What Has Changed in Policing since the Arab Uprisings of 2011? Challenges to Reform and Next Steps

→ Alex Walsh
The killing by Minneapolis police officers of George Floyd in May 2020 has ignited large protests across the United States and Europe, blending critique of the police with protest over racial inequality, the distribution of power and poverty. However, in the Middle East and North Africa, the police have been at the centre of the contestations rocking the Arab world since 2011. In countries currently in the throes of conflict, there is a growing desire for the return of the police amidst a high level of lawlessness and a proliferation of armed groups. Yemenis’ perceptions of policemen as security providers have been improving since 2017, Libyans have much more trust in formal security providers (the Security Directorate and the Municipal Council) than in militias, and Syrians hope that it will be the police and not the feared Mukhabarat or non-state groups that is responsible for providing security in the future.

It is now widely held that the reform, reconstitution and repositioning of the police as primary security providers is a key part of building the peace in these countries. The people in these conflict countries want the return of the police, but the question is, which police?

Elsewhere in the Arab world – in Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq and Lebanon – despite 10 years of protesters and activists attempts to challenge abusive practices, policing continues to suffer from problems of ineffectiveness, corruption, partisanship, violence (including the use of torture) and impunity, albeit to considerably varying degrees.

After a decade of struggle over the nature of policing, what is still holding up change, and where will the struggle for accountable and fair police go next? The answers to these questions are of great importance for the future of just peace and security for the region, and of course for Europe.

Figure 1. People across Yemen would like the police to play the leading role in security.
Roadblocks in the way of reform

1. Resistance

The resistance of policing institutions in the region has been a major roadblock to those attempting to change policing in the last decade. The ability of ministries of interior or police directorates in resist change in the failed and imperfect transition states can be explained through their solid internal cohesion compared to any other ministry or institution. Tunisia furnishes a good example of this, where the Ministry of Interior was able to actively resist changes from as attempted for instance by Ennahda’s choice of Minister, Ali Larayedh in 2012. Another factor here is their alliance with other powerful actors (such as politicians and the judiciary), who, as in Egypt, appreciate the police’s capabilities in social and
political control. On a tactical level, their capabilities to coerce, intimidate and detain are particularly apposite for supressing activist challenges, impeding judicial processes, or withstanding generalized demands for change. The citizen’s view of the police station, its walls foreboding, its windows barred, and its entrances flanked by barbed wire and armed guards, furnishes a fitting image for this roadblock that seems resistant to demands for change. This arguments has been articulated in a number of national and regional studies, which show the police as a relatively free and powerful actor compared to other state and non-state actors such as the judiciary, civil society or activist groups.

2. Ossification

How this resistance looks from the outside is well documented, but what is much less well understood is how this “resistance” functions on the inside of police institutions. In fact, to most police officers, it looks more like ossification rather than resistance. Working in stultifying institutions, where meritocracy is undermined by nepotism and corruption, and hyper-concentration of power at the top dampens initiative and effectiveness. Most officers are usually unempowered, frequently aggressed by superiors, badly paid, and required to pursue outdated and ineffective procedures. In some cases, because of poor pay, they take second jobs. The large majority of Arab police officers are far from empowered actors, and this represents a significant roadblock to change. A police officer must be more or less free to change his behaviours in order to adopt new ones. He or she must also have time and resources relinquished by old patterns of work to use them in the service of new ones. For instance, in an internationally managed police reform project, officers are expected by the newly developed procedures to listen to citizens and come up with solutions to their concerns. However, since officers do not have the power to actually do such a thing, this ambition is frustrated, and both citizens and officers’ time is wasted. Officers find themselves in a lose-lose situation. If they respond to citizens’ requests, they are sanctioned by superiors, and if they ignore citizens, they are criticized for bad faith.

The ossification roadblock is less well attested because it requires an internal viewpoint that is also free and willing to express its views. Indeed, in informal conversations, police officers do express pride in their institutions and the ideal of
service, but often describe their position in terms of being trapped, compelled to act in one way or another, or ranged between gross ineffectiveness, on one side, and the forces of anarchy and vandalism (as they see it), on the other side. There are some empowered actors among the most senior officers, but the majority have a very ambiguous position as defenders and victims of the status quo.

If the first roadblock *resistance* looks like the outside of a police station, then *ossification* looks like the inside: a building badly maintained, jammed with stacks of disordered paper dossiers, choked with procedures that have long outlived their usefulness, curtailing the liberty of both detainees and the initiative and choices of the majority of officers.

