



WIDER ATLANTIC POLICY PAPER SERIES

# CHALLENGES FOR TRANSATLANTIC COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION IN NORTH AFRICA

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**G | M | F** The German Marshall Fund  
of the United States  
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION



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## INTRODUCTION

The United States and Europe share a common interest in addressing the growing terrorist threats from North Africa. The emergence of ISIL as a force in the region — notably in Libya, but also in Egypt and to a lesser degree in Tunisia, Algeria, and Mali — is cause for genuine concern. The ISIL challenge is compounded by the persistence of older terrorist organizations, both local ones such as the region's various Ansar al Sharias as well as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al Qaeda's local affiliate. Even though ISIL has suffered a blow thanks to the efforts of multiple actors to dislodge it from its safe haven in Sirte, along the Libyan coast, its potentially large number of remaining fighters continue to threaten regional security — as evidenced by the massive U.S. airstrike conducted on a rump ISIL battalion south of Sirte on January 19, 2016, rumored to be retaliation in part for the December 2016 Christmas market attack in Berlin. ISIL and other groups also continue to threaten U.S. and European regional interests, while contributing to Europe's migration crisis via the central Mediterranean route. As of today, North Africa's terrorist groups are a clear challenge for transatlantic security, even as other issues in the Levant and Eastern Europe soak up the bulk of policymakers' attention.

Of greatest concern is the problem North African terrorist groups might pose if they continue to expand at the rate they have in recent years. Left unchecked, the rampant expansion of such groups across the region would further destabilize the situation — most immediately in Tunisia, but also potentially in parts of Egypt and even Algeria, whose conquest has long been a preoccupation of the older generation of Salafi jihadists who fought together in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Not only would

the local populations suffer, the possibilities that the region could become a launching point for attacks in Europe or the United States would also intensify. Al Qaeda and other terrorist leaders of significance have found refuge there. In 2013, for example, a U.S. special forces team captured Abu Anas-al Libi in Tripoli, Libya, who helped plan the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Given the presence of such individuals, intelligence organizations on both sides of the Atlantic will need to remain watchful of the potential for plots targeting Europe from the region.

# 1

## REGIONAL SECURITY SITUATION

The underlying conditions for the growth of extremist groups in the region remains ripe. The blow dealt to ISIL's North African ambitions at Sirte is welcome from a security perspective, but the extant circumstances that allowed ISIL to gain a foothold in Libya in the first place have changed little. Libya remains a stateless territory, with no clear path toward the establishment of stable state institutions. At the time of writing, the Libyan Political Accord, signed in Skhirat, Morocco in December 2015 is increasingly viewed as abortive. Eastern militias loyal to General Khalifa Hiftar still reject cooperation with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord and are gaining ground in part with greater support from outside powers such as Russia. There are rumors that these eastern forces may intend a military move on Tripoli, which would likely incite a broader civil war. Meanwhile, instability reigns in Benghazi, parts of south Libya, and Tripoli itself, where feuding militias — al Qaeda and ISIS elements among them — control the city. Sirte may be largely free of ISIL, but the huge reconstruction and reconciliation tasks ahead make for a very uncertain future there. Nationwide, the possibility of broader economic and, hence, humanitarian disaster looms if current account balances continue to drain Libya's reserves.

Morocco has been an enthusiastic supporter of U.S. and European counterterrorism (CT) objectives, both domestically and further afield. Domestically, it has cooperated closely with the United States on counterterrorism, so much so that in 2004 it became a major non-NATO ally of the United States. For example, the United States holds an annual joint exercise with Morocco known as AFRICAN LION, trains Moroccan security personnel, and engages in other forms of CT-related security cooperation

and financing. Morocco's domestic counter-radicalization programs have been widely promoted and earned respect in Europe and the United States as possible models for other parts of the broader Middle East and North Africa region. Morocco has also sought to play a constructive role in Libya.

Tunisia is in a much better position than Libya, but continues to struggle with the difficult process of political stabilization and democratic consolidation that began with its 2011 uprising against the Ben Ali regime. ISIL successfully conducted multiple attacks in Tunisia in 2015 and 2016, aggravating anxiety, straining the political system, and stemming the inflow of critical foreign tourist dollars. At home, Tunisia has a severe radicalization problem that has helped make it the largest per capita source of foreign terrorist fighters in the world. Its defense sector is underdeveloped, internal counterterrorism coordination mechanisms are lacking, and the powerful interior ministry continues to resist reforms needed to strengthen Tunisia's defenses against its internal terrorist threat — a threat that will continue as long as neighboring Libya remains in a state of anarchy.

