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**Power and the Security Sector**

*Thoughts from the Sociology of Power*

**ABSTRACT**  Following the long trail of critique that emerged from first- and second-generation security sector reform (SSR) programs, this paper introduces a new theoretical framework for the socio-political analysis of the security sector that will enhance the potential for reform and transformation. This introduction to the special issue gathers shared considerations among authors researching the security sector in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and promotes a dialogue for the improvement of the analysis of the sector within its socio-political context. Drawing from Sociology of Power, we aim to provide analytical and theoretical tools in order to develop a new conception of the “security sector,” which differs from what mainstream academia, think tanks, and public policies have traditionally dealt with.  
**KEYWORDS:** security sector, security sector reform, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Sociology of Power

**INTRODUCTION**

Security sectors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region had long been a neglected topic for scholars, despite its fundamental role in explaining power regimes (Barak and David 2010). After the wave of military coups in the Mediterranean region during the 1970s, academic interest for civil–military relations decreased. The uprisings that emerged in 2011 have shed a new spotlight on the importance of civil–military relations, and on security issues and the recent democratic and authoritarian developments in the region.
The development of security sector reform (SSR) programs in the region is even more under-researched. The limited amount of specifically labeled SSR programs should not deter scholars from looking at the possible transformation and the need for reform of the security sectors in the region, especially when important deficiencies in the diagnoses of SSR programs have been identified as one of the main reasons for failure (Ashour 2014; Berg 2012; Jackson 2011). Indeed, most scholarly analysis of SSR has dealt with Sub-Saharan countries (e.g., Albrecht and Buur 2009; Dyck 2013) and Southeast Asian countries, with the notable exceptions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Ball 2002).

The relevance of this Contemporary Arab Affairs special issue is thus empirical as well as theoretical. The assemblage stems from the attempt to resituate the importance of the security sectors within the political and historical contexts, as well as from the realization of a shortfall in analytical tools developed that can adequately engage with their analysis.

To that end, we specifically present the Sociology of Power, discussed below, that draws from sociological conceptualizations and tools to study power regimes. We argue for a useful and flexible analytical framework drawing from the layout of the Sociology of Power through a series of shared considerations. Sociological approaches that take power into account advance a more integral approach to security issues in an era of expanding securitization processes and of blurring frontiers (internal/external threats; exceptional/ordinary security policies). So far, institutionalist approaches have been incapable of providing a comprehensive understanding of security dynamics, nor to prescribe successful initiatives for transformation.

The empirical case studies gathered in this issue illustrate the value of a sociological framework of analysis whilst advancing the knowledge on the current state of the security sectors in several countries in North Africa and West Asia.

SSR WITHIN LIBERAL PEACE

SSR programs emerged at the end of the 1990s as proposals integrated into the vision of liberal peace, development cooperation, and democracy promotion within a new framework of North–South relations. From development studies, SSR is proposed as a way out of the “hard” approach to military relations between the great powers, the regional powers, and the countries of the Global

South. This approach (notably lead by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the UK’s Department for International Development) arises from the perception that security problems in the Global South are dysfunctions in good governance. The goal of SSR is thus to ensure the efficient and effective provision of state and human security within a framework of democratic governance (Hänggi and Tanner 2005, 16).

In the development of the new liberal peace paradigm of the post-Cold War era, the premise is that insecurity of populations is an obstacle to stability, peace, and economic and social development of certain states. Resolution 2151 of 28 April 2014 of the United Nations Security Council (S/RES/2151) stated: “reforming the security sector in post-conflict environments is critical to the consolidation of peace and stability, promoting poverty reduction, rule of law and good governance, extending legitimate State authority, and preventing countries from relapsing into conflict.” This framework is also supported by quantitative studies that claim a close relationship between insecurity, violence, and poverty, linking security to the new concept of human security proposed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). By strengthening the theoretical postulate of security–development nexus, SSR programs would unblock situations of instability, insecurity, and poverty, allowing the development of the country in question (Jackson 2011). In fact, SSR was initially applied to post-authoritarian and post-conflict contexts, almost exclusively in the African continent, and specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa (Guinea-Bissau, DR Congo, Sierra Leone). However, even in states where SSR programs have been a relative success (as in the case of Sierra Leone), its subsequent impact on the country’s economic development and on the human security of the population is questionable (Dyck 2013), showing a more complex relationship between security and development.

