What Has Changed in Policing since the Arab Uprisings of 2011? Surveying Policing Concepts and Modes of Contestation

→ Alex Walsh
The 2011 Egyptian protests started in earnest nine years ago on National Police Day on 25 January, a holiday that Hosni Mubarak had introduced to commemorate Egyptian police officers killed and wounded by British colonial forces in 1952. Protesters upended the original meaning of the holiday to turn it into a symbol of police brutality and corruption under Mubarak. In the drama of the 18 days that followed, Egypt’s internal security apparatus fought the protesters in the streets, delivering one shocking provocation after another, galvanizing the protest movement and ultimately contributing to the removal of Mubarak.

Since 2011, the police and internal security forces of many countries in the Arab world have been at the centre of the conflicts and struggles that shape the region for better and for worse. Recent and ongoing encounters between protestors and police in the streets of Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria and Sudan are a stark reminder that the police are more than just a proxy target for a protestation of the state. They are also the object of much anger both as a grouping, and in terms of the concept of policing and social control they embody. The impact of this sustained contestation of police behaviour and doctrine in the region deserves reflection. Has the police and policing changed in the Arab world? And if so, in what ways?

This paper maps out some of the main modes in which the police and policing have been contested since 2011, and provides a preliminary assessment of its impact. It argues that mass mobilised contestation has only been successful in the instance where institutional reform followed. It notes that hybridisation of policing – where informal security actors cooperate and challenge formal security actors – has spread in many countries but that the concept of state security – with its emphasis on the state over citizens – continues to prevail across the region. Indeed, almost a decade after that fateful 25 January 2011, many of the aspirations of citizens protesting the police are far from realised, even while there are some promising developments.

Should we address policing through a regional lens?

Addressing the topic of policing within the frame of the “Arab World” is challenging for at least three major reasons. First is the question of definitions with ongoing
debates about what counts as “policing” rather than “internal security” or indeed military practice.¹ Boundaries are blurred further in the Arab context in the cases where authoritarian governments have instrumentalised the police as a political enforcement bodies, or where the police have found themselves on the front lines of armed conflicts and are substantially militarised and partisan, or where competing policing bodies have been set up.² It is perhaps most straightforward to proceed with an approximate continuum-style definition of what constitutes “policing” – i.e. bodies that in principle function to protect law and order, claim legitimate use of force through their place in the state, and are not as militarised as the military in their respective countries.

Make-shift definitional issues aside, the second challenge is the diversity in the police forces and their encompassing political structures. To use a somewhat acontextual measure of capacity, in the World Internal Security Index, Bahrain and Algeria’s police scores highest and fifth in the world, while Morocco and Yemen lie in the bottom quartile.³ To take another measure – at one end of the trust scale, around nine in 10 Jordanians say they trust their police, but only around half of Palestinians trust theirs.⁴ Meanwhile, in terms of legal-judicial framework, while most police forces in the Arab world function within systems founded on the French Code civil tradition and follow an inquisitorial style of criminal procedure, the picture is nuanced by the legacy of Common Law in areas of former British influence, various codifications of sharia, as well as uncodified traditions and customs.⁵ Furthermore, the police also are part of highly diverse political systems – spanning authoritarian regimes (from the more benign to the less so), tentative democracies, weak or contested states and outright conflict zones.

A third major issue is that of data and access. Research funding usually favours studies of regional militaries over police studies, while information on the topic is often purposefully obscured and tightly protected by authorities as a sensitive area of national security. Attempts to inquire about policing practices are often met with officious obfuscation, blunt repression or fatal violence.⁶ In certain cases where international engagement in the security sector is intense – for instance, Lebanon, Tunisia, or Iraq – there is a considerable amount of information publicly available. In other cases – for instance, Algeria or Saudi Arabia – there is much less so.
Lack of access also tends to skew the type of knowledge produced, tending to generate more knowledge from the outside (human rights reports, political analyses, etc.) than insights on what is going on in the inside, or indeed what is going on with the less political aspects of policing – such as criminal investigations or human resource management. This means there is a huge amount we do not know about how police officers themselves experience their jobs – a very important part of the picture and a consideration that should caution comprehensive diagnoses. Can we usefully compare policing in the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, of which we know quite little, with policing in consociationalist Lebanon, of which we know a good deal more?

