport service, the security of public events, installation and operation of security alarms and surveillance equipment.

⁴⁷ Securitas, affiliated to Société Suisse de Surveillance SA, Switzerland, was established in Lebanon in 1987. It was operating the same kind of services as FSC.

⁴⁸ SCAP was not affiliated to a foreign company. It was established in Lebanon in 1991.

⁴⁹ Zod Security Group, not affiliated to a foreign company, was established in 1985. It provides no guards or bodyguards. It only sells security equipments (such as locks, alarm systems, fire equipments, etc...).

⁵⁰ Interviews with TM, Beirut, January 2011.

privatizing public security, especially with regard to the protection of the well off. In particular, the reconstruction of downtown Beirut by the private real estate company Solidere in the early 1990's became emblematic of the new logics that prevailed in this realm. Beyond economic interests, social and political matters were also important determinants of how the situation evolved on the ground. In a very interesting study of Beirut's security landscape published in 2009, researchers highlight that

“it was indeed there (Beirut's old city) that the first comprehensive security program was established to control access to major public spaces in the city. Beirut downtown's project became eventually the emblem of the neoliberal urban and economic strategies that largely determined the city's development during the next years, yielding a politics of marginalization based on class divisions. This trend eventually continued to define the development of the city that has now acquired a well-defined landscape of privately secured zones where the city's upper income dwellers have established their territories. These consist of buildings (eg. malls, shopping centers, boutiques, restaurants, cafes, high-end residential towers, sea resorts) and infrastructure systems (eg. highway networks, airports, seaports) that cater to their needs. In these areas, private security systems have also deployed their visible architecture of exclusion that protects the 'private' reserves

where the well-heeled can wander undisturbed”⁵¹.

This security regime can indeed be traced back to the years of the civil war, when Beirut was fragmented into multiple territories controlled by sectarian militias. But the political turmoil that followed Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination in 2005 yielded an unprecedented scope of the phenomenon, with the proliferation of security systems invading large parts of the city – the popular and religious neighborhoods of municipal Beirut and its suburbs excepted⁵². Banks, malls, and large department stores introduced screening measures such as bag searches, electronic detectors, and car inspections. The public was prevented access to large areas of the capital city's central district, now guarded by private security guards employed by companies such as G4S or Hawk⁵³. As described by Rabih Shaer, political adviser to former Lebanese Interior ministry Ziyad Baroud (2008-2011),

“after the war, and even more during the period of terrorist attacks, private security firms proliferated. Companies were trusted the responsibility for securing banks, institutions, neighborhoods. The objective

⁵¹ Mona Fawaz, Ahmad Gharbieh and Mona Harb, « Beirut. Mapping security », Diwan, 2009.

⁵² On the boom of private security firms after 2005, see for instance “Private security firms cash in on increasing paranoia”, in *The Daily Star*, April 5, 2007, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=1&article_id=81192#axzz1Ho6NBLGq.

⁵³ Formed in 2006, HAWK is described as « one of the most growing security companies » in the country. With over 700 employees, it is notably in charge of several projects in the Solidere area. For more details, see the company's website: <http://www.hawk-lb.com/About%20Us%20Page.html>.

was to protect neighborhoods against car bombs, to secure financial businesses against criminals, etc... (...) After the terrorist attacks the whole political class also asked for bodyguards. Around 1,000 public security agents were affected, but we had to take a decree listing criteria: the level of protection offered by the state was to depend on the level of responsibility. Then ministers started hiring bodyguards on their own; they managed to get permits from the ministry of Defense for their escorts to carry firearms.”⁵⁴

In this context, private security sector has become economically important in Lebanon (it reportedly employs around 5,000 persons), evolving due to changes in the economy and the political conditions. Yet it is difficult to provide reliable data about the number of existing firms in the country. According to a well-informed retired army general,

“Around 40 companies are registered today. The most important ones are Zod Security, G4S Lebanon, Pro.Sec Lebanon, SCAP, Protectron and Patrick Security – most of them essentially providing bodyguards and money transfer services. Some of them are purely Lebanese, such as Pro.sec, while others are subsidiaries of foreign firms, such as G4S for instance”⁵⁵.