Egypt, meanwhile, faces a smoldering insurgency in the Sinai by a group once known as Ansar Bayat al Maqdis, but which has now directly linked itself to ISIL as the Wilayat Sinai ("Sinai Province"). This group is widely held to be responsible for the downing of the St. Petersburg-bound Metrojet airliner on October 31, 2015, and continues to resist Egyptian efforts to rein it in. Most outside observers note that Egypt's military is ill-equipped for a successful counter-insurgency operation in the region, focused as it has been for decades on fighting a

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conventional war with Israel. The prospects for improvement of the situation in the Sinai thus also seem limited for the near term.

Algeria has managed to escape significant terrorist attacks in recent years, but is the home of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a group itself born out of the Algerian civil war that conducted a series of coordinated attacks in Algiers in 2007. The stability of the Algerian state is difficult to fathom from the outside due to the opaque processes by which it operates. It is clear that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's long tenure in office will come to an end before long (he is nearly 80 years old), but what will follow is difficult to know. Some believe that a period of instability due to elite infighting could follow, opening the door to an internal collapse; lingering social discontent supports this perspective. However, other observers argue that the memory of the bloody civil war will serve as prophylaxis against renewed unrest. A collapse of the Algerian state would be an enormous boon to jihadist aspirations across the region.

Directly to the south, Northern Mali remains a source of regional instability despite the positive impact that French and UN forces have had there since the French intervention in 2013. Niger has proven somewhat more resilient in the face of terrorist attacks, as have Mauritania and Senegal. The circulation of jihadists between Northern Mali via Niger, Algeria, and Chad to Southern Libya nevertheless continues to complicate efforts to contain North African terrorism.

Clearly, the counterterrorism needs for the region are very great indeed. To begin with, efforts to strengthen the reach of the state will

be essential to any lasting counterterrorism strategy. This must include not only training defense and interior ministry forces, ensuring they have the necessary intelligence and other means, but also ensuring that they are capable of working effectively together, and doing so in the context of a justice system that respects human rights and the rule of law. This means that efforts to promote structural-level security sector reform are needed as well as efforts to strengthen tactical capabilities of security forces, e.g. through small-unit CT training via Joint Combined Exchange Trainings (JCETs) or other mechanisms.

A key part of strengthening internal security is improving the ability of states in the region to control their borders. At present, financing, arms, other logistics, and terrorists themselves flow with relative ease across the borders of Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, and Mali. Tamping down on such movements is an essential step toward progress in hampering and containing the growth of the region's jihadist groups in the first place. Border security, like internal security, requires not only technical capabilities, but also effective policies, coordination practices between relevant agencies, command and control, and cross-border communication systems and procedures. In nearly all cases, such systems and capabilities are weak or altogether lacking (with the exception of Tunisia and Algeria, where improvements to cross-border communication and intelligence-sharing and other measures have improved the tracking and apprehension of terrorist groups operating across the border).

Such measures are intended to address the current challenge posed by jihadist groups. A fully effective regional strategy, however, would

also address the underlying radicalization problem in countries such as Tunisia. Understanding of radicalization processes and the effective means of stopping them is not as strong as it might be, but it is clear that if a country like Tunisia is to escape from a long-term domestic terrorism challenge, counter-radicalization will be needed. Similarly, if Libya is ever to regain statehood of some form, counter-radicalization is likely to be no less important there. On one level, economic opportunity and efforts to control the malicious effects of efforts to spread radical ideologies outside the religious mainstream are desirable, but these must be complemented by programs that intervene directly to prevent youth from radicalizing.

Because North Africa, despite the threats emanating from there, remains largely a secondary front for the United States and its major allies when it comes to radical terrorist groups (after the Levant), it is unlikely to receive large-scale military resources. For the most part, the United States and its allies in Europe will pursue partner-based strategies that aim to empower local actors to combat radical trends through means such as those identified above. Occasionally, however, the use of direct military force will be needed to address specific problems such as that posed by the emergence of ISIL in Sirte over the course of 2015. In that case, U.S., U.K., and other special forces provided training and other forms of support to the Misratan brigades that drove ISIL out under the banner of Bunyan Marsus (“The Solid Structure”). Meanwhile, the United States also supported the operation from above with airpower, much as it has in Iraq. In addition, direct action by special forces as well as airpower will continue to be called for to address specific threats and

high-value targets. Paradoxically, however, excessive reliance on direct action of this type can run counter to efforts to strengthen the counterterrorism capacity of local partners in other areas, if it proves politically unpopular in partner nations.