### 3. Fragmentation

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the roadblock of *fragmentation*. In Yemen, Libya and to some extent Syria, Iraq and Sudan, policing institutions have been broken across conflict lines, and even within particular sides’ territories. The contest for the control of ministries of interior has made policing a battle ground between local, national and international rivalries. This has certainly seen the end of the traditional centralization, but has rendered the police partisan, under-resourced, divided among themselves, marginalized by other armed actors, and instrumentalised for war. In Yemen, Libya and Iraq, policing has been fragmented, and its reconstitution along national lines is well sought. However, the reform of the police, and the security sector more generally, is entangled in a Catch-22 with the wider conflict. For sides to come together on national peace, there must be agreement on how the security sector will look, but it is difficult to bring the sides to agree on a political deal without a detailed security structure.  

The *fragmentation* roadblock looks like a partially bombed-out station, its telephone wires only reaching a scattered handful of other stations, and its officers tentative in their jurisdiction, dominated by militias or military units.

### 4. Deprioritization

In the last decade, much effort and indeed many lives have been expended on
contesting policing models. However, contesting the police has not necessarily translated into increased understanding of what a reformed police should look like in practice. In Tunisia, the political transition has been more successful than anywhere else in the post-2011 era, but one observer noted in 2017,\(^7\)

*Even as Tunisians exercised new freedoms and embraced democratic values, they continued to demand economic development and stronger counterterrorism capabilities as much, or more, than security reform.*

The stark economic realities and genuine security threats of the past 10 years have exacerbated this problem. Elaborating a persuasive and realistic alternative to existing concepts of policing is difficult when you are struggling in a badly performing economy. Economics has dominated the political agenda, and the cause of police reform has found it hard to compete.

**Figure 2 and 3. Data from 2013 and 2018 show that the economy remains the biggest single concern.**

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\(^7\) Arab Reform Initiative
Playing on this tendency, there is also an old trick of interior ministries and others resisting security sector reform: the securitization argument. A politician or an official may ask, “How can we talk about human rights, when we are threatened daily with suicide bombs and insurgency, and have no resources to do our job properly?” This is an old argument, but it has unsurprisingly found traction in the last conflict and insurgency-heavy decade. For instance, Tunisians do not trust their police very much comparative to the region, but they still give them good ratings in terms of fighting terrorism.\(^8\)

The success of the securitization argument should also be understood in terms of the relative unpopularity of other state institutions. People may have misgivings about the police, but generally they trust, respect or at least fear them more than most other government institutions. As civilian politics and institutions have shown themselves to be mercurial, disappointing and frequently corrupt in the last 10 years, the idea of allowing the “autonomization” of security institutions, whereby they can function independently from legislative, judicial or executive control, becomes more attractive. The de-prioritization and securitization roadblock looks like the centre of a capital city in the Arab world, where the economy is in constant decline, the parliament is fractious and despised, the government partisan, unstable or absent, and the ministry of health overwhelmed; meanwhile the ministry of interior and ministry of defence assert their claim to be strong and stable.
5. Politicization

These four ‘roadblocks’ of *resistance, ossification, fragmentation* and *securitization* are really all just sides of the larger political struggle over policing and the state. This breaks down in many different ways. In the case of Egypt, the police and other internal security agencies have been the natural instrument of authoritarian retrenchment since 2012, and have been both protected from change and further empowered by the Sisi administration. In Lebanon, *ossification* of policing is tied into the mapping of the consociationalist logic onto the police, which leads to the ‘territorialisation’ of the police, whereby leadership of units, branches or stations are reserved for certain sects. In Syria, civilian policing has been both instrumentalized and marginalized by the Assad regime and its international allies. In Iraq, sectarian contest over control of the police reflects wider conflicts and makes them very popular among certain populations and intensely disliked among others. In short, the police are far from impartial, professional and independent purveyors of law and order, but are rather pawns and players in political struggles. This mix will continue to intertwine policing with wider political struggles, with the future of policing highly dependent on the outcomes of the battle over the character and control of the wider state.
What does the future hold for the struggle over policing?

The dependency on the outcome of the nature of the post-conflict State makes the future of policing in these countries very difficult to predict. However, what is certain is that the argument over policing, propelled by and propelling the argument over the nature of the state and its functions, will continue. People will continue to push for the reconstitution of police as the major guarantor of public security, in a service that is effective and professional, impartial and independent, respectful of human rights and upholding of standards of integrity. This will see the contest over policing manifest in several forms.