Testimonies do converge on the fact that the ministry of Interior is competent for granting licenses. However the procedure to be followed to register officially does remain particularly opaque:

“You have to submit an application to the ministry of Interior, providing technical information about the company and what it will be doing. Before 2004, Minister Elias al-Murr had given permits to several companies in order to legalize their activities. Most companies that had been created before 2004 were legalized by Mr. al-Murr – something like 90 % of them. But there are still firms working de facto, without a license”.

Beyond the opacity of the licensing procedure, no information is available with regards to the rules regulating the sector, if there are any – which could not be confirmed. Of course, the connections between private security firms’ executives and high-ranking security officials have played a crucial role in the development of the sector. Like everywhere in the world, most companies are headed by retired army officers or officers who chose to join the private sector before the end of their service. However, the weakness of the state and its institutions has proved to be an even more determining factor of how the sector has developed. According to Rabih Shaer,

“No license has been delivered since Ziyad Baroud arrived at the ministry. The reason is that we do not have any means of control; there are risks of the situation skidding. We did not authorize the creation of new companies, but existing companies continue to operate. The problem is that they are not professional. (...) As for the

⁵⁴ Interview with Rabih Shaer, Beirut, January 11, 2011.

⁵⁵ Interview cited.

authorization to carry arms, this is a competence of the ministry of Defense. But you know there is no real control... everyone is armed in Lebanon"⁵⁶.

The particular context of a weak and fragmented state does account for much in how private security has developed in Lebanon. Security is theoretically part of the state's sovereign prerogatives and should be regulated by law, but as one Tripoli-based researcher insists on, for most Lebanese, community belonging and patronage relationships prevail over the state and its institutions:

*"You do not ask the state for protection, you ask your political or community leader. And in reality, the patron / client relationship looks like a system in which the latter asks the former to protect him against the law"*⁵⁷.

Relying on data provided by a recent poll, Rabih Shaer also underlines that

"83 % of Lebanese do not trust the Internal Security Forces (ISF) to ensure their security. It is a matter of available means, training, and of course political considerations. In addition, police agents are recruited on contracts; they are not 'fixed'. Hence they lack motivation and the number of desertions is high. And because of the way they are recruited and paid, you cannot expect a lot from them. At the moment, of a total of 23,000 police staff, 11,000 were hired on contracts. Our objective is to 'fix' them. But since three

*quarters of them are from a particular sect, there is a risk that the sectarian balance might be altered... By now, we should recruit and train more than 4,000 people within a one-year period. Suffice it to remind you that in 1993, the plan was to have a 29,000-strong force..."*⁵⁸.

In such a context, the evolution of the political situation after 2005 has exacerbated citizens' feelings that they could not rely on the state to ensure their security. From this period on, it has also been regularly highlighted that political parties were using private security companies as covers, with the hidden objective of re-creating militias. According to M.A., the researcher from Tripoli, the phenomenon was not new:

*"Between 1992 and 2005, private security firms were created by Hariri, the Lebanese forces, but essentially by pro-Syrian parties. This was not openly displayed, however. The movement accelerated after 2005, when Syrian forces left the country. Then private companies were used as fronts to form military forces affiliated with parties."*⁵⁹

The Sunni community, in particular, appealed to its leaders for protection when the political struggle between political elites shifted to the street and the first clashes happened with supporters of the Hezbollah-led opposition in Beirut at the end of December 2006. Bloody incidents multiplied between residents of Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods in 2007 and 2008, with clashes spreading to other regions and involving other communities. A report published by International Crisis Group in

⁵⁶ Interview cited. It took place only a few days before the government of Saad al-Hariri fell.

⁵⁷ Interview with M.A., Tripoli, January 12, 2011.

⁵⁸ Interview cited.

⁵⁹ M.A., interview cited.

