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Security Sector Transformation in North Africa and the Middle East

Summary

- The events of the Arab Spring are a unique and unprecedented opportunity for democratic political change for the Middle East and North Africa, but the political transitions in that region remain fragile. The United States and other external actors can help the new democratic regimes by supporting their efforts at security sector reform (SSR).

- Police corruption, abuse, and impunity—along with the sheer size of police forces—were among the catalysts for the protests of the Arab Spring. But the transition governments, generally speaking, do not seek to dismantle their police forces and build them anew so much as reform them. External actors can work with the new governments in structuring police forces to be the appropriate size as well as democratic and accountable for their actions. This also involves work in judicial reform.

- The United States must approach SSR work in the Arab transition countries with care, as it bears the legacy of supporting many of the previous dictatorial regimes in the name of preserving its own security. Involving more external actors, under the aegis of the United Nations, would be preferable to a unilateral approach, as would seeking out places where the interests of the new governments and the international community converge as entry points for collaboration.

- Any SSR effort must be in response to requests that the new governments make for help, and each response should be tailored to the circumstances in each country. In carrying out the work, external actors should involve nongovernmental organizations, civil society, as well as traditional elites, to ensure that the new security and justice architecture is democratic, accountable, and stable.

- SSR work should be linked to the broader goals of justice, political stability, and economic development, which lay at the heart of the Arab Spring protests; doing so could improve relations between the United States and the Middle East.

The events of the Arab Spring present the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with a unique and unprecedented opportunity for democratic political change, and the removal of entrenched dictators, such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, and the late Muammar Gadhafi in Libya, is a step in this direction. But the political transitions in these states remain fragile and prone to reversal. A range of factors will determine their success, from the effects of reconciliation and transitional justice processes to the results of elections and economic reforms. While the revolutions are undoubtedly locally driven, external actors will be important to their outcomes. External actors, particularly the United States, can play a prominent role in transforming the MENA countries' security and justice architecture—that is, in supporting security sector reform (SSR). The transition states of the region have inherited repressive, corrupt, and outsized security institutions with histories of acting with impunity; the Arab Spring can partially be considered a reaction not only to the excesses of individual dictators, but to the abuses and indignities citizens suffered at the hands of their predatory security establishments.

The international community has accumulated significant experience in supporting SSR across a range of postconflict and postauthoritarian states over the past decade. The record of success in conflict-affected cases, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, has been mixed. Results in postauthoritarian states, which pose an altogether different array of challenges, have been more positive. It is now widely accepted in the international development and security communities that sustainable development, political stabilization, and long-term safety and security are nearly impossible to achieve without an effective, rights-respecting, accountable, and legitimate security system that conforms to the rule of law. Over the past decade, a broad set of guidelines has emerged to guide security sector reformers in their efforts. However, as with economic growth and democratization, there are different routes to a well-functioning security sector, and the international community has learned that there is no road map or blueprint that can be applied universally. When donors have taken a cookie cutter approach to SSR, transplanting homogenous reform templates from one context to another with little adaptation, the most clear-cut failures have occurred, and the diversity of political dynamics, historical traditions, demographics, security conditions, and economic trends in the Middle East makes universal solutions particularly infeasible. SSR efforts must be tailored to each state's needs and circumstances, thinking comprehensively but acting locally.

SSR is not an ideologically neutral concept. It is rooted in Western values and integral to donor-led democratization and state-building projects. It has been argued that the liberal origins of the concept make it inviable outside the West. But the core principles that under-pin the SSR normative framework are not alien to the Arab world. A glance at the rhetoric and statements of the Arab protest movements reveals a great deal of common ground with the core values of SSR, such as transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights. Every SSR context is different and thus requires different types of interventions, but SSR experience has shown that regardless of context, many people want the same fundamental things from their security systems.

Some form of SSR is needed in the Arab transition states, and donors such as the United States will almost certainly be significant in its implementation. But the form that the process will take and the nature and extent of the U.S. and international roles are not yet clear. Several factors are crucial to shaping the process, but two stand out. First and foremost are the evolving visions of the security sector among the new transitional administrations

and their restive populations. The emergent regimes are the products of domestic Arab revolutions, and thus local ownership is essential to achieving sustainable security. The new governments and their civil society partners, not external donors, will outline the contours of their own security systems. The second factor involves the type of assistance the new regimes ask of the international community. Libya has requested support for police reform, demilitarization, and transitional justice. Egypt has been keen to receive aid but wary of appealing to the United States due to its legacy of arming the Mubarak regime.

