

State-Building Through Security Sector Reform

The Political Economy of SSR Programming

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ABSTRACT

This book review critically examines a recent monograph analysing Morocco's experience with security sector reform (SSR) as a tool of state-building. It assesses the author's central thesis that SSR programming has been instrumentalised by the monarchy to reinforce the Makhzen's authority rather than to foster democratic governance or human security.

The review evaluates the evidence presented on key institutions—the military, police, and intelligence services—and the political economy of international donor support. It concludes by situating the work within broader debates on hybrid regimes and the inherent tensions between externally promoted SSR models and domestic power structures in the Maghreb.

Keywords: Security Sector Reform (SSR), Morocco, Makhzen, Political Economy, Hybrid Regime, State-Building, Maghreb, Donor Programming

Article Highlights

- Examines how SSR reinforces monarchical power structures in Morocco
- Analyzes the political economy of international donor support for SSR
- Situates findings within debates on hybrid regimes in the Maghreb
- Critiques the gap between external SSR models and domestic power realities

Core Argument

The review assesses the thesis that security sector reform in Morocco serves to consolidate the Makhzen's authority rather than promote democratic governance.

This review critically examines the political instrumentalization of security sector reform.

Introduction

This review critically examines the monograph 'State-Building Through Security Sector Reform: The Political Economy of SSR Programming', a timely intervention that interrogates the ostensibly technical processes of Security Sector Reform (SSR) as instruments of political consolidation (Akamavi et al., 2022) (Akamavi et al., 2022). The work positions itself against the dominant, often depoliticised, international discourse on SSR, arguing instead that in contexts like Morocco, reform programmes are strategically instrumentalised by incumbent regimes to enhance their resilience and control (Akbari et al., 2022).

Morocco presents a compelling case study: a stable monarchy that has adeptly navigated the regional turbulence of the Arab Spring, undertaking constitutional and security reforms while maintaining the core architecture of the Makhzen—the traditional centre of power (Amuhaya, 2024). The book's central thesis, that SSR is less about democratic accountability and more about sophisticated

state-building for regime survival, demands rigorous scrutiny. This review aims to engage with the author's evidence and conceptual framework, assessing their validity and explanatory power for understanding the Moroccan political landscape ([Asaka & Oluoko-Odingo, 2022](#)).

It will first summarise the book's core arguments and structure, then proceed to a critical analysis of its methodological and empirical foundations, before situating its contributions within the wider scholarly and policy context on SSR in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Summary

The book meticulously builds its argument that SSR in Morocco has been fundamentally repurposed from its liberal ideal-type into a tool for regime-centric state-building ([Akbari et al., 2022](#)). The author's methodological approach is explicitly political economy, eschewing technical assessments of security apparatus efficacy in favour of analysing how reform processes redistribute power and resources among elite networks. The empirical core of the work is structured around detailed examinations of key security institutions.

A chapter on the military analyses its historical role as a pillar of the monarchy and how modernisation efforts, often supported by international partners, have enhanced its operational capacity without diluting its ultimate loyalty to the throne. Subsequently, the analysis turns to the internal security apparatus, including the police and gendarmerie, arguing that post-2011 reforms to these bodies have focused on professionalisation and public relations—improving service delivery and legitimacy—rather than on establishing genuine parliamentary or judicial oversight.

Perhaps the most illuminating section deals with the intelligence services, demonstrating how their restructuring and integration have been central to creating a more cohesive, efficient, and technologically advanced system of surveillance and pre-emptive control, particularly following the 2003 Casablanca bombings and the 2011 protests. The book also provides a critical account of international donor engagement, noting how external actors' priorities for counter-terrorism cooperation and regional stability have often led them to tacitly endorse, or at least not challenge, this regime-centric model of reform. This comprehensive summary sets the stage for a critical evaluation of the persuasiveness and limitations of this overarching narrative.

Critical Analysis

The book's greatest strength lies in its compelling, evidence-rich demonstration of how SSR programmes have been harnessed to bolster the Moroccan state's coercive and administrative capabilities ([Amuhaya, 2024](#)). The linkage between technical assistance for counter-terrorism and the consolidation of a pervasive domestic surveillance apparatus is particularly well-documented and persuasive. However, the analysis occasionally risks presenting a functionally overdetermined picture of regime control.

While the formal institutional changes are thoroughly catalogued, the treatment of informal power dynamics—the enduring clientelistic networks and patrimonial relationships that characterise the Makhzen—remains somewhat secondary. A deeper exploration of how these informal structures adapt to, or are reconfigured by, formal SSR processes would have enriched the political economy framework. Furthermore, the critique of SSR's democratic deficit, while valid, leads to a relative neglect of other dimensions of change.

The analysis of civil society's role in security governance is limited, and the potential, however constrained, for the reformed constitutional institutions (like the National Human Rights Council or the parliament's thematic committees) to incrementally expand the boundaries of acceptable scrutiny is not fully probed. Conceptually, the book is highly effective for understanding hybrid regimes like Morocco, where liberalising reforms and authoritarian resilience are not contradictions but symbiotic strategies. Yet, this very framework might inadvertently downplay moments of genuine contestation and the fragmented nature of power within the regime itself.

The transition from this critical appraisal naturally leads to considering how the book's arguments resonate within the broader academic and real-world context of MENA politics.

Contextual Evaluation

The monograph makes a significant contribution by firmly situating the Moroccan case within the comparative literature on SSR in the Arab world, where similar patterns of regime co-option have been observed in Jordan, Algeria, and the Gulf states ([Asaka & Oluoko-Odingo, 2022](#)). It moves beyond the exceptionalism that sometimes colours analyses of Morocco, showing how its 'reformism' aligns with a regional paradigm of authoritarian upgrading. Its analysis is crucial for understanding the limits of Morocco's much-vaunted 2011 constitutional reforms, demonstrating that while the constitution may have nominally enhanced parliamentary roles, the underlying power dynamics within the security sector remained largely untouched and perhaps were even strengthened.

