

THE ARAB SPRING: A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY FOR SECURITY SECTOR REFORM IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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Since December 2010, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been hit by waves of civil unrest, demonstrations, and revolutions, which have been harbingers of an era of unprecedented and profound change in the political landscape of the region. The ouster of the decades-long authoritarian rules of leaders like Ben Ali, Mubarak, and eventually Gaddafi certainly symbolizes the opening of a new page for the region's political structure. The reform of the military, police, judicial systems, and intelligence services is crucial in achieving broader goals of establishing durable peace, stability, and healthy democracies. Especially against the background of massive human rights abuses committed by police, military, and intelligence officers before and during the revolutions, the Security Sector Reform (SSR) emerges as a vital agenda item for the MENA countries undergoing profound political change.

As noted in by the OECD Development Assistance Committee's guideline document - *Handbook on Security System Reform* (2007:5), security sector is defined as core security actors (e.g. armed forces, police, gendarmerie, border guards, customs and immigration, and intelligence and security services); security management and oversight bodies (e.g. ministries of defense and internal affairs, financial management bodies and public complaints commissions); justice and law enforcement institutions (e.g. the judiciary, prisons, prosecution services, traditional justice systems); and non-statutory security forces (e.g. private security companies, guerrilla armies and private militia). As the old and intransigent structures of the past regimes are being overthrown, this is a golden opportunity for reforming the militaries, police forces, and the intelligence services of these countries and bringing them under civilian oversight. This should not only help avoid repeating the mistakes of the past but also help establish legitimacy of these institutions in the eyes of the local populations.

Furthermore, none of these countries have previous experience with democracy. Therefore, it will take time to instill a culture of democracy in these countries. It is important to do away with the authoritarian legacies in the institutions of the security and justice sectors, as most of these institutions were once under the control of authoritarian leaders. Establishing accountability, strengthening the rule of law, and deterring future abuse of power by the officials of security and judicial sectors are vital for ensuring stability, development, justice and democracy in the region. In order to accomplish this, first of all, the old security institutions should be dismantled. But even in Egypt, which is the closest of all MENA countries to establishing a democratic regime, the military is reluctant to give up its power.

Once the former security institutions are dismantled, then all former members of the police organizations, intelligence services, and militaries should undergo a careful process of vetting. Those who are found guilty of committing crimes against humanity and violating human rights should be prosecuted accordingly. As a further step, a new generation of officers should be trained based on democratic values and human rights principles.

When establishing new security infrastructures, the civilian oversight becomes an important issue for ensuring successful SSR and democratization processes. The new ministries of defense and internal affairs should operate transparently and adhere to democratic principles. In doing so, while it is important to respect the local ownership principle, establish cooperation with civil society organizations and local populations, and cultivate a culture of transparency and accountability; the international community should also play an active role in the SSR process.

One such vital actor in this process is the European Union (EU). The 2003 *European Security Strategy* (ESS) established SSR as an objective in the EU's overall security framework. The Union already started playing an important role on that front. For instance, during the opening of an EU office in Benghazi, Baroness Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, confirmed the EU's commitment to the SSR and institution-building processes in Libya.

Besides the EU, Turkey, as a majority Muslim yet secular country, is another effective partner in providing SSR assistance to the MENA countries. Due to its geographical and cultural proximity to the MENA countries, Turkish involvement can help boost EU's effectiveness in rendering SSR assistance to the countries under transition. Turkey's religious, cultural, and historical affiliation has already proven to be a priceless asset in the NATO missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, as well as in the EU missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. As indicated by various public opinion surveys conducted in the MENA region, the majority of the people have favorable opinion towards Turkey. Therefore, Turkey's involvement in this process can help the process of democratization and reform.

While only time will show whether the SSR process will be a successful endeavor in the MENA region, one thing that is for sure is that the current transitional period represents a golden opportunity for the countries in the region to revamp their security and judicial institutions and conduct successful SSR. The international community, policymakers and pundits alike should remember that achieving success in this realm will take time and hence require patience and serious commitment of resources on the part of all actors involved.