Whilst the failure of most of the SSR programs carried out to date is widely acknowledged, the shortcomings have been attributed to their implementation, as well as to the theory behind them. On a theoretical level, the main difficulty of SSR is its state-centric conception, which, despite some postulates based on human security, starts from the Weberian notion of the state as the last and legitimate holder of the use of force.² Despite the rhetoric of civil society participation, local ownership,³ and the political...

². For a discussion on the need to include non-state actors, see Abrahamsen and Williams (2006).
³. For a critical review on the concept, see Bendix and Stanley (2008).
dimension (of good governance) of SSRs, a disregard for power relations in both the state and sub-state subsystems (tribal, communal, etc.) and, especially, in the global system, reduces this political dimension of SSR to a simple problem of political will. Consequently, orthodox SSRs ignore the impact of neoliberal globalization and the emergence of transnational resources, actors, and power relations.

This inability or lack of interest in identifying and analyzing the political and supra-state dimension translates in practice into excessively technical implementations, which end up turning SSR programs into “train-and-equip” programs, not far removed from the traditional military assistance used during the Cold War (Mobekk 2010; Riis Andersen 2011; Sedra 2010b).

These critical points have been raised by a revision of the SSR model during the second decade of the twenty-first century, from which different proposals for a second generation of programs have emerged. Preeminent proposed solutions are to make of SSR a more process-oriented project, more adapted to the context, less tied to the tempos of donors—however feasible that might be—more hybrid and less state centric (Jackson 2011; Sedra 2010a). One must bear in mind, however, that these proposals often come from think tanks and experts closely linked to the business and practice of SSR programs, such as consultants, practitioners, etc., and are aimed above all at a Western audience or donors and experts in the field (O’Reilly 2010).

In the more academic literature, however, in addition to the reformist vision of SSR, there are other authors who fall within the critical studies of security and/or development, or peace studies who see SSR programs as an instrument of liberal or post-liberal peace (Chandler 2010; Riis Andersen 2011), a Western instrument of intervention (Riis Andersen 2011; Sayigh 2007), and one of the essential mechanisms of imperialist biopolitics (Mustafa 2015). Prominently, scholars such as Chandler (2010) or Richmond (2011) point at SSR and peace-building as, respectively, tools to control populations in order to fight against the threats identified by Western elites; or in order to deepen neoliberal globalization. The one responsible for the violence identified in SSR, as well as for poverty, is also the fragile or the failed state that does not assume its responsibility towards its own population and towards the international community, or one whose institutional capacities do not allow security to be ensured: of the state, of the markets, and finally and causally, of the population.
The debate on SSR during the 1990s and early 2000s did not reach the MENA region at the time (Luethold 2004; Sayigh 2007). The first European Union (EU) SSR program in the region was in Palestine after the Oslo Accords and with consequences that, as Mustafa (in this issue) describes, have proved detrimental to the real interests of the Palestinian population. The Lebanese SSR experience has also meant very little improvement for the Lebanese population (Farrés-Fernández, in this issue). In the case of Tunisia, Hanau and Cimini (in this issue) show how the myriad of donors for security assistance and their different priorities and agendas, against the backdrop of the counter-terrorist fight, have prevented a successful transformation in the security sector, effectively reinforcing the presidential control over the security sector while weakening the parliament’s role.

The fundamental role of security sectors in the region prompted some authors to advocate opening the debate on SSR in the MENA region (Luethold 2004) and building an indigenous agenda beyond the rhetoric and praxis of Western donors and institutions (Sayigh 2007). In this sense, Eckhard’s (2016) global analysis for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung supports the thesis of focusing efforts on civil society and on how to articulate real and truly transformative popular participation.