SSR assistance in the MENA region will have to be demand driven and adopt a problem-solving approach; otherwise it will be perceived as illegitimate. At present there is not a good understanding of SSR within the region; external reform in the security field tends to be perceived as imperialistic. The role of the United States also will be shaped by its own domestic limitations and constraints in a period of fiscal austerity following expensive engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global economic downturn. The United States and the greater international community should seek out points of convergence between demand and supply in SSR assistance that can move the Arab Spring transitions toward stable democracy. This report explains why SSR is needed and relevant in the Arab Spring transition states, identifies some of the entry points for international assistance, outlines the core principles that should frame the interventions, and breaks down the challenges facing the United States and other donors.

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Why Security Sector Reform?

On December 17, 2011, in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself in front of the local governor's office, triggering a wave of protests that would not only end the twenty-three-year reign of Tunisian president Ben Ali, but would sweep across the region, claiming regimes in Egypt and Libya and threatening several others. Bouazizi's desperate act of defiance—for the Arab Spring, his martyrdom—was a reaction not only to poor economic conditions in Tunisia, which had an unemployment rate of up to 15 percent, but to the consistent abuse and mistreatment he had suffered at the hands of municipal government officials, primarily food inspectors and the police. It is an all too familiar story in many Arab states, where the vanguard security forces of authoritarian regimes routinely have acted with impunity. One would be hard-pressed to find an Egyptian who cannot recount a story of police corruption or brutality under Mubarak's reign. The Egyptian police's 2010 beating death of businessman Khaled Said rallied the opposition movement that organized over social media to oust Mubarak.

It is not surprising that the police were one of the main targets of the Egyptian population's wrath as the Mubarak regime crumbled. Every police station in the Egyptian Sinai was burned to the ground, and police across the country shed their uniforms in the face of public attacks. While the army in Egypt and other Arab states may enjoy a degree of respect, despite their own excesses, the police and intelligence services, or *mukhabarat*, tend to be despised. While the army could stay in its barracks, avoiding clashes with the public, the police and *mukhabarat* were the face of the regime on the street. Creating a new social contract and fostering public trust in the state requires bottom-up reform and public education within the security sector. Egyptians, Tunisians, and Libyans need to see drastic change in their security establishment if they are to believe in the transition and must correspondingly be educated in the responsibilities of security institutions in a democratic polity. These goals are at the very heart of SSR.

Notions of justice and accountability have largely been absent in Arab states. When people were abused or mistreated they had no recourse, as the lines separating regimes, judiciaries, and security forces were thin to nonexistent. The security apparatus was struc-

tured to control rather than serve the population and featured redundancies among security forces to ensure that state institutions did not threaten the regime. These states had too much security rather than too little. At the time of the revolution in Egypt, there were sixteen or seventeen types of security forces, each watching the others to ensure obedience to the leadership. Such structures are antidemocratic and wasteful, diverting resources from other areas of state service delivery. SSR can help disentangle this Gordian knot and correctly size the security establishments of the Arab transition states.

In the Arab world, there is a clear need to move away from the train-and-equip philosophy of security assistance. Past U.S. support took the form of strategically driven training, equipment drops, private arms sales (some ongoing), and, to a much lesser degree, good governance and democracy assistance. The revolutions in the region have shown that this technical assistance, eschewing a human security lens, can foster hard but brittle regimes prone to collapse. Paradoxically, the events in Egypt also illustrated the soft power of long-term education exchanges and professionalization programs. It can be argued that the contacts between the Egyptian and U.S. militaries contributed to the Egyptian forces' siding with the democratic protest movement, paving the way for Mubarak's resignation. U.S. military assistance programs exposed the Egyptians to democratic practices, standards, and values, which helped to shape their attitudes and outlook. Such professionalization programs need to be extended to all levels of the security and justice apparatus, as well as civil society.

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The civil society actors who spearheaded the youth protest movements were themselves influenced by civil society groups in the West and further afield, a form of soft power the United States can continue to employ by supporting global civil society networks committed to democratic change and reform. The MENA revolutions have carved out a new role for civil society in Arab political life that is still evolving. A core element of SSR is to develop the capacity of civil society—whether it is the media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or the private sector—to engage the security establishment; in the current Arab transitions toward democracy, this may be one of many fruitful entry points for international engagement.

Where Are the Entry Points?

Comprehensive SSR, as outlined in framing documents such as the *OECD-DAC Handbook on Security System Reform,*[1] entails a rather optimistic process of complete security sector transformation intended to replicate Western structures and standards. This Cadillac version of reform demands simultaneous progress across all parts of the security and justice spheres, requiring massive external resources, extensive domestic capacity, widespread local support, amenable local officials, and an institutional blank slate. It is infeasible in the Arab transition states, where these basic conditions for reform are not fully present. In fact, those conditions rarely materialize in any SSR context, thus explaining the mixed record of Western donor-led SSR programs.

