



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

PEACEBRIEF¹⁹⁷

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Regional Security through Inclusive Reform in the Maghreb and the Sahel

Summary

- In the countries of North and West Africa, few mechanisms exist for security officials and their civil society counterparts to work in concert to address the critical reform and security agendas.
- Regional knowledge sharing and collective problem solving can generate broader interest in and political support for the region’s reform agendas.
- One way to further the regional reform agenda is to improve citizen-police interactions, which can improve the lingering trust deficit and make the police more effective. Overcoming poor perceptions—of both police and citizens—is a key step in building community-security partnerships to create effective and responsive security institutions.
- Community-security partnerships are a valuable mechanism to balance the competing demands for security and reform and to redefine the role and purpose of security and justice sector institutions in an inclusive and transparent way in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.
- Community-security partnerships affirm the state’s role in the provision of security while acknowledging the communities’ critical role in the process.

Introduction

Throughout the Maghreb and the Sahel, governments are struggling to manage a security environment that has been fundamentally transformed by the events of the Arab Spring. Escalating violence in Egypt and Tunisia risks the destabilization of already weakened governments, while ongoing conflicts in Libya and Mali have created safe havens for regional terrorist organizations and transnational criminal groups. Foreign fighters move rapidly across regional borders, sharing their routes with traffickers of guns, drugs, and people. The combination and magnitude of these threats pose an unprecedented challenge to the region’s security forces and the ministries that oversee them.¹ Senior security officials are searching for answers to the region’s security conundrum: how to strengthen their existing institutions to protect against internal and external threats while also meeting the growing demands of their populations for real and meaningful security sector reform.²

The events of the Arab Spring ushered in a new set of expectations about the role and purpose of the security and justice sectors in the countries across the region and empowered their populations to demand fundamental reform. Pre-Arab Spring security institutions, which in places like Tunisia and Libya were designed for regime protection not public service, became the focal point for demands

to create security and justice institutions that could protect the lives and livelihoods of citizens and deliver justice in accordance with democratic principles and the rule of law. Elsewhere, in places like Mali, Niger, and Senegal, ongoing security sector reform efforts were given renewed attention to enhance the capacity of existing institutions and forces through good governance, effective oversight, and respect for human rights. Joined by a host of new institutions created in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, civil society organizations in many of these countries began, with different levels of success, to engage with their governments to promote reform.

Throughout the region, however, the efforts on the part of both governments to secure their territories and civil society organizations to create accountable and transparent security institutions have proceeded almost wholly divorced from each other. Few mechanisms exist for security officials and their civil society counterparts to work in concert, either within their countries or with counterparts across the region. A variety of factors have stymied engagement, including pre-Arab Spring laws that restrict communication between security forces and populations and legacies of mistrust resulting from past abuses. On the part of security forces, engagement is limited by a lack of community outreach skills and persistent perceptions that civil society groups—and citizens more broadly—remain threats. The absence of community-security engagement has also contributed to the perception that effective security and meaningful reform cannot be achieved in parallel. As security conditions have worsened in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, even government proponents of reform have begun arguing that security must come first. Populations across the region have found that the doors to reform—and to their participation in shaping that reform—are increasingly closed.

Key Insights

Security officials and their civil society counterparts from North and West Africa have begun to work in concert to address the region's shared challenges. The following are key insights resulting from that engagement.

Addressing the Trust Deficit

Remarkably, both government and civil society participants agree that building trust between the public and the security services—the police, gendarmerie, and other security forces and the ministries that oversee them—is critical for improving the provision of security and realizing the region's democratic aspirations. Both security forces and civil society also agree that trust is largely absent. "Trust doesn't need to be rebuilt because it didn't exist," a senior security official explained. "We need to create it."³ Tunisian police officers go even further, suggesting that the lack of trust is actively eroding police capacity. Although police-citizen interactions on the street are often tense and sometimes violent, by working in concert with national and regional counterparts, the initial mistrust gave way to intense conversations and even problem solving. From both sides of the debate, participants identified the need for new training and communication protocols, as well as legal reform to remove the prohibitions on community-security engagement. "We are all immobilized," a senior security official explained, "until the issues from our past are addressed so that we can move forward."⁴

Changing Poor Perceptions

One way to address the lingering trust deficit is to focus on the fact that police, in the words of one officer, "are citizens too."⁵ In numerous exchanges, police officers explained that they shared the frustration of civil society about the slow pace of reform. "We are afraid to act," one participant explained, "because citizens have attacked us." The security forces are hamstrung because the rules and regulations that govern their behavior are largely unchanged. "We don't have the authority to act

differently.”⁶ Across the region, police officers recognize that their practices and procedures are at odds with democratic and human rights standards. Populations have few opportunities to engage with police officers, which furthers the perception of police officers as instruments of the old security apparatus. Participants from both sides of the debate acknowledge that initiatives to humanize the police can go a long way toward changing poor perceptions. Creating new opportunities for police-citizen engagement can also shift police perceptions of citizens—not as threats but as partners. Overcoming poor perceptions is key to building community-security partnerships and using them to shape reform initiatives to enhance both effectiveness and responsiveness to citizen security needs.

