Reforming Arab security sectors

by Florence Gaub

In 2011, Arab security forces, long suspected to be inextricably linked to their respective regimes, once again became decisive political agents in their own right: agents of change, agents of repression and, in some cases, both. Their facilitation or suppression of democratic transitions has sparked a long-overdue debate on security sector reform in the Arab world. What are the main features of security sectors in the region? What are the main obstacles to reform? And why is this debate taking place only now?

Security in the Arab world ceased to be an object of scholarly debate in the 1970s after the routing of Arab armed forces in the Yom Kippur war. Corroborated by the poor performance of Arab military regimes in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Libya, Western political scientists shelved the modernisation theory which saw military involvement in politics as a normal step in the process of state development. Research on Arab security stopped. Although security sector assistance, such as American military aid to Egypt, continued in the decades that followed, it remained part of broader political calculations rather than being an end in itself.

A more complex understanding of security emerged with the end of the Cold War, although mainly in the context of the transitions taking place in Eastern Europe. 'Human security', a concept which expands the notion of security beyond pure military dimensions was developed in 1994, followed by Security Sector Reform (SSR) in 1998. Since then, SSR has failed to penetrate the predominantly autocratic systems of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) which remain resistant to change. This is in spite of the fact that the MENA is a region where military spending (in GDP percentage terms) is among the highest in the world and conflicts frequently occur.

What is SSR?

At the core of this concept are the two key dimensions of 'delivery of security' and 'accountability' (or control). Although often primarily seen as an attempt to introduce an element of human rights protection into the sector in question, SSR is also about the professionalisation of forces in order to improve the delivery of security to the people.

Ideally, the security sector is governed by laws and doctrines which define its tasks, its mandate, and its purpose. It is a professional field, controlled by certain elements of state and society and subject to codified law. In the triangle of state, people and security sector, the former – accountable to its people – controls the latter so that it effectively performs its duties. In the Arab world, the opposite is true: governments are

not accountable to the people, and the populace at large is the subject of security rather than the recipient. Moreover, the state tends not to trust the armed forces and therefore ensures that they remain weak in order to avoid the emergence of a potential political threat.

The main features of Arab security

It is important to keep in mind that Arab security sectors remain – in contrast to their European counterparts – distinct from one other since Arab integration (be it in terms of security, economy or politics) is very limited. Common standards and information-sharing are therefore rare. That said, although important differences exist between the 19 different Arab security sectors, they do share a number of core features.

Bloated institutions

With almost 10% of the Arab world's population employed in the security sector, most Arab forces are vastly overstaffed. This is largely the result of four factors. First, they perform a social function, providing employment opportunities in societies that often perform poorly economically. Second, certain countries (such as Algeria or Egypt) were influenced during their formative years by Soviet military doctrine which was manpower-intensive. Third, with most of the conflicts in the region to date having been infantry-based – be it counter-terrorism operations in Algeria or the full-scale war between Iraq and Iran – large armed forces are intended to act as a deterrent. Finally, in contrast to the small, highly professional post-modern armed forces popular in Europe, the Arab world's militaries remain modern in size and retain a preference for conscription (although, as in Europe, the era of conscription is slowly coming to an end).

Internal is external

The line between internal and external security is blurred in most of the states in question. Instead of co-existing as equal partners in the security sector, each with a specific role, the different security agents are ranked in a vertical hierarchy in which the armed forces are normally the dominant actors. The existence of multiple actors, overlapping or unclear responsibilities, and an uneven distribution of resources can lead to much confusion: exemplified by the almost identical uniforms often worn by both *external* and *internal* security forces. As an operational example of these puzzling overlaps, the attack on Iran's embassy in Beirut in November is being investigated by the Lebanese army, rather than the country's internal security forces.

Lack of clear purpose

The nature, scope, mission, and tasks of these forces are not always clear. At a more strategic level, few Arab states have national security strategies, thus diluting a common threat perception and damaging the professional work ethic in the security sector. While the mission statement of the police in the United Kingdom is 'to uphold the law fairly and firmly; to prevent crime; to pursue and bring to justice those who break the law; to keep the peace; to protect, help and reassure the community; and to be seen as to do this with integrity, common sense and sound judgment', its Tunisian equivalent singles out obedience to superiors as its defining feature. As a potential indicator of change, however, articles 206 and 207 of the new Egyptian draft constitution declare that the police are loyal to the people (essentially identical to the military's mission) and that they are expected to honour human rights.