Despite the diversity, threads unite the realities of policing across the region, which makes a regional approach worth exploring even if one should remain cautious about overgeneralising. The most basic is a shared policing concept of what policing is and what it is for – one that is based around the state security model. This model sees the primary role of the police as protecting the security and stability of the state, often conceived as separate from the citizens. Within this model, the police is set apart from the general population and is formed as a quasi-military organisation. This character is reflected in the universal use of military ranks – where the police officer on the ground is usually ranked “soldier” and the chief of police is often a brigadier. In many instances, military officers will be transferred to head police units, and in some cases, such as Lebanon, all ranking officers must graduate from the military academy. Between the ranks, there is a high “distance to power ratio” which indicates that lower-ranked members of the police accept that power and decision-making is concentrated at the top. A similar distance operates between the police and the public, even in countries where the police are relatively popular. Within this model, security is a situation more often imposed from above than built cooperatively with a population. As a quasi-military body, civilian oversight in such a model is often limited, whereby the institution and its members enjoy varying degrees of immunity in law and in practice. However, it is important to note that the functional outcome of this concept can be vastly different – ranging from extremely abusive and repressive to the more benign.

Such a model has been adopted and adapted, in different ways, from colonial
regimes. Colonial powers saw themselves as distant and distinct from a population that was to be controlled. New political elites emerging after independence, including in Egypt and Tunisia, found much utility in the colonial policing model’s capability to subject and control, and deepened and developed this aspect, making the police a key partner to the ruling regime. In the most repressive states, such as Syria and Iraq (pre-2003), the more uniformed gendarmerie-style police lost much ground to intelligence agencies, whose expansive competencies included criminal investigations as well espionage, counter-espionage and political control.

In other instances, where the colonial relationships were somewhat different, as in Transjordan and the Trucial States, and where the state was much less established and expansive, the relationship between police and people was conceived along traditional paternalistic lines – where the police’s fatherly position was conceived to protect and discipline the sons and daughters of the nation. In Kuwait, this is talked about in terms of the police acting as kudwah (fatherly role-modelling). And in Oman and Jordan, the ruler is also the chief of police. In this smaller Gulf states, in addition to Tunisia and Lebanon, there has been a notable and recent tendency to adopt Community Policing strategies, alongside state security approaches. While the police in these countries are not short of critics, there has certainly been systematic efforts to bring the police and the policed closer. Such strategies are diverse, and their impact varied but to one degree or another represent a softening of the state security model.

Modes of contesting police and policing since 2011

Mass-mobilised challenge

Unsurprisingly, given the diversity of the police in the region, contestation of the police and policing has evolved in diverse forms across the region since 2011, with particular intensity in the “Arab Spring” countries. The most common type of contestation has come in the form of mass mobilised challenge – where large
protests amass to protest the police specifically or within a wider collection of grievances. It is not always easy to differentiate between the two targets of ire. The particular touchstones of such protests differ according to country. For instance, certain protests in Autumn 2018 in Sudan focused on the ill-treatment of women by the so-called “Society Police”, while protest rhetoric in Morocco in October 2016 focused on the death of a fishmonger who was crushed by the internal mechanism of a sanitation lorry after his goods were thrown away by security agents. He was then elevated as a symbol of police/government injustice. The lineage of such narratives can be traced all the way back to the genitive moment of the 2011 uprisings, the self-immolation of Bouazizi in December 2010, who was reportedly humiliated by the police.

However, despite the persistence of this form, its immediate successes in challenging existing concepts of policing tend to be dramatic, but limited. While revolutionary momentum in 2011 drove Egypt’s security forces off the streets for a period, and led to the dissolution of the notorious State Security Investigations (SSI, in Arabic, Mabahith Amn El Dawla), the security apparatus consequently reprises its powerful position. SSI has more or less been reconstituted as Homeland Security (Qita‘ El Amn El Watani), and judicial outcomes have been far harder on protesters than police officers, with more death sentences handed down to the former in the intervening since 2011. Policing institutions and the state security concept appears unchanged in Egypt.

