



POLICY BRIEF

Securing and stabilising borders in North and West Africa

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Since the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Libya and the start of Mali's internal conflict in 2012, states in North and West Africa have focused on building up their border security architecture. Locally led and donor funded border stabilisation and reform are generally undertaken as part of national reforms. Although such programmes are necessary, they rarely provide the tailored approach needed to deal with unique frontier issues.

Key findings

- ▶ Frontiers in North and West Africa have come to be perceived by regional governments as places of vulnerability and threat.
- ▶ This has led to increased efforts to buttress security by means of both security sector stabilisation (SSS) and security sector reform (SSR) programmes.
- ▶ Although the security context in border areas differs substantially from other security situations, SSS and SSR programmes are rarely tailored to borders.
- ▶ Border populations are often transnational, with informal commerce and smuggling a net contributor to stability.
- ▶ Border security architecture is defined by security pluralism with many different law enforcement and military forces reporting to different ministries, often with overlapping mandates.
- ▶ Transborder engagement is impossible to avoid for border security forces. This means that cooperation or competition with forces in neighbouring states often has an effect on security outcomes.

Recommendations

National governments in North and West Africa, regional bodies and the international community should:

- ▶ Consult borderland communities as a key part of SSS and SSR in border areas.
- ▶ Develop initiatives that are not only focused on security but also on sustainable development.
- ▶ Design and implement SSS and SSR programmes on frontiers to encompass the entirety of forces holding a border-linked mandate or operating in a frontier area.
- ▶ Emphasise coordination, remove conflicts in roles and mandates, and develop a holistic understanding of the border security mission, its challenges, and the role of positive engagement with border communities.
- ▶ Minimise the military's role in border security in favour of law enforcement units.
- ▶ Take into account the impact of neighbouring countries' security approaches on each other's border security.
- ▶ Consider the capacity and ability of neighbouring states' forces to positively shape cross-border trends.
- ▶ Emphasise regional reform, either as part of centrally designed initiatives or by means of concurrent programmes.

Introduction

Since the revolutions in Tunisia and Libya in 2011, and the start of Mali's internal conflict in 2012, borders in North and West Africa have assumed a new importance. Rather than points of opportunity for trade, social connections and building better bilateral relations, these frontiers are now often perceived by regional governments as places of vulnerability and threat.¹

This perception is not without merit. Conflict in the two regions has taken on a distinctly transnational dimension. In some instances, such as Libya and in Mali, violence has spilled across borders into neighbouring states, even as transnational organised crime groups increase their presence in the regions.²

States in North and West Africa have responded by focusing on building up their border security architecture and 'thickening' their borders.³ This includes efforts to acquire and employ surveillance systems and, in some cases, attempting to improve the coordination and training of law enforcement and military forces managing border security.

The challenge is to design border programmes that go beyond buttressing security capacity alone

This focus has been encouraged by international donors. Between 2014 and 2020, at least 489 separate border projects were funded in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) and West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Togo, Senegal).⁴

Donor interest in improved border security in the two regions is often predicated on distinct threats to their own countries or key allies, such as terrorism, organised crime and migration. Many of their interventions are technical and tactical in nature, often involving efforts to equip and train regional border security forces.

Both locally led and donor funded border security stabilisation and reform in North and West Africa are often components of larger, national-level reform programmes. Such programmes generally fall in two domains: security sector stabilisation (SSS) aimed at ensuring the basic operational capacity of security forces and safety of

citizens, and security sector reform (SSR), which involves improving the effectiveness and popular accountability of law enforcement.⁵

Although national-level SSS and SSR programmes are valuable and necessary, border security reform is rarely tailored to the specificities of conditions on frontiers. Borders require a different, often more complicated, form of SSS and SSR compared to what is typically undertaken in urban or interior areas.