Prioritizing Police Reform

Reforming police institutions remains a top priority across the region. An official from Benin emphasized that citizens are unlikely to partner with the police if police practices do not improve. “People will provide us information,” he explained, “but they won’t continue to do so if the security services don’t listen and don’t care.”⁷ A senior gendarmerie commander from the Sahel noted that “we need to improve how our officers are trained so that they know how to engage with citizens.”⁸ Another agreed. “We cannot keep promoting officers who behave badly.”⁹ Initiatives to improve citizen-police interactions, not just at high profile events but also in day-to-day interactions, are one way to further the regional reform agenda. In addition to improving the lingering trust deficit, such changes can also make the police more effective.

The idea that better engagement with citizens can make police more effective is not widely recognized by security officials across the region. However, the benefits of enhanced engagement became apparent as government and civil society actors, working in concert, weighed how best to address the challenge. They identified a set of ideal attributes to guide recruitment, training, and promotion of the region’s security officers. In addition to technical and physical skills, it included new skills like communication and listening, as well as fundamental values such as patriotism, loyalty, integrity, and faithfulness. “We cannot hope to succeed in our reform efforts,” a senior security official from Benin explained, “if we don’t bring in the right people. New procedures and new rules are not enough. It has to be about people.”¹⁰ A security official from Mauritania suggested that knowledge about human rights was a basic necessity from which the other skills and attitudes would derive.¹¹ A participant from Niger concluded that these skills, attributes, and knowledge should be considered “professional obligations.”¹²

The Benefits of Inclusive Regional Reform

Closer coordination among border security forces in the Maghreb and Sahel is increasingly being recognized as critical to managing the region’s security challenges.¹³ More recently, there has been a growing recognition that border management can be more effective if forces work with border communities and adopt community sensitive approaches. What is less widely recognized is that the twin agendas of reform and security could also benefit from a regional approach. This is especially critical amidst an increasingly complex security environment in which the proliferation of cross-regional threats could eradicate the reform progress made throughout much of the Maghreb and Sahel. By working with regional counterparts, government officials, operational commanders, security forces, and civil society organizations all stand to gain from sharing best practices and lessons learned from reform initiatives elsewhere in the region.

Additionally, change agents in critical institutions may have few allies to support their reform agendas. As insecurity spreads, these reformers may face significant pressure to curtail or pause their efforts. A regional approach links these change agents—both within countries and across borders—into a network of reformers, assisting them in withstanding bureaucratic pressures to pause reform and helping to generate broader interest in and political support for reform.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The U.S. Institute of Peace, in partnership with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, designed a regional platform to bring security officials and their civil society counterparts from North and West Africa together to begin working in concert to address the region's shared challenges. This brief shares key insights from the engagement between official and civil society actors both within and across borders, makes the case for working regionally to address the twin challenges of security and reform, and highlights how community-security partnerships offer one approach to advancing the region's security and reform agenda. Dr. Querine Hanlon is the founding president and executive director of Strategic Capacity Group. Previously, she served as special adviser for USIP. Joyce Kasee is a senior program officer for the Center for the Middle East and Africa.

Given the legacy of mistrust and lingering poor perceptions of security actors across the region, community-security partnerships can serve as valuable mechanisms to build trust. Community security is a people-centered approach to addressing insecurity. It works by bringing together "a wide range of state and civil society actors to identify root causes of insecurity collectively and develop coordinated responses to them."¹⁴ The inherent inclusivity of these processes can enhance transparency and accountability, all of which contribute to good governance efforts. The legitimacy of security actors remains key to the establishment of social and political trust, both of which must be present to strengthen resiliency among communities and lessen grievances that could negatively impact justice and security provisions. Although some operational commanders were initially reticent about the value of such partnerships, the opportunity to engage with civil society counterparts generated a gradual shift. Over time, and with some degree of variance by country, security officials recognized that civil society organizations could be partners in reform. And civil society actors gained insight into the difficult challenges security actors face managing a more dangerous and complex security environment.

Building robust community-security partnerships is proving to be critical to the transformation of the security sector. By creating linkages and bridging gaps, community-security partnerships are a valuable mechanism to balance the competing demands for security and reform and to redefine, in an inclusive and transparent way, the role and purpose of security and justice sector institutions in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Notes

1. Fiona Mangan and Mark Shaw, *Illicit Trafficking and Libya's Transition: Profits and Losses*, Peaceworks no. 96, U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 2014.
2. Security sector reform (SSR) is a conceptual approach to strengthening, reforming, or (re)constructing the human and institutional capabilities and capacities of the security sector to provide security, maintain the state's monopoly of force, and operate in accordance with democratic principles and the rule of law. See Querine Hanlon and Richard H. Shultz, Jr., *Prioritizing Security Sector Reform: A New U.S. Approach* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, March 2016).
3. Interview, security official, Tunisia, 2014.
4. Interview, security official, Tunisia, 2014.
5. Interview, senior security official, Malta, 2014.
6. Interview, senior security official, Malta, 2014.
7. Interview, security official, Morocco, 2015.
8. Interview, senior security official, Morocco, 2015.
9. Interview, security official, Malta, 2014.
10. Interview, security official, Senegal, 2015.
11. Interview, senior security official, Senegal, 2015.
12. Interview, security official, Senegal, 2015.
13. Security officials from the Sahel noted the absence of mechanisms to coordinate among the security services, even in critical border areas where their missions overlap.
14. Saferworld, *Community Security: A Vehicle for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding* (London: Saferworld, September 2014).



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