

Security Issues Emerging in the Maghreb and the Sahel after the Arab Spring

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The year 2011 was undoubtedly marked by the popular uprisings that affected three of the five countries of North Africa. The overthrow of the old regimes represents a historic rupture with the long winter of authoritarian stability and a change of paradigm perceptible on various levels:

- Local, within the very political decision-making centres where the nature of powers is undergoing change;
- National, with a blurring of hierarchies between urban centres of power and marginalised peripheries;
- Sub-regional, with the resurgence of protest in outlying territories;
- And regional, with impact of the security vacuum on neighbouring countries.

In addition, there is a new front of instability instigated by the Libyan crisis and its regional repercussions that foreign intervention forces did not anticipate and which has reopened old conflicts that had been relegated to the ash heap of history.

By modifying the geopolitical map of the Mediterranean Maghreb and the Sahel, the fall and elimination of Gaddafi shook the former strategic balance, caused psychological shock among the numerous communities remaining loyal to the Libyan Guide and generated profound socio-economic repercussions. Considering the articulation of domestic crises and strategic issues, the centre-periphery prob-

lem has resurfaced with force and will weigh upon future developments, both in Libya and neighbouring countries.

The region, already weakened by a number of security challenges such as drug, arms and human trafficking and the intensification of kidnappings and terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), is now facing new threats associated with the instability born of the Arab Spring, particularly in the area where the Sahara meets the Sahel.

These are:

- The reactivation of several foci of conflict in cross-border areas by the reappearance on the political arena of communities who contest the old ideological frameworks in which they have been confined and take the opportunity to demand the resolution of crises blocked by States in the region and the International Community;
- The expansion of the area of instability to the whole of North Africa and the Sahel (and up to Western Africa) through the multiplication of flows and agents of the criminal industry, and the strengthening of local and international jihadi networks on the continental level.

Reactivation of Frozen Conflicts

Thanks to the Libyan uprising and the Arab Spring, we are witnessing the reaffirmation of "ethnic" identities, the re-emergence of territorial issues and demands for political representation and social justice. The Arab revolutions have had unexpected effects on communities far from the focal points of the uprisings, which have long remained invisible. Hence in outlying areas, old conflicts resurface through the mobilisation of floating populations wishing to participate in the process of general emancipation.

The other cause of reactivation of frozen conflicts has to do with the role and influence of the Libyan leader in the Sahara. Using the different national minorities in Libya and neighbouring territories, Colonel Gaddafi was an agent of both destabilisation and pacification for many populations, in particular the Tuareg and the Tubu peoples.

The Tuareg Question

Since 2007, the Tuareg area occupied by AQIM has become an increasingly insecure zone. The uprising of Tuaregs beginning in January 2012, though it differs from previous rebellions in its intensity, territorial hold, composition and human (some thousand combatants) and material resources (Libyan weapons), is remarkable for the issue at stake, which is no longer economic development but self-determination. Resulting from the fusion of various political factions including many Libyan Tuaregs, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL) also has the goal of eliminating drug traffickers and AQIM combatants.

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The assaults on the cities of Ménaka, Kidal, Léré, Andéramboukane and Aguelhok between the 18th and 26th January 2012, then the storming of Tessalit in March, demonstrate the determination of the rebels, under the leadership of former Tuareg generals from the Libyan army. The summary executions of nearly a hundred Malian military personnel are the work of *Ansar Dine* (Defenders of Faith), an Islamic faction led by Iyad Ag Ghaly (a relative of Emir Abdelkrim Targui) and interested in exacerbating the violence and keeping the region under tension. This armed conflict threatens Mali's stability and territorial integrity and compromises the elections due to be held in April 2012.

The Tubu Question

Gaddafi had entrusted the Tubu with managing border areas to stop the monopoly of trafficking and

cross-border contraband. Near oil fields and aquifers and established in the area between southern Libya, northern Chad and eastern Niger, the Tubu wish to negotiate their strategic position in exchange for recognition of their language, rights and political weight through the management of reunified southern Libya (now divided between Fezzan and Cyrenaica). They demand representation in one of the three key ministries, i.e. those of Oil, Foreign Affairs and the Interior. A sign of local rivalries for the control of criminal proceeds at the borders between Chad, Sudan and Egypt, deadly armed confrontations between the Tubu and the Zuwaya tribe in February 2012 illustrate the degree of tension reigning in outlying areas of Libya and radiating to the northwest of Chad, likewise affected by the problem of illicit flows, since it lies on the drug trafficking route between northern Mali and Europe via Egypt and Libya.

