

EU and Maghreb Countries: Counterterrorism Cooperation

In recent years, the EU has adopted a short-sighted approach in its relations with the countries of the Maghreb, driven by fear of illegal immigration and a potential spill-over of violent extremism from the South - but trade-offs between security and democracy are not sustainable.

By Ramla Allani and Donald Monan and Natasha Mueller and Ioana Puscas and Lisa Watanabe

The global security discourse following 9/11 that put excessive emphasis on (Islamist) terrorism as an imminent and ultimate threat has created a new global paradigm of insecurity, originating from the US, but with profound global implications. The appropriation of this security narrative in the EU's official discourse on foreign relations was made explicit through a series of documents that followed both the '2001 momentum' in the US and the 'domestic' instances of radicalization and terrorism, such as the Madrid and London attacks.

In a world of increasing transnational threats, the prioritization of the fight against terrorism was, however, expanded beyond the realm of diplomacy, intelligence and security and became embodied in a series of cross-pillar measures and policies.

Looking South

For the EU the first target of such measures was its near periphery in North Africa, particularly the Maghreb countries. Data gathered by EUROPOL for several consecutive years revealed that the majority of terrorist suspects arrested in Europe came from North Africa, "most notably Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia". Engagement with this region was therefore reoriented along the axis of counterterrorism policies, with many sub-fields of EU foreign relations acquiring a new security dimension. Political or economic objectives, such as aid, development and migration policies, became securitized and subsumed into an overarching security rationale: that of combating terrorism.

From an afterthought in EU policy discourse in the pre-9/11 era, terrorism has thus increasingly come to be seen as a priority, creating a window of opportunity for the EU to engage with the region more energetically and resulting in the development of the EU as a counter-terrorist actor in its own right. The constant expansion of the EU as a counter-terrorist actor since 9/11 has, on the one hand, enabled an unprecedented number of member states to adopt specific laws to fight terrorism and has brought to the forefront specific instruments, such as the Justice and Home Affairs programs that had been relatively marginal prior to 2001. On the other hand, the EU has had a poor implementation record in counter-terrorist initiatives; a problem that stems from the lack of coordination between different EU institutions and departments, as well as member states' preference to operate bilaterally with third-party countries.

As a result of the particular development trajectory of the EU as a counter-terrorist actor, namely the need to unite numerous member states under one foreign policy agenda, and in an environment of increasingly open borders, the EU has seen its internal and external aspects of security as "indissolubly linked". Pivoting on the link between the threat of terrorism, and migration and border control, this process of intense securitization has been extended to EU-Maghreb cooperation and counterterrorism initiatives, with particularly detrimental effects in the field of migration. The connection between migration and terrorism became naturalized, often overriding other normative imperatives. Maghrebi migrants became more than alien figures, they were criminalized, subject to prohibitions, containment and potential stigmatization.

Given the threat posed by groups such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the prospect of spillover from instability and terrorism-related violence to European countries, the region presents an important area to review. Examining Algeria and Tunisia is particularly relevant given their priority status for the EU, as demonstrated by their membership in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), as well as their geographical

proximity in an era of enhanced border control and increasingly restrictive immigration practices.

From Algeria...

When the second round of the first multi-party elections in 1992 were canceled after a majority win in the first round by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), Algeria was thrown into a civil war between government-backed militia and Islamist militants. In 1999, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika granted a partial amnesty to militants who renounced violence. Among those to lay down their arms was the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). However, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) continued its violent opposition to the government. The GSPC has now merged with Al-Qaida, changing its name to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This merger has been accompanied by a shift in tactics. AQIM not only targets the Algerian government, but also foreign nationals and companies in the Maghreb, and has threatened France. Terrorist incidents in Algeria increased from 20 in 2001 to 185 in 2009. The emergence of AQIM appears to have been a response to the largely successful measures taken by Algerian authorities to curb the insurgency. AQIM has recently sought to expand beyond Algeria into neighboring Libya, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

AQIM is of particular concern to European governments, who fear that Algerian militants in Europe may be linking up with insurgents in the Maghreb. Counterterrorism cooperation with Algeria is largely aimed at reforming the justice system and encouraging international cooperation in the area of law enforcement. Since Algeria is considered a transit country for migration, the EU Commission has also sought to strengthen Algeria's border control measures. In addition, the Commission and member states have supported the establishment of the African Centre for the Study and Research of Terrorism (ACSRT) in 2004. Located in Algiers, the ACSRT serves the African Union's counterterrorism efforts by evaluating the African terrorist threat and improving intra-African counterterrorism cooperation.

Despite the EU's concern with AQIM, counterterrorism cooperation with Algeria is surprisingly modest. This appears to be partly due to the Algerian authorities' preference for bilateral cooperation with individual EU member states, particularly France, Spain and Italy. Differences of opinion within the Commission about how to deal with Algerian authorities are also believed to hinder counterterrorism cooperation between the EU and Algeria.