In states such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, which possess high levels of human and institutional capacity, donors would be advised to take an incremental, problem-solving approach. The United States and its partners need to respond to requests for assistance rather than seek to define needs and reform agendas. This approach means allowing local counterparts to emerge organically rather than selecting like-minded clients, which, in turn, entails preparing to work with a variety of groups, wearing different political and sectarian stripes. Such a hands-off approach may be perceived as dangerous because it could result in leaders unfriendly to Western interests, but it is more likely to produce legitimate governments that can own and lead reforms. With domestic politics still volatile in the transition states, donors should seek to empower and embolden reform champions, moderate Islamist or

secular, rather than manufacture them. Indications from the U.S. government that it is willing to work with the Muslim Brotherhood are accordingly a very positive sign.

Just as Western support for some of the Arab world's authoritarian regimes lasted over several decades, SSR assistance for transition states also must be conceived as a long-term process. The impulse to design reform blueprints in Western capitals before the revolutionary dust has settled must be tempered by the understanding of the fluidity of political, economic, and security conditions in the MENA region. This is a time to listen, gather intelligence, and build political capital to set the stage for more ambitious reform assistance. It is essential to ask local people—political leaders, civil society actors, government officials, and average citizens—what kind of security and justice institutions they want. This will help to identify key entry points where external assistance is demanded, external supply exists, and progress is possible. Some potential entry points are already beginning to emerge.

Corruption

Corruption is one of the touchstone issues that helped to trigger the Arab Spring. Although it is a politically sensitive issue, there is a broad consensus within the region that corruption, cronyism, and graft must be addressed in some manner. It is also a key issue for donors, who want to ensure that development aid is not diverted or lost—especially after billions of dollars of U.S. aid to Iraqi and Afghan SSR programs disappeared, or ended up supporting spoiler and insurgent groups.

However, dealing with corruption is a complex governance challenge, as each society perceives and rates it in a different manner. The impulse among many Western officials is to identify grand corruption (e.g., political elites and government officials embezzling large amounts of funds) as the central priority while considering petty corruption on the street (e.g., traffic police extorting fees from motorists) to be simply too widespread and ingrained to control. It is petty corruption, however, that erodes state service delivery, undermines legitimacy, and fosters the kind of grating public resentment of the state that fuelled the protest movements of the Arab Spring.

That said, corruption in some MENA states also can be conceived as a form of wealth redistribution and has, to a certain degree, had a stabilizing effect. Without effective state welfare mechanisms, corruption allows wealth to trickle down through society; where the public administration is inadequately remunerated, graft helps employees make ends meet, keeps supporters in line, and calms dissent. The problem is, of course, that this wealth does not tend to trickle down evenly or proportionally throughout society, with regime loyalists absorbing the lion's share.

As with any area of the security sector, there is a premium on local knowledge. Reformers must develop a keen understanding of the nuances of corruption in the countries in which they are operating if they are to craft effective strategies to address it. A number of prosaic, technical approaches can be taken, such as establishing more intensive accountability structures and fiduciary controls and investing resources in pay and grading systems in the public administration. For their part, donors can have an immediate effect by closely monitoring their own aid disbursements to governments, NGOs, and private contractors, ensuring that funds are not misallocated. Donors in many of these contexts tend to be part of the corruption problem.

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Transitional Justice

Although the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) has stated its intent to minimize the international footprint in its transition, it has explicitly requested help in transitional justice and police reform. Dealing with the crimes of the previous regimes is at the top of

the agenda for the transitional governments in Egypt and Tunisia; Mubarak and his sons have already been put on trial, and many other senior officials languish in prison. Transitional justice is not a part of SSR, but it is intricately connected to it. Although some despots in the region, such as the late Col. Gadhafi and his son Saif al-Islam, have been indicted by the International Criminal Court, it is likely that, as we have already seen in Egypt, the former leaders will be tried domestically as part of a broader justice and reconciliation process. However, the domestic judiciaries do not yet have the capacity to handle the scale, scope, and specialized demands of such processes, and there are serious questions in some states about the judiciary's impartiality. Having supported transitional justice programs in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the international community is well placed to support them in the Arab transition states through advice and material assistance. It should do so: Amid calls for justice, a spirit of revenge has emerged in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, possibly creating new rifts in society and triggering violence. Transitional justice and reconciliation programs are designed to help avert this.

Another aspect of transitional justice that is deeply entrenched in the SSR framework is vetting of the state administration. The excesses of de-Ba'athification in Iraq, which deprived the Iraqi state of vital bureaucratic capacity during the volatile early days of the reconstruction process, illustrate the dangers of trying to purge state and society of old regime influence. Meticulous processes are needed to remove unfit and tainted staff without triggering resentment or leaving major gaps in service delivery. In Tunisia, ad hoc lists of officials with links to the previous ruling party have emerged to bar them from taking part in public life. Purges in all ministries and departments have taken place in Egypt, also on a rather ad hoc basis. Greater control must be exerted over these processes lest they create a new aggrieved minority willing to resort to violence. The stability of the transition depends on the ability of the new governments to compromise with and accommodate members of the old regime—something that seems unlikely at this stage.

