

Security Sector Reform in the Southern Neighbourhood

A seminar organised by the EUISS in cooperation with IEMed and EuroMeSCo

REPORT

On 19 May 2017, as part of the outreach process in the context of the Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of July 2016 on Security Sector Reform (SSR), the EUISS convened a seminar on 'Security Sector Reform in the Southern Neighbourhood'. SSR in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) presents unique challenges: the authority of states is not always fully established, open conflict is widespread, resource constraints are severe, and non-state armed actors, as well as armed civilians complicate the picture. The Joint Communication recognises these difficulties and proposes a more comprehensive and adaptable approach to SSR in environments such as the Southern Neighbourhood. The seminar brought together practitioners from the field and EU officials in order to discuss a more tailored approach to SSR in the region. As underscored in the opening remarks, the region faces far-reaching security challenges, and while the EU has earmarked over €1 billion for security-related projects, more expertise is needed to ensure the appropriate allocation of resources and a proper evaluation of the programmes.

The first session was devoted to law enforcement, with focus on detention and criminal justice. Penal reform in many countries in the MENA is a necessity: speakers emphasised, for instance, that prisons in the region are highly overcrowded. Some participants suggested the MENA's penitentiary infrastructure need more investment in order to improve conditions and compliance with human rights standards. Countering this view, other panellists argued that rather than building new facilities, countries in the region should be encouraged to reform their outdated legal frameworks and review punishments for certain crimes, including for the possession of drugs. Excessive prison sentences, the rare use of probation, and ineffective crime prevention measures were underscored as the main reasons behind the inefficiency of the current systems.

Furthermore, participants stressed the importance of local ownership and the participation of civil society in EU SSR projects. They also noted the need to invest more in the areas of training, communications, and human rights, as well as the need to ensure the transparency of the judicial and penal systems. Speakers highlighted internal resistance to change as the main obstacle to reform in the realm of law enforcement. As a possible way ahead, some argued that the EU could engage in softer topics which would serve as entry points, such as post-release integration and rehabilitation.



Speakers also discussed the coordination challenges among donors, as well as institutions involved in criminal justice and penal system. A final point was raised about the links between crime and terrorism: prisons often serve as an incubator for terrorism, where injustices highly increase the risk of radicalisation.

The second session focused on the work of police forces in the region and improving the conditions for the police. The speakers moved away from a more strategic discussion towards a more tactical approach, discussing the various challenges faced by police officers. Speakers called for greater flexibility in EU-funded projects (by taking into account a longer-term perspective when designing a financial timeframe, for example). An additional point was raised about the need to improve coordination with other donors, as well as local and state authorities to ensure that funding is channelled to support larger-scale strategic planning efforts – which are often already in place when the project starts. It was underscored that police reform should not only focus on training, but also on improving the working conditions of the police (by introducing a human-rights compliant shifts system and transparent recruitment mechanisms, for instance), and streamlining new processes.

It was further argued that the EU and all external actors should take into account the political landscape, as well as the emotions involved in reforming the security sector. Building on this point, panellists agreed that the word ‘reform’ itself often carries negative connotations in the region, and that the public and security forces could see it as a way of implying that no improvements have been made so far. At this point, participants suggested different words that could be used instead, such as security sector modernisation, development and governance. It was also argued that, when compared to the military, police forces in the region are viewed poorly, since citizens remain in close contact with the police throughout their life (in some countries, such as Egypt, official certificates are issued at police stations), while the army remains a symbol of a country’s strength and unity. Other speakers discussed the growing crime rate in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and its impact on increasing a perception of insecurity, including among police officers, who are often the victims of violence.

