

AFTER THE SPRING: REFORMING ARAB ARMIES

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The Arab Spring was widely hailed as a popular uprising against authoritarian dictatorships; but it also had a military dimension in both the protesters' targets and the role of the armed forces in facilitating, or obstructing, regime change. All the challenged regimes had a military background, but the military forces of two of them—the Egyptian and the Tunisian—joined the demonstrators, two disintegrated in the face of popular protest—Libya's and Yemen's—and only one, Syria's, stood (and still stands) firmly with the regime.

This monograph seeks to assess the challenges these forces are facing when it comes to reform in the near- and mid-term future, and focuses on the structural aspects of reform the Arab Spring forces would benefit from; it identifies seven features which need to be addressed when attempting Arab military reform in the countries affected by large-scale unrest in 2011. These are: an unclear mandate, over-politicization, lack of civilian oversight, a challenging ongoing security situation, limited resources, pockets of paramilitary activity, and, in parts, lack of an institutional perception of the need to reform.

An Unclear Mandate.

The majority of Arab states do not have a nationally defined security strategy which provides an overarching plan to achieve one or more goals under conditions of uncertainty. In several states, strategy is confused with doctrine which defines a standard set of maneuvers, kinds of troops, and weapons employed as a default approach for defense against an attack.

The absence of such a document has crucial consequences: inefficient spending of an already limited defense budget, inadequate training and leadership conceptualization, doctrines detached from the strategic goal, incoherent prioritization of resources and personnel, to just name a few. Blurring of purpose is found not only in matters of national defense; it exists at the security level at large. In addition, Arab military forces take on internal security tasks. This is the result of a horizontal rather than vertical division of labor between external and internal security forces.

Overpoliticization.

Arab armed forces have more often than not played a political role since independence; coups d'état are a frequent feature in the Arab world. Events since 2011 have indeed shown that the Arab armed forces are still very much involved in their national politics—this is a concern when it comes to security sector reform (SSR). It not only negatively affects the establishment and consolidation of democratic systems, but it equally has a detrimental effect on the armed forces' capacity. It distracts from the military's main purpose—defense of the nation—and thereby impedes cohesion, command and control structures, and leadership; and invites corruption into the military.

Lack of Oversight.

Civilian oversight of the security sector in Arab countries is either nonexistent or mostly malign rather than benign. More often than not, it consists of deliberate techniques aiming at weakening those aspects of

the armed forces which could be used in a coup rather than ensuring its maximum professional capacity with a minimum of political threat. Civilian oversight, as it is at its most effective, includes parliamentary oversight, transparent resource allocation and management in the defense sector, and clear legal as well as institutional frameworks. Most of these aspects are missing in the Arab world. Where institutions are weak and nepotism is frequent, decisionmaking structures pertaining to personnel, strategy development, and even arms procurement are extremely vulnerable to political interference. This is particularly the case in highly hierarchical systems such as in the smaller Gulf States, where decisionmaking is highly personalized. Relevant bureaucracies, in particular defense ministries, therefore, need to be reformed along with the armed forces and be decoupled from the political structure.

Ongoing Security Challenges.

A large majority of Arab countries are facing significant ongoing security challenges impeding reform efforts. These range from domestic turmoil to counterinsurgency, terrorism, civil war in Syria, and post-conflict insecurity. Undertaking reforms in such a context is arguably difficult. As security forces are overstretched, crime rates have gone up as well: Egyptian homicide rates have tripled since the 2011 uprising, kidnappings and car thefts have quadrupled, and armed robberies have increased 12-fold. In addition to this, terrorism is on the rise, given the self-destruction of security agents in several Arab countries. SSR, or reconstruction, is severely restricted by such conditions which limit time, resources, and personnel; where SSR has taken place successfully – most notably in Eastern Europe and the Balkans – security conditions were either stable enough, or security provisions were ensured by an external force. Neither is the case in those Arab countries facing the most pressing need for SSR.

Financial Constraints.

By and large, Arab security sectors operate in a highly restrained resource environment. The reason for this is that, with the exception of the Gulf States, most Arab nations struggle financially. In North Africa and the Levant, economic performance has improved over the last decades, but it is still low: Egypt's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is at U.S.\$3,112 (in comparison, the American GDP per capita is at U.S.\$49,922). High poverty rates, corruption, and low

foreign direct investment result in underperforming institutions at all levels, including those in the security sector. What is worse, dysfunctional institutions and lack of security impede economic development significantly. Simply put, Arab security sectors underperform in part due to harsh economic conditions, which, in turn, exist in part because the security sector underperforms. SSR does not need to be obstructed solely by financial limits – but more often than not, side effects of low economic development fuel other aspects impeding such reforms, such as corruption, terrorism, and organized crime.

Paramilitary Activity.

Many of Arab states have trouble asserting the monopoly of violence over their territory, which affects SSR considerably. These pockets of paramilitary activity hollow out not only existing provisions for civilian control and rule of law – since they operate outside the state system – they also disrupt other efforts related to SSR. Nonstate violence affects economic development even more than state-induced violence because it is less predictable; it weakens the state not only in its credibility, but is also a symptom of state weakness in the first place. The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) of Iraqi, Egyptian, Libyan, and Lebanese groups is more often than not part of a broader political problem rather than merely a technical process. Therefore, solving this issue always requires a broad and holistic approach; political solutions hence have to precede the DDR process.

Institutional Opposition.

One of the main problems in Arab SSR is that the security institutions themselves do not perceive the need for change. Resistance from within the bodies concerned makes reform attempts not only more difficult, it can derail the process altogether. One reason for opposition to change is the fact that the delivery of security services in the countries concerned is satisfactory – or at least used to be. Before the Arab Spring, homicide rates in Egypt were only a fifth of America's, and a 20th of Brazil's. The rationale for change is not always evident if the delivery of services seems adequate.

According to a survey conducted in 12 Arab countries, 67 percent of respondents were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with security in their home countries. The institutions themselves fare surprisingly well, too. In such a context, the need for institutional change needs to be articulated carefully.

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