The idea of justice, and its importance in the psyches of individuals and groups, is often underappreciated in SSR programs. There is an assumption that if people are given basic security they will be appeased, but without access to justice, local actors will feel unsatisfied and compelled to find justice through vigilantism or nonstate judicial mechanisms. Supporting transitional justice provides a good foundation for longer-term judicial reform, often the poor cousin of the SSR family but indispensable to the project's success. Developing courts' capacity and professionalism will equip them to try former regime officials and perform their basic function of upholding the rule of law. It will also put the rest of the security sector on solid footing. After all, the cop on the beat is nothing but an agent without purpose in the absence of a functioning justice system.

Police Reform

In Egypt the police melted away after the Mubarak regime collapsed. Months later, many police had yet to return to their jobs, and a significant amount of police infrastructure attacked during the protests remained in tatters. Police reform faces the dual task of quickly restoring basic police services while launching a longer-term process to transform the police force's culture. While the police need some material support, particularly to rebuild infrastructure, its overriding need is for new focus, procedures, and institutional culture, which cannot be accomplished without overhauling the interior ministry that oversees and directs them. Train-and-equip strategies tend to overlook the need for governance and institutional reforms within the security ministries, but even the most professional police in the world would be hard-pressed to function effectively if the interior ministry were ineffective, politicized, and corrupt. Recognizing this, Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) has called

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for "assistance with policing to get the public security situation under control and gradually develop a democratically accountable public security force."[2]

Across the Arab transition states, police reform tends to be more fertile ground for external intervention than military reform. The militaries in Egypt and Tunisia have retained significant power and public respect, a sort of praetorian role for the state, giving them the capacity to resist reforms. Also, the armies in many MENA states, despite their involvement in corrupt practices and repression, tend to be the most professional and effective organs of the security sector, their officer corps composed of educated elites who have had opportunities to train abroad. The police, by contrast, are more likely to be locally recruited, poorly educated, and untrained. Given that the police forces are the principal interface between state and society, their transformation should be a high priority in the early stages of transition.

In deciding to focus on the police, the U.S. and other donor governments should resist the urge to channel SSR assistance through the militaries in Egypt and Tunisia, due to their familiarity with those institutions. The temptation is understandable: Though it is somewhat reluctant to actually govern, the Egyptian military has been a central part of the state and national political life since the 1952 revolution. Some have even called the ouster of Mubarak a military coup with a civilian face, as the military had been concerned for some time about succession plans and could have exploited the tumult to act (or not act on Mubarak's behalf). While this is too simplistic an explanation of the complex and dramatic chain of events that led to Mubarak's fall, it exemplifies the predominant place the military retains in Egyptian society. Overreliance on the military potentially undercuts one of the core principles of SSR—democratic civilian control—and could embolden the military to hold onto power and resist core reforms. While a military centered approach may seem expedient to donors, offering the quickest route to stability and the safeguarding of Western interests, it could over time return the status quo ante prior to the Arab Spring. Donors must remain cognizant that even like-minded actors who say all the right things have conflicting motivations for continuity and change. The military in each of these transitions will be reticent to abandon its primary place in the state, politics, and in the case of Egypt, economic life. This is not to say that external actors should not work closely with the military establishments of the region; only that they should widen their consultations and partnerships to include other key stakeholders, particularly other branches of the security and justice architecture, civil society actors, political parties, and traditional elites.

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Civil Society

An eclectic mixture of civil society groups, rather than specific political parties, military factions, or external actors, has driven the protests in the Middle East; they have been mostly grassroots movements with varied support from internal elites and external patrons, and their unprecedented assertiveness presents both opportunities and potential dilemmas for the transition and its external supporters. Emboldened by their victories, the protest groups have grown more confrontational and outspoken with each passing month, consistently challenging the actions and legitimacy of the transitional governments and security establishments, who for their part tend to view nonstate political actors with some skepticism. In Egypt, tensions have already emerged between the youth activists and the military command council over the pace and direction of political change. The youth in Egypt are educated, highly disillusioned, and skeptical of anyone associated with the previous regime.

A central part of the SSR agenda is both to empower civil society to play a productive role in the security sphere and to rewire states to interact constructively with civil society, emphasizing transparency and state-society partnership. Through civic education, formal

training, and societal outreach activities, among other initiatives, external actors can contribute significantly to reducing state-society tensions. It may be best for donor governments to work through their own domestic civil society groups, whether it is academic institutions or globally focused NGOs, to implement change, fostering international civil society networks to share experiences and develop best practices. Considering the dominant role of social networking in the Arab Spring, donors could focus their attention on expanding Arab civil society groups' ability to utilize Web 2.0 technologies to further drive change and hold governments accountable.