A high degree of politicisation…

Most, though not all, Arab forces are politicised to some extent. In an internal conflict they are prone to take sides – be it in a constructive or destructive way. As a result, the political elites fear them as potential rivals and seek influence over – or purposefully weaken – the sector altogether by withholding funds, appointing cronies and meddling with promotions. This technique – called coup-proofing – usually leads to a further fragmentation of security agencies and an increase in overlapping responsibilities.
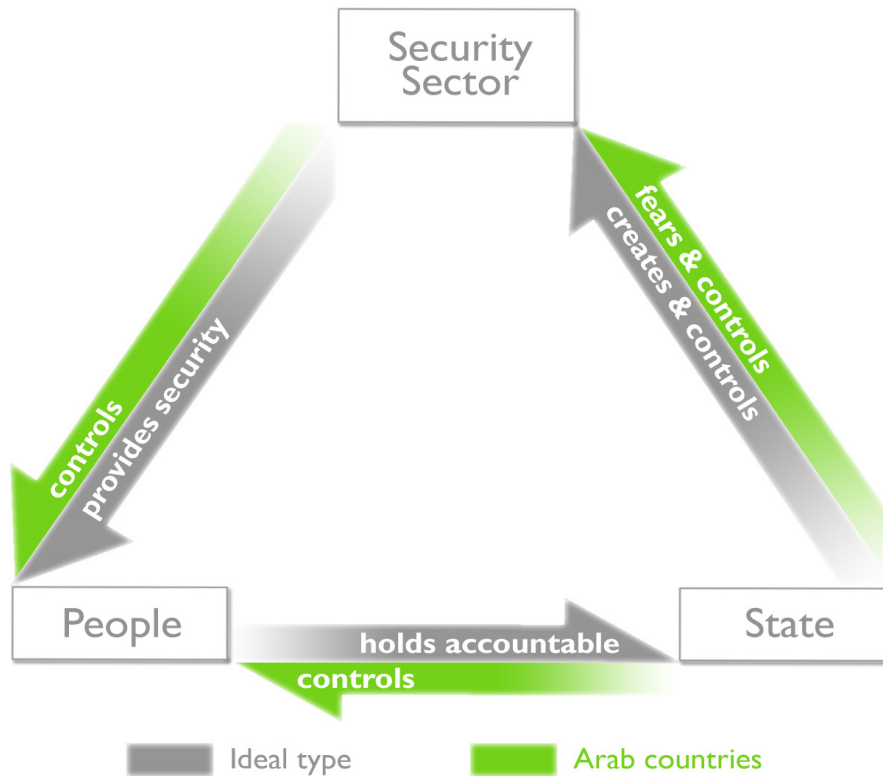
… and centralisation

Arab societies generally profess a preference for centralised structures, and this is particularly so in the case of the security sector. In practice, this means that local units are not accountable to their constituencies, and what's more, not even administratively attached to them – a setup which, in turn, facilitates human rights abuses.

Low crime rates

Despite the high frequency of political violence, Arab countries, on average, have the same homicide rates as European states. Egypt experiences only a fifth of America's homicide rate, and a twentieth of Brazil's. Statistically, Arab citizens are generally satisfied with security provisions in their states, with the exception of those in countries that frequently fall victim to politically motivated unrest, such as Iraq or Lebanon. Although often overlooked, this aspect is important to keep in mind: if the security apparatus does indeed deliver a sense of security, the rationale for change is sometimes difficult to communicate.

The security triangle

Security Sector

controls / *provides security*

fears & controls / *creates & controls*

People — holds accountable / controls → **State**

Ideal type / Arab countries

Unpopular, but still respected

Even in the face of large-scale human rights abuses, Arab forces still rank higher in popular perception than regular civilian/democratic institutions such as political parties and parliaments. The militaries of the Arab world enjoy particularly high levels of support, despite their rather poor performance on the battlefield. In this regard, SSR in the Arab world is not framed within a technical but more of an ideological and emotional debate. The relationship citizens have with state institutions is not necessarily driven by objective criteria, and this needs to be taken into account when re-thinking the security sector at large. Any attempt to introduce changes in the region will have to avoid vilifying the relevant institutions, and take into account that those elements which hold the security sector accountable in Europe – such as parliaments – are often perceived to be inefficient and divisive.

