

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE MAGHREB: THE NEXUS BETWEEN BAD GOVERNANCE AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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The uprisings that rippled through the Maghreb in 2010-2011 had stirred hopes for a new period in its young post-independence history. Hopes that the incumbent regimes would finally open up the authoritarian systems and allow for greater political participation and improve their governance in order to lead their societies into a new era of peace and prosperity were short-lived. Indeed, those hopes were dashed when the regimes “upgraded authoritarianism” (Heydemann, 2007), whereby they showed façades of democracy, often in the form of regular, carefully concocted elections, resulting in “electoral authoritarianism”, “illiberal democracy”, “hybrid regimes” or “competitive authoritarianism” (Bogaards, 2009). The objective of the pseudo-reforms was often enunciated to ward off criticism from Europe and the United States. Both have been more concerned with “stability” than with genuine reforms that would upset the status quo that might bring to power forces antithetical to the values of Western democracies. Yet, whatever the forms the regimes have taken in the Southern Mediterranean in general and the Maghreb in particular, the incumbents and their supporters in the North were unable to predict the wave of rage that swept through the region. Even if some of them, such as Morocco and Algeria, have eluded the so-called “Arab Spring” (hereafter Arab revolts), the conditions that provoked the wave of discontent (Zoubir, 2012a) have not completely dissipated and continue to pose great risks for both shores of the Mediterranean. The optimism generated by the Arab revolts has been short-lived as the rulers have either reverted to a precarious status quo ante (Morocco and Algeria), notwithstanding the cosmetic changes they brought about, or are confronted with civil wars (Libya). Confronted with dire socioeconomic difficulties and terrorism, Tunisia’s promising transition has been protracted due to political wrangling and popular disenchantment, which have endangered the political democratic transformation progression. All in all, the Maghreb countries, no matter their differences, suffer a similar predicament.

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Youth Unemployment: The Achilles Heel of the Maghreb

The Maghreb region suffers from authoritarianism and bad governance; these two features, coupled with political exclusion, mismanagement of the economy, marginalisation and repression have contributed to radicalisation and pushed the often marginalised youth to Jihadism, a fanciful notion of holy war, migration (legal or clandestine), or to illicit activities (narco-trafficking). Today, there are good reasons to be alarmed by the persistent conditions in this region, conditions that have been exacerbated by the security situation in Libya and the Sahel. Violence, terrorism, internally displaced people and refugees have become the hallmark of this area. The spill-over of the Libyan civil war and the presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), local Jihadist militias and, more recently, the Islamic State (IS) have generated formidable threats to the Maghreb, but also to the contiguous Sahel countries (Mali, Chad, and Niger), where armed groups have built safe havens and can potentially create havoc. The military conflict in Syria has had reverberations in both Libya (movement of IS groups) and Europe (IS cells). By 2015, the instability in the Southern Mediterranean had spilled over into European soil through the waves of tens of thousands of refugees and acts of terrorism (France, Belgium and Germany).

In spite of some noticeable changes prompted by the uprisings, the reforms the regimes had introduced have not been profound enough to produce genuine change. Notably, they have failed to address the problem of youth unemployment. Indeed, of the many problems that these countries face, unemployment, particularly among the youth, including graduates who become easy recruits for Jihadist organisations throughout the region, stands at the top. The relatively high levels of economic growth (an average of 2.1% from 2011 to 2015 compared to 5% in the period 2003 to 2008) (Arroyo, 2015) and the creation of jobs, mostly in Algeria, have not resulted in the reduction of the chronic unemployment. On the eve of the Arab revolts, unemployment stood at a combined rate of 10%, with 20% among the youth; Tunisia scored highest in youth unemployment in the region with 46%, due mostly to the regime's neglect of the interior of the country and its incapacity to create new jobs, while Morocco, in spite of a substantial decrease of close to 20% in the 2001-2010 period, scored 37.18%. Youth unemployment soared to more than 20% in the region after the uprisings (Hong, 2015); Tunisia and Libya are the most affected. Undoubtedly, unemployment in Tunisia and Egypt, especially among the youth, was one of the main causes of the uprising in 2010 and 2011, respectively. Six years after the revolution, youth unemployment in Tunisia stands at 40%, reaching more than 54% in some parts of the country (OECD, 2015) and the rate among urban youth in Morocco reached 38.8% by June 2016 (World Bank, 2016b). In Algeria, although the youth do not trust the government, the institutions or the opposition parties, they have benefited from the largesse of the government in the form of easy loans. Objectively, the

government did well in dealing with unemployment; by 2010, unemployment among the youth was reduced by 64.02% from the level it was at in 2001 (Hong, 2015).

