

## **DILEMMAS OF REFORM: POLICING IN ARAB TRANSITIONS**

**YEZID SAYIGH**

Struggles over the security sector have been central to the politics of every Arab state that has undergone transition in the wake of armed conflict or political upheaval since the early 1990s. And wherever pre-transition elite coalitions have been neither forged anew nor replaced, security sectors no longer clearly serve a dominant political, social, and economic order. In these contexts, generic Western models of security sector reform cannot adequately resolve the dilemmas revealed by Arab states in transition and can do no more than alter these sectors superficially. Systemic change is needed, but the political and institutional brittleness of Arab states in transition presents a significant obstacle.

### **Dilemmas of Policing in Arab States in Transition**

- Constitutional frameworks in these states are degraded and politics are polarized, which prevents the effective governance of security sectors.
- State capacity is in decline, undermining the ability of policing to help uphold the social order and moral economy.
- These governments' renewed emphasis on counterterrorism has intensified long-standing patterns of violent behavior and impunity in the security sector, reinforcing the sector's resistance to reform while prompting the public to acquiesce to the restoration of authoritarian practices.
- Declining state resources, increasingly informal economies, and deepening illegality have raised the costs of reforming and professionalizing security sectors. These trends have also incentivized security sectors' implication in corruption and collusion with criminal networks and armed actors, stiffening the sectors' resistance to reform.
- Growing numbers of citizens have turned to alternative forms of community policing and mechanisms based on customary law, but these systems are eroding, often giving way to hybrid, militia-based structures.

### **A Challenging Future**

- Security sector reform cannot take place unless political elites and leading institutional actors see a shared interest in it. In the absence of this, security sectors have fractured along sectarian, ethnic, and partisan lines, or have asserted their complete autonomy in pursuit of their own agendas.
- Generic transparency rules and oversight frameworks recommended in conventional reform approaches cannot tackle corruption or illegal economic activity in the security sector. Arab states in transition are especially unwilling to undertake necessary but risky reforms or to impose accountability.
- The rehabilitation and reform of security sectors requires a nonpartisan approach and depends on reaching a reasonable consensus on the components of the social order and the principles of an acceptable moral economy. Without this, the technical assistance and training routinely offered in conventional reform programs will be of little value.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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