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EU-Maghreb Counter-Terrorism Cooperation: The Need for a More Holistic Approach

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Keypoints

- EU-Maghreb counter-terrorism cooperation forms part of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU's main framework for relations with its southern neighbours. Within this context, the EU's cross-pillar approach to fighting terrorism has been externalized to the Maghreb.

- Despite the EU's concern with a possible spill-over of terrorism from the Maghreb, counter-terrorism cooperation with Maghreb countries has been largely limited to reform of the judicial, police, and prison systems, as well as border management.

- There has been little effort to address the root causes of terrorism on the part of the EU and to develop a more comprehensive approach to counter-terrorism cooperation within the context of the ENP despite the fact that some Maghreb countries have adopted multi-faceted approaches to counter-terrorism and could be better supported in their efforts.

- On the positive side, the Arab Spring has prompted a review of the European Neighbourhood Policy and, as part of this, the EU should use the opportunity to develop a more holistic approach to EU-Maghreb counter-terrorism cooperation.

- The EU needs to better allocate resources to projects aimed at reducing economic and social exclusion, as well as to develop a coherent strategy with which to engage political Islam.

The Framework for EU-Maghreb Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

EU-Maghreb counter-terrorism cooperation spans a number of different pillars of competence of the European Union (EU). Counter-terrorism cooperation between the EU and Maghreb countries takes place primarily through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU's main arena for relations with its neighbours to the South. The ENP was developed as a first pillar[1] mechanism in 2004 to provide a framework for relations between an enlarged Union and its closest neighbours. It is largely a bilateral partnership between the EU and individual partner countries although it is accompanied by, and designed to build upon, the multilateral framework of the Union for the Mediterranean, which was launched in 2008 as a successor to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), formerly known as the Barcelona Process. The stated objective of the ENP is to prevent the emergence of new "dividing lines" by offering the Union's neighbours the possibility of cooperation on political, economic, security, cultural and educational issues. The EU also aims to promote common values, such as the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, and development of good neighbourly relations.[2] Sixteen of the EU's closest neighbours are members of the ENP. They include Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine (shown in green on Map 1 below). While the ENP does not offer a prospect of EU membership and, in this sense, is distinct from the enlargement process, it does not preclude ENP member states from becoming members of the Union in the future.

Map 1: European Neighbourhood Policy Members
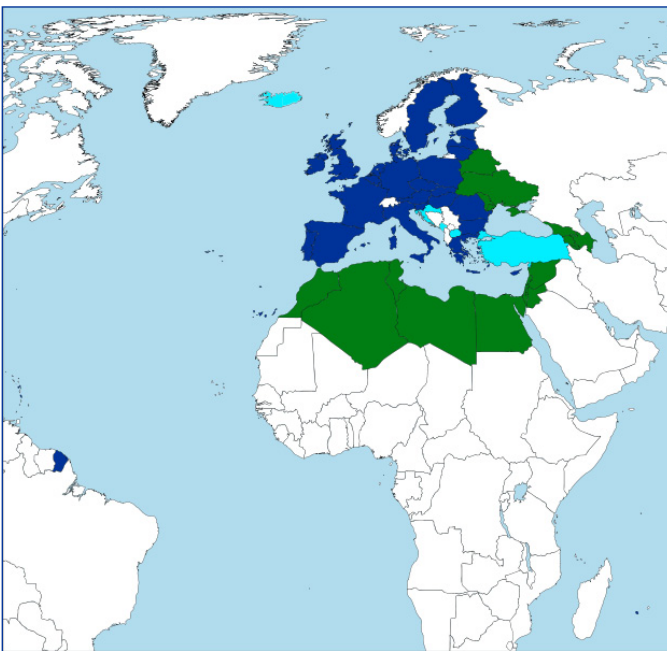
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:European_Neighbourhood_Policy_member_map.svg

- ■ European Union
- ■ Official candidates
- ■ European Neighbourhood Policy

Specific dimensions of the relationship between the EU and partner countries are outlined in bilateral ENP Action Plans, which set out programmes for political and economic reforms over the short to medium term. While each Action Plan is intended to be tailor-made to reflect the degree of shared values and common interests between the EU and specific partner countries, a number of priorities are built into each Action Plan in order to strengthen the commitment to shared values. The latter include "strengthening democracy and the rule of law, respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of media and expression, rights of minorities and support for the development of civil society". Commitment to the fight against terrorism is also considered a priority for the EU.[3] While Action Plans are in place for Morocco and Tunisia, an Action Plan for Algeria has yet to be agreed upon. Therefore, cooperation between Algeria and the EU occurs within the framework of Algeria's EMP Association Agreement, which came into effect in 2005. While Association Agreements do not specifically mention the fight against terrorism, they do include political dialogue on security issues as well as cooperation on some justice and home affairs questions.[4]