Border populations are often transnational, with informal commerce and smuggling a net contributor to stability. In contrast, for populations in interior areas routine bi-national movement is less common. Because domestic and transnational challenges overlap, borders also involve security pluralism, with many different agencies cooperating and competing. Law enforcement and military actors on frontiers often functionally have to engage their counterparts across the borders. Operational and political decisions on the degree of cooperation or competition can have an impact on security outcomes.

The challenge for governments and donors is to conceptualise and design frontier programmes that go beyond buttressing security capacity alone, and instead contribute to broader, conflict-sensitive stabilisation. This should incorporate borderland community needs for cross-border mobility and commerce, pluralist security provision and the need for cross-border cooperation.

This policy brief looks at some of the idiosyncrasies of SSS and SSR in border areas. It starts by detailing why context matters and then lays out several ways border security sector reform differs from security sector reform more broadly. It ends by detailing programmatic options for addressing these differing dynamics.

Borders and security sector reform

The focus on SSS and SSR in North and West Africa is relatively recent, with most domestic and donor funded programs dating to the early to mid-2010s. However the intersection of borders and SSR first arose in the post-Cold War period, as policy makers and scholars sought to grapple with the issue in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

In contrast to national-level SSS/SSR, that involving borders was often prompted by concerns over growing

transborder issues such as migration, organised crime and the corruption risks they posed to security forces.⁶ Practitioners also focused on borders SSS/SSR as an essential means to buttress fragile, post-transition or post-conflict states' abilities to collect taxes and tariffs, and so lay the financial groundwork for state strengthening.⁷ Programmes also reflected donor interest in efficient, securely controlled borders that also enabled trade and established a cooperative border security architecture.⁸

The aim of many of these efforts in Eastern Europe and the Balkans remained the same as general SSR (and to a lesser degree SSS) approaches. They focused on the creation of 'capable and professional security forces that are accountable to civil authorities [and develop] a clear institutional framework for the provision of security that integrates security and development policy and includes all relevant actors'.⁹ Yet, perhaps because border security was seen as technical, many stabilisation and reform approaches emphasised capacity building, including the acquisition of specialised equipment and training in tactical border security skills.

Shifting global security priorities in the 2000s and 2010s – which meant a focus on counter-terrorism and limiting the mobility of foreign terrorist fighters – led to a further emphasis on technical, capacity-building approaches to border security reform.¹⁰

The global dynamics of border SSS/SSR also manifest in North and West Africa, though the timing was slightly later. Much of the effort to stabilise and reform border security capacity in these regions emerged after the 2011 uprisings in Libya and Tunisia, and the start of transborder conflict in the Sahel in 2012. The perception of rising regional instability, terrorism and crime led to states' reform programmes in North and West Africa.¹¹

Donors have been heavily involved in several such initiatives. In Tunisia, for example, donors including the US, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Union have invested heavily in land and maritime border-surveillance systems, associated infrastructure and the training to operate the systems.¹² There has also been an explicit focus by some donor nations, as well as the EU, on addressing irregular migration.

Both national and donor reform initiatives in North and West Africa have resulted in a securitisation of borders, with security priorities – usually defined at the national level and highly technical – dictating approaches on the frontiers.¹³

On borders, context matters

In security sector stabilisation and reform, there is an acceptance that programmes must match local needs and context to be successful. In 2007, the OECD noted that 'a balance must be struck between support to provide quick wins ... and taking time to understand each particular context'.¹⁴ Typically though, initiatives are developed at a national level and address general national contexts.

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BORDER PROJECTS WERE
FUNDED IN NORTH AFRICA
FROM 2014–2020

However, there is rarely much subnational variation in programming, even for security forces deployed in vastly different contexts. Adapting to specific situations is particularly important on borders, which represent a context of their own. Border security reform still largely translates into technical fixes, which are rarely tailored to specific contexts. Moreover, the focus of such programmes is often on training and equipment provision, instead of reforming the way security forces see their mission or their relationship to borderland citizens.

Border communities in this part of Africa are often not only on the physical periphery but also the economic and political periphery

The risk is that reforms focused on building capabilities may not meet the specific needs of populations living on borders, or the forces operating there. This limits the effectiveness and durability of these initiatives.