The consequences of the different analyses existing around SSR lead to the debate on whether to discard SSR, delve into its true meaning for change, or simply shy away from the label and focus on the need to reform security systems. In recent years, and most acutely in the MENA region, the hegemony of the perception of the “terrorist threat” as a global threat seems to move the SSR proposal further away, once again prioritizing “hard security.”

Experts at the Arab Reform Initiative wondered accordingly whether SSR was possible without radical change or total crisis in a region where the security sector is the backbone of many regimes (Kodmani and Chartouni-Dubarry 2009; Sayigh 2007). In the case of the Arab world, the proposal is to integrate SSR into a more holistic process of change, based on human rights and dependent on the rhythms and agendas of activists and civil society (Kodmani and Chartouni-Dubarry 2009). It is in accordance with this approach, anchored in a historical and socio-political awareness, that we see the relevance of addressing power relations when engaging with the study of the security sector.
THE SOCIOLOGY OF POWER: TAKING POWER INTO ACCOUNT

Sociology of Power aims to be a theoretical tool for the analysis of large hierarchical social systems. Limits of space oblige us to present the basic points of this proposal briefly, implemented as well in some of the articles in this issue (Morocco, Libya and Lebanon). It is, however, recommended to resort to the original sources that describe the theoretical framework at length (e.g., Farrés-Fernández 2012; Goenaga Sánchez 2015; Izquierdo Brichs 2008, 2012, 2013; Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington 2017; Izquierdo Brichs, Etherington, and Feliu 2017; Lampridi-Kemou 2011; Navarro Muñoz 2015).

Sociology of Power holds that only individuals, or groups of individuals, relevant in terms of power in the studied system, can be considered actors. Organizations or institutions (including the state, as well as corporations, political parties, churches, etc.) are excluded from the conceptual category of actor, as will be explained below. At the same time, the hierarchical organization of the society implies the existence of elites who control certain resources of power that, in turn, help them maintain their position at the top of the hierarchies. These elites will be categorically distinct from the rest of the analyzed society (which will be called the ‘population’). Therefore, generally, the relevant actors will be members of the different elites of the system. However, exceptionally, the population can become, at the macro-sociological level, a collective actor through its mobilization, with a potentially huge impact on the power relations of the system.

Avoiding the interactionist error presented by Pierre Bourdieu, Sociology of Power assumes that social, economic, and political relations between actors

4. This perspective has been previously developed in the analysis of power regimes in the region (Izquierdo Brichs 2013), and of political Islam (Izquierdo Brichs et al. 2017).
5. We refer to macro- and mega-size systems in the classification proposed by Bunge (1999, 387–88), which includes large cities, corporations, large political parties, etc. up to the global system.
6. We understand organizations as entities constituted at the same time by a great group of individuals and by structures that include (besides norms, practices, internal culture, etc.) different roles and positions for the different individuals who are part of it. The mere existence of these structures already implies the existence of different interests, some opposed or incompatible, between the different individuals who form the organization. This fact prevents organizations from being considered actors (Wight 2006). Sociology of Power has referred to this type of organization as “institutions,” a term that we be will used here in order to simplify the drafting. Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington (2017) and Lampridi-Kemou (2011) have further arguments (complementary to that of Wight just seen) on why institutions, and especially the state (the actor par excellence for the classic International Relations schools), cannot be considered actors.
7. The interactionist error means, according to Bourdieu and Inda (2001), mistaking power relations with simple communicative relations.
in large hierarchical social systems are relations of power, and not simple interactions. Likewise, we must bear in mind that the position of these actors, and ultimately their existence as actors, depends on the resources of power they possess, and for this reason we understand that these relationships they establish are relations of power. The priority of elites who control the hierarchies is the differential accumulation of power, which is to control more power than the other individuals of the elite, because if they lose that competition, they stop controlling the hierarchy. As a result, actors do not have absolute goals other than to keep permanently on top of the accumulation of power. These power relations have no end, are circular, and feed themselves. That means that actors have to use their power constantly to gain more power differential with respect to their competitors (Izquierdo Brichs 2008).