The ENP is also viewed as being supported by the 2003 European Security Strategy, belonging to the EU's second pillar of competence, which aims to "to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations".[5] Within the context of the EU's counter-terrorism strategy, the EU has provided support since 2007 to the Algiers-based African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), which was established in 2004 with the aim of encouraging member states of the African Union (AU) to deepen their cooperation and enhance their capacities to tackle terrorism.[6]

Under the EU's third pillar, a strategy on the external dimensions of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice has also been developed to address a number of challenges, including terrorism. It forms an integral part of the EU's external relations policy.[7] Some of the projects undertaken within the ENP framework, including those in the area of judicial reform and border control management, have been funded by the European Union-Mediterranean Economic and Development Aid (MEDA) Programme and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) with the aim of assisting Maghreb countries in the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1373 (2001), which call on UN member states to undertake measures to improve legal and institutional capacities to combat terrorism nationally, regionally and internationally.[8]

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in the Maghreb

Before looking at counter-terrorism cooperation between the EU and Maghreb neighbourhood members in practice and how it could be improved, it is useful to consider the experience that Maghreb countries have had with terror-

ism and the background to the development of their counter-terrorism policies. Current counter-terrorism policies in the Maghreb were developed in response to the Islamist challenge to the state. Islam had played an important role in channelling resistance initially to colonialism and later to incumbent regimes. Partly as a result of the measures taken to crush Islamist opposition, remaining insurgents with a more global than national vision of change have sought to continue their struggle by becoming Al Qaeda franchises.

Algeria

This is most clearly evidenced in the case of Algeria. Despite having courted Islamist parties as a means of countering Communists and Berberists in the 1980s, the prospect of a landslide victory by the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut – FIS) in the first multi-party elections held in 1992 prompted the regime to cancel the elections, throwing the country into civil war. While many militant Islamist groups laid down their arms in response to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's offer in 1999 of partial amnesty to those militants who renounced violence, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat – GSPC) continued its violent campaign against the government.

Within the GSPC leadership, those with global ambitions gradually gained prominence. The 2003 War in Iraq played an important role in bringing about a shift in the GSPC's strategy, helping to boost the number of recruits and to develop a North African network, as Moroccans, Tunisians, Mauritanians, and Libyans wishing to fight in Iraq passed first through GSPC training camps before going there. The culmination of this strategy came in 2007, when GSPC merged with Al Qaeda and changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique – AQMI). Reflecting the merger with Al Qaeda, foreign nationals and companies, as well as France became targets of AQMI, along with the Algerian authorities. Suicide attacks, previously unknown in Algeria, also became part of the organization's new tactical repertoire.

As a result of reduced operational space within Algerian territory, due to the government's counter-terrorism strategy comprising a strong military dimension, as well as a lack of support among the local population, AQMI has been expanding its activities beyond Algeria into neighbouring Libya, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The intertwined nature of terrorist and criminal networks in Southern Algeria and the neighbouring Sahel pose a particular challenge to the countries concerned, many of which experience difficulties in controlling the entirety of their territories. However, Algerian authorities have recently increased the number of troops along the country's Southern border, as well as military operations against AQMI. Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger have also agreed to create a 75,000 strong security force with which to police the Sahara-Sahel region against terrorist and trans-border criminal networks.

Map 2: AQMI Operational Zone

Tunisia

In Tunisia, current counter-terrorism practices also date back to the late 1980s when a number of tourist destinations were targeted by the Islamic Tendency Movement (Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique – MTI). Before this time, the MTI had largely focused on moral questions presenting itself as a religious association with a reformist agenda and had been tolerated by the government. However, the growth of Islamist movements and the rise of extremism in the early-to-mid-1980s led to a ban on fundamentalist groups and a crackdown on opposition groups, under the then Interior Minister Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

As President, Ben Ali adopted a less hard-line policy toward Islamism, which included the reinstatement of Islam as the religion of Tunisia and the adoption of a more conciliatory approach toward moderate Islamism (although strict legal measures against extremist activities carried out in the name of Islam also existed). Amnesty was also granted to imprisoned MTI members. The movement and its Secretary-General were included in the High Islamic Council, created by the government to address religious matters, and the MTI was also included in the National Pact, which brought together all political parties to engage in dialogue and draft rules of political participation. Despite these measures, the Ben Ali government launched another offensive against Islamists following the election of An-Nahda candidates in April 1989.[9] These measures included the banning of "Middle Eastern" clothing, altering the curriculum of Islamic subjects, closing mosques after prayer and installing government-appointed imams.[10] In addition to the effort to crush organizations engaged in terrorist activities and to contain Islamism, Ben Ali also sought to remove the socio-economic causes of radicalization, reducing poverty and infant mortality, increasing home ownership, and improving childhood education.