There are, broadly, three considerations specific to border areas and security that are relevant to SSS/SSR approaches: the salience of border communities; security pluralism; and the centrality of cross-border cooperation. Each is detailed below.

Consulting border communities

The first, and in many ways the most important way that borders differ from interior areas of a country is in the transnational mobility and connections of the people living there. Such communities often maintain webs of relations across a frontier, including familial and trade-based relations. These can persist even in the face of antagonistic relationships between neighbouring states. Despite the long-term closure of the Algeria-Morocco border, for example, intermarriage across the frontier is routine, with borderlanders sometimes relying on human smugglers to cross the frontier and see family.¹⁵

Borderland communities in North and West Africa often sit not only on the physical periphery of states but also the economic and political periphery. These factors shape the environment for border SSS/SSR.

Economic marginalisation affects how local communities engage with borders and border security actors. For many people living in border regions, the frontier is a key means of directly or indirectly earning a livelihood. Individuals leverage their cross-border connections to engage in informal trade and smuggling, or are active in the sale or support of contraband activities.¹⁶ Weak state control or *de facto* acceptance by officials of some extra-legal activities are central to communities' economies. Efforts by states to reform and build the capacity of border security forces pose a direct threat to economic coping strategies.

Political marginalisation is no less important. Border policies and SSS/SSR are usually initiatives of national authorities, designed to address larger



BORDERS OFTEN
PROVIDE LIVELIHOODS
OPPORTUNITIES

security challenges. Border communities are often politically marginalised and unable to advance their specific interests and needs at the national level.¹⁷

The lack of political voice or consultation is a problem for SSS and SSR, precisely because it is borderland communities who face the significant, often negative, impacts of tighter border control. The challenge is that frontier communities are asked to adhere to border security policies defined by the perceptions and interests of the central state, not those in the borderlands.

Limited local support can undermine border security and SSS/SSR initiatives.¹⁸ Unless locals have a degree of ownership of the process, there is the risk they will ignore, subvert or instrumentalise it. They may also be reluctant to share information with authorities on transborder threats such as terrorism or transnational organised crime.¹⁹ Local grievances may also increase, aimed at law enforcement and military forces, as well as foreign donors' support of border strengthening.²⁰

The aim should be to develop a concept of border security that melds local and national needs. Trust and dialogue are needed to ensure that stabilisation and reform initiatives are not overbearing and impractical, or simply cosmetic. These questions should be asked: what is the aim of border security reform, who is it for and what input do frontier communities have into the definition of border security priorities?

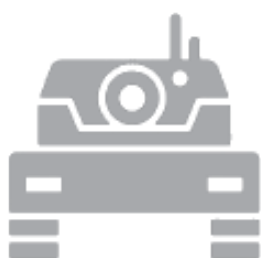
Challenge of security pluralism

A second factor setting border security apart from that practiced in interior areas is the many different law enforcement and military forces active there, often with overlapping mandates and sometimes contentious relationships. In Mali, for example, the Police, National Guard, Gendarmerie, customs officers and military personnel all have roles in border areas and are overseen by three different ministries.²¹

Such security pluralism is the norm in North and West Africa, though the exact disposition of forces involved differs by country. Overlapping authorities often exist, with different forces –including both law enforcement and military – patrolling similar spaces and undertaking similar missions. This contrasts with the security force disposition in interior areas, where a single force or a number of forces under a single ministry are responsible for policing and security.

Security pluralism on borders has become more complicated in North and West Africa over the last decade. A heightening of border security has led to military units increasingly being used as frontline actors. Rather than deterring cross-border threats such as terrorists, militaries have been deployed to target and arrest low-level smugglers and migrants.