## 2 EUROPEAN AND U.S. REGIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM ROLES

*It is plausible to assume that U.S. support to partner-led counterterrorism operations involves at a minimum some tactical intelligence sharing to strengthen those operations.*

The challenges in implementing a successful long-term strategy to counter terrorist groups in the region are thus very great. The resources available, in both the United States and among key European allies, are meanwhile limited and the politics difficult.

As in so many other cases around the world, the United States has the most resources to offer. This is true despite the fact that the region has been a secondary priority in U.S. foreign and security policy. The global Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF) inaugurated by President Obama in 2014 offers an important line of funding available to address problems in the region. Funding is available for a range of activities, including countering violent extremist messaging, counter-improvised explosive device (IED) training, border security, intelligence support, C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), logistics, mobility, and other efforts designed to assist partner states in detecting, degrading, and disrupting violent extremist groups.

This authority is complemented by the pre-existing Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which funds a range of law enforcement and military training in the region, border security, rule of law, counter-threat financing, and other measures. The United States has used this funding and other sources to support a range of CT-related activities, including support to CT-related training, equipment, and reforms in Tunisia; direct action, partnering, and strikes against terrorist groups in Libya (e.g. Sirte and Sabratha); CT cooperation with Algeria through Operation Enduring Freedom–Trans Sahara and its successors; and military-to-

military engagement aimed at strengthening Egyptian border controls and counterterrorism practices in the Sinai. U.S. special forces have also conducted specialized counterterrorism training for small groups in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (in addition to those in Libya), and the United States also sponsors the region's premier international military exercise, FLINTLOCK, which is aimed at improving regional states' military capabilities, with a heavy focus on counter-terrorism. It is plausible to assume that U.S. support to partner-led counterterrorism operations involves at a minimum some tactical intelligence sharing to strengthen those operations.

After the United States, the role of France is the most significant. In 2013, France intervened in Mali, successfully destroying a large Al Qaeda safe haven with Operation Serval. Subsequently, the French military expanded its operations across several Sahelian states, including by forward-basing aircraft in northern Niger and Chad to provide closer intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and strike capabilities across some of the most remote trafficking routes in the Sahara desert. French special forces and members of service action of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE) have played a counterterrorism role in Libya, presumably in Benghazi, as reported by Le Monde in February 2016 and evidenced by the downing of an Egyptian helicopter with a French crew in July 2016. French forces are also working to support counter-IED and other CT-related training for Tunisia. Additionally, France has announced a major arms deal with Egypt, although that deal is largely focused on conventional arms sales and the sale of the Rafale fighter jet in particular, areas of limited relevance to Egypt's counterterrorism needs.

French cooperation with Algeria continues to be limited by their tortured history — from the French colonial period through the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s that saw terrorist attacks on French soil. As in the U.S. case, active French support to groups in Libya and elsewhere likely involves the provision of at least tactical CT-relevant intelligence.

Regional U.K. operations have been more limited in recent years. That said, U.K. special forces are also engaged in counter-terrorism operations and related training in Libya. After the attacks that killed 38 tourists at the resort in Sousse, Tunisia in 2015, where British vacationers were among the largest number dead, the U.K. government also began a program designed to strengthen Tunisia's ability to protect tourist infrastructure with technical advice, training, and mentoring of Tunisian security personnel. Like the United States and France, U.K. military detachments also conduct training for Tunisian defense forces in terrorism-related areas, such as border security. In addition, the U.K. has worked with Egypt on protecting tourist infrastructure, aviation security, and providing counterterrorism training to the Egyptian military.