The regime's effort to reduce terrorist activity within Tunisia is perceived by the United States as having been generally successful.[11] However, Tunisian nationals have continually been involved in terrorist activities abroad, notably in Europe, Algeria, and Iraq. Also, as in the Algerian case, the success of the Tunisian counter-terrorism strategy has led the Tunisian Combatant Group, founded in 2000, to become linked to Al Qaeda and other extremist groups in Europe. Despite the strides made in reducing terrorist ac-

tivities on Tunisian soil, the accompanying lack of political reform and civil liberties also served to exacerbate repression and corruption within the country, generating popular anger and resentment towards the Ben Ali regime.

Morocco

Morocco, too, has pursued a multi-faceted counter-terrorism policy following the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings, which were believed to have been carried out by members of the Moroccan Islamic Combat Group (*Groupe Islamiste combattant Marocain* – GICM). The strategy comprises legal, social, religious, and military dimensions. Soon after the 16 May 2003 bombings, an anti-terrorism law was passed. A National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) was also launched in an effort to eradicate city slums and improve living conditions for under-privileged sectors of society, whose young men are the target of Islamist extremists seeking to attract new recruits. The Kingdom has also engaged in efforts to rehabilitate jailed Islamists, inspired by Saudi and Egyptian rehabilitation programmes.

Religious reforms have comprised improvements in education and the inclusion of women in the religious establishment, stricter academic requirements for imams and preachers, as well as the creation of several television and satellite stations that promote an official version of Islam. Sufism has been encouraged, particularly those forms of Sufism that are compatible with the Sunni Maliki tradition in Morocco. As part of the state's effort to assert its monopoly on religion, Wahhabi and Salafi religious schools have been closed down.[12]

In addition to legal, social, and religious counter-terrorism measures, specialized army units focused on curtailing illegal immigration, terrorism, and drug-smuggling, which are often intertwined in Morocco (as in Algeria), have also been created. The establishment of these units, in conjunction with increased regional cooperation is believed to have played a significant role in limiting AQMI operations on Moroccan territory. Cooperation between Algeria and Morocco, nevertheless, remains problematic due to the Western Sahara question.

On the whole, the Moroccan counter-terrorism policy is viewed as having limited terrorist activities on Moroccan soil. Yet, a number of shortcomings are perceptible, notably in relation to human rights, the rule of law, transparency and accountability. Moreover, while there may have been a need for reform of the religious establishment, the crackdown on Sunni fundamentalism, which does not necessarily equate with violent extremism, and the promotion of officially "sanctioned" forms of Islam pose a problem in relation to people's right to religious freedom.[13] In addition, GICM members have been active outside Morocco, including in the 2004 Madrid train bombing. Networks affiliated to AQMI have also been apprehended for attempting to smuggle drugs through Morocco and Moroccans have transited through AQMI camps in Algeria on their way to Iraq.[14]

EU-Maghreb Counter-Terrorism Cooperation – From a Limited to a Holistic Approach

Notwithstanding the considerable efforts made by Maghreb countries to tackle terrorism, a number of groups thus remain active, most conspicuously AQMI, which are often intertwined with transnational criminal networks operating not only in the Maghreb but also in the neighbouring Sahel. Despite this considerable source of instability and the EU's concern with the potential spill-over of terrorism from the Maghreb to the EU, cooperation between the Union and Maghreb countries in the field of counter-terrorism has been less significant and comprehensive than one might expect. Cooperation has tended to be limited to projects supporting reform of the judiciary, police, and prison systems, as well as improving border management organization. The EU has made surprisingly little effort to try to address the root causes of terrorist activities in the Maghreb.