1. Protest

The most visceral and visible challenge to policing in conflict and (failed) transition states – mass mobilization and protest – will continue. Large-scale protest against the state (or the status quo) as a whole will engender protest against the police, and vice versa. This was seen in Iraq in 2019 after the police fired on protestors, and Morocco in 2016 when the police were involved in the crushing of a fish vendor in a sanitation lorry, just as it was in Tunisia with the mistreatment of Mohammad Bouazizi in 2010. The police will continue to be a detonator and lightning rod for protests because they will continue to have the role of defending the status quo.

The last decade suggests that anti-police demonstrations can only, but not necessarily, take the state to a tipping point when the state response is particularly brutal. However, even in the cases where protests unseat ruling administrations, mass mobilization can only be the first step. Real changes to policing only happen when there is a directed and concerted effort by the new administration. The 2010s are often considered a decade of missed opportunities for Security Sector Reform (SSR) in the Middle East and North Africa. However, in the next decade, this lesson will be taken to heart by revolutionaries in Algeria and Sudan, where protest movements show they have learnt much from the Arab Uprisings in the preceding decade.
2. Cyberwars

The cyber realm has been a significant place for contention around policing, and it will gain new dimensions in the coming period. For those contesting policing, the cyber world has so far been most important for organizing protests, propagating protest discourse and bringing attention to victims. In response to these challenges, police have variously taken advantage of the cyber world for mass-surveillance, as well as honey-trapping and other types of stitch-ups.

In the next decade, the cyber world will become a more active space for contestation of policing. As Arab police forces, and the state more widely, digitalize their operations, they will both increase their capability to monitor and target critics and make themselves more vulnerable to cyberattack or ‘hacktivism’. Hacktivists and those contesting policing are likely to take advantage of the opportunities that cyberattack offers to conventionally weaker parties, through various hacking methods. This might include leaks such as that of June of this year targeting police departments across the US, being called ‘Blueleaks’, as well as the leaking of information and the destruction of records. The MENA region is particularly vulnerable to cyberattacks in general due to weak legal regimes, poor digital hygiene and a skills gap. Mass surveillance technologies now accessible to richer Gulf nations, already buying highly sophisticated technology from Europe and elsewhere, will become affordable to other Arab states. This attempted capture of the cyber realm will provoke new sections of activists who will mobilize along issues of privacy against police intrusion.

3. Algeria and Sudan

As the transitions unfold in Sudan and Algeria, the necessity for changes in the security sector will become increasingly clear. In both countries, there has been historic police abuse and impunity, and in both instances the security sector has been an essential structure for authoritarian administrations. In Sudan, because of the fragmentation of the security sector, police and security reform is already a prominent theme in the transition movement, and it will be a bumpy ride. Sudan’s security sphere situation has seen recent Russian involvement, but there are also ambitions to invite European SSR assistance. In Algeria, the protest movement
puts less focus on the security sector *per se*, and the public order response to the massive *Hirak* protests has been remarkably composed, regionally speaking. The Algerian security sphere will claim exceptionalism in the face of change, but this too will be contested as the movement sets its eyes on roots of the administration and not just its more visible branches.

### 4. International influence over policing models

The internationalization of the contest over policing will develop further. In conflict zones, what and who the police are, will be increasingly used by regional powers to pursue their strategic goals. Part I of this essay touched on the emergence and operation of the Free Syrian Police (FSP) and the Asayish (Internal Security Forces in Kurdish-held areas) in areas liberated from regime control. No analysis of the FSP can be made without reference to its early international backers – counting the US, UK and Denmark, which from 2014 provided significant financial, equipment and training support. Indeed, without external support, the policing groupings that may or may not have arisen would have been significantly different. It is doubtful that they would have taken up the Community Policing approach that they ended up with, even if it were adopted in the actual case.

In Syria, Western nations plumped for policing support partly because it squared the circle of their opposition to Assad and their aversion to giving lethal support to the Opposition, and partly because they appreciated that policing was a key piece in the puzzle of creating a viable and legitimate alternative state. This had both symbolic and practical elements. Symbolically, the police had the task of embodying the type of alternative state that was hoped to take root on the overthrow of the regime. And, in practical terms, if the FSP could play their part in securing and stabilizing Opposition-held areas within secular(ish) frames, it was hoped that the moderate armed groups would gain supremacy and would be able to concentrate on the job of fighting the Syrian regime.

