

Viewpoints
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American Policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism is Not Enough

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Exhausted and disappointed by failed nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States seems to be moving toward the opposite extreme, neglecting political transformations to focus on security. Unless the countries restore or maintain political stability, however, counterterrorism efforts cannot succeed.

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The United States has never played a central political role in the Maghreb. The region is geographically removed from the major conflicts that plague the Middle East. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a distant reality. Iran’s interest in expanding its influence does not extend so far to the west, and the Shi’a minorities in the Maghreb are far too small to offer an easy entry point for Iranian influence. Europe, particularly France, continues to have a strong political and economic presence. Furthermore, since the end of the Cold War Washington has not had to worry about geostrategic competition in the area, which was previously a matter of concern in Algeria.

Security concerns are not new either. Libya’s quixotic strongman Muammar Qaddafi was always a threat. He has now been removed, but greater threats are emanating from the Maghreb and extending into the Sahel. New intricate terrorist networks have been metastasizing there for over a decade, receiving new impetus from the uncontrolled flow of weapons from Libya that started after Qaddafi’s overthrow.

Marginal Interest in Politics

On a recent trip to Tunisia, I was berated by many of my interlocutors for the lack of interest and support from the United States for their country’s transition. The complaints are not unusual. All around the Arab world, people of all political persuasion accuse the United States of not showing enough interest in their country – although they also complain loudly when the United States becomes involved.

Complaining Tunisians, however, have a point. After hailing the success of the uprising that deposed President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the United States has kept aloof of the transition. With little money to provide in foreign assistance and no old strong ties to build on, Washington has remained on the margins of the process, assuming as in the past that Tunisia was of greater interest to France and Europe than to the United States. On the symbolic level, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Tunisia twice, but even that superficial relationship was badly shaken after the U.S. Embassy in Tunis was attacked by a large mob on September 14, 2012, with the authorities intervening far too late to stop the violence.

In Morocco, the United States has welcomed the stability provided by the monarchy, turning a blind eye to the authoritarianism that marked much of King Hassan II’s reign and welcoming

modest signs of liberalization under his son Mohammed VI. It has sought to strengthen relations by signing a Free Trade Agreement in 2006 and by being only mildly critical of the Moroccan annexation of the Western Sahara, illegal under international law. As in Tunisia, the United States maintains friendly relations with Morocco, but it is not a particularly influential presence, nor does it seek to be.

Political relations with Algeria were always difficult. At independence in 1962, the country established close relations with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt and the Soviet bloc. A partial political opening in the late 1980s made the situation even worse, because an election led to the near victory of the radical Front Islamique du Salut (FIS, or Islamic Salvation Front) and renewed military rule, precipitating almost ten years of a bloody civil war in which both government troops and Islamist militias committed unspeakable massacres against civilians.

Elections in early 1999 saw the re-establishment of civilian government under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, one of the leaders of the war of independence against France, who managed to restore domestic peace by offering amnesty to everybody ready to lay down arms, no questions asked. Most combatants complied. Those who did not, largely members of the Islamist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC from the French name), went on to launch al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The threat posed by AQIM and the increasingly intricate networks of violent groups that now operate throughout North Africa and the Sahel, constitutes the only issue on which the United States and Algeria can cooperate.

Security concerns were always at the center of U.S. policy toward Libya since Qaddafi came to power in 1969, and for good reasons. The colonel sought confrontation with the United States and was a destabilizing factor in the countries of the Sahel. He repeatedly targeted American interests – by nationalizing oil companies, allowing mob attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli in 1979, strafing American war ships engaged in war games in the Gulf of Sirte, and most infamously planting a bomb on Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988.

After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Qaddafi changed tack – he negotiated with the United States and Britain, accepted to comply with all UN Security Council resolutions passed after the downing of Pan Am 103, and agreed to abide by international conventions related to nuclear and chemical weapons. Normalization of sorts followed in U.S.-Libyan relations, but when Libyans rose up against Qaddafi in early 2011, the United States joined with other NATO countries to help rebel Libyan forces defeat Qaddafi.

Since then, the United States has deliberately avoided getting involved in nation-building, focusing instead on trying to secure the weapons from Qaddafi's arsenal and to understand and control the ever-growing networks of radical Islamist organizations. The danger posed by such groups was demonstrated by the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi in September 2012, in which Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

Getting Ahead of Islamist Extremists

The security situation in North Africa is indeed worrisome. The overthrow of Qaddafi and the subsequent absence of a government able to control Libyan territory had unintended long-term

security consequences: militias proliferated, new networks developed, and all groups became better armed as weapons from Qaddafi's arsenal flooded the region.

Nobody has a clear picture of the networks operating across North Africa and the Sahel, in part because they constantly split and reconfigure. AQIM, which originated in Algeria but now operates across a much broader region, is the best established and the best known. It is involved in drugs and arms trafficking and raises money by kidnapping foreigners for ransom, but it is not clear what it hopes to accomplish in the long run because it is difficult to see a clear pattern or goal in its activities; nor is it clear what its affiliation with al-Qaeda central really is. AQIM played a central role in the crisis in Mali in 2012, directly and through affiliated groups such as Ansar Dine and MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa). Although displaced by French intervention in January 2013, these groups have by no means been eliminated and will continue to be a threat, possibly under new names. Another AQIM-related faction seized an Algerian gas facility in In Amenas in January 2012, taking hostages and leading to a confrontation with the Algerian army before retreating again into the desert.

Libya has generated dozens of militias during the battle against Qaddafi and afterwards, including the radical Islamist group Ansar al-Sharia, which is considered responsible for the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi. Ansar al-Sharia also has a presence in Tunisia, although it is not clear, as it never is with such groups, whether the organization is united or different groups operate under the same name. And while solid evidence is lacking, there is considerable fear, particularly in Morocco, that AQIM and other organizations are beginning to recruit in the camps for Western Sahara refugees run by the Polisario Front in Algeria and are establishing links to Boko Haram in northern Nigeria.

U.S. efforts to combat extremist organizations operating in the Maghreb and the Sahel have been ongoing for years, with much of the responsibility in the hands of the military. A first Pan-Sahel Initiative, launched in 2004 and limited to a few countries, was replaced in 2005 by the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative, renamed Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) in 2008. The TSCTP now covers a large swath of the region, including the Maghreb countries, Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. The Partnership offers a mixture of counterterrorism training for the security forces of these countries and activities that aim to "create an environment inhospitable to terrorist and trafficking operations and to address youth vulnerability to violent extremism and recruitment by terrorism networks." Recent development in the region, including the collapse of the Malian army and the proliferation of militias, suggest that the TSCTP is not having much impact.

The U.S. preoccupation with the growing security issues in the Maghreb and Sahel is understandable and inevitable, but it should not come at the expense of continuing engagement with the fundamental issues concerning the political transformation of the Maghreb countries, because in the long run, only successful transitions can provide the stable framework within which security issues can be tackled.



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