

THE IMPERATIVE OF SECURITY SECTOR REFORM AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

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The social and political revolts that began in earnest in the Middle East and North Africa in December 2010 generated unprecedented transformations in the countries of the region. The interface between state and society, the prerogatives of the military, the role and place of civil society, the responsibilities of an elected and accountable government as well as the nature of the relationship between local authorities and external partners are fundamental components of this changing scene. Among the most important, and indeed urgent, features of this evolution is the question of the need for reform of the security sector in the transitioning countries.

Certainly, such reformation had long been on the agenda of the countries of the region, and had even gathered some momentum in recent years. Dysfunctional security services – by virtue of, by and large, being authoritarian, unaccountable, politicised and inefficient – have, in that respect, more often than not been a recognisable feature of the majority of Middle Eastern and North African countries. Invariably, their accumulated deficiencies and negative role stood at the centre of the causalities that generated the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

As the countries of the region now move from the moment of revolution to the process of transition, there is a timely opportunity to actively engage in a consequential renovation reallocating a proper democratic space and role to security services in the Arab world. This moment is also a chance to endow the latter with a lasting function as key stakeholders of the political liberalisation of their respective countries. Above and beyond the societal mutation ushered in by the popular movements, the current phase is insistently revealing itself as a consequential period of re-examination of the policy environment and of new and existing security challenges, wherein infrastructure, democracy and state-building are interlocked.

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In such a context of recalibration, the post-Arab Spring security sector reform faces three main challenges: to outline an ambitious and system-wide vision beyond quick fixes aimed at stabilizing the current fluid security situations; to engineer a lasting strategy downsizing overlapping institutions and communicating the process to the general public; and to secure the materialization of dedicated and constructive engagement on the part of external partners.

Firstly, the very nature of the mission of the security forces must be wholly redefined. Whether in Ben Ali's Tunisia where the police had become synonymous with arbitrariness and their function had shifted and shrunken from protection of the citizenry and public order to that of the regime's interests, or in Mubarak's Egypt where systematic police abuse and violence had sparked outrage among those who would lead the revolution, let alone Assad's Syria where they would be used as a first line of attack against the population, security services in the region have rightly been identified as a primary source of the persistence of authoritarianism. The "Republic of Fear" must now give way to the "Republic of Hope" and this cannot be achieved without doing away structurally with what the *mukhabarat* and the *istikhbarat* long stood for in terms of injustice.

In striking the proper balance between visible and less visible initiatives, lastingly addressing the question of justice and impunity (indictments, amnesties, compensations) and avoiding witch-hunts which inevitably sow the seeds of a revenge cycle, one is here looking to pursue reform of the very manner in which security is conceived. In recent years, notably echoed by the Arab Human Development reports, concepts such as human security had begun gaining a measure of currency in the Arab world. Today, a new centre of gravity has to be created for orphan security services that need to be connected to society – notably by way of transparent consultations – instead of regime so as to rebuild an eroded public trust in these actors. As the new societies rework their internal dynamics, in particular the state-society interface, security will be redefined along terms which prioritize accountability and this will spell a new imperative of responsive security services.

Secondly, the reform process must be the subject of a society-wide literacy campaign. The organizational restructuring ought, in that respect, to feature quantitative and qualitative dimensions. On the one hand, the reform process will have to tackle the question of the proliferation of different services which had come to occupy an increasingly larger space under logics of duplication and replication in the fallen regimes. Downsizing or dismantling is an immediate issue that must be resolved authoritatively,

yet with enough wisdom so as not to generate further disorder in these systems. Outsized services are more than any other sign an indication of a flawed and impractical structure. All the same, reform of the military, the police and paramilitary services can only take place if the general public understands that such change is part and parcel of a larger process of national transition towards the rule of law. This enables an actor-led process, wherein civil society can play a key constructive role, and generates ownership but also entails making the issue visible in the national debate.

Finally, these various efforts, however readily initiated and genuinely pursued, cannot be achieved if they do not receive important support and assistance from the countries' external partners, in particular the United States and Europe. Whereas the fallen regimes could not realistically be expected to genuinely engage in such revamping – beyond cosmetic steps paying lip service to aid conditionality and under foreign policy requirements – the new authorities are arguably concerned with democratic reforms embracing the role of security services. On that front, the major challenge will be for partners to strike the proper tone, enable sustainability and avoid paternalistic approaches, for much can be achieved in merely making experience and expertise available to the new systems. Natural convergence would, in that respect, be more productive than lesson giving, export of roadmaps or readymade blueprints about what are perceived, by outsiders, as priorities. Change from within also applies to change from without on this set of issues.

To the extent that, when it comes to the Arab Spring, everyone is in a learning process, international experience must be calibrated with the current transformations. As United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recently noted: "Security sector reform is not palliative or short-term... It is a core element of multidimensional peacekeeping and peace building essential for addressing the roots of conflict and building the foundations of long-term peace and development." Specifically, this means factoring in the heterogeneity of the transformations and contextualizing reforms – for instance, Tunisia's focus is on the police, Egypt's on the military, Libya's on militias and, in time, Syria's on paramilitary groups. It also implies that efforts supporting reform processes need to adapt to these alterations. As the authorities leading the transitions and their partners are bound to discover, there will, in all likelihood, be frustration, resistance and at times belligerence. Long-entrenched systems and vested interests will not dissipate so easily nor will former actors turn into democrats overnight. Be that as it may, the current context is clearly a unique opportunity for genuine reform to be attempted and potentially realised.

The Arab Spring was born amid episodes of police brutality (Khaled Said's death in Egypt and Mohamed Bouazizi's immolation in Tunisia) and fuelled by a dual quest for dignity and justice. Transforming instruments formerly used to enable such brutality into ones to "serve and protect" the citizenry is, therefore, the primary benchmark of the success of the revolts. In the final analysis, legitimate and accepted security services are the best bulwark against relapse into authoritarianism. Good governance is ultimately about processes, and a reformed security sector whose own dynamics would have been revamped to reflect the new values and functions, as per new institutions anchored in representativeness and accountability, will go a long way in cementing the achievements of the Arab Spring. As reform of the security services goes, so will the transitions.

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