Institutionalised challenge

Tunisia, on the other hand, presents a more successful case of contesting policing methods. As in Egypt, mass mobilised contestation of the police led to rapid and dramatic gains – with the dissolution of what the public conceived of as the “political police”, and the removal of a number of senior police commanders. However, the development of mass mobilised challenge into institutionalised efforts set Tunisia apart from Egypt. In 2014, the new Constitution conceived of the police explicitly as apolitical, the Ministry of Interior promulgated a Human Rights Guide, there was a revision of the laws governing arrest, and legislation allowing security workers to unionise. A parliamentary committee to oversee the security sector is now functioning, even if its efficacy is critiqued.
The extent to which the opportunities for police reform and general reform were fully exploited in Tunisia have been regretted by some, and there is certainly much left to do. However, the important point is that it is a work that remains in progress. The state security concept lingers, and the changes mentioned above are certainly imperfect, but at least point towards a concept that places the citizen rather than the state at the heart of the police’s work. Today, the institutionalised contestation is work that is quotidian, iterative, and not easy to characterise in broad strokes but is at least ongoing. Little by little (and not without obstacles, which will be addressed in Part 2), these efforts focus on improving police accountability, integrity and effectiveness.

Hybridisation

Hybridisation and informalisation of the security sector is a situation where multiple non-state actors make a claim on the security sphere, or where non-state actors are absorbed in one way or another into state security sectors. As a phenomenon, it also represents a type of contestation of police and policing organisations because it presents alternative “policing bodies”, and because it challenges the concept that state police have a monopoly on force and policing more generally. Such a situation prevails in Lebanon, where state security entities – including the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces – have to share the sphere with other groupings (including political parties and private security), which carry out their own patrolling, surveillance, investigation and public order activities. It is difficult to characterise briefly the complexity of the relationship between state and non-state actors in Lebanon, as the situation varies in degree and nature according to neighbourhood and area. The roots of this situation go back beyond 2011, at least to the civil war. Hybridisation of a different nature is also particularly acute in Yemen, where parties to the conflict also carry out internal security. In such circumstances, contestation over policing is part of a contest for the territory and state more broadly.

Hybridisation of the security sphere is particularly acute in Syria. Civilian policing in regime areas retreated giving ground to intelligence agencies; as the internal security space politicised to the point of militarisation, a myriad of actors national and international have hybridised the internal security space, which is difficult to
disassociate meaningfully from the military space. The conflict did not simply introduce new actors but also new concepts, particularly in areas that slipped out of regime control. From 2013, the emergence of the Free Syrian Police (FSP), based on Community Policing principles in the opposition-held areas in Aleppo, Idlib and Latakia governorates, and the creation of the Internal Security Forces (ISF, known as Asayish in Kurdish)\(^\text{[20]}\) in north-eastern Syria manifest starkly new policing concepts. Certainly, flawed in many ways, the largely unarmed FSP’s courageous attempt at Community Policing – and policing by consent – was a first in Syria. It is very significant that amidst the conflict, priority and precious resources were shaped into such organisations. This reflects on the enduring link between statehood and policing even in places where the police (and the state) have been historically feared. The FSP and ISF were built as central parts of the revolutionary and or alternative states. They are or were policing as a revolutionary state-building act. No account of the FSP can be made without considering the international support, which will be considered in Part 2.

**International attempts to reform policing**

Certain strains of international engagement with Arab police forces can also be categorised within the frame of contestation of policing concepts. This applies in the case where engagement qualifies as reform, as opposed to “security assistance”. The latter builds the capability of security sectors without working towards change in their underlying concepts and operation. While security assistance is not necessarily negative, much valid criticism has been directed at programming that falls into the security assistance category for a host of different reasons – including the huge prioritisation of counter-terrorism\(^\text{30}\) and transfer of spying technologies without ensuring proper judicial and legal framework.\(^\text{21}\)

Less discussion has been had about the impact of the internationally-backed efforts to reform policing concepts in the Arab world even though such efforts have existed since the 2000s. They have intensified since 2011 as the uprisings presented international players with new entry points and new risks of state disintegration to head off. Tunisia and Libya opened as new ground, and police
reform was confirmed as an avenue of state-building.