Democratic Civilian Control

Democratic civilian control of security forces is one of the primary objectives of SSR. Most Arab states' legislatures tend to be rubber stamps for executive decisions rather than a genuine check on executive authority. For instance, Egyptian law mandates parliament to provide oversight of the security sector and enables it to question ministers, but parliament rarely if ever exercised such powers under Mubarak. With new elections on the horizon and a palpable desire among the population for a more responsive government and legislative branch, there appears to be room to enable parliament to better monitor the security sector and hold it to account. This accountability could involve a range of donor-supported projects, from increasing the institutional capacity of parliament through the building of infrastructure and systems to the training and mentoring of legislators.

Guiding Principles

As mentioned above, addressing local demands requires a sophisticated understanding of local political dynamics, history, and culture that reformers often lack. Donors must invest in developing this contextual knowledge and situational awareness; otherwise their programming rests on a weak foundation. A number of key principles, adapted from the core SSR framework to the Arab transition states, should guide external SSR support.

An International Face

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Rather than having each donor create individual bilateral SSR programs, external donors should work through an international entity, such as the United Nations. A UN face will imbue the mission with greater legitimacy, both within the Arab transition states and among the donor community. The United Nations has already carved out a leading role in the incipient Libyan transition with full NTC support. With the negative legacy of Western state support for MENA military dictatorships, giving assistance efforts a more neutral front man is likely to be beneficial. It could also facilitate greater coordination among donors, always a problem in complex transitions.

Demand-Driven

Even as external actors influence local ones to take certain reform routes, external engagement should be demand- and problem-driven, based strictly on requests for assistance from host country partners. Too often, SSR programs are driven by supply—that is, Western interests and available resources—rather than local needs. Such an approach is unsustainable. The Arab transition states are so protective of their revolutions that even the appearance of imposition could undermine the whole effort and set back relations with donors. That said, it is also clear that the Arab transition states want donor help. The United States already has sent assessment teams to Tunisia and Egypt, and senior Tunisian police officers have visited

the United States to discuss potential reform opportunities. The NTC has been forthright about its desire for international support, presenting its plans to the international contact group for Libya, even as it prefers a limited international footprint. External actors must find the common ground between Arab demands and donor supply and the points of confluence between their interests. Finding this space—which does exist—requires good joint assessments led by local actors, with engagement from both the state and civil society. Joint donor-recipient assessments can help to ensure not only that reform entry points and goals are realistic, but that they have local and donor buy-in.

Project-Based Problem-Solving Approach

The fluid and volatile political and security environments in the region do not lend themselves to rigid timelines and protracted reform plans. Early in the transition period, quick-impact projects should be launched to produce tangible reforms that meet specific needs, address urgent problems, and build local confidence in the process. But a gradual approach to SSR is needed to incrementally develop local trust. Donors should not box themselves into highly specific reform plans until the political dust has settled and there is consensus among key stakeholders. The mantra should be to start small and scale up.

The transformation of institutional cultures in the MENA countries could best be described as a generational project. As a part of this long-term vision, donors should seek to construct durable and resilient initiatives. Permanent training facilities could be established nationally and regionally to train future generations of Arab personnel according to democratic standards. Solid institutional peer-to-peer links and professional exchanges between Arab and Western security and justice officials could deliver significant dividends over time. The U.S. International Military Education Dialogue provides a model for such activities, but should be extended to other parts of the security and justice spheres, from judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys to police officers and legislators.

Move beyond the Rhetoric of the War on Terror

A great deal of the security assistance provided to Arab states has been couched in the rhetoric of the war on terror. The United States and its allies supported Mubarak, Ben Ali, and other regional strongmen because they were a bulwark against radical Islamist groups. While containing Islamist terrorism remains a high priority for the United States and its allies, these messages do not resonate with Arab populations and will be associated with past bankrupt regimes. Stable Arab states with security sectors that are effective, democratically accountable, and respecting of rights will provide the best antidote to terrorism.

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Some infrastructure support may be required to repair damage or modernize facilities, but the main need is software rather than hardware. Most MENA states are seeking to change their existing but broken security systems rather than building new ones from scratch. Thus, among the areas most in need of assistance are training, institutional reform, depoliticization, vetting, and forming systems to promote accountability and transparency. There will always be requests for new weapons systems and the latest kit, but donors must bear in mind the overarching priority of changing the way these security sectors do business.

Political Engagement

SSR is inherently political, and overly technocratic approaches will not succeed. While technical assistance forms the backbone of SSR programs, it must be framed within a political strategy. The U.S. reform program in the Palestinian Authority made headway because of the direct engagement of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayed. A

successful U.S. initiative to establish a coastguard in Yemen grew from careful dialogue and engagement with Yemeni officials up to President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Achieving the security sector transformation that many Arab activists want requires external actors to invest significant political capital in the process. That means entering political dialogues with a range of stakeholders, from civil society activists to traditional elites, and using incentives and disincentives to encourage reform and adherence to core SSR principles. It is about empowering reform champions, containing spoilers, and persuading everyone that the process is in the broad interests of the country. Donors certainly will not be perceived as politically neutral, so they must keep lines of communication open with all parties to the process.