The utility of this approach was appreciated by Turkey, which took up the FSP model and modified it from 2017.\(^{16}\) (These groups are also known as Free Syrian Police but here are referred to as the Syrian Polis (Turkish for ‘police’).\(^{17}\) The
Syrian Polis looks more like the Turkish gendarmerie model – i.e. more paramilitary than Community Police, and at times has supported Turkish military operations. Turkey appears to have greater direct control of these forces when required, which is consistent with the Turkish military control of the zone.

The Syrian experience of police reform as foreign policy has some predecessors, but is also novel in a certain way. Police reform as a way of rebuilding the state and building peace after a conflict is now quite a standard ‘stabilization’ tool in support to transitions – as with NATO and the EU’s work in Bosnia and Kosovo. What is unusual about the Syrian experience is that international actors tried to do it as the war continued. In the case of the FSP’s sponsors, this choice was partly made because of limited options; in Turkey’s case, it was not absolutely necessary to train and keep a local policing body, but it had shown itself useful. This strategy of policing as a state-building-in-conflict-strategy will be taken up in the conflicts of the next decade by regional powers. It is a model that the UAE is using in Yemen, with its support to certain internal security units.

5. Industrial action

Historically, police forces in the region have not been unionized nor have they turned to strikes, protests or riots to push for their demands, with some exceptions. Nonetheless, there have been more police attempts at industrial action in the Arab world in the last decade than in the last fifty years even if this increased activity has not been very effective. It has been attempted in Egypt, Algeria, Sudan and Tunisia in the form of strikes, threats of strikes, demonstrations, and unionization. There have also been direct action approaches such as exfiltrating police officers from trials. It is both a reaction to ossification and a manifestation of resistance to change. For instance, in Egypt, through 2013-2015 members of the police and the paramilitary Central Security Forces (CSF), went on strike in 2013 in ten governorates with a mixed bag of demands – from refusal of perceived instrumentalization by President Morsi, to demands for improved conditions and greater immunity. Certain actions were quickly and firmly put down by fellow officers, and it is hard to draw a link between police industrial action and significant fundamental change. However, the limited success of industrial attempts should not obscure the importance of this emerging
phenomenon. The infection of protest has caught within the body police and will continue to flare up.

**Ways forward for Europe in supporting change**

In many respects, the primacy of the state security model, or regime security model of policing, has managed to survive the decade since the Egyptian uprising started on Police Day in 2011. In other countries, the contrast between 2011 ambitions and current realities is not so stark, nor are sides drawn so clearly; nonetheless, there remains much to overcome for the police to be part of a stable and just state.

The EU, its member states and other European nations have a great deal of interest in the development of reformed police in the Arab World and continue to invest in the area. Since 2015, the EU has spent €200 million on “security system management and reform” in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Yemen. This amount is not particularly large within the greater European Official Development Assistance portfolio (the world’s biggest) but it is notable that the annual figures have grown consistently in this period.\(^{22}\) It is clear that these investments really only bear fruit when space has been made by homegrown movements. The next decade of struggle to reform the police will be hard, often violent, but there are a few ideas that might be woven into such international programs.

1. **Understand police institutions within political economies**

The mutually reinforcing link between security and development (prosperity) is now well attested within development practice. While SSR programming design frequently references this link, it can neglect its practical significance. In fact, formal political economy analysis has much to offer SSR on macro and micro-levels. The involvement of police within protest movements in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Sudan illustrates the obvious fact that the police arise from the same socioeconomic context as the rest of the population, albeit within a highly
ambiguous class role. Understanding both police institutions and individual members as part of these struggles is vital. As the Egyptian experience shows, police industrial action can both prop up the resistance of old policing models and serve up opportunities to undermine institutions’ internal ossification around carnivorous practices. A point for the future will be to anticipate better these strains and struggles in Sudan and Algeria, and where they deliver entry points for programming.

On a more micro or personal scale, programming that seeks to change the habits, behaviour and conduct of police officers should have a good and current idea of their material conditions. Officers are often interested in adopting new behaviours, despite the difficulties of the hierarchy, but are limited by the fact they must take another job, travel great distances to work, and find some way to bring healthcare to their family. Programming design can benefit from being sensitive to facts such as how much they are paid, their pension plans, and their access to healthcare, proper nutrition and decent shelter, but this is not often achieved. Compared to the police human rights department, beloved within international SSR, the human resources department is usually a remoter concern, if it is one at all. Programme adaptation should also be sensitive to changes in officers’ material conditions. Today in Lebanon, a police NCOs’ salary is now worth around $80 a month, in a city where daily costs compare to those in Turin and Bonn. What imperatives this throws up for an NCO, who must support their family, is important for anyone seeking to hold their attention.

