

## Reforming Hybrid Security Forces in Arab States

*Eleonora Ardemagni and Andrea Cellino*



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*Reforming hybrid security forces and stabilizing fractured Arab states will require a focus on human security and local security providers.*

Regionalized civil conflicts after 2011 and the coronavirus pandemic have reshaped political-military dynamics in Arab states. Security sector reform (SSR) in the region needs new perspectives. Traditional approaches to SSR are based on a top-down model of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and on a binary reading of the security landscape that focuses on formal military forces. Such approaches have failed to deliver long-term stabilization and are increasingly detached from ground reality.

A [December 2020 joint report](#), edited by Andrea Cellino and Annalisa Perteghella and published by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, suggests a new policy toolkit for SSR. This report analyzes the cases of Iraq, Libya, and Yemen and delves into theoretical considerations around security hybridization between formal and informal security forces and the changing nature of security provision, all against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. Based on this, the report argues that traditional approaches to SSR have proved ineffective in establishing sustainable reform processes in conflict-affected and hybrid contexts across the region.

In contexts where traditional top-down and institution-centric SSR approaches prove ineffective, more decentralized and tailor-made approaches favoring informal civilian forms of oversight may be adopted. The report recommends that future attempts at comprehensive and holistic reform stress local-level community engagement to make hybrid actors accountable through their involvement in security governance. The report also suggests that key donors' coordinate their support or patronage for SSR efforts.

### **Hybridity and Human Security**

After the 2011 uprisings, hybrid security actors gained prominence in SSR efforts due to fractured or challenged state institutions. "Hybrid actors can support, parallel, or contend with established governments," [notes Jerome Drevon](#) in his chapter on the challenge of hybrid actors for security governance. "Hybrid groups' core defining feature is governance," and their expanded prerogatives range now from the provision of social services to adjudication mechanisms and policing social norms. In this way, the coronavirus pandemic "has added a sense of urgency" to address SSR and its gaps in transitioning societies, as [Ranj Alaaldin points out](#).

Far from being only a health crisis, the pandemic has generated further pressure on governments: rampant economic and social grievances also provide new room for action to hybrid security actors. In such a context, adopting localized approaches to SSR "avoids imposing alternative designs that are not applicable to dynamics of governance and political contestations," with the possibility to "generate consensus on security sector governance" in a broader way. Without a human security perspective, competing interests can constrain SSR, as occurred in Iraq after 2003, [suggests Irene Costantini](#).

### **Implementing SSR in Yemen and Libya**

In the 2010s, SSR in fractured states such as Yemen and Libya was marked by convergent and dysfunctional mechanisms: widespread politicization by domestic and regional players, integration efforts at an institutional or group (but not individual) level, limited adaptability to complexity, and local dynamics. In this sense, "Yemen needs to refocus on local communities rather than on military elites as part of a decentralised process of state rebuilding," [writes Eleonora Ardemagni](#). A network-oriented, and not an army-centric, approach to SSR "would acknowledge differentiated security priorities among Yemen's governorates," supporting efforts to civilianize and localise security.

In Libya, external interference and complex internal dynamics have exacerbated growth of hybrid forces. In the post-revolutionary environment, multiple armed groups proliferated and militarized the country's (in)formal security sector. Ten years on from the revolution's onset, SSR initiatives in Libya have failed to meet the

necessary threshold of political will for successful and holistic implementation. Instead, as [Jalel Harchaoui observes](#), several foreign powers have begun supporting bilateral, SSR-branded initiatives, primarily focused on train-and-equip efforts and short-term stabilisation, rather than long-term sustainable peacebuilding based on oversight mechanisms and security sector professionalism. As a result, the risk is that “a plethora of separate SSR pushes” focused “on limited parcels of territory in uncoordinated ways” could trigger further violence.

As a mirror of political balances, SSR must be ready to adapt its tools to pursue shared goals. Where local security providers and hybrid security governance are the norm—rather than the exception—SSR should reckon with these contextual idiosyncrasies and aim to rebuild a cohesive national framework.

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