Changing Regional Order

A Fragmented Maghreb Facing a Security Challenge

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Security Threat

On 18 March 2015, authorship for the Bardo Museum attack in Tunis that caused the death of 24 people and wounded 45 was claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This attack constitutes the first major terrorist operation to strike in the heart of the capital of Tunisia since the January 2011 revolution.

In this country, which continues to spark hope for real political change, security is the primary challenge to the success of the political transition. Although terrorism is not new to Tunisia,1 terrorist violence has gained a new impetus since the revolution. This violence is partly due to regional disorganisation. The assault on the American embassy by Salafists on 14 September 2012 and the assassinations of two leftist political figures (Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi) in 2013 demonstrate that the capital is just as vulnerable as the hinterland. These acts of violence occurring in the very heart of the capital confirm the fear of Tunisian government officials regarding the jihadi threat and the chaos ravaging Libya, as well as the persistence of terrorist hotbeds in the Mount Chambi area along the Algerian border.

In any case, in contrast to other attacks, the Bardo attack occurred when Tunisia seemed to have stabilised on the political and institutional levels. Beji Caid Essebsi, the head of the coalition that had just won the legislative elections of November 2014, was elected president of the Republic.

This security issue demonstrates that the fragile Tunisian transition is feeling the effects of the new regional order and the destabilisation of Libya. After the fall of Colonel Gaddafi, the chaotic situation in Libya has affected the entire region. The porosity of its borders and the weakness of certain states in the region are the source of significant arms circulation that benefits the members of both Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State (IS), two rival organisations.

The security threat emerging from the Arab Spring combines with older factors. Well before the Arab uprisings of 2011, Maghreb and Sahel countries were already suffering from state weakness, perceptible in their inability to control their territory and protect their citizens. Hence, illegal activities developed, such as contraband (fuel, cigarettes, sugar, stolen automobiles) or criminal activities. These undertakings, which escape state control, are associated with a tradition of irredentism among certain populations, in particular the Tuaregs, who have always had difficult relations with states.

More recently, the presence of AQIM has constituted a source of insecurity in the region.2 To fund its activities, AQIM has not hesitated to take Europeans hostage, and states have negotiated their release by paying substantial ransoms. But the organisation

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1 On 11 April 2002, a 25-year-old French Tunisian blew himself up in a tank truck he was driving that was packed with explosives. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack, which took place in front of the Ghriba synagogue in Djerba and caused 21 casualties and 30 wounded. On 3 January 2007, a shootout took place between the police and an armed group calling itself the Asad ibn al-Furat Army in the area of Soliman, southeast of Tunis. At first the press presented the attack as a case of banditry, but the inquiry revealed it was a Salafist group. The emergence of violent Islamism marked a rupture with Tunisian political Islamism led by Ennahdha.

2 Emerging in September 2006 as a splinter group from the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), AQIM has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda.
also controls contraband networks. Thanks to this type of funding, AQIM has managed to build up a significant arsenal. The attack on the Algerian In Amenas gas facilities in January 2013 revealed the sophistication of the weapons the al-Qaeda-allied organisation has on hand. Today, a large part of its arms cache comes from the dispersion of Libya’s weapon stock after the downfall of Colonel Gaddafi. Many of Gaddafi’s auxiliary troops returned to their countries of origin (Mali, Niger) equipped with arms they then sold or exchanged. The terrorist organisations striving to defy states and their institutions recruit throughout the region. The terrorist attack against the In Amenas gas complex, which showed the limitations of Algerian security strategy, also revealed the transnational nature of the group of assailants. Of the 37 terrorists, 11 were Tunisian, allegedly recruited by AQIM during the Arab Spring.3