Circular power relations established by endless competition among elites are the dynamics that generally govern the system. Only occasionally do we find another kind of power relations, when the population can consciously identify its needs and to mobilize to achieve them (Izquierdo and Lampridi-Kemou 2009, 21–22). Through this process, the population, which is generally a resource of power in the hands of elites, becomes an active social movement who, by exercising its power, can have an enormous impact on the system.

In addition to the usual control of the population, elites will use different resources of power, both material and symbolic, in the competition. Depending on each system, we will find some resources or others, with different relative weights, by which the actors will compete among themselves for their control. However, we must not forget that “resources such as the control of the State, Ideology, Capital, Coercion, Information or the Population itself, serve to compete for the accumulation of power. As a result, the analysis cannot be done in isolation for each of these areas because, if the competition is always for power, the players involved in the competition all play against each other in a single and unique game but using each one the resources of power that they can get” (Izquierdo and Farrés 2008, 111).

Finally, returning to the institutions referred to above, we find that entities such as corporations, state institutions, churches, some political parties, etc., insofar as they can be controlled by specific actors, can represent an important resource of power, while, at the same time, they have a notable structural component (rules, practices, bureaucratic mechanisms, internal culture, ideology, etc.) that escapes the control of the actors. That is, institutions cannot be actors per se, but are, on the one hand, a resource of power in the hands of elites (usually the elites of their own hierarchy), and, on the
other, a structure that offers opportunities and limitations to the actors who act within it.

**POWER AND THE SECURITY SECTOR**

When analyzing the security sector within the framework of Sociology of Power, we must consider that the former is made up of a set of institutions with a dual nature, being in part a resource of power and, in part, a structure. The proportion of the structural component to the resource component is a characteristic of each institution or organization and, therefore, should be determined by the empirical study itself. The more transparent, democratic, institutionalized, bureaucratized, ideologized, etc., institutions are, the more limited is the room for maneuver of the actors who control them, which implies that their structural proportion is greater.

These structures can serve to limit the power of elites vis-à-vis the population. This fact is especially relevant in the analysis of the security sector given that we refer to those mechanisms that protect against the arbitrary use of the security sector against the population or certain groups within society (Ball 2002; Bellamy 2003; Sayigh 2007). These can range from the signature of human rights conventions, the establishment of civil and democratic control mechanisms, specific internal control mechanisms (e.g., cameras in police stations, human rights department, etc.), mechanisms for transparency and control of corruption, etc.

However, as we will see in the cases researched in this issue, structures may also simply be limits set in the competition among elites. In this case we refer to agreements (tacit or not), regulations or specific norms, imposition of quotas or power-sharing of the institution between elites of different communities, ideologies, or simply a status that protects elites from certain actions in the security sector. We can also find structures that strengthen the position of elites vis-à-vis the population (in many cases established by consensus among the elites) but that are not resources of power because once established, they escape the control of the elites. The ideological hegemonies, norms, and traditions through which symbolic violence is exercised would be an example of this.

On the other hand, insofar as the institutions of the security sector are controlled by specific actors, and they are useful in the competition with the rest of the actors for the accumulation of differential power, we will identify them as resources of power. As such, the institutions of the security sector can have very different weights in the different power regimes. They can in some cases...
be the main power resource on which the primary actors of the system are based, or they can be a secondary resource with little relevance in the competition among the elites. This can happen for different reasons. The most obvious are the weight of other resources of power (such as capital, ideology, etc.) in the studied system. Equally, its weight will depend on the acceptance or perceived legitimacy of its use, for example, as coercive power, by the population.

As well as a resource of power, the control of the institutions of the security sector can offer access to other resources of power. It may offer access to economic capital through corruption, extortion, and beneficial economic positioning, as is the case of some Egyptian or Moroccan officers (De Martino & Hussein, in this issue; Camps-Febrer, in this issue). In some social systems it can grant an important prestige (that allows, for example, the passage to high political positions, or other forms of influence); or the control of other institutions controlled from the security sectors (defense industry, think-tanks, military educational systems, etc.).

