

MISSED OPPORTUNITY: THE POLITICS OF POLICE REFORM IN EGYPT AND TUNISIA

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Police forces and security agencies genuinely accountable to democratically elected civilian authorities have not emerged in either Egypt or Tunisia four years after popular uprisings forced the countries' longtime leaders from power. Ministries of interior remain black boxes with opaque decisionmaking processes, governed by officer networks that have resisted meaningful reform, financial transparency, and political oversight. Until governments reform their security sectors, rather than appease them, the culture of police impunity will deepen and democratic transition will remain impossible in Egypt and at risk in Tunisia.

Missing the Opportunity for Reform

- The uprisings generated two significant opportunities to initiate security sector reform: in the immediate aftermath, while public support was widely mobilized and the sectors were too weak to resist, and after the formation of new interim governments following general elections, which gave political leaders the legitimacy and mandate to prioritize reform.
- Initial measures were not sustained by sufficient unity of purpose, effective political coalition building and social consensus, or coherent reform policies.
- Amid deep political polarization, Islamist parties elected to office were accused by secular rivals of using the reform agenda to control security sectors and “Islamize” them.
- Appeasing the security sectors and assuring their political neutrality became watchwords of successive interim governments.
- Delays in pursuing serious reform allowed security sectors to retrench and use the growing threat of political violence and terrorism to resist efforts to make them transparent and accountable.

Lessons From Egypt and Tunisia

Neutrality is key. Legacies of distrust and political polarization in transitional countries make it essential for actors to avoid competing to control the security sector. Neutral ministers of interior should be appointed and empowered.

Security sector reform is both a top-down and a bottom-up process. Institutional design, policymaking, and ensuring compliance are top-down processes, but political parties, civil society, and media must be engaged to build broad consensus, provide transparency, and generate complementing pressure on security sectors to comply.

Engagement with security sectors is necessary for reform. Because transitional structures are fragile and new political actors lack relevant policy and legislative experience and technical expertise, the security sector must be involved in identifying priorities and designing processes.

Benchmarks and oversight are needed. Offering security sectors a real stake—through improving professional capabilities, pay and service conditions, and recruitment and promotion policies—must be tied to the sectors' improvement in performance and compliance with legal, political, and financial oversight.

Governments must not cede on critical issues. Compromises are unavoidable, but governments should hold the line when it comes to ending security sector impunity, setting policy and budgets, and making or ratifying senior command appointments.

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