The Sahrawi Question

Condemned to oblivion for nearly 40 years by regional and international actors, the Sahrawi living in refugee camps are the forgotten ones of history. After the defection and return to Morocco and northern Mauritania of a great number of its senior officials, the Polisario Front is the object of growing contention among Sahrawi youth at the Tindouf camps in Algeria. In 2004, an internal split deprived it of its monopoly on representation. The main reason for dissent revolves around the issue of the rights and living conditions of the refugees, used as pawns by the leaders. Resulting from the scission, the *Khat al-Shahid Polisario Front* (Way of the Martyr Polisario Front) movement has emerged as the representative of part of the Sahrawi public opinion, both internally and abroad. Recent demonstrations by the "Sahrawi Revolutionary Youth" movement, chanting "*Erha!*" (get out) against the re-election of Mohamed Abdelaziz, in power for 35 years, illustrate not only the rise of a generation who no longer sees eye to eye with the old guard but also the effect of the Arab Spring on a youth ready to rise up against the corruption and tribalism of the Polisario Front leaders. The political issue represented by the Western Sahara area is aggravated by the security issue associated with the participation of organisation members in arms and drug trafficking and in kidnappings, and with the fact that the Polisario refugee camps have become places of recruitment for AQIM.

The Multiplication of Pockets of Insecurity

Lacking a State and economic alternatives and living under harsh climatic conditions, the Saharan-Sahe-
lian regions have become lawless areas where all
sorts of trafficking prospers: Latin American cocaine
in transit towards Europe, arms, oil or cigarette
smuggling or trafficking of clandestine migrant work-
ers en route towards the Gulf States and Europe.
Criminal and terrorist networks, in turn, have an in-
terest in perpetuating the instability conducive to the
development of their activities, for it ensures greater
opacity of the environment in which they operate.
The Libyan crisis thus offers an unexpected opportu-
nity for new destabilising intentions, as shown by the
emergence of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad
in West Africa (MOJWA), which has claimed author-
ship of the kidnapping of three European humanitar-
ian aid workers from the Polisario refugee camp in
Rabouni and the suicide bombing against a police
brigade in Tamanrasset in early March 2012.

The Sinai Peninsula

Quick to rebel against the Mubarak regime in January
2011, the Sinai Bedouins, heavily armed, gained their
independence from Cairo by attacking Egyptian po-
lice and military personnel. Since the fall of the *Rais*,
combatants associated with al-Qaeda have made the
peninsula a haven and a base for attacks, namely
against Israel, leading to an expansion of criminal ac-
tivities and networks of terrorists who are adepts of
the Salafist doctrine. Excluded from the financial
windfall of tourism, the Bedouins have become spe-
cialised in all sorts of trafficking towards Israel and the
Gaza Strip, in particular of arms from Libya's looted
arsenals. The Egyptian gas pipeline leading to Israel
and Jordan has suffered five sabotages in six months,
reducing supply by 80%. In late July 2011, dozens of
Bedouins stormed the police barracks of El Arish. The
attacks perpetrated the following month in southern
Israel demonstrated that Egypt no longer controls this
portion of its territory. On 31 January 2012, the *Al-
Tawhid wal Guihad* group took 25 Chinese workers
from a cement factory hostage in exchange for the
liberation of five of their members accused of attacks
against tourist sites between 2004 and 2006. In early
February 2012, 19 police officers were kidnapped af-
ter a Bedouin was killed in an exchange of fire with the
police. On 3 February it was the turn of two American
tourists and their Egyptian guide to be abducted while

they were en route to the Saint Catherine Monastery.

The Libyan Breach

The war in Libya has made weapons flow in great
numbers in North Africa as well as the Sahel. The pro-
liferation of heavy arms combined with the porosity of
borders has introduced a new threat for Libya as well
as the entire region. The numerous arsenals without
surveillance, accessible to all sorts of racketeers,
smugglers and mercenaries, harbour a rich diversity
of arms: Kalashnikov assault rifles, rockets, mines,
shells, chemical weapons, SAM-7 surface-to-air mis-
siles, of which Libya has a stock of 20,000 units, and
Russian SA-24 missiles, among the latest generation
aerial missiles capable of shooting down fighter jets.
These arsenals have also benefited some of the re-
bel factions who recognise neither the authority nor
the legitimacy of the National Transitional Council
(CNT) and make it the counterparty in order to chal-
lenge the government and weigh upon its political
choices. Moreover, the implication of militias in the
generalisation of torture and atrocities against cer-
tain populations is a disturbing sign of the fragmen-
tation of "revolutionary" Libya and its "Iraqisation."