The hard security challenges derive from the internal political and socioeconomic dynamics evolving in each state; there is a correlation between the rise of violent extremism and the domestic conditions which, in turn, are hindered and exacerbated due precisely to the security conditions. Indisputably, the civil war in Libya has had the most negative reverberations, not only for the other three countries, but also the Sahel. NATO's intervention produced the current overall disorder; it created a political vacuum that has persisted to this day, as well as the mushrooming of numerous armed militias (see below). The return of the Gaddafi-trained Tuareg to Niger and Mali destabilised these two countries. One movement, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), sought the independence of the Azawad in northern Mali, while another, Ansar-el-Dine made alliances with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) with the objective of creating a caliphate (Zoubir, 2012b). Furthermore, the immediate and subsequent regional ramifications of the civil war in Libya have provided fertile ground for drug, human and arms traffickers, and other criminal networks to operate in throughout the region.

Libya: The Source of All Predicaments

Notwithstanding the euphoria that followed Gaddafi's overthrow and the optimistic outlook during the first year, by 2013 political wrangling among various political forces, backed by militias and/or foreign powers, could not agree on the future setup of Libya, resulting in the existence of three governments. The UN-led dialogue has also failed to bring about lasting political stability. The political status quo has allowed Jihadist groups to flourish and operate in and from Libya (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, Willcoxon & Basuni, 2015). Furthermore, foreign-influenced Salafist groups, such as the Madkhalis (a Saudi Salafi, allegedly quietist, creed), are also meddling in Libya (Wehrey, 2016) and, incidentally, in Algeria (Bouaricha, 2016).

The Islamic State is present, albeit in limited numbers, in the Maghreb, mainly in Libya, precisely because of the civil war and the chaos prevailing there, succeeding for a time in building a series of bases from which it sought to expand inside the country and launch attacks against Tunisia, as it did in March 2016 in an attempt to take over the border town of Ben Gardane. While its numbers have been exaggerated, IS presence exacerbated the crisis not only due to the alignments and realignments of the various militias with or against IS, but also because of the setting up of training camps to prepare fighters to operate in neighbouring countries. The presence of IS has also resulted in US

bombings in the country and the intervention of Western Special Operations Forces, thus curbing Libya's sovereignty. The involvement of the Gulf countries in Libya's security affairs, whether through Salafism or the Muslim Brotherhood, has complicated matters in the Maghreb.

This being said, it is doubtful that IS could have had a permanent presence in Libya for a number of reasons. IS ideology and methods are more extremist than those of the most radical Libyan militias, which explains the strong mobilisation of other Salafists against it. Clearly, IS could not control Libya (1.8 million square kilometres), which is mostly desert and many times the size of Iraq and Syria combined (622,252 square kilometres). Thus, while a "caliphate" in Libya is impossible, the eventual return of the 800 to 1,500 Libyan fighters from Syria and Iraq, as well as the arrival of the many hundreds of Tunisian and Moroccan combatants in the Levant, is worrisome. These forces will certainly seek to expand to Tunisia, the "weakest link," but also to fragile states such as Chad, Mali and Niger; they have used Libya as a training ground and springboard for attacks against the neighbours (Algeria in January 2013; Tunisia in March 2016).