Engaging the process politically requires situational awareness, good contextual knowledge, and diplomatic acumen. Deploying the right mix of people on the ground with these attributes is critical. There should be representation of geographic, sector-specific, and system-wide SSR expertise on SSR missions. Senior diplomats and political officers in the country may not have the time to fully engage in the intricacies of SSR programming, but it is important for them to be involved politically, providing direction as necessary. For their part, program managers need to have a diplomat's attitude and negotiator's approach.

Link to Development and Economic Growth

In the Arab transition states, woeful economic conditions are coupled with ominous demographic trends. High unemployment rates and rising prices of staple goods in countries facing a youth bulge are a dangerous mix, and one of the contributing factors to the revolutions that are still sweeping the region. Aid and investment are needed to alleviate immediate suffering and spur economic growth. Over the long term, however, the health of these economies will depend on their ability to undertake fundamental structural reforms. Although SSR is normatively conceived as one pillar of broader state building and democratization projects, it tends to be treated as a stand-alone program firewalled from other reform and development activities. This approach is problematic, given that the SSR concept emerged from the development community and is rooted to development principles and practices. The increasing involvement of the World Bank and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in SSR issues illustrates its importance to economic recovery; its primary rationale, after all, is to enable sustainable development and economic growth.

The link between economic development and SSR should be made more concrete in the Arab transition states. Issues of employment and infrastructure development should be factored into SSR programming, as the security sector is typically a major employer and can be engaged in infrastructure creation. The judicial system, for its part, provides the legal framework and regulatory environment that anchors a successful economy. Donors can use economic incentives, such as preferential agreements on trade, labor, and customs, in exchange for action on SSR priorities. Linking the security and economic agendas, in light of the region's economic turmoil, could catalyze change and crystalize the symbiotic connections among security, good governance, and economic prosperity in the minds of local actors.

Nonstate Actors

Just as donors need to expand their interaction with key stakeholders beyond military elites to include civil society, they must also engage actors and structures outside the state. This interaction is particularly important in Libya, where nonstate entities, such as tribes, can provide security and justice and are perceived by local populations as more legitimate and cost effective than the state. The development and SSR communities are increasingly aware

of the advantages of encouraging a mutually reinforcing relationship between state and nonstate authorities.

The SSR concept, though, is biased toward centralized national structures rather than local-level governance institutions and mechanisms, which tend to be the main locus of service delivery. As the Arab Spring was partially a reaction to overcentralization and accumulation of power by narrow groups of elites, it would stand to reason that an overcentralized approach to the transition could be counterproductive. Donors must balance emphasis on national-level institutions with attention to local-level service delivery. Donors have a responsibility to encourage an inclusive process and caution against the neglect of local-level actors and interests, which could reinforce destructive center-periphery or urban-rural divides.

Obstacles, Challenges, and Risks

There are a number of distinct obstacles, challenges, and risks to international engagement in SSR in the Arab transition states. The revolutions in the region offer the chance for democratic political change and a new beginning to the relationship between the MENA region and the West. But success is by no means guaranteed, and destabilizing setbacks are almost certain. The messiness of such transitions is already on full display in Egypt, where sectarian and political tensions run high and the dual desires for rapid change and revenge for past crimes cause volatility. Donor governments must clearly assess the risks to engagement and develop strategies to mitigate them.

The Legacy of Western Assistance

For people in the MENA countries, the legacy of Western patronage of several Arab dictatorships, including those of Mubarak, Ben Ali, Saleh, and even Gadhafi, challenges the credibility and legitimacy of Western SSR support. U.S. military assistance to Egypt has held steady at $1.3 billion per year since 1998 and covers as much as 80 percent of the Egyptian military's weapons procurement costs.[3] The United States and Tunisia regularly conducted joint military exercises, and the United States provided modest levels of security assistance, even as a 2009 State Department cable described Tunisia as a "police state, with little freedom of expression or association, and serious human rights problems."[4] Yemen received $252.6 million in military assistance between the fiscal years of 2006 and 2010, with over 60 percent of that aid coming in the final year.[5] Most of this money went to counterterrorism operations, to which the U.S. military contributed directly by deploying drones with the consent of the Saleh regime. Even Libya and Syria had U.S. ties through intelligence agency cooperation, information sharing, and extraordinary rendition, whereby high-value terrorist suspects were transferred for interrogation.

Generally, U.S. aid to the region has been shaped by six goals: counterterrorism, containing Iran, access for naval bases, stabilizing Iraq, maintaining relations with Israel, and energy security. These goals are as valid today as they were before the Arab Spring, but the approach to achieving them has to be recalibrated. U.S. policy in the region can be described as subcontracting protection of U.S. interests to friendly regimes in return for tolerance of their repression of internal dissent. To break with this legacy, the United States should unambiguously place human security above regime security in conducting SSR and embed human rights principles into all its programming.