With these considerations in mind, we must examine the degree of centralization of elites within the security sector. That is, we must determine if there is a common elite, recognized by the different institutions, and that therefore accumulates an important power, or if, on the contrary, we find different elites of different bodies that compete among them. Regardless of the degree of centralization, however, the actors who are part of the elites of the security sectors compete with each other continuously. This competition can have very different consequences if it is carried out through legally established channels, with impartial mechanisms that are based on the merits of the different actors, or alternatively through irregular channels, obtaining positions through corruption or nepotism, or boycotting adversaries in various ways, for example, using the institutions themselves illegitimately against them, or even through violent actions. In other words, it is important to identify the resources of power that elites use in the competition because this can affect the dynamics of any system.

Likewise, we can observe which of these mechanisms are used in the incorporation of new actors in the elites, and if the access to these elites is open or if in reality it is blocked and renovation is limited by current actors (Izquierdo and Lampridi-Kemou 2009). The degree of homogeneity (or heterogeneity) of the elites, closely related to their (geographic, ethnic, class) origin, is also an aspect that can facilitate alliances and the exclusion of the rest of the actors who are not part of the distinguished group.

In contrast, the population component that can be found inside the security sector are all those individuals in this sector who are not part of their
elites, that is, they do not have the necessary resources of power (even if they are symbolic, or due to their position) to exercise a control, or have a notable impact on their hierarchical system.

Certainly, the population of the security sectors, especially those of the police or army corps, militias, etc., is the paradigmatic case of the population used as a resource of power. However, history shows that sometimes this population can be activated as a collective actor, sometimes revolutionary, sometimes in alliance with the rest of the population of the system.

Accordingly, we must consider the general characteristics of this population: its demographic weight and proportion with respect to the rest of the population (hypertrophic security services as opposed to underdimensioned); their economic, social, and cultural situation; their level of education and technical knowledge regarding their functions; if they form a closed social system or, on the contrary, they are integrated into the rest of the population; its origins and if they represent the diversity of the system that surrounds them, or if with a homogeneous or similar origins, we only find in it specific sectors of society. A case in point to these questions is the demographic study of the Egyptian army (De Martino & Hussein, in this issue).

However, the security sector cannot be analyzed, nor can its transformation be envisaged, without locating it in the environment that gives it meaning. Therefore, we understand that it is essential to look at the role it plays in the power regime in which it finds itself. To whom is the security sector useful? What actors outside of its institutions does it reinforce? Through what mechanisms? What relationships (of alliance, dependencies, etc.) do its actors establish with global actors and what is their role at the supranational level? What relationships does it establish with the population?

**SHARED CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS**

Security sectors are an unavoidable element of the regimes of power in North Africa and West Asia. As such, the analysis of their entrenchment with the power dynamics is essential in order to understand the historical political changes going on in the region, as well as its effects at the societal level.

The theoretical proposal presented in this special issue was derived above. Its application to the different case studies shows the different academic backgrounds of the contributing authors and their personal appropriation of the proposals, creating an interesting range of visions from the standpoint of
shared considerations. The following visions are the main ones, which constitute the backbone of the respective analytical works.

First, we see as paramount the task of analyzing power structures within their social, political, and economic contexts. We propose the consideration of the power structure (complementary to the political system) as a relevant factor to explain the security sector. The evolution and ongoing transformations of these sectors in the different countries studied have to do with the struggle of elites for a differential accumulation of power (and with the population’s aspirations for an improvement of their living conditions).