To give a final example - placing a Ministry of Interior (MOI) within the political economy of state institutions can also avert counterproductive SSR outcomes. For instance, SSR professional and UN-nominated expert on Libya, Moncef Kartas argued that in Tunisia in the period between 2011 and 2014, international support made the MOI less accountable rather than more. By providing funds directly to the MOI, international sponsors untethered the MOI from the oversight of the legislative and the executive branches, on whom it was no longer reliant. This allowed the MOI to ‘autonomize’, thus supporting its resistance to change.

2. Localize the profession of security
sector reform

Today’s international security sector reform industry is large and competitive, with NGOs, government agencies, multilaterals and private companies competing for funding and for traction with partner nations. The industry attracts a highly educated workforce with the gravity of its concerns, and its international and high stakes elements. Advantages of international staff can include a certain degree of detachment and independence that is useful in otherwise highly clientelist contests. However, there are too few nationals involved in the process, who are the ultimate legatees of the intended change. Such interventions as the Arab Reform Initiative’s two Tahdir for Syria 1 and 2 projects, which trained members of the diaspora in SSR concepts and practices, are good examples of projects that advantage of the opportunity to develop reform concepts among the diaspora. If the concepts and language of police reform are to make more headway against depoliticization and the securitization, it is important that they are propagated by people from the region in its languages.

3. Take holistic approaches

This piece has rather artificially abstracted the police from the wider security and justice sector. However, to treat police problems as simply police problems is doomed to fail. For instance, attempting to deal with massive overcrowding in police cells, a programme that improves the detention facilities of a police force will only have meaningful results if it also engages, in some way, process issues (why are people not released on time), doctrinal issues (why so many are being detained), systemic issues (why the judicial authorities are not processing people fast enough) and socio-political issues (why are so many person of type-X being arrested). Such a response requires a lot of funding and imagination.

4. Invest in digital governance

Digital policing tools – from automatic number plate recognition and bodycams to surveillance and honey trapping – promise to be hugely powerful in the coming decade for police forces in the Arab world for better and for the worse. The dark
side of this technology must be anticipated now by building in digital governance structures into policing projects.

5. Do not give up on the police

Working theories in aid and development change from decade to decade. European support to security sector reform to the Arab world increased hugely in the 2010s. It has encountered significant roadblocks and has not fulfilled the hopes engendered in 2011. Prevailing arguments on contested states predict the permanent fragmentation of the state and the end of the Weberian model – along with its police forces. In autocratically retrenched states, China and Russia are ready and willing to support the state with no-reform-strings attached. However, as popular hopes for the police in Yemen, Syria and Libya show, even in the direst situations, there is a popular desire for the return of the police. Police reform experiences in the Balkans show that this is a process that happens over multiple decades along arduous and winding roads. Europe should persist.
Endnotes


12. ‘Egypt’s Police “using Social Media and Apps like Grindr to Trap Gay People” | The Independent’, accessed 4 February 2020, independent.co.uk.

13. Aaron Holmes, ‘Hackers just leaked sensitive files from over 200 police departments that are searchable by badge number’, Business Insider, 22 June 2020. businessinsider.com


17. These police groups, with uniforms with Arabic and Turkish (‘Polis’) markings became active in the areas under Turkish control, with branches covering Azaz, Jarablous, al-Bab, Sheikh Hadid, Jinderes, Bulbul, Afrin, Maabatli, Marea, Al-Rai, Akhtarin and Qabasin (Bzaah). ‘The Free Police’ SY24, (Arabic), sy-24.com.

20. ‘Egypt’s Police Strike and the Need for Reform’, Atlantic Council (blog), 9 March 2013, atlanticcouncil.org.

22. Disentangling this reform-minded work, which aims at fundamental change in governance and doctrine, from programming focused on counterterrorism and migration management is not the purpose of this essay, as it is an important and complicated task in its own right. We attempted it for Germany’s SSR and security assistance portfolio in Tunisia. Alex Walsh and Jana Treffler, ‘What Is Germany Bringing to Tunisia’s Security Sector?’, Middle East Institute (blog), 13 August 2019, mei.edu.

24. arab-reform.net/project/tahdir-for-syria/ and arab-reform.net/project/tahdir-for-syria-2/
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