Providing space for dialogue among civil society, government officials, and the donor community will help to address the West's credibility problem, as will direct outreach efforts to Arab populations. The United States must avoid allowing any one issue or interest—whether it is terrorism, Israel, or energy security—to dominate or unduly influence its reform agenda. This does not mean abandoning core interests but working harder to align

Donors must balance emphasis on national-level institutions with attention to local-level service delivery.

them with those of the local population. This does not have to be a zero-sum game: Stable, free, and democratic Arab states will be the best bulwark against terrorism and will naturally share interests with the West. Donors must ask themselves whose security they are seeking to advance through reform. The answer should be that of the local population, a goal that over the long term will best serve Western security, economic, and political interests.

Coordination

SSR in the Arab transition states inevitably will be a multilateral enterprise. In a region of such acute geostrategic importance, there will be as many competing interests as actors. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and non-NATO states jockeyed for position in Libya to influence the NTC—particularly over economic interests—before the shooting had even stopped. Influence over security sector leaders in the Arab world, particularly in oil-rich states with plans for defense procurement, is an attractive commodity. Working under a UN banner could help to contain or suppress some of this deleterious competition, though interests tend to rise to the surface no matter how hard one tries to contain them.

Competing, conflicting, or even contradictory SSR programming—all too common in many SSR cases—could undercut the process before it makes any headway. Western donors must harmonize their interests as much as possible and avoid unhealthy or excessive competition. In the Palestinian Territories, the United States has worked closely and effectively with its European and Canadian counterparts to implement SSR programming. In Libya, the donor contact group similarly has had a positive coordinating role. Such cooperation needs to be replicated across the region, perhaps under the auspices of the United Nations or another intergovernmental body. Initiatives such as NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and the Mediterranean Dialogue, which encourage general dialogue, practical bilateral cooperation and partnerships on security issues between NATO and non-NATO regional states—including numerous states in the Arab world—provide a model for achieving greater regional and donor cooperation.

Counterrevolution

All the Arab revolutions are vulnerable to reversal. There is no shortage of counterrevolutionary forces at play, from former regime loyalists to radical Islamists. Attacks by radical Salafi groups have been reported in both Egypt and Tunisia, raising fears that they could be attempting to take advantage of the political vacuum to trigger sectarian conflict, as was seen in Iraq, or advance their plans for a government takeover. Such groups remain on the fringes of society, but through violence, they can punch above their weight. Not all Islamist groups, however, are averse to taking part in the political process. The Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, has renounced violence and operates within the confines of the political process in Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia. The Arab transition countries contain population segments that are deeply religious, thus some sectarian-based politics is inevitable. As long as these groups operate within the political process and according to the rule of law, this need not be viewed as a threat. External donors must recognize the many contradictory forces at work and prepare for multiple contingencies in their programming, lest the Arab Spring become known more for its counterrevolutions than its revolutions.

Regional Differences

The Arab Spring has created rifts in the region that could potentially hinder reform. Algeria and Saudi Arabia successfully resisted their own protest movements and are eager to halt the regional domino effect. Saudi Arabia deployed troops in Bahrain to support the country's teetering monarchy and has dispatched funds to shore up other threatened regimes. U.S.

silence over the crackdown in Bahrain, which hosts a U.S. naval base, has raised accusations of double standards and reinforced the credibility problem.

Today, the region appears to be drifting into two camps—revolutionary (e.g., Egypt, Bahrain, and Libya) and reforming states (e.g., Jordan and Morocco) versus counterrevolutionary states (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Syria)—and it is possible that the latter could seek to undercut the reforms of the former. SSR is difficult to implement in unfriendly regional neighborhoods due to the interconnected and globalized nature of contemporary security challenges. To address this dilemma, donors could provide space for dialogue among the various states in the region to secure pledges of noninterference in domestic politics and reach an accommodation or common ground on regional reform directions. External actors also could encourage the Arab League to engage directly in SSR. Unlike many other regional organizations, such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States, the Arab League has not endorsed SSR or supported such reform among its members. With the Libyan NTC requesting Arab League security support after the fall of Gadhafi, there may be a window to introduce the concept to the body and stimulate some support for its application more broadly. In today's politically charged atmosphere in the Middle East, these steps are not likely to make much headway in the short term, but opportunities could open up over time.

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Donor Domestic Pressures

With looming fears of recession and growing war weariness, the United States may be reluctant to make major commitments to the Arab transition states in the security sector. The United States was comfortable playing an indispensible but background role in the NATO mission in Libya, with France and the United Kingdom leading the charge within the alliance. U.S. engagement will be crucial for SSR in the region, but given the range of other donor involvement and with the United Nations poised to assume an active role, it will not necessarily have to lead. With anti-American sentiment palpable on the Arab street, a more subtle U.S. role may even be advisable.