2010 gives a very interesting account of the situation Sunni leaders were confronted with during this period:

“This new stage of inter-confessional confrontation led many within the Sunni community to ask its leadership for a military, self-defense capacity. (...) The Future Current, facing competition from Sunni rivals in several localities, could not remain passive as its constituency became increasingly restless. (...) The Future Current’s response to growing popular pressure was not to establish its own, centralized militia; Hezbollah’s overwhelming military power would have rendered any such endeavor futile and counterproductive. Instead, it created a private security organization charged with protecting its leaders (...). It also recruited young militants to join Future Current-funded and managed groups to defend Sunni neighborhoods.”⁶⁰

The Future Current hence chose to create a commercial security firm, Secure Plus, and used it as a cover for providing protection to the Sunni community. Young people – partisans of the Movement, most of the time jobless – were recruited in Sunni neighborhoods of the capital city, but also in Tripoli and Akkar. The experience of militias was used as a model for the creation of self-defense groups – the most famous being Fouhoud Tariq al-Jadideh in Beirut and Afwaj Tarablos in Tripoli – reportedly managed by Salim Diab, the

⁶⁰ “Lebanon’s Politics: the Sunni Community and Hariri’s Future Current”, *Crisis Group Middle East report n°96*, May 26, 2010, pp. 12-13. See the report for more details, especially Future Current’s leaders’ testimonies.

Future Current’s former general coordinator. The idea was to hire kind of “mercenaries” who were to be “trained by former army generals”⁶¹. In 2007, a Canadian blogger travelling in Lebanon wrote an interesting report about his encounter with a young member of the group formed in the Tariq al-Jadideh area. It provides information – even though unconfirmed – about the structure of such self-defense groups and their connections with the commercial firm Secure Plus:

“ - ‘Secure Plus’.

Sam drew out the organizational structure of his neighborhood watch, but he was very careful never to say the taboo word ‘militia’.

Secure Plus is a Sunni security firm, a legitimate, professional business that provides bodyguards and surveillance for Sunni communities and figures. It also doubles as a secret training ground for two smaller watch-groups, the Panthers and the Eagles. These two groups are organized gangs of non-professionals, crewed by youths in their teens and twenties. They aren’t necessarily thugs and toughs – Sam certainly wasn’t – but I wouldn’t be surprised if there were a few hardheads.

After having proved a certain degree of loyalty and competence in the Panthers or the Eagles, youths are chosen to undergo combat training with Secure Plus. Some remain; most return to the ranks of the two watch groups. This is how Tareek Al-Jadidah screens and trains its foot soldiers.

⁶¹ Interview with Sahar al-Atrache, Beirut, January 14, 2011.

- 'We use electrical prods', said Sam. 'Tasers'. And guns? 'No!' A vehement negative. 'We don't use guns'.

- Against who?

- 'Thieves. And people who are unwelcome'.

- Like Shi'ites and Palestinians from the south?

- 'Well, yeah. Who else?'

The neighborhood is divided into several watch zones amongst the Panthers and Eagles, with a highly organized chain of command. The section leaders, mostly middle-aged men, have noms de guerre that seem to have been stolen right out of a B-movie. (...)

- 'We have day-time and night-time patrols. Some are mobile – we have men on scooters and in cars. On street corners and the entrances to important buildings, we have watchmen in plainclothes. They look like everyone else; you would have no idea who they are. If you look suspicious, they stop you and question you'.⁶²

According to the already mentioned Crisis Group report, such groups may have numbered several thousand people, though

⁶² Excerpt from « The Sunni street », published on « The Juan Show », the blog of a 2007 graduate from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver who worked as an internet journalist in the Middle East in 2007/2008. Available at: <http://yahyashow.blogspot.com/2007/12/sunni-street.html>. On the circumstances surrounding the creation of Secure Plus, as well as on its organization and activities, see also "Au Liban, les clans sunnites et chiïtes se réarment", in *Le Figaro*, April 8, 2008, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2008/04/09/01003-20080409ARTFIG00004-au-liban-les-clans-chiïtes-et-sunnites-se-rearment.php>.

the estimates vary widely. As for the Tripoli-based Afwaj Tarablos, it is said to have numbered anywhere between 3,000 and 9,000 militants⁶³. Yet, for researcher Sahar al-Atrache, who conducted interviews with several young people who joined these groups during this period, many of them were driven by financial motivations more than by the feeling of threat or insecurity⁶⁴. Even though they were insisting on their community belonging, on their loyalty to Saad al-Hariri and on the necessity to defend themselves, it soon became clear that motivation was lacking, as well as equipment and training. On May 7, 2008, when Hezbollah and some of its allies took control of large parts of the capital city, including Sunni-dominated West Beirut, fighters from Tripoli and the Akkar were sent to participate in combat. Yet they proved unable to counterbalance the forces of the Hezbollah and its allies and Saad al-Hariri found himself humiliated, under siege in his residence. A reporter from *The Los Angeles Times* gave a sharp account of what happened in Beirut on that day, highlighting the failure of the Secure Plus experience:

« In a single night late last week, the curious experiment in private-sector warfare crumbled.

