

WHY MENA SECURITY SECTORS SHOULD NOT BE NEGLECTED

A commentary by Eleonora Ardemagni and Andrea Cellino



Part of Dossier

SECURITY SECTORS IN THE MENA: THE ECONOMICS OF GOVERNANCE IN CRISIS

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Why MENA Security Sectors Should Not Be Neglected

by **Eleonora Ardemagni** and **Andrea Cellino** in

**Security Sectors in the MENA: The
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In both fractured states and relatively stable countries, security sectors across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are facing increasing economic and financial challenges. This contributes to worsening accountability and good governance prospects, potentially shaping the region's security sector governance — and its trajectory — over the next decade.

At the domestic level, MENA countries still present multiple centres of political-military power (e.g., Libya, Yemen), they are marred by deep ethno-confessional cleavages which lead to segmented security landscapes (e.g., Syria, Iraq, Lebanon), and they have experienced authoritarian downwards (e.g., Tunisia) and restructuring (e.g., Algeria). In this region in particular, reforming security sectors has become all the more complex since the 2010s as security players —both state and non-state ones — have rising political and economic interests. Since they are also multifaceted actors, any type of reform attempt would challenge a lucrative — albeit ineffective — status quo, thus often provoking backlash and obstructions. Moreover, the fallout from global crises (e.g., the economic and social implications of the Covid-19 pandemic; the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and the rise of energy and food prices) adds new layers of uncertainty to already dysfunctional economic systems, casting a shadow on the sustainability of security sectors.

The interdependence between domestic and global factors also affects development and assistance programmes. Albeit essential, the latter have started to reveal limits and politicisation risks. In fact, international and multilateral funds for security assistance are declining — and are likely to further decline — due to partners' and donors' financial constraints, as well as shifting international priorities following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As is the case in Lebanon, partners and donors tend to choose the enabling of basic financial duties (e.g., salary payments or transport fuel) over funds and programmes aimed at implementing good governance and building a culture of accountability. However, human rights and civilian oversight can't turn into a 'luxury good'. This would leave even more room for train-and-equip programmes sponsored by external (often regional) players, who, instead, tend to feed into polarization, indirectly perpetuating cycles of violence abroad.

As this joint Dossier between the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) highlights, illicit economic activities are pervasive across the MENA region, drawing in both armed groups and regular military forces. Some armed groups or units even reorient from active fighting to the informal economy in order to survive and maximize profits. Against this backdrop, corruption ensures greater flexibility and adapts to shifting power dynamics in fractured as well as relatively stable states.

As many security sectors become unsustainable, security personnel is the first to pay the price. For instance, widespread devaluation of national currencies in Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, and Syria has deeply impacted payroll in the security sector and, therefore, on soldiers' and policemen's purchasing power. As a consequence, armed groups' recruitment capacity grows as the army and police are unable to provide fair and regular wages. This, in turn, weakens group discipline and sense of belonging (*esprit de corps*), encouraging disaffection and desertion. In fractured states, different sources of security funding (e.g., in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Libya) supporting a variety of players hamper the establishment of effective and coherent security sectors leading, instead, to further — often externally-sponsored — competitive violence on the ground.

What's also striking is the imbalanced relation between the amount of state revenue and salaries allotted to the security sector, a trend that has accelerated since the 2010s. In rentier economies (e.g., Algeria, Libya, Iraq) and in semi-rentier ones (e.g., Yemen), the current rise of energy revenues due to high international oil and gas prices is likely to once again boost military spending and, at the same time, armed groups' enrichment. This will likely mean the strengthening of illicit economic networks and predatory mechanisms by armed leaders at the expense of fair and regular salaries for soldiers and policemen as part of locally-oriented and community-based pathways towards security governance.

While the different countries examined in this Dossier display similarities, as described in the articles, they are also significantly different in terms of their political economies and potential for implementing Security Sector Reform (SSR). As the authors have made clear, the MENA region suffers from mismanagement and corruption in often already difficult financial contexts and against the backdrop of an increasingly challenging international economic outlook.

Nonetheless, based on the findings, it is still possible to draw some general recommendations which may benefit MENA countries and international development programmes in supporting a better use of economic (and other) resources while addressing the challenges of dysfunctionality and accountability within the security sector. This, in turn, can make international actors' engagement better focused and more effective.

