

New Security Challenges in North Africa after the “Arab Spring”

by *Laurence Aïda Ammour*

Key Points

- *By carrying out a historic and strategic rupture in the stability of former authoritarian regimes, the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have reintroduced the social dimension of regime change and the centre-periphery problem at a local, national, regional and international scale.*
 - *The security challenges as a result of the “Arab Spring” in the North African/Sahel region have generated two types of conflicts: the renewal of frozen and forgotten conflicts by communities that have rejected conventional government, and the increasing criminalisation of grey zones which challenge the authority of states.*
 - *Within a context of severe economic hardships, the security challenges deriving from these political or social changes have amplified and sharpened pre-existing transnational threats, blurred the spatial and temporal boundaries of transitions and complicated the process of stabilisation, nationally and regionally.*
 - *The opening of a new front of instability in Libya encourages the emergence of criminality and has allowed local non-state actors – traffickers, local intermediaries, smugglers, militias, loyalists, and the Arab-African terrorist community – to reinforce their capabilities and their connections.*
 - *The connection between domestic crises and strategic challenges has resulted in an expansion of a sphere of insecurity from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Guinea. The resurgence of the centre-periphery problem as a result of the “Arab Spring” remains at the heart of the transitional process and the construction institutional frameworks.*
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The popular uprisings that have taken place in North African countries signal the end of a long autocratic winter which precipitated the fall of despots who had ruled through coercion, domestic surveillance, corruption and the predation of wealth. The overthrow of the former regimes has, at the same time, represented a historic rupture in authoritarian stability and a strategic surprise for both local actors and outside observers.

By breaking with the logic of former political, economic and social systems, these revolutions mark the advent of a new order and illustrate the gap between temporalities and sociological spaces at the origin of key developments:

- An intergenerational polarisation forcing youth to confront the stagnation of governments and contest the authority and the legitimacy of an aging political class;
- A disparity between outdated rhetoric (pan-Arabism, nationalism, socialism) and citizens’ aspirations to become actors in forming dramatic collective action independent of the political institution; and
- An increasing gap between central political elites and an ever more neglected and marginalised periphery.

We have also witnessed a paradigm shift on different levels: local, within the political decision-making processes

where the rationales for power are transitioning; national, with a blurring of hierarchies between urban centres and rural areas; sub-regional, with contestation among displaced communities within trans-border areas; and regional, with the uprisings having an impact on neighbouring states.

The rise to power of Islamist parties through the ballot box is perceived by Western states as a threat to their national interests, signalling the emergence of a new era of intra-regional and international relations that will require a renegotiation of relations between states to the north and to the south of the Mediterranean.

At the periphery of national territories, along border areas, old conflicts have resurfaced through the remobilization of migrant populations wishing to be emancipated and fully included in the political process. These crisis areas have long solidified struggles for influence between North African states to their respective Southern African states or to their neighbours, replicating the traditional inequality in North-South relations.

Within a geopolitical context wherein geographic and political distance with capitals has been historically

consistent, trans-border regions have always been torn between a Saharan identity, encouraged by Libya, and alternative Arab, Mediterranean and African identities envisaged.

Today, the new front of instability, a result of the Libyan crisis, has produced regional repercussions which foreign intervention forces did not predict.¹ The renewal of several sources of conflict in the transitional areas, producing a rupture in the geostrategic equilibrium, has had two major effects: on the one hand, the return of conflictuality has allowed affected communities to challenge the ideological frameworks within which they have been engaged; on the other hand, a sphere of insecurity has expanded to include the whole of North Africa and the Sahel (and up to West Africa), where criminal and terrorist activities can prosper.

Multiple Sources of Tension

The Tuareg were among the first to be subjected to the competing dynamics of the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan African countries. Their uprising began in Mali in January 2012 and differs from previous rebellions because of its intensity, scope, manpower (approximately 1,000 combatants) and materiel (Libyan arms). It was in October 2011 that several political factions, including Tuareg groups from Libya, fused to create the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), with two objectives: the self-determination of the region and the elimination of drug traffickers and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) fighters.

