

Security Sector Reform and the Arab Spring

OMAR ASHOUR

-
- **What is the role of the Security Sector in triggering the Arab-Majority Uprisings?**
 - **What kinds of obstacles is Security Sector Reform facing?**
 - **What steps need to be taken in order to facilitate Security Sector Reform?**
-

THE SPARK OF ARAB-MAJORITY UPRISINGS

The Arab-Majority Uprisings¹ were principally sparked by the brutality of the security sector in almost every single country where they occurred. In Tunisia, Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation, following an insult by a policewoman in December 2010, triggered the uprising. In Egypt, the June 2010 murder of Internet activist Khaled Said by two policemen, followed by the brutality of the police during the fraudulent parliamentary elections of November-December 2010, set the uprising's context. In Libya, the arrest in February 2011 of Fathy Terbil – a human rights lawyer who had represented the families of the victims of the June 1996 Abu Selim Prison massacre, in which more than 1,236 political prisoners were gunned down by Muammar al-Qaddafi's security forces – sparked that country's armed revolution. In Syria, abuses committed in March 2011 by Assad's security forces, which included the pulling out of the fingernails of children and teenagers in Deraa, triggered the protests that ig-

nited that country's ongoing armed uprising. In many ways, the Arab-Majority Uprisings were a region-wide reaction against violations committed by the security services and a quest for holding them accountable.²

Throughout the decades prior to the 2011 revolutions, many Arab security establishments behaved more like organized crime syndicates than professional security services. Concepts such as transitional justice, human rights, human security, democratic control, elected civilian oversight, and accountability were absent from the lexicons of Arab interior and defense ministries, and any attempts to meaningfully introduce them were met with repression. Egyptian activists unsurprisingly chose to stage the protests that initiated Egypt's uprising on January 25 - Egypt's "Police Day," intended to "honor" the security services.

Due to the legacy, the demand for security sector reform became immediate objectives of most revolutionary and reformist forces, regardless of ideological or political affiliations. In Egypt, between 2011 and

1. This term is more accurate than the "Arab Spring" or "Arab revolutions" given the participation of non-Arabs in the uprisings, the different transition trajectories, and the controversy around casting some of the 2010-2011 events as "revolutions."

2. Omar Ashour, "History's Lessons: Dismantling Egypt's Security Agency." *BBC Online*, 9 March 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12679632>

OMAR ASHOUR

Dr. Omar Ashour is a Senior Lecturer in Security Studies at the University of Exeter and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Brookings Doha Centre. He is the author of *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movement* and recently "Salute and Slaughter: Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt." Dr Ashour previously served as a senior consultant for the United Nations on security sector reform, counter-terrorism and de-radicalization issues. He can be reached at O.Ashour@exeter.ac.uk or [@DrOmarAshour](https://twitter.com/DrOmarAshour)

2013, activists, scholars, parliamentarians, officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international governmental organizations (IGOs) proposed several initiatives and plans aiming at security sector reform (SSR). In early 2013, a five phases, ten-year-long proposed plan was submitted by the author of this article to the Presidential Adviser on Security Issues, General Emad Hussein,³ and the National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee of the Egyptian Upper-House (Consultative Council), which is partly composed of retired army and police officers, among other parliamentarians. None of these initiatives reached an execution stage, due to various political, institutional and bureaucratic hurdles. Following the military coup of July 2013, the probability of implementing any security sector reform initiatives became almost negligible.⁴ The political will and material of interests of the new military-dominated regime have not reconciled yet with reform processes. This was reflected in the following statement by General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi in a widely disseminated lecture to army commanders:

“What happened with the police in the last two years engendered a new environment. The police officer would stand with you [army officers] to a certain point. He can shoot, use bombs, tear gas, shotguns. But if someone dies, he may get tried. This [due process] should never happen again. And the protestors now [should] know it.”⁵

Despite the gravity of the security violations and the intensity of the pro-democracy efforts, the January uprising in Egypt failed to bring about successful security sector reform processes. In Libya, the situation deteriorated into an armed conflict between the pro-revolution forces and pro-continuity ones. In Tunisia, some progress has been made on the SSR front, however it fell far from the expectations of the pro-uprising forces.

3. The former head of Egyptian Police Academy.

4. Omar Ashour, “Egypt: Back to Generals’ Republic?” *BBC Online*, 21 August 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23780839> Yezid Sayigh, “Arab Police Reform: Returning to Square One.” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 9 January 2014. <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/01/09/arab-police-reform-returning-to-square-one/h3bh>

5. See the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rF8Yz8J3MHI>

SECURITY SECTOR REFORM: BETWEEN FAILURES AND LIMITED REFORMS

Based on the experience of SSR initiatives and attempts in the “Arab Spring” countries, eight major hurdles to successful SSR attempts were identified:

- **Extreme political polarisation** between pro-change forces (whether reformists or revolutionaries) leading to the politicisation of the SSR process as well as to political violence.
- **Internal resistance** and spoiler games played by anti-reform factions within the security sector.
- **Limited capacity and resources** of the newly elected governments.
- **Weak democratic institutions** that failed to contain the political polarisation and limit the political conflict to the institutional realms.
- **Limited knowledge** and experience of SSR requirements among stakeholders.
- **Limited pro-reform regional support**, mainly among democracies and pro-reform states
- **Aggressive anti-reform regional patrons**, mainly among repressive autocracies bent on maintaining the dominance of an authoritarian status-quo in the region.
- **Incomplete demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR)** (mainly in Libya and Yemen; and if the Assad regime falls, Syria will face a similar challenge)