The European Union's focus in the region is largely on longer-term economic and political development, which is obviously important to counterterrorism in the long term, but it has taken some fewer specific actions in counterterrorism realm. Initially, the EU sought to take a leading role in Libya on border security through the European Union Border Assistance and Monitoring mission (EUBAM), but when security derailed the mission had to decamp for Tunis, where it remains, largely in waiting for a resolution of the civil war in Libya. The EU has

provided some training for the Tunisian Interior Ministry and plays a key role in strengthening Mali's security sector through the Bamako-based EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), which focuses both on tactical training as well as broader defense institution building. The EU's naval operation in the Mediterranean, Operation Sophia, has some counterterrorism relevance, but is first and foremost aimed at stemming the flow of migrants through the Mediterranean central route. Italian officials discussed the possibility of an Italian-led intervention in Libya that would at least have helped to stabilize the capital, but then backed off when political leaders sensed a lack of public support for such an operation. Germany, Spain, and other countries also provide support to EU efforts in Mali and have offered occasional support relevant to counterterrorism elsewhere in the region, but none on a scale that merits attention in this overview.

# 3 LOOKING AHEAD

*It will be difficult for the time being for European powers to offer meaningful counter-radicalization programs in North Africa, when there is a clear need for such programs at home in countries like France and the United Kingdom — and perhaps now also Germany.*

In an ideal world, U.S. and European partners in North and West Africa would develop strong and capable security services embedded in effective domestic and regional institutions that were supportive of human rights and the rule of law. Despite the progress in Tunisia and Morocco, there is a long way to go to achieve these objectives regionally. The needs are great. Some countries such as Algeria and Egypt are reticent about the conditionality of U.S. and European assistance and may even be seeking to develop stronger partnerships with Russia. The challenges in Libya are unlikely to be resolved soon. With continued support, Tunisia may make progress, but it will continue to be threatened by broader regional instability as well as its domestic fissures.

It is uncertain how the region will figure in the broader foreign policy of the Trump administration, but, barring a major terrorist attack on the United States based from the region, it seems unlikely that North Africa will gain in importance over the Obama years, where it retained mostly second-tier importance. The main possibility would likely be an increase in attention to the challenge posed by ISIL, perhaps with the addition of more military resources — especially special forces assigned to the region — or even closer cooperation with Russia in Libya and elsewhere. At the time of writing, however, it is very difficult to predict and a U.S. retrenchment from the region seems equally plausible. Meanwhile, European countries, for whom the region is more important if only because of geographic proximity, will remain consumed with the need to counter radicalization within their own countries, at least in the near term. The case of the 2016 Berlin Christmas Market attacker, Anis Amri, who was a Tunisian, has only

underscored the challenges that lie ahead when it comes to Europe's dealing with North Africa on counterterrorism: Amri was in Germany at the time of the attack because Tunisia had been stalling his return home. It will be difficult for the time being for European powers to offer meaningful counter-radicalization programs in North Africa, when there is a clear need for such programs at home in countries like France and the United Kingdom — and perhaps now also Germany. European contributions to regional counterterrorism are thus unlikely to grow in the foreseeable future, whatever turns European politics may take in latter half of 2017.

Better coordination between the United States and Europe is always a good idea in principle. NATO may be able to play some role in this, but it is not alone the solution due to continued internal resistance from some countries. U.S.–EU cooperation is also limited in scope for the region because the EU's main focus will remain on broader structural challenges rather than CT. Clearly, it makes sense for the United States, France, the U.K., and other interested countries to coordinate policies at the country level, as they have recently in Tunisia through the G7 format. But the basic problem in the region when it comes to foreign assistance will be the gaps in resources and knowhow — in the United States, Europe, and the region itself — not an overall lack of coordination.

## CONCLUSION

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Regional security will still remain a thorn in the side of Europe, and could become a more dangerous issue for the United States over time, especially as ISIL adherents make their way back to their homelands in North Africa from Syria and Iraq. At a minimum, it is essential, therefore that existing U.S. and European programs remain in place. Discussions of burden-sharing in the region should not become a means of reducing the European or U.S. footprint. Existing military, security sector, and other CT-related programs should stay in place, especially in countries like Morocco or Tunisia, which need all the support that they can get to avoid backsliding on security or other issues. North Africa continues to experience the aftershocks of the Arab uprisings of 2011, but remains a region of moderate-income countries that are free of many of the sectarian and other rifts that divide the Levant or Gulf. As such, Europe and the United States should hold out hope that over the long term the states of the region will again recover their security and begin to develop economically and politically in a direction that is conducive to U.S. and European interests on counterterrorism, in the Mediterranean, and perhaps further afield.



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