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Despite the efforts of the CNT to keep the country uni-
fied, the signs of Libyan fragmentation are multiplying:

- In Misrata, where the first local elections were held in February without the CNT's approval, the Zintan militia, holding Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam prisoner, exercises armed control over the city and presents itself as a power against Tripoli;
- In Cyrenaica, where Sheikh Ahmed Zubair al-Senussi, cousin of the king overthrown by Gaddafi in 1969, launched an appeal in March for autonomy of eastern Libyan on the federalist model in effect from 1951 to 1963.

Moreover, many heavily armed Gaddafi loyalists, to-
gether with their children, have taken refuge in

neighbouring countries. The presence of dignitaries of the former regime in Algeria and Niger remains a challenge for the region, insofar as a union between loyalists and relatives of the former dictator could eventually compromise the already difficult process of stabilisation and unification and offer dissidents the opportunity to lead a coordinated strategy of maintaining regional tension.

Terrorist Connexions on the Rise

The Arab Spring has offered local terrorist groups the opportunity of gaining ideological influence and material strength and it has allowed al-Qaeda to consider repositioning itself on the African continent. The collapse of the Libyan security flank and the setbacks of al-Qaeda in Asia are two factors conducive to a new centrality for the Maghreb, the Sahel and West Africa via:

- A continental extension of jihadism through AQIM's connections in the Sahel, Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia, essentially consisting of operational collaboration, sharing training and tactics, thanks, among other factors, to personal relations between former Afghanistan combatants;
- A strategic reshuffling of certain al-Qaeda networks in the Maghreb and the Sahel to compensate for their weakening on the Asian front after the elimination of several of the organisation's leaders and recovering international visibility by seeking to participate in the upheavals underway. The transfer to Libya of certain of its prominent figures demonstrates the will to exploit the advantages and opportunities offered by North Africa and the Sahel, and probably eventually West Africa as well.

Conclusion

The expansion of the spheres of vulnerability and the multiplication of foci of tension and instability from the Mediterranean shore to those of the Gulf of Guinea, whether through political protest or intensification of criminal activities and strengthening of terrorist networks, is part of the set of challenges arising from the Arab Spring. The accumulation of multifaceted threats combines with the weakness of economies to pro-

duce a deterioration of the security situation and a prolongation of the transitional processes that are struggling to consolidate the legitimacy of new States. In 2011, Gaddafi's fall caused the abrupt discontinuation of Libyan assistance to entire subregions that had until then depended on investments and financial flows from Libyan companies. This change in the situation weakened territories that are home to communities in chronic rebellion and aggravated the latent food insecurity. Over the past year there has been a drastic decline in standard of living in many households of Mediterranean countries after the reflux of thousands of Sub-Saharan workers displaced by the fighting and instability, unemployed and persecuted by the Libyans. Ten thousand people are now threatened by famine following a prolonged drought and bad harvests and the total grain shortage by the end of 2011 was 25% higher than the previous year, heralding a long-term food crisis in Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso. And finally, fleeing the fighting between the MNLAs and the armed forces, the migration of many hundreds of thousands of Malians to Mauritania, Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso and as far as Guinea aggravates the precariousness of populations subject to the stress of violence and represents an economic challenge for these States, hardly prepared for humanitarian crises.

The regional reconfigurations will continue to fluctuate until Libya regains stability. Moreover, Tripoli will need a stable, consolidated geopolitical environment. Pragmatic diplomacy will allow it to transform its former enemies into future neighbours and defuse intra-regional tensions born of the hostile positioning of certain countries towards the CNT.

The action plan for border security adopted in Tripoli in March 2012 by the ensemble of Mediterranean and Sahelian countries will most likely only be the first stage in a cooperation strategy covering spheres as crucial as resolution of the internal and sub-regional crises underway.

The centre-periphery issue will resurface time and again in the form of more or less violent protest until leaders formulate and implement economic and social programmes specifically aimed at these areas of exclusion, and until they choose to better distribute investment flows, which are thus far acting as a "bloodstream" only to urban centres of power to the detriment of remote peripheral areas. Such a choice would ensure a rebalancing of African and Mediterranean geopolitical pursuits in this strategic region.