

Security Sector Reform in North Africa: Why It's Not Happening

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Popular discontent with the repressive nature of security institutions and security forces in North Africa was the precipitating cause of the uprisings that composed the Arab Spring. Across the region the security apparatus was structured to protect regimes from their people. Security ministries, military and police were instruments of internal repression. Security forces operated with impunity. There was no judicial recourse for abuses of human rights. The region's security sectors were a visible, physical and dangerous manifestation of the denial of fundamental rights and freedoms. Along with removing authoritarian governments, reform of security institutions was a primary goal of the Arab Spring.

In the aftermath of regime change, it was evident in all countries that reform of the security sector was more than symbolically important. It was

an essential requirement. Without reform, the path toward democratic governance would be blocked by the repressive security institutions that remained in place. There appeared to be an overwhelming imperative for reform. Yet almost four years later there has been little progress. Why has it been so difficult for regional states to reform their security institutions? Why are we still talking about the need to reform the security sectors in these countries?

Impediments to Change

In every country, regime change was followed by internal demonstrations and a spike in local crime. Externally, regional states were confronted with the emergence of three new drivers of conflict: transnational Islamist terrorist organizations, the proliferation of weapons and narcotics trafficking by international organized crime. Ter-

rorist groups protected drug traffickers and used the income to purchase arms and recruit followers. Working together these groups exploited the region's porous borders and exposed the shortcomings of its military and civilian security forces. Regional states were confronted with internal unrest and external threats to their security that were beyond the experience and the capacity of weakened security institutions.

Insecurity rapidly emerged as the primary concern of citizens and their newly elected leaders. In each country, security institutions—ministries, police and military forces—were called upon to restore public order by controlling politically motivated civil unrest and combating a spike in street crime. At the same time security forces were asked to deal with emerging internal terrorist threats and to prevent the infiltration

of transnational terrorist groups and traffickers in drugs, weapons and people. Fragile governments were reluctant to challenge existing security structures for fear of provoking greater instability. Removing existing leadership, altering the chain of command and reorganizing and reassigning units all create uncertainty. As the security situation continued to unravel, increasingly fearful publics demanded that the security services crack down to restore order and protect against external infiltration. In the face of growing instability, the media and citizens groups were often the first to demand that the security services crack down in the old manner on criminals and demonstrators.

It is difficult to prepare a banquet while you are learning the recipes and remodeling the kitchen. Likewise, security sector reform (SSR) is especially challenging when the imperative to provide security is in conflict with the imperative for change. Classic SSR theory envisions a reasonably benign security and political environment and a functioning government. It aims at introducing civilian oversight, right-sizing institutions, and making security forces more citizen-friendly. It offers limited

guidance in situations where the requirement is to rapidly add personnel and capacity to deal with existential threats. SSR theory has little to say about situations where security forces remain in barracks because they lack leadership, doctrine and are uncertain about whether they might be outgunned or attacked by mobs if they use force.

Faced with a deteriorating security situation, those seeking to reform security institutions were often told it was too soon to make changes and they should wait until things settled down. Where reformers did try to go forward, they were hampered by the fact that there was no tradition of civilian oversight, no cadre of civilian experts ready to staff the relevant offices and committees and no legal basis for circumventing official secrecy and exerting civilian control. Despite the trappings of democracy—elections and parliaments—previous authoritarian governments were dominated by ruling cliques and a network of patronage alliances that controlled the state and divided its resources. To ensure they remained in power, authoritarian regimes established an interlocking network of civilian and military security organizations with different official

missions, but with overlapping and redundant functions of intelligence gathering and internal enforcement. These agencies were supported by vast networks of informers and used brutality to silence political opposition.

After regime change much of this hidden internal infrastructure remained in place and proved surprisingly resistant to change. Simply creating an organizational diagram of the interior and defense ministries and determining the command and reporting relationships between individuals and units could be an impossible task. Obtaining access to buildings or documents that required security clearances could be difficult if not impossible. Dealing with organizations that were staffed by armed agents accustomed to intimidating or eliminating their opponents could be dangerous.

Another barrier to security sector reform has been the very diversity among security sectors and security institutions and forces in the region. Egypt and Tunisia have highly developed security ministries and operational forces. Libyan security institutions were dismantled by Qaddafi and must be rebuilt from the ground

up. Security ministries in some countries follow the Western model. They are led by political figures and are responsible for policy, management, administration and logistic support. Operational forces –the police and military –are led by a professional, uniformed officer and are bureaucratically separate from the ministry. In other countries, the ministry and the operational forces are one in the same with a uniformed general officer serving as both the minister and the force commander.

Given this diversity, it has been difficult for external donors to develop regional approaches and for internal activists to identify models for institutional change. Regional conversations among security officials aimed at finding common solutions have instead focused on explaining the differences in organizational structures and levels of development. These discussions about the complexity of the security sector have highlighted the reality that reform cannot be done as a technical exercise directed by foreign experts under tight deadlines. Time must be provided for consultations among political elites, for open debate among public groups, for public information campaigns and the testing and validation of innova-

tions. This process must be managed to ensure that it remains on course and does not result in unwanted outcomes. This takes time.

Misdirection in Reform Programs

Changing the fundamental nature and organization of critical security institutions has had unintended consequences. Altering existing power relations has created winners and losers, introduced confusion and uncertainty and led to a renewal of conflict. This was especially true in societies that were threatened by extremist violence and where weak governments were uncertain and viewed as not fully legitimate. In Egypt, the military reasserted control, banished the elected Muslim Brotherhood government of President Mohamed Morsi and suppressed any indication of dissent. In Libya, early optimism about building democratic security institutions was replaced by a confrontation between two rival governments, parliaments, military forces and their foreign supporters that seems headed toward civil war.

Nearly four years after the beginning of the Arab Spring the prospects for meaningful security sector reform in most North African countries is

bleak. The primary exception is Tunisia, the country where the regional revolution began. After successful presidential and parliamentary elections, the victors must organize a government and proceed under the country's untested constitution, but there is optimism that continued progress is possible. Security officials are streamlining command and control relationships, and new code of conduct to improve accountability are being considered. Security institutions are exploring ways to better engage with the communities they serve in order to increase public support. The new constitution provides a democratic framework for the security sector and protects citizens' rights. Encouragingly, these ideas are consistent with the basic principles of good governance: (1) accountability; (2) transparency; (3) public participation; (4) respect for human rights; and, (5) rule of law.

Tunisian officials are aware of their country's potential to become a model for the region. They are also aware of the fragility of their institutions and the magnitude of the challenges they face. From an external perspective it is clear that even Tunisia requires UN and external donor expertise, plus political, financial and material

support. The international community can play a role in promoting and sustaining security sector reform in North Africa, but it must be based upon the art of the possible. Effective reform programs involve obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the security sector, beginning with the identification of entry points to address specific problems. Resolving pressing problems builds trust and creates the momentum required to deal with greater challenges. The international community needs to develop a track record of success in a region where initial optimism has given way to doubts about the possibility for meaningful progress.

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