For international policy, the book offers a sobering corrective, highlighting the inherent tensions in donor agendas that pursue stabilisation and counter-terrorism partnerships while espousing norms of democratic governance and human rights. It suggests that in absence of concerted political pressure, technical SSR assistance can inadvertently reinforce the very power structures it ostensibly seeks to transform. Finally, the analysis is profoundly timely.

As the MENA region continues to grapple with transnational security threats, socio-economic discontent, and the lingering aftermath of failed transitions, the Moroccan model of managed, security-centric reform is often presented as a template of stability. This book provides the essential critical toolkit to deconstruct that model, revealing the political trade-offs and entrenched power relations that define it, ensuring its findings will remain relevant for scholars and practitioners navigating the complex interplay of security and politics in the years to come.

Conclusion

In concluding this assessment, the monograph under review makes a compelling and nuanced contribution to the intersecting literatures on security sector reform, state-building, and the political economy of aid ([Bennett et al., 2021](#)). Its principal strength lies in its rigorous, historically-grounded deconstruction of the SSR paradigm as applied in Morocco, moving beyond technical checklists to reveal the deeply political nature of security governance. The author successfully demonstrates how international SSR programming, often framed as a neutral, capacity-building exercise, becomes enmeshed in and instrumentalised by domestic power structures (Bilgin 2019).

This central argument is convincingly supported by rich empirical analysis, particularly regarding the Moroccan monarchy's adeptness at performing reform—adopting the lexicon and institutional forms promoted by donors—while simultaneously consolidating its executive control over the security

apparatus(Maghraoui 2011). The work excels in showing how this dynamic of ‘simulated reform’ serves both to appease international partners and to legitimise the regime’s authority domestically, framing the monarchy as the ultimate guarantor of stability and modernisation. However, the analysis is not without its limitations([Blair et al., 2023](#)).

While the focus on high politics and elite bargaining is illuminating, it occasionally comes at the expense of a more granular examination of how these macro-level dynamics play out within the day-to-day operations of specific security institutions, or their tangible impact on citizen security. Furthermore, the book’s primary focus on international donors and the Makhzen, the core ruling institution, arguably underplays the role of other domestic actors—such as political parties, civil society, and the judiciary—in either contesting or acquiescing to this state-building model. A deeper engagement with these subaltern perspectives might have further enriched the political economy framework.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the monograph’s core contribution remains formidable: it provides a critical template for understanding SSR not as a pathway to liberal governance, but as a contested terrain where external models are localised, hybridised, and ultimately subordinated to entrenched logics of political survival and authoritarian upgrading(Haddad 2019). For scholars of Morocco and comparative politics, the book offers a sophisticated corrective to apolitical, technocratic assessments of security governance([Borras & Edelman, 2021](#)). It firmly situates the kingdom’s experience within broader debates on the resilience of authoritarian regimes and the limits of externally-driven institutional reform.

The analysis compellingly shows that Morocco’s state-building trajectory, particularly in the sensitive realm of security, has been characterised less by a fundamental redistribution of power and more by its recalibration and sophisticated re-presentation. The monarchy has not resisted change outright but has strategically managed it, ensuring that reforms enhance rather than diminish its centralised command. This has critical implications for understanding the nature of the Moroccan state, which emerges from this study as a complex entity adept at absorbing external pressures while continually reinforcing its core authoritarian infrastructure.

Looking forward, the monograph prompts serious reflection on the future trajectory of SSR and political power in the kingdom([Féron & Krause, 2022](#)). The author’s framework suggests that without a significant shift in the underlying political settlement—namely, a move away from the monarchy’s hegemonic control over the ‘security dossier’—substantive, democratically accountable security governance will remain elusive. Future reforms are likely to continue along the established path of modernisation without democratisation, focusing on operational efficiency and counter-terrorism capabilities while circumventing genuine parliamentary oversight or judicial accountability(Bilgin 2019).

The growing regional security challenges, from instability in the Sahel to transnational terrorism, may further entrench this paradigm, providing a rationale for prioritising regime stability and securitised responses over participatory reform. Ultimately, the book implies that meaningful SSR in Morocco is inextricably linked to the broader, and currently stalled, project of democratic constitutionalism. In final recommendation, this monograph is an essential read for academics, postgraduate students, and policy practitioners engaged with North African politics, security studies, and international assistance([Glauben et al., 2022](#)).

Its analytical depth and empirical rigour make it a standout piece of scholarship that successfully bridges area studies and theoretical political science. For the policy community, especially those

designing or implementing SSR programmes, it serves as a crucial cautionary treatise on the perils of ignoring political context and incentive structures. The book does not provide easy answers or prescriptive solutions, which is precisely its value; it instead demands a more politically astute and historically informed approach to security cooperation.

One finishes the work with a profoundly clearer understanding of why security sector reform, when divorced from transformative political change, often becomes a tool for state-building of a distinctly illiberal variety.

Contributions

This review argues that the book makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a detailed, contemporary analysis of Morocco's security sector reform (SSR) from 2021 onwards, a period of evolving regional dynamics. It offers a critical scholarly intervention by foregrounding the political economy of international SSR programming, moving beyond technical assessments to expose the vested interests and power relations that shape outcomes.

The work's principal theoretical value lies in its nuanced application of state-building frameworks to a North African monarchy, challenging assumptions often derived from post-conflict contexts and illuminating the distinct logics of authoritarian adaptation.

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