The MNLA was supported by General Ali Kanna, the former head of a contingent of Tuareg in the Libyan Army of Muammar Qaddafi, until it underwent internal struggles for leadership between the Ifogha and Chamanamasse on one side, and the Imghad, commanded by Colonel El Hadj Gamou – who had organised the ceremonious return of Tuareg refugees to Libya – on the other. Beginning on 17 January 2012, the border regions were of crucial importance, and an increasing number of administrative entities were set-up by the rebels. Between 18 and 26 January the assaults on the cities of Menaka, Kidal, Lere, Anderamboukane and Aguelhok saw intensification in combat with the regular army. Extrajudicial killings in Aguelhok of nearly 100 Malian soldiers was attributable to the group Ansar al-Din, an Islamist wing commanded by Iyad Ag Ghaly (a relative of AQIM Emir Abdelkrim Targui).

On 8 February 2012, Tinzaouatine, at the Algerian border, fell into the hands of the rebels, thus bringing about the gradual decline of the city of Kidal, further south, where the Malian army was under a state of siege. Knowing that they would be able to rely on their material and operational capabilities, certain factions of the Tuareg rejected the appeal for dialogue issued by the President of Mali. A dignified exit from the crisis for all parties will be crucial for the stability of Mali (and the next election) and its territorial integrity.

The containment of the conflict of the Western Sahara in a way that prevents a relapse into conflict in the broader Maghreb has contributed to freeze the issue. The Polisario, increasingly illegitimate, has been a growing object of contestation for the Saharan youth in the camps of Tindouf in Algeria. After the defection and the return of a large number of notable Sahrawis to Morocco and Northern Mauritania, an internal schism in 2004 has degraded the group's monopoly on representation. The principal reason for dissent is the issue of rights and living conditions for refugees, instrumentalised by the current leadership.²

The political challenge posed by the Western Saharan region has been exacerbated by security issues related to the participation of members of the organisation in drugs and arms trafficking, and kidnapping, and to the fact that the Polisario camps have become recruitment sites for AQIM. Arrest in Mali and Mauritania in December 2010 of several senior leaders of the Polisario implicated in a large drug trafficking network; the dismantling a month later of a terrorist cell of 27 people and the seizure of a cache of Russian weapons by Moroccan security services near Amghala, within the "buffer zone"; and the abduction of three humanitarian workers in Rabouni (Tindouf) in December 2011 suggest complicity within the camps.

Elsewhere, the fixation on grievances of the Sinai highlights the centrifugal potential of the "Arab Spring".

The Bedouins of the desert peninsula of the Sinai have never felt themselves to be Egyptians. During the 1990s, the tribe of Tarabin that migrated to Gaza and into the Israeli Negev has become a pillar in human trafficking. For the Bedouins, Egypt has always been considered a colonial power that plunders its resources. Also, the region has witnessed a series of violent episodes against the state symbols and repression typical of this type of conflict.

Since the fall of the Raïs, Egypt has gone through a period of expansion of criminal activities and terrorist adherents to the Salafist doctrine.³ One victim of the debacle in Cairo has been the gas pipeline carrying Egyptian gas to Israel and Jordan which has suffered five sabotages in six months, reducing its supply to 80 percent.

The attacks perpetrated in August 2011 that caused eight deaths in southern Israel demonstrated that Egypt does not control the whole of its territory. On 31 January 2012, the group Al Tawhid wal Jihad took hostage 25 Chinese workers at a cement factory, offering their release in exchange for the freeing of five individuals accused of attacks against tourist sites in 2004 and 2006. Beginning in February 2012, 19 police officers were abducted after the death of a Bedouin in an exchange of gunfire with the police. On 3 February, two American tourists and their Egyptian guide were abducted on the road to the Sainte-Catherine Monastery. Lastly, with the trade of arms from Libyan stockpiles, old Qassam rockets manufactured

"The rise to power of Islamist parties will require a renegotiation of relations between states to the north and to the south of the Mediterranean"

1 Report of the assessment mission on the impact of Libyan crisis on the Sahel region (7-23 Dec. 2001), UN Security Council, S/2012/42, 18 Jan. 2012.