Drawing on these remarks, some participants cautioned against extensive information campaigns on police reform which are not coupled with visible improvements in service delivery. At this point, speakers discussed projects such as the creation of an ideal police station, which could serve as a standard model and provide assessment criteria for measuring reforms. Here it was put to the audience that obstruction to reform often comes from middle-ranking officials, often as a result of internal power struggles and out of fear that change could affect their personal career development. There was also a broad agreement that there is a need for more holistic and strategic approach to police reform (both at ministerial and police level), including the review of legislation (in the case of Palestine, the security sector is dominated by the military, which makes any reform much harder to introduce). Participants underscored the inherent challenges to police reform such as the politicisation of – and the high turnover in – the leadership of judicial and police institutions. The panellists also argued for greater transparency in promotion mechanisms and improved pension schemes to balance the number of low- and



high-ranking police officers (at the moment, police forces are often top heavy). As a possible way ahead, some argued that the support to SSR in the region should be based both on a top-down and bottom-up approach: more funds could be allocated to budget support operations rather than equipment and coordination, and it would be more efficient if this was led by beneficiaries rather than donors.

The third session was devoted to regional challenges in relation to border control. First, participants discussed the political landscape following the Arab Spring and the ongoing conflicts and resulting humanitarian crises in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. In the whole region, there are around 35 million migrants living outside of their place of origin, with roughly 16 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Due to numerous security risks (extremism, terrorism, smuggling), countries in the region have increasingly resorted to closing borders in the last few years, often putting people seeking international protection (refugees) in the same category as migrants. In this context, it was argued that security concerns have become the main factors driving border management: local authorities should focus to a larger extent on *managing* population flows, rather than limiting them. It was put to the audience that regional governments should think beyond improving efficiency and procedures, and take into account the critical humanitarian situation. Other speakers highlighted the need for projects to be designed with an in-depth understanding of the local context: creating new institutions tasked with border management could disrupt existing processes, especially if not introduced as part of a long-term strategic plan. Furthermore, it was claimed that the border management challenges in the region are going to increase even if the Syrian crisis ends, as peace is likely to improve the mobility of populations who lack prospects at home.

At this point, the discussion turned to the situation in Libya, where the reality of border management is particularly challenging, with control often in the hands of local tribes instead of the central authorities. Speakers suggested programmes in Libya should take into account the effects of border control on local populations, which often benefit from centuries-old smuggling routes. Given that it was argued that cross-border trade has provided a livelihood for trans-border communities for years, stricter border control management should be coupled with long-term support to local populations, for instance through vocational training and agricultural development. Other panellists voiced their concern regarding the EU's approach to human smuggling in the region, suggesting that while *Operation Sophia* did save lives, it did not stop smuggling networks or affect their business model. It was also suggested that the recognition of the Government of National Accord (GNA) by General Haftar would not change the situation on the ground, since both centres of power rely on local militias and tribes, which represent their own interests. Turning back to a regional perspective, participants recommended that the EU and other donors should better express their expectations and conditions of support, thereby improving donor-beneficiary communication. A final point was raised on the need to closely follow the situation in other burdened countries in the region, including Tunisia.

The fourth and final session of the seminar was devoted to counter-terrorism in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood. First, the audience was informed that new Council



Conclusions on counterterrorism are likely to come out in June: while they are expected to reiterate the EU's current approach to the subject, they will be accompanied by new geographic and topical focuses. It was further underscored, that Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies which follow a preventive approach to counterterrorism are receiving increased attention and funding from the EU. They include various programmes which attempt to tackle the push and pull factors related to radicalisation and recruitment to terrorist organisations, and often focus on excluded groups, such as religious minorities, unemployed youths, prisoners, IDPs and refugees. In the context of the Arab Spring, panellists pointed to the fact that unfulfilled expectations led to increased scepticism about existing mechanisms of political participation, thereby contributing to youth radicalisation.

Speakers stressed the specific challenges in the context of CVE, recalling the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of CVE as compared to a military approach. Additionally, the panellists suggested that tackling terrorism with a CVE approach forces governments which cooperate with the EU to introspect (especially with regard to marginalised populations), which can pose additional challenges: tensions often emerge between EU-supported civil society groups and state authorities. A discussion was held about the lack of continuity and follow-up on counterterrorism strategies when governments or administrations change. With this in mind, the lack of communication between institutions, international bodies and donors often results in a duplication of work. Furthermore, it was argued that any CVE projects should be coupled with a broader approach and take into account the socio-economic context in the region. Final points were made about the negative perception of some EU-funded projects which are labelled as CVE, as well as a civil society–state dialogue on counterterrorism, which could be further encouraged in the Southern Neighbourhood.