- Persuading national authorities of the need to use national sources of income (in particular in rentier countries) to fund security sector support (Libya, Iraq, Algeria). In post-conflict countries, it would be crucial for international actors to also support the rebuilding of economic centres in order to provide alternatives to illicit and criminal revenue streams and favour institutional entrenchment for stable revenues.
- Parallel to this, more targeted efforts are needed by development agencies to address corruption at different institutional levels, but more specifically within security forces. In countries where functional national security institutions exist (e.g., Tunisia, Algeria, and to a lesser extent Iraq), international actors ought to work with them and security officers to convince them of the benefits of improving integrity and accountability in terms of operational effectiveness and better use of resources.
- Financial accountability conditions to foreign assistance should also be weaved into the abovementioned recommendation, as that could be used as a means to tackle corruption within institutions without having to engage in broader institutional reform.
- At a time when maintaining a focus on holistic institutional SSR support has become increasingly difficult, local- and community-level security engagements should provide viable solutions. This needs, however, to be conducted in partnership with local administrations and civil society actors, through careful monitoring, and based on existing mechanisms of cooperation (if they exist) between formal and informal actors.
- Locally owned and based solutions, within a post-conflict framework or more holistic state reform processes need to include strategies to address economic issues, involving the use of economic incentives (e.g., Libya, Yemen). This, in particular, should be done with an eye to eventually strengthen Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) efforts and attract armed groups' members to resume jobs in the regular economy.
- In countries where an international initiative (UN-led or otherwise) exists, there's a need to strive for more coherent and coordinated approaches to favour investments in SSR and promote more sound uses of economic resources. Further coordination should also be found among key international actors, such as the UN and the EU, possibly shepherding the different approaches of each member state.
- Cautiousness around the illicit economy, as its networks prosper in fractured as well as relatively stable countries, involving both armed groups and sections of the regular sector.
- Emphasize input/process-based conditionality of foreign aid in manners that enable the mainstreaming of democratic norms across security institutions, since that is one of the tenets upon which SSR should be built.

One broader conceptual recommendation is that, theoretically, the conduct of an SSR process requires turning a political and national vision of security into an operational programme. In most of the countries analysed in this Dossier, their level of internal fighting and fragmentation entailed a focus on micro-levels of security, or a rethinking of how SSR should be practiced given institutions' hybrid nature. However, the "essence" of SSR as a practice shouldn't be done away with: there ought to be an active focus on promoting security-centred dialogues to develop "national visions" of security. Aside the fact that such an effort would tangentially contribute to furthering social peace, said dialogue would also go a long way in enabling both donors and practitioners to support local stakeholders with approaches to put that vision into practice by operationalizing it.

More generally, against the backdrop of a global financial, energy, and food crisis at the tail end of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is limiting, if not altogether crippling, international cooperation capacities and resources, reform efforts for the region's security sector are clearly suffering. While the West prioritises addressing the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine and the short-term challenges of these multiple crises to their countries' well-being, the results of neglecting targeted development aid in the MENA region, and reforming security governance in particular, could easily backfire. For instance, the new NATO Strategic Concept and the Madrid Summit's final communiqué both barely mention the partnerships with MENA states (i.e., the Mediterranean Dialogue, MD and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, or ICI). Admittedly, they do acknowledge that conflict, fragility, and instability affect the Alliance's Southern neighbourhood. Partnerships are just focused on tailored initiatives to support defence capacity-building.

Failing to address the consequences of these crises in Europe's near-abroad risks exacerbating their lasting impact on a region already heavily marred by deep inequalities, the pandemic, the current energy and food crises, and chronic instability. Apart from creating further volatility on Europe's doorstep and empowering "authoritarian actors" who "challenge our interests, values and democratic way of life"[1], such short-sighted choice also risks favouring the roles of Russia, China, and their regional proxies in MENA countries at the expense of the West.

References

[i] NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 290622-strategic-concept.pdf p.3.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the sustainability of security sectors is increasingly affected by economic and financial challenges. After protracted conflicts and multiple economic crises, this trend encompasses both fractured states and relatively-stable countries. In some cases, budgets are reduced or more dependent on international or regional support; in others, salaries are low or even intermittent; too often, good financial governance is threatened by old and new dynamics.

As MENA countries are still affected by mismanagement and corruption amidst difficult financial contexts, it is becoming increasingly clear that the policies towards the MENA region – including in terms of security assistance – do not support the resilience of security forces and their good governance. Through a number of case-studies, this joint Dossier between ISPI and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) thus seeks to trace the most pressing security sectors' economic and financial issues, shedding light on trends and outlooks and trying to devise alternative blueprints for security assistance in the MENA region.

For full dossier, please find: "[Security Sectors in the MENA: The Economics of Governance in Crisis](https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/security-sectors-mena-economics-governance-crisis-35920)"
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