Figure 1. Spending on Security System Management and Reform by 16 members of the EU in the Middle East (West Bank and Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Oman, and Saudi Arabia). Figures for 2018 are not fully accounted for. Source: https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/content/explore/recipients_en

These international reform projects (funded notably by the EU and its member states, the UK, US and UN agencies) promote models of policing that emphasize the human security paradigm, with commitments around security that is inclusive of different communities, is gender sensitive and respects the rule of law. International reform support efforts have had some notable successes – for instance, the British support to the Jordanian Public Security Directorate in the cases of Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps. This introduced a community-focused policing approach and avoided an over-securitisation of the camps. By 2013, over 140,000 refugees took shelter in the Zaatari refugee camp, where security conditions became an issue. Tensions between Jordanian government officials attempting to regain control and Syrian camp residents broke out into clashes between police and residents in April 2014, and rendered areas of the camp unsafe for police officers. National and international bodies raised concerns over safety and security for camp residents. With British support, the Jordanian police adopted a conciliatory community-focused policing approach, building productive relationships with residents, allowing them to do their work to defuse tensions and avert what could have been a serious security problem. This represents a notable difference compared to what might have happened through a traditional hard securitisation of the camp.

International efforts certainly have their limitations. They have to function with the consent of host administrations, which often requires a trade-off between aspirations and what is politically possible. Furthermore, it cannot be emphasised enough that international efforts can only really succeed where national movements for change have created space in the first place. In addition, international project team members working on reform are generally not subject to the risks that their regional colleagues are.

International efforts also tend to try to side-line or at least ignore the functioning of informal and non-state actors in the security sphere, as a way of supporting the primacy and monopoly of the state over policing. This accords with the international sponsors’ general assumptions that Westphalian-type states are in the best interests of the people of the region and their own international interests. How these two sets of interests are balanced differs between international sponsors and according to their beneficiary programming. On the one hand, reform efforts can lead truly to improved security provision for citizens, in other circumstances, well-meaning support to police can inadvertently worsen situations. Moncef Kartas’ critique of the international support to the reform in the Tunisian sector argues how these efforts have contributed to reinforcing police autonomy and in the process decreased its accountability, thus cementing traditional standards of impunity.
However, in many cases, the balance that international engagement with police strikes between the foreign actors’ interests and the interests of citizens is quite complicated to unpick. For instance, German engagement with the Tunisian security sector promotes both good police governance and securitisation of Tunisia’s borders, which has both positive and negative effects for Tunisians.

Where next?

Policing in the Arab World is extremely diverse. Since 2011, modes of contesting the police have been similarly varied, achieving different levels of success. Mass mobilised contestation has only been successful in the instance where institutional reform followed. In turn, contestation through institutional reform has shown that this it is a slow and difficult process. In areas of security hybridisation, non-state security actors both cooperate with and challenge police organisations and traditional policing concepts. The centrality of the concept of state security prevails across the region, with some exceptions.

Nonetheless, groups across the region continue to work hard to change how policing is conceived and delivered: further modes of contestation not mentioned here include judicial contestation (including within transitional justice processes in Tunisia), and industrialised contestation with the formation of police unions in Egypt and Tunisia. The diversity of this contestation – and the efforts and sacrifices it embodies – should encourage those on the ground and the international community to keep going. Police reform is a slow and difficult business but promises a great deal. It has been almost nine years since 25 January 2011, but experience in Eastern Europe – in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the international community engaged intensely – suggests a timeline of decades.

Data and understanding of the field of policing in the Arab World is patchy, a situation that belies the importance of the topic to the region’s residents and the international community and underlines the importance of further research. Among many other avenues, much more research is needed to understand the experience of police officers themselves. This area requires much more research, as understanding this perspective is important for changing conduct. If you want a police officer to change the way they behave, it is crucial to know what motivates them and what constrains them. Perspectives that take the police officer outside of the conventional frames of “enforcer of injustice” or “security partner” and place them within wider social and political frames are critical. While this piece has tried to narrow its focus on the police and policing, which artificially isolates them to some degree, research that places state police within wider ecologies of policing are also crucial.

Part 2 surveys the obstacles and vested interests hindering the transformation of policing in the Arab World and looks to future trends in regional and international efforts.

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This oversight committee is in a period of evolution and growth. See Hamza Mighri, ‘Barriers to Tunisia’s Security and Defense Reform’, https://carnegie-mec.org/sada/77214


Some degree of hybridization and informalization is extremely common – for instance in any context where private security or neighbourhood watch initiative operates. It is not a uniquely or inherently Arab world phenomenon.


For an analysis of Germany’s balancing act in terms of its security support to Tunisia, see Alex Walsh and Jana Treffler, ‘What is Germany Bringing to Tunisia’s Security Sector?’, Middle East Institute, 13 August 2019 https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-germany-bringing-tunisias-security-sector


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