The Weight of Algerian-Moroccan Disputes

Maghreb countries are not organised to handle this alarming security situation. Maghreb integration has never really worked, despite the establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989. The disputes between Algiers and Rabat have constituted a sizable obstacle to AMU operation. The conflict between the two major Maghreb countries initially involved border disputes. Independent Algeria did in fact renge on the agreement made by Farhat Abbas on the restitution of certain territories claimed by Morocco. Tensions continued between the two countries until 1988, when Hassan II admitted on a visit to Algiers that his country’s territorial claims on Mauritania and certain parts of Algeria were utopian and constituted an obstacle to possible cooperation with the new Algerian military government. A period of detente between the two countries followed, with Algiers at first refusing to come to the aid of the Polisario Front, which had been fighting for the independence of Western Sahara since 1973. But in 1975, after the announcement of the Green March to ‘recover’ what Rabat considered ‘its Saharan provinces amputated from Morocco,’ the Algerian government’s attitude changed radically. Indeed, the Moroccan initiative of the 350,000-strong march on Western Sahara allowed the old demons of ‘Greater Morocco’4 to re-surface, a concept that Algiers thought definitively buried after Rabat’s recognition of Mauritania and the Ifrane Agreement, which recognised Algeria’s possession of Tindouf. As of 1975, the two states accused one another of wishing to destabilise the neighbouring regime. This attitude was put forth as defensive by Algiers, indicating the protection of its revolution, whereas for Morocco, the aim was to recover territories in the name of its ‘historic rights.’ But beyond the official arguments, Algiers and Rabat were clearly engaged in a struggle for regional hegemony that was to be extended through different channels, in particular the Western Sahara conflict, which regularly experiences convulsions and would become the focal point of the recurrent tension between the two countries.

These tensions are all the more difficult to dispel for the Algerian political class since Rabat has still not officially recognised the inviolability of the border between the two countries, the 1972 convention not having been definitively ratified by the Moroccan Parliament. In Rabat, on the other hand, the issue of the border is never dissociated from the issue of Western Sahara. These reasons do not suffice to explain Algeria’s obstinacy regarding the Western Sahara issue. Algerian political players continue to accuse their Moroccan counterparts of coming to the aid of Algerian Islamists during the 1990s with the aim of destabilising the regime.5

This rivalry between Algiers and Rabat was likewise perceptible in their handling of the Mali crisis. Algiers, which always wished to keep both France and Morocco out of the management of affairs regarding

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4 The concept of Greater Morocco was developed in the mid-1950s by Allal al-Fassi, the leader of the Istiqlal party. According to this concept developed by nationalists, Morocco should legitimately recover all territories that were “amputated” before and during the French protectorate. Based on a map drawn by a party member, Moroccan nationalists believe their country, which should extend to Saint Louis in Senegal, should also include Mauritania, part of Mali, part of the Algerian Sahara and all of Western Sahara.
the Sahel area, put forth two factors it considered essential: its expertise in combating Islamist terrorism and its ability to conduct negotiations between Tuaregs and the governments of Mali and Niger. Since 2001, it is as an experienced victim that Algeria has offered its services to participate in the international struggle against Islamist terrorism established by President Bush. Washington felt that this country, which had fought against armed Islamism on its own soil during the civil war (1992-1998), could be but an invaluable ally.

Algeria also used its power of negotiation and mediation between the Tuaregs and the governments of Sahel countries. Algiers played this role in numerous conflicts, in particular between 1991 and 1995. In 2010, the government signed the Tamanrasset Accords with Niger, Mali and Mauritania, which marked the beginning of joint military cooperation that deliberately excluded Morocco. But in January 2013, when Operation Serval was launched in Mali, it signalled, to a certain extent, the failure of the Algerian strategy in the Sahel. Indeed, Algiers always attempted to lead the Sahel states to reject foreign military and security presence in the region. In 2012, after the military coup in Mali, Algeria found it very difficult to rely on its former allies, particularly the Tuaregs.6

The Malian army collapsed and a coalition of jihadists and Tuareg separatists embarked on the conquest of northern Mali.

The regional counterterrorist strategy implemented by France weakened the Algerian government’s position while putting the country’s political leaders in an awkward position with regard to the principles they had regularly been putting forth. The French army’s return to Mali thwarted Algeria’s policy, which consisted of stemming French and Western interference in the Sahel. It has thenceforth participated in the French-American strategy and the diplomatic and military alliance between France and the Sahel states. But this return of the French army to the region is likewise contrary to Algeria’s ambition of becoming the major regional power controlling all security parameters.

Excluded from Sahelian negotiations, Morocco has taken action on another front to express its concern with terrorism, particularly displaying its desire to protect itself from the threat from the south. Competition between the two major Maghreb states is also exercised through the countries’ presence in Western Africa. Taking advantage of a lesser presence of Algeria in the African arena, the King of Morocco visited a number of African countries in March 2014, namely Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Gabon. Moroccan presence and investments revolve around two focal points: the economy and religion.