Regarding the competition for the differential accumulation of power among the elites within the same state, we have seen, for example, the case of Morocco, which shows how transformations in the security sector have served to establish and maintain a balance of power of the elites who control these bodies, preventing any potential threats to the primary elite, the monarchy (Camps-Febrer, in this issue). However, in the Lebanese case (Farrés-Fernández, in this issue), the reform of the security sector is used in the competition between the main political elites of the country. In this case, the structures inherited from the civil war, the long Syrian presence in the country, and the security sector model developed during the Second Republic allow the security sector to be used harshly in the competition between the main Lebanese elites. This unleashes a tough competition to obtain control of the sector, and SSR is a tool used by political elites who maintain alliances with Western powers (essentially the United States, the UK, and France) to strengthen their position in this competition. In both cases, we have seen how reforms of the security sector do not respond to the political will to approach a perspective of human security and to improve the respect of human rights, but it must be understood as part of the dynamics of competition among the elites of each country. This explains the poor progress made by these reforms.

Second, the relevance of the state level should be assessed by considering other levels of analysis (local, national, transnational, global) and their interrelation. Various thematic fields (including security) show different power structures linked to other fields in a complex web of interrelations. There is, thus, a need to study power systems as a whole and address very different resources and determining factors, such as the institutional, ideological and informational, religious, military and coercive, economic (capital), or political resources of power. This point is well illustrated by the Palestinian and Libyan cases included in this issue.
Third, the traditional internal–external divide must be avoided (Eriksson and Rhinard 2009). The national framework of state borders is just one of the possible spaces where power is manifested. Dominant elites may behave at different levels, and its essence can be defined simultaneously with different labels, in the manner of the double agents identified by Bigo (2016) who act also transnationally, while some external actors operate as local actors, becoming involved in national/local processes (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington 2017).

It is thus important to engage in the observation of the actors’ practices—whether elites of international governmental organizations (IGOs) such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of militias and armed groups, of state security bureaucracies, of military–industrial complex leaders, or elected politicians—and the specific power relations that emerge during the agenda setting. The resources within reach of these actors can be mobilized at different levels, and the primary elites choose the level on which they operate.

Fourth, it follows from the above that structural elements should be tackled together with agency factors. Contemporary SSR policies take place in a global historical context of neo-liberalization. This uneven and contested process with its specific genealogy shows the selective impetus of occasionally contradictory ideas, projects and policies dependent upon the interests of the elites (Zemni and Bogaert 2009).

A case in point is Mustafa’s (2015) analysis of the Palestinian SSR. With a remarkable theoretical component, the author shows how SSR can lead to a dysfunctional securitization. She illustrates how power relations are articulated between the global actors (donors and implementers of the SSR), Israeli actors, local elites, and the Palestinian population. Thus, we see how SSR is used for the control and transformation of Palestinian society in terms of the interests of global elites, producing and reinforcing a new local elite benefited from the process of SSR.

Fifth, as illustrated in Camps-Febrer’s (in this issue) analysis of the security narrative, the formation of identity and subjectivity, and its associated discursive elements, are also important for the study of the relationship between knowledge and political practices from a power perspective, and on how unequal power relations arise and are being transformed and confronted.

De Martino and Hussein (in this issue) illustrate a case in which the elite of the security sector (in this case, the elite of the Egyptian army) has managed to become the country’s central elite. This elite has managed to preserve its considerable resources of symbolic power (mainly its legitimacy and prestige) during the
convulsive periods, accumulate a huge amount of material resources, and have a strong influence in the main institutions of the state. All this makes the privileged position of this elite remain unchallenged, and that a reform of the Egyptian security sector that includes its army is at present unthinkable.

Finally, the theoretical framework must engage with change, with historical events, as tested in the post-Arab Spring from a claim of historical depth. The Libyan case (Feliu and Aarab, in this issue) illustrates this changing dynamic between elites and the security sector. From a concentrated regime with tightly concentrated control and a unified security sector, the post-Ghaddafi fragmentation of the state has led to a situation in which elites compete even for territorial control through the security sector (including the different armed groups). This situation leads to the strongly mobilized security sector representing one of the central resources of power in the competition between the main elites of the country. At the same time, the fragmentation of the country makes it extremely difficult to transform a sector that is both a cause and a consequence of the situation.

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