Attacked by Hezbollah, the Future movement fighters quickly fled Beirut or gave up their weapons. Afterward, some of the fighters said they felt betrayed by their political patrons, who failed to give them the means to protect themselves while official security forces stood aside and let Hezbollah destroy them.

'We are prepared to fight for a

⁶³ "Lebanon's Politics...", report cited, p. 13.

⁶⁴ Interview cited.

few hours but not more’, said one of the Sunni fighters in the waning moments of the battle. ‘Where do we get ammunition and weapons from? We are blocked. The roads are blocked. Even Saad Hariri has left us to face our fate alone’.

The head of a conventional private security firm in Beirut, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said the Sunni force was ‘not really ready’.”⁶⁵

After 2008, the idea of using private security firms as covers for rebuilding militias affiliated with political parties apparently lost ground. First, the Future Current had proved unable to protect the Sunni community – which resulted into strong resentment towards Saad al-Hariri himself. Moreover, the philosophy behind Secure Plus and similar companies appeared to be in total contradiction with the positions defended by the movement, which insisted on the necessity to reinforce the state and its institutions. According to a Tripoli-based researcher,

“After 2008, they realized that it was useless. They did not have the means to cope with their adversaries through military means; they could only ensure the protection of a few leaders. At the end of the day, the only choice left was between the army and Hezbollah. It was necessary that the state protected everyone. In addition, their position was perceived negatively: they were

accused of ‘breaking’ the state. Hence the solution they chose was to reinforce the state. (...) The Tripoli Brigades (Afwaj Tarablos) ended with the invasion of Beirut.”⁶⁶

Similarly, Secure Plus was reportedly dissolved in 2009. The experiment had undoubtedly proved unsuccessful. While it could not provide the Future Current with the military means that could have helped him secure its political power – following the saying that says ‘he who controls the use of force controls politics’, it constituted one more blow to the state and its capacity to provide security to all its citizens, whatever their sectarian or political affiliations.

Even though it has developed in the general context of economic liberalization and the emergence of new markets, private security has proved it is not just “a business like any other” in the Arab world. While regimes of the region have mainly relied on security apparatuses to ensure and retain their grip on political power over the last decades, the emergence of a commercial security sector has provided them with new tools to be used for the same aim. Be it in Dubai, Jordan or Lebanon, political actors have indeed been very quick to adapt to this phenomenon and to benefit from it. Of course, varied political contexts have led to different strategies and results. In the three countries, however, private security firms have been given a role to play that has an impact on politics.

In Dubai, private companies providing security services have become instruments in their own to be used by rulers to control society; they now seem to be part of power arrangements in the emirate. Hence, even if political authorities insist on the total control they exert on the sector, they have

⁶⁵ “Private force no match for Hezbollah”, in *The Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/may/12/world/fg-security12>.

⁶⁶ Interview cited.

also become heavily dependent on it, as well as on the important foreign manpower it relies on at all levels.

In Jordan, top-ranking officials within the intelligence and the army – including the King himself – got involved in the sector since its very emergence. They managed to exert a tight control over it and to use it to serve their political strategies. Yet, while doing this, they may have contributed to increase the fragmentation of the state and further delegitimize state institutions.

In Lebanon, in a context in which the state is already fragmented and weakened, political parties – especially those linked to the Sunni community, even though not only – thought the development of a commercial security sector could provide them with the military means needed in order to impose themselves in the political arena: private firms were used as covers to re-create militias. The experience miserably failed in 2008, leading Future Current's leaders to insist on the need to reinforce the state and its institutions.

How this will be translated into reality remains to be seen. There is no doubt, however, that research into private security in the region will need to be pursued and studied further.