Tunisia: The Weakest Link

Tunisia presented all the ingredients for a successful transition to democratic polity. However, not only has the economy been the Achilles' heel of the transition, but the lack of political acumen has resulted in bickering among the political elites which, in turn, resulted in lack of trust among Tunisians, particularly the youth, who feel that their revolution has been stolen and that the country is now led by a gerontocracy, more specifically by two elderly men, secularist Béji Caïd Essebsi, head of Nidaa Tounes, and Islamist Rachid Ghannouchi of the Ennahda Party; the perception is that the two men entered an unholy alliance to preserve the interests of their respective clienteles (Islamists, businessmen, former members of the old regime...). There is an unmistakable generational gap that has exacerbated the feeling of marginalisation among the youth. The state has been unable to provide stability or to provide economic solutions (GDP growth was 0.8% in 2015, World Bank, 2016a); the persistent regional disparities are evident and seem to even widen (author's interview with Tunisian scholars, Tunis, 3 November 2016). The political and socioeconomic context provides the main explanation for the insecurity in the country. The seeming security in the capital Tunis in recent months might be deceptive, notwithstanding the reintegration of the security forces and some of their chiefs who had been sacked after the revolution (author's interview with Tunisian journalist, 4 November 2016). The high unemployment remains one of the main factors that drives many young Tunisians to join IS or other extremist groups. (Bourekba, 2016; Bendermel, 2015). The financial incentive of \$400-\$4,000 is a major factor in the recruitment of young people by criminal organisations, such as IS (Daguzan, 2017). While

the Tunisian state does not address the youth's grievances and regain their trust, insecurity will not subside. Recently, a nexus between arms and drug traffickers and armed Jihadist cells has developed in the border regions; the illicit lucrative systems have resulted in increased violence, not necessarily the work of terrorists (International Crisis Group, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the continued deterioration of the political and security conditions in Libya will inevitably have consequences for Tunisia. Domestic terrorism there represents a particularly overwhelming menace for the Tunisian authorities seeking to protect the borders. When Ennahda came to power in 2012, the government freed thousands of Islamist militants, some of whom were Salafist Jihadists, imprisoned under the Ben Ali regime. Ennahda permitted Salafist preachers to exploit mosques across the country as platforms. Hence, "by early 2014, 90% of Tunisia's mosques were under the control of Salafists, which facilitated the propagation of Jihadist messages. Those messages resonated with some youth, who had been marginalised under Ben Ali and continued to live on the margin following the 2011 revolution as Tunisia's economy struggled to recover" (Khatib, 2014). As happened in Algeria in the 1990s, the self-proclaimed Imams manipulated the marginalised youth who are unable to even read the Quran, providing them with an extremist interpretation that has enticed them to join "Jihad" against the regimes in various Muslim countries; this explains the many hundreds of Tunisian Jihadists who are said to have joined the fight in Syria and Iraq. Today, Ennahda's ostensible moderation and its failure to bring the party's hitherto grassroots supporters into the system, by basically cutting ties with them, resulted in the perception among young Islamists that they had been abandoned and thus had no alternative but to join global Jihadist and/or criminal groups, especially since the job market could not absorb them either. The task of security officials is how to identify the many thousands of radical Islamists who have joined terrorist/criminal groups or may adhere at any time. After the banning of Ansar al-Shura of Tunisia (AST) in 2013, many of its members dispersed and migrated not only to Iraq and Syria, but also to Libya. Furthermore, a process of individual radicalisation, as opposed to group radicalisation, has also taken place and is making the identification of those individuals extremely difficult. In sum, thousands of leaderless individuals, with unclear objectives, are now operating at the border with Algeria (Torelli, 2017). Clearly, the Tunisian situation confirms the hypothesis that unemployment and marginalisation, particularly of the youth, results in radicalisation and extremism, which cannot be fought through repressive means alone, a reality that Algerian authorities had eventually understood. In fact, a case can be made that repression increases radicalisation (Colombo, 2016).

Algeria: Facing a Dangerous Neighbourhood

After a decade of civil strife in the 1990s, Algeria had regained a certain degree of stability that was little affected by the upheavals that had taken place in Tunisia and Libya in 2010-