For example, counter-terrorism cooperation with Algeria has focused on the reform of the justice system, modernization of policing, and increasing international cooperation in the domain of law enforcement. Given that Algeria is considered a transit country for migration to the EU, the Commission has also sought to strengthen Algeria's management of border controls. In doing so, the Commission and EU member states have also supported the ACSRT, in which Algeria has an important role to play in encouraging the much-needed counter-terrorism cooperation between states in the region. Cooperation between the EU and Algeria in the field of counter-terrorism has, thus, been fairly restricted. However, projects that have been undertaken have done little to encourage the Algerian authorities to address the root causes of radicalization. Similarly, the EU has sought to support Tunisia's efforts to reform and modernize the judicial, prison and policing systems, as well as build organizational and institutional capacities with which to improve border surveillance. Tunisia's Action Plan also commits it to implementing UNSC resolutions and other conventions on fighting terrorism, as well as to implement legislation aimed at curtailing the financing of terrorism.[15] Morocco's Action Plan too includes commitments to implementing the legal measures aimed at countering terrorism, improving border control capacities, creating special training opportunities in counter-terrorism, promoting cooperation between the judicial and police forces on counter-terrorism, as well as strengthening cooperation on tackling the financing of terrorism, and cooperating on maritime security with an aim to prevent terrorist activities.[16] These measures are certainly valuable in terms of supporting the efforts of Maghreb countries to reduce the operational space of terrorist organizations within their territories and to meet international legal obligations in relation to tackling terrorism.

Nevertheless, there has been little effort to address the root causes of terrorism and to develop a more holistic approach to counter-terrorism cooperation within the context of the ENP. In Algeria and Tunisia in particular, frustration with the lack of opportunities for political participation and the removal of serious opposition to the government

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played a significant role in causing some sections of society to support movements that seek to overthrow incumbent regimes, if need be by violent means. While political liberalization could play a role in limiting radicalization, the Algerian experience and fear of potential electoral victories by Islamist parties has meant that the EU has preferred to support gradual political overtures and the dissemination of democratic values. The apparent political stability that this seemed to offer was seen as a vehicle for security.[17] Yet, as the Algerian experience demonstrates, this is a false assumption; it was the intervention of the Army and the cancellation of elections in order to prevent a landslide victory of the FIS in Algeria that generated the decent into civil war and terrorist acts targeting the Algerian authorities, at least in the first instance. Indeed, limiting political opposition from Islamist parties may only serve to increase radicalization and terrorism in situations where the legitimacy of the incumbent regime is in question. Moreover, support for existing regimes as a vector of security has not been conducive to encouraging less coercive responses to the threat of terrorism in Maghreb countries, where some aspects of counter-terrorism policies have clearly violated civil liberties and human rights while demonstrating a lack of respect for the rule of law. The temptation to use the pretext of counter-terrorism to crack down on dissent remains a risk in the Maghreb.

The growth in popularity of Islamist parties in the late 1980s was in large a part a response not only to limited political reform, but also to harsh socio-economic realities that people faced and the failure of post-independence regimes to deliver on their promises. Not only did this situation generate increased demands for political liberalization, but also socio-economic malaise, and accompanying frustrations, made particularly acute against the backdrop of a bulging youth population in the countries concerned. Political and socio-economic disenfranchisement may not be the primary factor contributing to radicalization of leaders within Al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations in the Maghreb, many of whom are "Afghan" veterans with a global vision of change, or even of "followers". Yet, radicalization among young recruits may be facilitated by harsh socio-economic conditions. Indeed, radicalization tends to take place in urban areas characterized by poor socio-economic conditions that generate a sense of desperation as well as alienation from the state. This was a major factor prompting the Moroccan authorities to focus on eradicating inner-city slums as part of their counter-terrorism strategy. Here, the EU could contribute to reducing the risk of radicalization by better allocating resources towards projects aimed at generating growth, creating jobs, and improving housing. The EU should also encourage greater integration between the Maghreb countries, as well as support the creation of multilateral mechanisms designed to facilitate greater regional cooperation in a variety of sectors. While the Union for the Mediterranean and the ENP promote economic integration through the liberalization of trade between southern Mediterranean countries, the level of intra-regional trade remains one of the lowest in the world.[18] Improving the prospects of young people through education is also an area in which the EU could assist Maghreb countries in their efforts to reduce economic and social exclusion. While Tunisia has made tremendous strides in improving education as part of Ben Ali's multifaceted counter-terrorism strategy, this is not mirrored everywhere else in the Maghreb.