Some donors have also incentivised a reliance on the military by providing training, equipment and technical capacity to units such as the Libyan Coast Guard and Tunisian army.²² Though understandable, the use of the military blurs the line between civil and military roles to the detriment of longer-term



USE OF THE MILITARY CAN
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good governance. It can also spark tensions with border communities in instances when military units' tactics and rules of engagement result in harsh or violent measures targeting cross-border smuggling or mobility.²³

In Mali, the Police, National Guard, Gendarmerie, customs officers and military all have a responsibility in border areas

The level of coordination between different frontier units can differ dramatically by country. In Algeria, where both the military and gendarmerie fall under the Ministry of Defence, coordination can be good, though not without friction.²⁴ In Mali, serious equipment gaps often compel the Gendarmerie, National Guard and customs forces to cooperate in order to patrol. In Tunisia, however, coordination between the military, National Guard and customs is more limited and often ad-hoc, especially along the Libyan border.²⁵ In some instances, overlapping mandates and pecuniary interests lead the different forces to compete for defacto control of specific border zones and access to illicit rents from smugglers that come with them.²⁶

Security pluralism in borderlands means that efforts to reform individual forces could have limited returns. More holistic reforms are needed that target all forces operating in a given border area.

Cross-border cooperation is a key factor

The third factor in frontier SSS/SSR is cross-border cooperation. The capacity and actions of border law enforcement forces of neighbouring countries has a direct impact on the practice of border security. Borders are shared, after all.

The strongest example of this is the emerging concept of collaborative border security, in which the security forces of neighbouring states work closely, via intelligence sharing, investigative assistance, joint patrolling and so on, to ensure mutual border security.²⁷ Each state commits to ensure that security threats within their national territory are addressed before neighbours are affected. This creates a layered security architecture that mitigates and limits threats.²⁸

Collaborative approaches, however, range from fluid and easy integration (as seen in the EU) to non-existent collaboration. In North and West Africa, such approaches to border security vary significantly.

Mali and Senegal, for instance, engage in routine concurrent patrolling and some information sharing.²⁹ By contrast political tensions between Algeria and Morocco preclude nearly all engagement, with information sharing (when it occurs) largely limited to counter-terrorism issues.³⁰ Along the Tunisia-Libya border, the dearth of governance and border security has stymied all engagement, to the frustration and detriment of Tunisian forces tasked with securing the frontier.³¹



Cross-border engagement affects not only how border security is practiced but also how SSS/SSR initiatives are conceptualised and developed. Yet few donor programmes in North and West Africa reflect this: only 32% of such projects focus on two or more countries.³² The dearth of multilateral and regional programmes impedes the effectiveness of border security initiatives focused on stabilisation and reform.

Better approaches to border security sector reform

This policy brief has focused on how SSS/SSR in border areas differs from that in the interior. These differences are important and challenge how governments and donors should approach stabilisation and reform, but do not negate the utility of SSS/SSR overall. The following section highlights opportunities for improving SSS/SSR in border areas.

Community consultation

Consultation with local communities should be central to SSS and SSR in border areas. Such communities are not only key stakeholders of any reform initiative, they are also potential spoilers. Border SSS/SSR and the linked process of revising border security strategies should be informed by consultations with border communities.

The key is assessing, with communities, what is feasible, what is needed locally in terms of border security, and how local interests can be reconciled with those of the central state. For donors, this requires an effort to move beyond engagement only with national authorities when designing SSS/SSR programmes. Instead representatives of communities must be identified and consulted, including those (such as women and youth) who may be marginalised within those communities.³³

Such consultations would be consistent with ‘do no harm’ approaches to stabilisation and development. Most importantly, they would promote a sense of local ownership by responding to borderland communities’ priorities and increase the likelihood of a positive impact.³⁴

Finally, the political and economic marginalisation of border areas means that SSS/SSR initiatives should be accompanied by larger programmes to buttress development there, and to increase borderland communities’ inclusion in the political process.

Handling security pluralism

The complexity of border security in North and West Africa is unlikely to lead to more streamlined or unitary systems in the near term. Therefore, the focus must be on addressing the current security systems as they exist now.