The extreme political polarisation per se, should not be a major hurdle to SSR. The diversity in the political spectrum, the heated debates, the intense arguments and the general difference of opinion should be celebrated as gains of the pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. This freedom of opinion and expression should be aimed for in other Arab-majority countries. However, some of the ramifications of such polarisation have negatively affected SSR processes. In all of the aforementioned transitioning countries, political and criminal violence is cheap and effective and the risks of using violence are low. On the one hand, ministries of interior are responsible for defending elected state institutions, constantly under attack by various violent groups, including the

groups affiliated with the losers in the electoral process or the losers from the whole transition process. On the other hand, if any of these protestors were killed or injured, the ministries of interior will be accused of brutality. Add to that the limited experience in non-lethal riot control tactics. The other consequence of the extreme polarisation is the politicization of the SSR process by rival politicians. On talk-shows, political figures call for SSR to be implemented and for police brutality to end. At the same time, the very same political figures praise security generals known for their support of brutal tactics, mainly when they crackdown on their political rivals. As shown in other comparative cases, the unity of political forces on the very particular demands of de-politicising the security sector and civilian control of the armed forces is key for the success of both SSR and, overall, democratization.

A second challenge is the strong resistance within the ranks of the Arab security sector to several critical elements of the reform process. Many of the Arab Ministries of Interior commanders perceive the reform process as only increasing the material capacities and the budgets of their respective institutions. Whereas this is a part of the process, exclusively aiming to enhance the performance of the sectors, other elements of SSR are usually unwelcomed and therefore blocked, especially in the Egyptian case. These elements include effective civilian oversight, procedures ensuring transparency, promotion criteria on merit basis (as opposed to year of graduation), and even revisions of the police academies' curricula (though there is lesser resistance to that element compared to others).⁶ Accountability in particular faces strong resistance.⁷

A third challenge is the limited capacity and resources. The post-revolution, democratically elected governments in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia are faced with serious economic challenges. In early 2013, Egypt's public debt exceeds EGP 1310 billion (US\$188

billions), or 85% of its GDP.⁸ Though much lesser public debts exist in Tunisia (15.8% of GDP) and Libya (4.2% of the GDP),⁹ their governments still suffer from limited resources to allocate for a thorough SSR process. The economic crisis in Egypt, however, did not prevent the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) from increasing the bonuses of policemen by 300% in the 2012 budget to "enhance the security performance."¹⁰ It also did not prevent the post-coup al-Sisi regime from increasing the official budget of the Ministry of Interior to \$4.1 billion and to buy 50,000 news pieces of weaponry.¹¹ There is limited public information on how such resources are spent and what the outcomes of such spending are. This undermines both transparency and accountability.

A related, fourth and fifth, challenges are the weak democratic institutions and the limited knowledge and experience of SSR requirements among many of the stakeholders in the process. In Egypt, the lower house of the parliament (People's Assembly), elected following the revolution, was dissolved by the SCAF following a Constitutional Court verdict that deemed parts of the electoral law unconstitutional in June 2012. The Upper House (Consultative Council) was dissolved following the military coup of July 2013. What was clear in the dissolved lower-house and upper-houses is the big gap between the revolutionary demands of eradicating torture, ending impunity and reflecting transparency and the limited knowledge of how to translate such demands into policies and procedures of SSR.¹² A general understanding of such limitations in Tunisia led the government and the Ministry of

6. This tentative conclusion is based on Omar Ashour's observations, interactions and meetings with police officers involved in SSR initiatives (both official and unofficial) between May 2011 and April 2013.

7. Ibid.

8. *Jumhuriyyat Misr al-Arabiyya* [Arab Republic of Egypt]. *Al-Bayan al-Mali 'an Mashru' al-Muwazana al-'amma lil dawla 2013-2014* [Financial Statement for the General Budget Project of the State for year 2013-2014]. Cairo, 2013, p. 1.

9. *Al-Jumhuriyya al-Tunisiya – Wizarat al-Maliyya* [The Tunisian Republic – Finance Ministry]. *Taqrir Hawl Mashru' Mizaniyat al-Dawla li Sanat 2013 [Report on the Draft Budget for the Year 2013]*. Tunis, 2012, p. 97.

10. *Jumhuriyyat Misr al-Arabiyya, al-Bayan*, p. 21.

11. Abdulrhman Aboughait, "Sisi calls for Austerity, and the government increase the interior's budget," *Al Jazeera*, last modified March 11, 2014 <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/3/11>

12. This conclusion is based on Omar Ashour's observations, interactions and meetings with MPs involved in SSR initiatives (from both the upper and lower chambers) between February 2012 and April 2013.

Interior to collaborate with an international organization and several SSR experts as early as July 2011.¹³ In Egypt, similar attempts were foiled; most notably an attempt by the presidential establishment in the fall of 2013, that sought international assistance in SSR.

The sixth and seventh challenges are quite straightforward. The seventh challenge is not that different from the European monarchies rallying to put an end to the French Revolution. In attempt to defend a regional status-quo whose main feature is authoritarianism, several regional actors did not perceive SSR processes, as well as any meaningful democratisation

13. Larayedh, Ali (Former Interior Minister of Tunisia), Conversation with Omar Ashour, Geneva. 22 November 2012.

process, as beneficial to their interests; more as threats to their regimes' security and stability. As a result, most of the pro-continuity forces in Egypt and other Arab Uprising countries had strong, wealthy and aggressive regional backers which bolstered their stances, morally, logistically, financially as well as by intensive propaganda campaigns of deception and misinformation. On the other hand, most of western democracies and regional ones were hesitant to commit or to assist in a time-consuming, resource-draining, no-holds-barred conflict. This stance differed from the support granted to Eastern European transitions during the "third wave" of democratisation, and thus weakened most of pro-change and pro-reform Arab forces.