The parallel involvement of Algeria and Morocco in Malian affairs reveals the lack of collaboration between the two countries. Their disputes have led them to establish alliances with actors outside the region. Having become structural, this contention is detrimental in more ways than one. First of all, it prevents the countries in the area from organising into a strategic subregion whose states cooperate to block the terrorist threat. Yet these national positions and the regional division considerably complicate action by NATO, which does not recognise a strategic Maghreb but rather has to deal with states, with whom it must negotiate separately. This configuration weakens the strategic scope of the Maghreb region, which appears, by force of circumstances, piecemeal and fragmented.7

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Today, the Maghreb’s great weakness resides in its division. The countries in the area continue to appear disorganised before united partners, as, for instance, the European Union. This division prevents it from building a collective security plan that could protect it from Islamic State or AQIM-led Islamist terrorism. The notion of collective security does not exist and each country is governed by its own security imperatives. By the same token, each country continues to follow its own logic, vying with the other at a time

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6 In April 2012, the personnel of the Algerian consulate in Gao were taken hostage by a Tuareg group that had long been friendly with Algiers.

7 Abdenour Benantar, “(Re)penser le(s) relation(s) Otan-Maghreb : perspective et limites d’un dispositif régional de sécurité limité au Maghreb,” in L’Otan et le Maghreb, FRS/ L’Harmattan p. 18-43.
when joint action is needed to neutralise the jihadi threat. It is imperative that the two major countries of the region relinquish their national approach.

**Shedding National Mindsets**

The advantages of an integrated region have been expressed more than once, whether they consist of economic synergy, the opportunity to sign agreements without uncoordinated negotiations that lend the parties less force, the importance for Maghreb societies getting to know one another and combining efforts to handle issues common to all of these countries, such as religious fundamentalism, writing up history or arriving at full and comprehensive civic rights.

In addition to these advantages, repeatedly put forth, there are new factors introduced by the Arab Spring. Indeed, this time of rupture has marked a milestone in the history of Arab countries while radically changing regional geopolitics. The standards governing regional and international affairs have been modified. It is no longer only the imperatives of power dictating international policy, but also the social pressure contributed by public opinion. What effects can these different changes have on the organisation of regional affairs in the Maghreb, while the Algerian and Moroccan ruling classes desperately cling to a nationalism that seems obsolete?

With regard to the Western Sahara conflict, a veritable bone of contention between Algerians and Moroccans, the types of demands have radically changed. Sahrawi demands regarding human rights precede the Arab Spring, dating back to 2005. Since then, demands have gained a civic nature. In doing so, they have drawn on a new register – that of human rights, individual and political liberties and international legality. Such human rights demands originating pre-2011 have likewise been fuelled by the Arab Spring. The emulation effect was felt as much among the Sahrawi populations under Moroccan administration since 1975 as among the Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf. In March 2011, the appeal made in Tindouf by the Young Revolutionaries group demanded reform and change in the administration and judiciary of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the end of corruption, reform of the electoral code and entitlement of youth to greater participation in political life. This protest was supported by the *Khat al-Shahid* movement, comprised by dissidents of the Polisario Front based in Spain.

The civil disobedience movements burgeoning in Western Sahara demonstrate that the measures and institutions established to represent the Sahrawis are increasingly inadequate. Neither Morocco’s nor the Polisario Front’s political offers meet Sahrawi expectations. The latter do not identify with the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS), established by Mohamed VI in 1992. They are also identifying less and less with the Polisario Front and are choosing more centreline options. As in Tunis, political action is now experienced and conceived in an entirely new manner by political activists and citizens, in a context where expression is slowly but surely growing freer. Wherever we may be, opinion now weighs upon decision-making. In the Western Sahara as everywhere, we are witnessing a new concept of politics that enshrines the emergence of the citizen. By mentioning the effects of the regional and international atmosphere, as well as the domestic evolution that would incite the parties to take ‘the people of Western Sahara’ into account, the UN Secretary-General’s 2012 report already hinted at this new order.

These are new factors we absolutely must address in order to settle the Western Sahara issue. Its outcome seems, in fact, dictated by three factors. First of all, the regional security situation calls for an end to the conflict, thus precluding the Sahrawis from swelling the ranks of the jihadists plaguing the area. Secondly, the economic climate of the countries in the region calls for Maghreb integration and greater economic synergy. And finally and perhaps above all, there is a lack of prospects for the Sahrawis, who had expressed their anger well before the Arab Spring.

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9 See the special issue of Orient XXI: “Quarante ans de conflit au Sahara occidental,” http://orientxxi.info/documents/dossiers/quarante-ans-de-conflit-au-sahara,0880