2011; no doubt the country eluded the Arab uprisings because Algerians feared a renewal of the tragic decade but also because of the increase of the price of oil, which provided a safety cushion to the regime to address any socioeconomic grievances. In other words, in spite of sporadic strikes and riots, the regime was able to offset them through payoffs in the form of higher salaries or housing subsidies, which has kept the protests localised. Efforts by the opposition to wrest concessions from the new authoritarian regime to bring about political change proved fruitless, especially since the opposition parties have little popular support. While Algeria's macroeconomic indicators were relatively good when the oil and gas prices were high, the dramatic drop of the latter, coupled with Algeria's reluctance to execute bold reforms (Escribano, 2016), including at the political level, has resulted in uncertainty. However, this bonanza, accumulated thanks to the rise of oil prices, could not last forever. Revenue from hydrocarbons account for about 60% of Algeria's GDP and 97% of foreign earnings. When the proceeds from oil and gas sales were high, the government could buy social peace. It could also invest heavily in infrastructure. Although such projects contributed to the much needed new housing and other infrastructures, they also resulted in the creation of a new and corrupt business class. The fall in the price of oil has worried the regime (Fakir & Ghanem-Yazbeck, 2016) and the new business caste whose survival is dependent on government contracts. So far, the regime has relied on the \$200 billion in reserves that it accumulated when the price of oil was high. After just two years of spending, today, this account is down by more than half (Zoubir, 2016). There is just enough left to cover about two more years of imports. The dwindling revenues, regional insecurity, and domestic socioeconomic and political conditions (decline in social services, uncertainty regarding the succession, rising costs of living, and the drop in subsidies since 2015), are a major source of concern. Due to the financial crisis of the state, the authorities may look into the capital markets, an option that could result in indebtedness similar to that of the 1980s.

The major security challenges in Algeria are multifaceted; they encompass the terrorist threats in Tunisia, the political breakdown and utmost insecurity in Libya, the Jihadist presence and insecurity in northern Mali and the flow of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, weapons smuggling, drug trafficking and other illicit activities in the Sahara-Sahel region. The regional insecurity compelled Algeria to create a new military zone and deploy troops as well as elite Special Forces units in the Sahara desert and along the borders with Mali, Niger, Libya and Tunisia, in addition to those along the 3,100-kilometre south-western border (Mauritania, Morocco, Western Sahara), which has recently been reinforced through the deployment of drones, the installation of radars and other sophisticated surveillance equipment. These measures are meant not only to counter the terrorist threat but also to thwart drug trafficking and narco-terrorist networks.

Threats come not only from AQIM and MUJAO, but, to a much lesser degree, also from IS, which has repeatedly, vainly, sought to establish cells in the country owing to the

effectiveness of the security forces. The latter eliminated the Jund al Khalifah group (an AQIM splinter faction that pledged allegiance to IS) and are trying to destroy Ansar al Khilafah, also an AQIM splinter faction based in the eastern city of Skikda, which pledged allegiance to IS in spring 2015. A lesser-known group, the al-Ghuraba Brigade, which operates near the eastern city of Constantine, yet another splinter group from AQIM now allied with IS, also poses a security risk, albeit limited. Other groups, such as Al-Ansar Brigade and Humat al-Dawa, believed to have joined IS, have been prevented from launching any attacks.

In spite of the seeming stability, terrorist activities have gone unabated and there is concern among security forces that young people may seek to join IS inside the country. The government has been rather effective in preventing departures of young people to join IS in Syria and has also prevented Moroccan volunteers to Syria from transiting through Algeria (Ghanem-Yazbeck, 2015). According to security officials the author interviewed in Algiers in January 2016, approximately 1,000 toughened Islamist fighters remain engaged in the fight against the regime, but have had difficulty attracting new recruits. Thus, the main challenge for Algeria is the insecurity prevailing in Libya and Mali, but also AQIM's resurgence and the persistent threat of IS expansion. Algeria has also played a key role in mediating between secularist and moderate Islamist forces in Tunisia to provide stability and avoid the "Algerian scenario" of the late 1980s and early 1990s. While the defeat of IS in Libya is a welcome development, there are concerns that defeated IS fighters might infiltrate Algeria through Libya and conduct operations similar to the one against the gas plant in Tinguentourine, near In Amenas, in January 2013. The attack was the work of al-Murabitun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who leads around 200 troops.

Morocco: The Fear of Returning Jihadists

Like Algeria, Morocco eluded the "Arab Spring" and, similar to Algeria, the promised reforms made immediately after the uprisings have remained more cosmetic than the hoped-for radical changes that would transform the authoritarian governance. In spite of some positive measures, the monarchy has overwhelming control over the political process. Although Morocco has made noticeable progress in creating a more favourable climate for international investors, it has failed to reduce unemployment, especially among the youth. In fact, "in Morocco... youth labour force was totally excluded from the new job creation efforts, and some young people even lost their jobs for the benefit of older labour force; these factors potentially explain the meagre fall of youth unemployment..." (Hong, 2015). Disillusioned Moroccan citizens are critical of political parties, which look all the same to them or are simply viewed as corrupt and self-serving (Bennani-Chraïbi, 2013). This disillusion is evidenced by the low turnout (43%) during the legislative

elections held on 7 October 2016. Even if Morocco has seemed stable, spontaneous riots can surge sporadically as they did on 2 November 2016, following the death of fish vendor Mohcine Fikri, a case reminiscent of the immolation of Tunisia's Mohamed Bouazizi, which sparked the upheaval in 2010.