Challenges ahead

Political polarisation

Politicised security sectors are difficult to reform since they are seen, and see themselves, as political entities which belong to a certain 'camp'. Any withdrawal from politics will therefore be perceived by in- and outsiders as a loss of influence within the system. The key to depoliticising the security sector is its professionalisation: the clearer the standards for recruitment and promotion are, and the more a career path relies on meritocracy, the less nepotism and corruption can affect it – and the less individuals need to rely on networks outside the sector to rise through the ranks. A professional working culture and a clear mandate will not only protect the forces from political influence, but also improve its performance: it should not be forgotten that the violent clashes between security forces and civilians in the last two years have also been particular lethal because riot and crowd control are areas in which these forces lack both training and experience.

Internal resistance

While the security sectors in the Arab world are open to one of the two dimensions of SSR – such as the improvement of training standards and modernisation of equipment – the concept of accountability faces considerable resistance. When the Tunisian head of the intervention forces was put on trial and subsequently dismissed for having given the order to open fire on protesters, a country-wide strike broke out in protest, with the security forces refusing to be used as 'the scapegoats for the families of the victims'. Replacing a culture of impunity with a culture of accountability will therefore have to be gradual, and will not simply happen overnight.

Accountability has to be placed in a wider political context in order for it to be seen as regular tool in a democratic system, rather than as a form of punishment. Recent moves in Egypt, however, point to a backlash: the creation of a new Supreme Police Council, to be consulted on any law affecting the police, means that SSR will be run by this, potentially biased, new body.

Limited resources

Arab countries tend to devote, on average, 5.18% of their GDP to military expenditure (the global average is 2.52%), which exceeds the amounts allocated to health and education. In absolute terms, however, this amounts to relatively little. In addition, the procurement of modern weaponry takes precedence over police equipment or salaries. Internal security forces in particular are over-burdened, with police officers routinely working 12-hour shifts in domains as diverse as traffic control, monitoring of political opponents, and criminal investigation. A regular Tunisian police officer earns the equivalent of €180 a month, which is less than a local bus driver or a lower-level bank employee. The judicial police are so badly equipped in the way of modern technology that trials and convictions are generally based on confessions or witness accounts, not on evidence such as DNA testing or fingerprint analysis.

Weak democratic institutions

As SSR involves the establishment of democratic control of the security sector, effective institutions capable of carrying out this task are crucial. But given the lack of democratic experience of the relevant institutions in the region, this control has been either non-existent, limited, or just badly-exercised. Although some parliaments nominally do have defence and internal security committees (Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco do not), their power is de facto limited since they have no say in some key areas pertaining to security – such as the budget. In the case of Egypt, the armed forces enjoy such a degree of autonomy that in the new draft constitution they are not considered part of the executive branch, but constitute a branch in their own right – and are therefore not subject to any control whatsoever.

Another factor hampering the establishment of civilian control over the security sector is the fact that political parties or parliaments are generally not held in high regard. Given their lack of experience due to decades of authoritarianism and the lasting effects of of divisive tactics such as sectarianism, they will need to grow into their new role before they will be perceived by the public as legitimate agents of the people. In addition, control over the security sectors in newly democratic states more often than not results in the settling of scores rather than transitional justice.

Limited knowledge of SSR

While the concept of security sector reform has been partially embraced in Europe, it is practically unheard of in the Arab world. What it entails, why it is useful and necessary therefore needs to be properly communicated in order for it not to merely be seen as yet another verse of the European human rights 'discourse' detached from local reality. On the flip side, Arab security sectors remain a mystery to most outsiders due to their notorious lack of transparency.

Incomplete DDR

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) is a crucial post-conflict process which aims at clearing the security sector of the remnants of war – the dissolution of militia forces is usually not enough to mitigate their spoiler potential; battle-hardened young men must find their place in society if they are not to take up weapons again. Although Lebanon managed to embark on a partially successful DDR programme once its civil war ended in 1990, the continued existence of Hezbollah raises doubts concerning the state's monopoly of violence. In Libya, the complete absence of DDR has caused the security sector to descend into total chaos.

Ongoing turmoil

Reforming a security sector in times of insecurity arguably poses the toughest challenge. As Egyptian Interior Minister General Mohammed Ibrahim aptly put it last February: "I have 186 dead officers and more than 800 injured so far, petty officers preventing security chiefs from entering offices, a presidential palace being torched on a weekly basis by a hundred or so kids, and Egypt's largest government complex was blocked for four days, so: when will I have time to reform? When these political polemics end." In a chicken-and-egg logic, security, democratic transition, and stability all go hand in hand. It is therefore unlikely that the perfect conditions for SSR in the Arab world will present themselves any time soon.

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