

THE DAMMING OF THE PALESTINIAN SPRING: SECURITY SECTOR REFORM AND ENTRENCHED REPRESSION

Tahani Mustafa, researcher, Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS, University of London

As a wave of protests swept through the Arab world in 2010-11, toppling regimes that had long seemed invulnerable to such popular mobilisation, the relative stability of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) largely escaped international attention. In a marked break with the unrest and massive sustained popular mobilisations of the past, no significant opposition emerged to challenge the status quo in the oPt, even though dissatisfaction with the status quo runs high in the territories.

The reason for this historic quiescence is the conflicted version of the security-led mode of governance in the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) that the Oslo Process has established in the oPt, backed by US and EU financial and technical assistance.

The PA's role is riddled with fundamental contradictions, most critically the contradictions between the organisation's aspirations as a liberation movement and its actual function as the occupation's enforcer, entrenching rather than challenging or tempering the paradigm of Israeli colonialism.

Resistance does not emerge from a vacuum; it is the product of a dialectical relationship in which power produces its own vulnerabilities. Mechanisms of control create and structure opportunities for resistance, and to understand the situation in the oPt it is necessary to look at the mechanisms of control there.

Security Sector Reform (SSR) has become the cornerstone of the Oslo state building project and the latest embodiment of external intervention in the Arab region. A European brainchild, SSR illustrates the phenomenon of aid securitisation in development; with the rationale of SSR

going beyond just capacity-building of security forces to entrench principles of democratic governance and the rule of law.

Despite its popularity with a constellation of international agencies, its operational success has been limited. The current critical discourse has largely focused on the discrepancy between concept and implementation and improving the operational capability of SSR programmes. Although this discourse acknowledges the political dimension of the SSR paradigm, it has ignored its implications.

The bedrock of SSR's conceptual framework is its holistic understanding of the security sector, which stresses human rather than regime security. Conceptually, SSR draws on the notion of the liberal peace, which draws on the concept of a security apparatus in the service of humanity.

However, contrary to the way it is commonly portrayed, SSR is not benign. It is highly intrusive, and has increasingly become the framework for Western powers' intervention in and regulation of non-Western societies. Whatever its liberal, humanitarian justification, SSR has in practice functioned as a programme of liberal rule and war whose ultimate purpose is the pacification of recalcitrant populations and their integration into the network of liberal governance.

The state-building project in the oPt has become synonymous with SSR, though it is, admittedly, an extreme example. However, it is precisely because the oPt is such an extreme example that it lays bare the underlying discourse and practices of power inherent in SSR.

In the oPt, SSR has been utilised to control populations and conduct surveillance of "at risk" or "risky" populations. Palestinian populations are treated as a political problem on the level of Israeli colonialism and on the wider international stage, linking the Palestinian Authority and its population to larger, global structures of control and programmes of pacification.

SSR functions to strengthen rather than weaken authoritarianism in states, despite the fact that it is clothed in the language of good governance and is steeped in the rhetoric of emancipation and empowerment. Rather than being the foundation of good governance, SSR in the oPt actually undermines it by advancing the security agendas of international stakeholders at the expense of target populations.

The limited success of SSR is largely due to problems in the implementation of its sweeping ambition of providing security with dignity to recipient populations in accordance with an internationally accepted understanding of what this should mean.

At the core of the problems associated with implementation is the fundamental tension between the forms of peaceful civil association SSR is intended to enable, and achieving this goal through the employment and monopolisation of force, or even just the implied use of force.

In other words, civilised society is supposed to be realised through the deployment of techniques of violence and control that represent the negation of the very civilised values that society is supposed to cherish. This is SSR's role in what has been dubbed bio-political imperialism, the underlying objective of which is population control and surveillance. The implementation of this programme of internationally sponsored pacification explains why the oPt has remained relatively quiet despite the political turbulence currently engulfing the broader region.

The application of an SSR programme in the oPt has created a socio-political paradox on the ground that is substantially different from conventional understandings of security and statehood. SSR in the oPt has produced a conflicted version of the security-led model of governance in the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority, entrenching rather than challenging or tempering the paradigm of Israeli occupation. SSR under the PA has served to entrench bio-political domination at both the level of Israeli colonialism and the broader international realm as the latest embodiment of Great Power regulation of and intervention in non-Western societies.

Far from being politically neutral, as it is presented, as with many other theories in the academic field of international relations, SSR needs to be situated within a specific historical context. We must be alert to the purposes and interests it serves, the specific groups it dispossesses and empowers, and the acts of epistemic and physical violence it sets in motion.

SSR in Palestine has failed to achieve stability. It has instead catalysed the polarisation of Palestinian politics and the division of the oPt into two separate political entities, one of which has been denied international recognition. SSR has created a paradox on the ground, whereby the PA, and to a certain extent the de facto government of Hamas are in control of a territory, but not anything resembling a state in the mainstream understanding of the term, and in which the principles of democratic governance and the rule of law have been undermined, not entrenched.

The utilisation of concepts that appear politically neutral in the official rhetoric of SSR like security, human rights and good governance serve to strip it of apparent political content and serve to legitimise the practice of power in contemporary international relations by making the exercise of that power appear as empowering rather than what it in fact is: domineering. It has shaped the Palestinians into subjects, not just of their own proto-state but also of an

international regime that has prioritised pacification and control of the Palestinian population, and active suppression of their capacity to independently mobilise against the occupation or even to protest against the PA's inability to meet the basic benchmarks of good governance the SSR project itself enshrined.