A Revised Approach for a Changing Neighbourhood

On a positive note, the Arab revolts have prompted a review of the ENP. A joint communication was issued in May 2011 by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Affairs and the Commission – "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy" – which states that EU support will be adapted according to progress on political reforms and efforts to build, though qualifying this by saying that no set definition of political reforms can be applied to the countries concerned. It also expresses a commitment to supporting the growth of civil society in neighbourhood countries, and to supporting sustainable economic and social policies. It aims to facilitate the mobility of students and workers to the EU, as well as to work with southern partners to generate jobs and inclusive economic development.[19] The EU recognizes that in light of the limited success that EU support for political reforms has had in the past, there is a need for more tailored assistance, this being especially important given the different rates of reform and varying types of political system in the Maghreb. The joint communication is particularly welcome, since counter-terrorism measures have, at times, been used to justify limiting the extent to which political opposition is allowed to operate and, thus, the prospects of a peaceful transition of power. Along with political freedoms, civil liberties have been a casualty in the fight against terrorism, reducing the avenues through which to express commitment to a particular cause, be it religious, social or political, through non-violent means.[20]

Greater support of political and social reforms in Maghreb countries is certainly a means by which the EU can help to reduce radicalization of sections of society and ought to be viewed as contributing to the EU's counter-terrorism efforts and long-term stability in the Maghreb. Moreover, the Lisbon Treaty allows the EU to strengthen its engagement with its neighbours across a wider range of areas and in a more integrated way. Yet, the EU needs to conceive of counter-terrorism in a more comprehensive manner and to better assist Maghreb countries in their efforts to address the root causes of radicalization and terrorism. As the political environment in the Maghreb evolves and greater pluralism emerges, part of a more holistic approach to counter-terrorism will also include the development of a coherent strategy with which to engage political Islam. Islamist parties constitute some of the most organized political forces in North Africa and are likely to form an important part of the political fabric of countries in the Maghreb, as demonstrated by An-Nahda's electoral victory in Tunisia's first post-revolution elections held in October 2011. Exclusion of Islamist parties from participating in the electoral process is not a viable option. Above all, the EU should not miss this opportunity to broaden significantly its approach to counter-terrorism cooperation with Maghreb countries as part of a revised ENP.

Endnotes

1. The first pillar of the EU was devoted to economic, social and environmental policies, the second pillar to the common foreign and security policy and the third pillar to justice and home affairs. The three-pillar structure was abolished when the Lisbon Treaty came into force on 1 December 2009.
2. Communication from the Commission to the Council on the Commission Proposals for Action Plans under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Brussels, 9 December 2004, COM(2004)795-final, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/action_plans/communication_commission_enp_action_plans.pdf, accessed 14 June 2011, p. 2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. "Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements", European Commission Website, http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/external_relations/relations_with_third_countries/mediterranean_partner_countries/r14104_en.htm, accessed 14 June 2011.
5. "A Secure Europe in a Better World", European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf, accessed 14 June 2011, p. 8.
6. Council Joint Action 2007/501/CFSP of 16 July 2007 on Cooperation with the African Centre for Study and Research on Terrorism in the Framework of the Implementation of the European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy.
7. "External Dimension of the Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice", Commission Communication: A Strategy on the External Dimensions of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, COM(2005)491-final, http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/justice_freedom_security/fight_against_terrorism/l16014_en.htm, accessed 14 June 2011.
8. See P. Wennerholm, E. Brattberg, and M. Rhinard, "The EU as a Counter-terrorism Actor Abroad: Finding Opportunities, Overcoming Constraints", *EPC Issue Paper* No. 6, Brussels, September 2010, p. 12.
9. The An-Nahda candidates ran independently after An-Nahda's application to register as a political party was denied.
10. A. Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism", *ISS Monograph* No. 144, June 2008, pp. 113-16.
11. See US Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2008 – Tunisia, Washington, DC, 30 April 2009, http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2008/122433.htm, accessed 4 November 2011.
12. See J. Kalpakian, "Current Moroccan Anti-Terrorism Policy (ARI)", Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid, ARI 89/2011, 13 May 2011, pp. 1-5.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-5.
14. A. Arieff, "Morocco – Current Issues", Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 11 July 2011, pp. 12-13.
15. European Commission, "EU/Tunisia Action Plan", http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/action_plans/tunisia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf, accessed 29 August 2011.
16. European Commission, "EU/Morocco Action Plan", http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/march/tradoc_127912.pdf, accessed 31 August 2011.
17. S. Haddadi, "Political Securitisation and Democratisation in the Maghreb: Ambiguous Discourses and Fine-Tuning Practices for a Security Partnership", Institute of European Studies Paper, Berkeley, CA, 2004, p. 6.
18. "Euromed", European Commission website, http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/regions/euromed/index_en.htm, accessed 1 November 2011.
19. Joint Communication by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy", Brussels, 25 May 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf, accessed 31 August 2011.
20. Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb", p. 199.

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