To handle security pluralism, SSS/SSR initiatives on frontiers must be conceptualised and implemented to encompass all the forces operating in a frontier area. The aim should be to develop a shared approach to the border security mission, promote coordination, deconflict roles and mandates, and harmonise border community engagement strategies.³⁵ Foreign donor programmes should aim to avoid competition by various security forces

32%

OF SSR PROJECTS IN
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over donor access. This could be accomplished by multi-force programmes focused on specific themes of border security.

Finally, to the greatest practical level possible, the role of military forces in border security should be minimised in favour of law enforcement units. Military units can play a beneficial role in countering cross-border violence and transnational terrorism, but their utility against smuggling and criminality is more dubious. The risk of a long-term confusion of civil-military roles probably outweighs the short-term benefits to the operational effectiveness of border security systems.

Community consultations must inform border SSR and processes to revise border security strategies

Promoting international coordination

Finally, border-focused SSS/SSR initiatives must take into account the security approaches of neighbouring countries. At a national level, efforts to build robust engagement with neighbouring forces and collaborative approaches to border security should be incorporated into SSS/SSR programmes. Institutional biases and norms against information sharing and close engagement with foreign security actors should be addressed. A particular focus should be on breaking down vertical communication siloes to promote field-engagement and information sharing by security officials on borders. Ultimately, however, reform needs to be complimented by sustained political will for greater engagement and trust in neighbouring states on border security issues.

To be sustainable, the planning and ownership of regional initiatives should be rooted in the governments of North and West Africa. Donors should support bi-national initiatives, but also have the opportunity to go further.³⁶ Border SSS/SSR must take into account the capacity of neighbouring-state forces and promote regional reform initiatives either as centrally designed or concurrent programmes.

Donors can also bring together representatives of neighbouring states to build trust and engagement at the

political and operational levels. Promoting engagement by operational actors, especially using informal and multilateral means, is a promising way to bolster trust and share concepts around border security, even if political tensions persist.³⁷

Conclusion

This policy brief describes how SSS/SSR programmes in border areas diverge from those in countries' interiors. Borderlands are characterised by transnational mobility, connections between frontier communities' and an array of different security actors requiring engagement with neighbouring states' border security forces.

Potential opportunities for better border SSS/SSR programmes are also noted. The input of border communities should be incorporated into reform planning, and reforms should encompass all forces along – and on the other side of – a nation's border. Governments' improvements to border security should ensure that reforms are context specific, sustainable and locally accepted.

Notes

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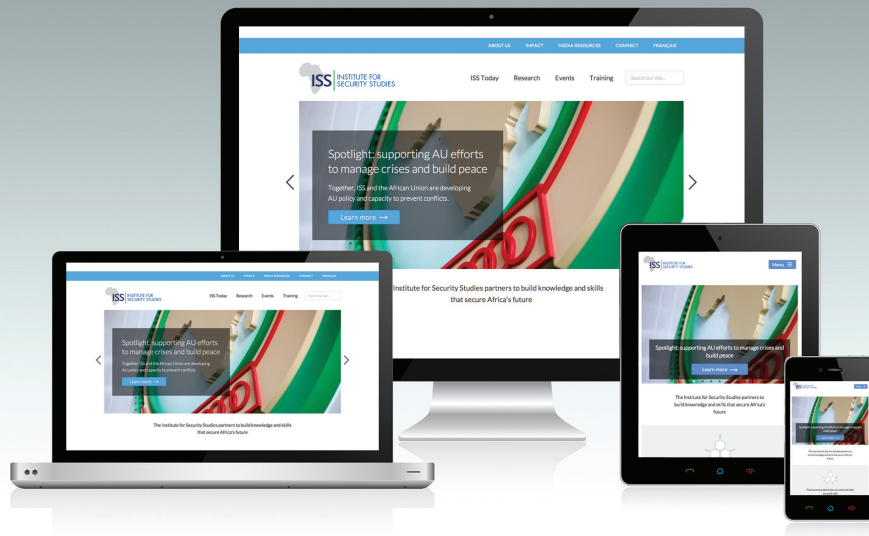
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