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005 raised the importance of Algeria's role in the fight against international terrorism and assistance from the EU and individual member states in its counterinsurgency efforts. On the positive side, this has translated into support for judicial reform and improvements in counterterrorism cooperation between African countries. However, the focus on terrorism in Algeria has overshadowed other domestic issues, particularly those responsible for growing civil unrest. The hopelessness felt by many Algerians contributes to domestic radicalization, and drives young Algerians abroad, where alienation may increase their vulnerability to radicalization. However, the link between the insurgency in Algeria and international terrorism is debatable. The sources of radicalization in each instance are believed to be very different. The challenge for the EU is to gain a better understanding of the roots of radicalization in both Europe and Algeria.

...To Tunisia

It is not possible today to talk about counterterrorism strategy in Tunisia without speaking about Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian citizen and a street vendor who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 to protest his humiliation by a municipal official. This act catalyzed the 2010-2011 Tunisian uprising with its popular demonstrations for political and social reform.

The link between the Tunisian uprising and counterterrorism strategy is clear. The Benali regime's security policies intended to counter extremism have repressed Tunisians beyond their endurance, triggering violent demonstrations. Bouazizi's 17 December self-immolation gave voice to the Tunisian people's anger over security policies which, while ostensibly

enacted to counter an Islamic extremist movement, have curtailed civil liberties and advanced the interests of the ruling regime.

The roots of current Tunisian counterterrorism policy can be traced to the late 1980s when popular Tunisian tourist destinations were struck repeatedly by the terrorist organization Harakat el Itijah el Islamee. President Habib Bourguiba was unable to quell the terrorist campaign, creating an opening for Benali, then a high-ranking military officer, to first become minister of the interior and then the prime minister. Benali succeeded in crushing the Islamic movement through heavy-handed measures and stiff penalties for involvement in terrorism.

Tunisia has largely won its struggle against Islamic militants, but this victory has cost the Tunisian people dearly. Benali's approach to counterterrorism was based on the dual goals of crushing terrorist organizations and removing the root causes of terrorism. While Benali was able to seriously degrade terrorist organizations, he did not increase freedom for the Tunisian people. The National Pact of 1988 demonstrated that Tunisians want better standards of living, education, opportunities, peace, security and freedom. Progress on these fronts has been made: The poverty rate was slashed to four percent, 75 percent of the population owns their own homes, infant mortality was halved and childhood education has increased. Tunisia has become the second most computerized country in Africa after South Africa.

However, the significant progress experienced in Tunisia was not accompanied by greater liberalization and freedom: The Benali regime remained repressive and highly corrupt, fueling popular resentment and encouraging militancy.

Unlike the Algerian case in which counterterrorism cooperation with the EU was institutionalized even before 9/11, cooperation between the EU and Tunisia in this domain was initiated following 9/11 within the framework of the Neighborhood Action Plan. The EU has since supported projects aimed at reform and modernization of the judiciary and

policing. Individual EU member states, most notably France, have also been cooperating with Tunisia bilaterally. Overall, the EU's prioritization of counterterrorism goals led it to support the Benali regime, despite its poor human rights record. After 23 years of censorship and repression, the Tunisian people began their struggle for democracy. The question remains, however, whether the democratic aspirations of the Tunisian people will resist hijacking by Islamist elements.

The challenges ahead

EU counterterrorism cooperation with the countries of the Maghreb, long inhibited by the under-institutionalization of European foreign policy, was facilitated by Javier Solana's 1999 appointment as High Representative and greatly mobilized by the 9/11 attacks. Prior to 9/11, European security cooperation with the Maghreb was largely bilateral, focused on normative concerns and ultimately ineffectual. Europe's advocacy of human rights and democracy amounted to little more than rhetorical bluster, as the continent largely turned a blind eye to violence and illiberal policies, particularly in Algeria and Tunisia.

North African states prior to 9/11 were dissatisfied with Europe's apparent indifference over regional violence, which many Maghrebi leaders presciently believed constituted an international threat. Europe failed to address the implications of North African terrorism for its own security. Indeed, the UK adopted a particularly ineffectual policy predicated on blind multiculturalism at home and short-sighted policies abroad. In the decades preceding 9/11, the UK became a safe haven for Islamic extremists, granting residency to convicted terrorists such as Rashid al-Ghannushi, the leader of the Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood.

The 9/11 attacks galvanized Europe to action. The EU quickly promulgated a strategy for fighting terrorism, created a European arrest warrant and agreed upon a statutory definition of a terrorist offense. The April 2002 Valencia Action Plan solidified joint Euro-Mediterranean counterterrorism action, including increased information sharing and funding for Maghrebi Justice and Home Affairs programs. North African states welcomed this

initiative, as they had advocated a more comprehensive European policy for years. Yet, as European attention shifted from normative concerns to counterterrorism, the latter, as we have seen, received priority at the expense of the former.

The challenge for European counterterrorism cooperation with the Maghreb is to balance the EU's normative concerns, such as human rights and democracy, with its immediate counterterrorism priorities. This delicate balance has become more important as the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarrak in Egypt indicates the extent of popular discontent with repressive, pro-Western regimes. In order to stay true to its normative ideals, Europe must support democratic transitions in North Africa, while remaining fully cognizant that such changes could disrupt counterterrorism cooperation.

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