Nonetheless, it is important that Western governments invest in the Arab transition countries from the outset. Without a good start, the chances of success are greatly reduced, especially with a range of reactionary forces lining up to stall the transitions. Investment in the transitions may not provide as immediate a benefit to U.S. strategic interests as supporting client dictators, but over the long term it will pay much greater dividends by building stable, enduring partnerships.

Paradigm Shift

The SSR concept has been largely mainstreamed in the international donor community over the past five years, but it is still a new concept and has been slower to take root in the United States than its European partners. U.S. agencies and departments engaged in SSR have only recently developed their own definition of it; the idea that the United States could deliver security assistance in a similar manner to development aid has not fully trickled down to the operational level or been translated effectively from policy to practice, which continues to focus on train-and-equip approaches. The paradigm shift required, particularly within the U.S. government, has not yet been consolidated fully. In spite of all of the emphasis on promoting joined up government in state-building interventions, U.S. security assistance still tends to be stovepiped, marked by gaps in coordination between key U.S. agencies and departments, as has been seen in the U.S. support to a number of SSR programs, including those in the Palestinian Territories, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This lack of coordination does not mean that U.S. departments and agencies have not learned lessons from their experiences with security

assistance, but it takes time to translate those lessons into improved strategy on the ground. If the U.S. government and its donor partners are to achieve meaningful progress in the Arab transition states, they will also have to change the way they do business.

Conclusion

In recent years the SSR discourse has been fixated on conflict-affected cases, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. But the concept is far more viable and appropriate in postauthoritarian environments, such as the Arab transition states. Countries where SSR succeeded in the past—postapartheid South Africa, the former Warsaw Pact states of Eastern Europe, and Indonesia—featured conditions comparable to those in many of the Arab transition states. They were postauthoritarian transitions seeking to right-size, rationalize, and transform the cultures of their security sectors. Just as in those cases, the Arab transition states do not face the endemic security and human and institutional capacity deficits seen in failed and conflict-affected states.

Without question, the United States and its partners have the capability and experience in the Middle East to provide effective technical assistance for SSR. The challenge is political: breaking down rigid patronage structures, overcoming ingrained aversion to change within the state, and building people's trust in their security sectors. The Arab transition states meet the core criteria for applying SSR and in some ways can be considered highly favorable candidates for reform, but external donors also face a range of obstacles, from potent anti-Western sentiment to numerous domestic spoilers. Donors must be mindful of the risks associated with these interventions and inject some modesty into their approach. They should not overestimate their ability to transform local institutional cultures in short timeframes. SSR is a generational effort that will invariably experience setbacks.

It is important to be realistic about what external donors can accomplish in the Arab transition states. SSR efforts can provide the new security and justice leadership with targeted advice and aid, provide space for dialogue among various key societal stakeholders, empower the citizenry to engage and understand their security systems, and create commitment to reform programs among key local actors. But being aware of what SSR cannot do is just as important as understating what it can. SSR cannot completely transform the security sector in short donor funding cycles, totally exclude elements that are unfriendly to donor interests, or align the partner state to particular policy goals. SSR may produce security institutions closely aligned with Western attitudes, standards, and interests, but attempting to push this end could arouse a backlash and delegitimize the process. SSR must influence and incentivize change, not impose it.

Changes to the security sector will be a crucial driver of the long-term success of the Arab Spring, and Western states have an opportunity to help in this important transition, promoting shared values, ideas, and interests. The same concerns about security and justice that lay at the heart of the protest movements are also the keys to sustainable development and political stability, as well as improved relations between the United States and the Arab world.

Conference Speakers

- Nicole Ball, Center for International Policy
- David Bayley, School of Criminal Justice, State University of New York at Albany
- Ambassador Barbara Bodine, Princeton University
- Daniel Brumberg, U.S. Institute of Peace
- Timothy Edmunds, University of Bristol
- Dale Eickelman, Dartmouth University
- Paul George, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Government of Canada
- Greg Hermsmeyer, Deloitte Consulting LLP
- Ellen Laipson, Stimson Center
- Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani, Carleton University
- Ambassador James Larocco, National Defense University
- Alex Martin, Coffey International Development
- Joseph McMillan, International Security Affairs, U.S. Department of Defense
- Alpaslan Özerdem, Coventry University
- Robert Perito, Security Sector Governance Center, U.S. Institute of Peace
- Jared Rigg, Department for Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations
- Joel Rubin, Ploughshares Fund
- Mara Rudman, Deputy Envoy and Chief of Staff to the Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, U.S. Department of State
- Mark Sedra, Centre for International Governance Innovation
- Charles Snyder, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Department of State
- Erwin Van Veen, OECD
- Catharina Wale Grunditz, European External Action Service

Notes

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