As one observer rightly pointed out, “although Mohammed VI's response to popular uprisings in 2011 has mostly succeeded, it has revived a persistent question of whether gradual, palace-driven reforms from above can produce tangible institutional change in how power is shared and exercised” (Malka, 2016). Clearly, the reforms have not addressed in any fundamental way issues of genuine political participation, youth unemployment, marginalisation and favouritism. Undoubtedly, as in the rest of the Maghreb, marginalisation and unemployment are the primary factors that push young people to join Jihadist groups. Studies have shown that two-thirds of the Moroccan fighters who joined the “Jihad” in Syria and Libya are under 25, and three-quarters come from poor strata living in the shantytowns of large and medium-sized towns, such as Casablanca, Salé and Tangier (Stitou & Guguen, 2015). Evidently, “poverty and the lack of alternatives...have pushed youths into informal or illicit activities... For quite a few, travelling to Syria is just another option to escape a social reality that offers limited prospects for a decent living, and constitutes an almost seamless transition from one type of illicit activity to another” (Masbah, 2015).

According to some scholars, initially, Moroccan authorities did not do enough to prevent Moroccan Jihadists from leaving the country and “this policy was clearly driven by the desire to get rid of them and reduce the burden of controlling and containing the local Salafist-Jihadist scene, within as well as outside the prison system” (Masbah, 2015). In 2012-2013, Morocco's position on Syria, i.e., the toppling of Bashar Al-Asad, coincided with the Jihadists' willingness to assist the Sunni opposition there. However, the return of the fighters to Morocco from Syria and, more recently, from Libya, compelled the Moroccan authorities to revise the leniency they had shown toward Salafist-Jihadists hitherto. They have undertaken new measures to thwart the threat by strengthening in 2014 the Antiterrorist Law enacted in 2003 following the Casablanca attacks. In addition, Jihadists have now been prevented from travelling to join IS or other Jihadist organisations. Security forces have cracked down on Salafist-Jihadists and dismantled many cells throughout the kingdom.

Masbah also argues that, even if the terrorist threat in Morocco is real, it has been politicised. There has been the tendency within the security apparatus to exaggerate the threat with the idea to “assert its independence from the elected [PJD] government and to re-establish a free hand over internal affairs, unhampered by oversight from the government or civil society” (Masbah, 2014). Morocco has undertaken commendable measures, such as de-radicalisation programmes and modernisation of the security

sector, to obstruct terrorist threats; however, like the other Maghreb countries, it has failed to effectively address the issues of marginalisation, youth unemployment and other socioeconomic and political questions that contribute to the expansion of violent extremism. The riots that have reignited in the Rif in February 2017 confirm the urgent need to address the root causes of discontent and enrolment in Jihadist organisations.

Conclusion

The security challenges that the Maghreb has faced are the product of bad governance and socioeconomic mismanagement. In order to bring about peace and prosperity in the region, the Maghreb regimes must introduce genuine reforms that entail the participation of civil societies and integration of the youth. European governments have a stake in addressing the security risks, such as terrorism and illegal migration; thus, they must engage in serious dialogue in the southern shores of the Mediterranean to convince the incumbent regimes that it is in the interests of both sides to initiate programmes for the youth. While imposing conditionality will not necessarily be productive, European governments must use their economic and financial leverage to persuade Southern Mediterranean regimes of the necessity of focusing on good governance and human security and should avoid enunciating “one-size-fit-all” policies for the region. In other words, the EU should adopt diverse strategies tailored in cooperation with each of the countries. One such strategy would be for the EU to work with both the authorities and civil society organisations, including businesses, to execute all-inclusive de-radicalisation programmes supported by social and economic (re-) integration processes whose primary objectives are to debunk the ideological foundations of Jihadism and the creation of sustainable socioeconomic, political and cultural foundations.

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