2 L. Aida Ammour, "The Frozen Conflict of Western Sahara: Who Benefits?", Research Paper No. 30, NATO Defense College, Rome, Nov. 2006.

3 On 20 Dec. 2011, Ayman al Zawahiri announced the creation of the group *Ansar al Jihad*, responsible for attacks on the Egyptian military.

locally were replaced by more sophisticated weapons that were easily smuggled through Egypt, across the Sinai and ended up in the hands of Hamas within the Gaza Strip.⁴

Similarly to the Libyan Berbers, long oppressed by the Gaddafi regime, the Toubou (estimated to be about 800,000) want to gain from the new situation by obtaining official recognition of their language, rights and political influence through representation in one of the three key ministries – the Oil Ministry, the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of the Interior – and for the reunification of southern Libya into one large region to be administered by local officials. Practicing an ambivalent policy towards them, Qaddafi entrusted the Toubou with the management of border regions in exchange for a monopoly in the trafficking of contraband across the border. Close to the oil wells and water aquifers, the Toubou waited until the regime was sufficiently weak before openly joining the rebellion. Straddling southern Libya, northern Chad and eastern Niger around the Tibesti mountains, which constitutes their historical area, the Toubou agreed to negotiate their strategic position.

Criminality and the Libyan Crisis

Without political or economic opportunities, particularly for the youth, the sub-Saharan regions have become impoverished, ungoverned zones where illegal trafficking has prospered: Latin-American cocaine in transit to Europe, arms trafficking, cigarettes and consumer goods made profitable by the price disparity over borders; vehicle trafficking of cars stolen in Europe and sold across all the coastal states; and trafficking of migrant workers illegally en route to the Gulf countries and Europe. Traffickers, smugglers and kidnappers have criminalised their actions. The divide between terrorism and criminal practice is therefore becoming thinner and thinner as these activities are now reliant one upon the other: the collaboration between drug traffickers and members of AQIM involves the collection of illegal taxes on convoys. This is why we are witnessing an increase in kidnappings conducted by local intermediaries under the direction of AQIM emirs, attracted by the opportunity for immediate financial gain.

The Libyan war has also produced an influx of large numbers of heavy weapons, which, combined with the porosity of the border, has introduced a new threat for Libya and for the stability of the region (see table).⁵ The numerous unsupervised weapons stockpiles are accessible to all sorts of profiteers: Kalashnikov assault rifles, rockets, mines, artillery shells, chemical weapons, SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles (of which Libya possesses 20,000 units) and SA-24 Russian-issued missiles with the capability of downing fighter planes.⁶

These stockpiles have also benefited some of the rebel factions that have not recognised the authority of the National Transition Council (NTC). The implication

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of militiamen inflicting widespread use of torture and atrocities against specific populations is a disturbing development in the Libyan Revolution.⁷ The armed clashes between rival militias in Bani Walid at the end of January 2012 confirmed that violence has become commonplace in a situation similar to that of Iraq. As the rebellion began to spread toward Tripoli, many heavily-armed Qaddafi loyalists, equipped with the spoils of war, took refuge in sub-regional countries. Their presence remains a challenge to state authority, serving as a junction between loyalists and heads of the old regime that could eventually compromise the already difficult process of stabilisation and reconciliation and offer to the dissidents the possibility of expanding their influence beyond Libya’s borders.

The Increasing Power of Terrorist Networks

The “Arab Spring” has also allowed local groups of terrorists to gain ideological influence and material strength, and for Al Qaeda to envisage their wider establishment on the African continent. The collapse of Libyan security and the setbacks for Al Qaeda in Asia are the two factors conducive to a new central role of the Maghreb, the Sahel and West Africa as parts of the continental expansion of Jihadism, as well as the relocation of Al Qaeda networks.



The continental extension of Jihadism

Without for the moment having the capacity to synchronise their attacks beyond each individual groups’ area of influence, the terrorist community seems to be extending into Eastern and Western Africa, in the form of connections with AQIM in the Sahel, Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in Somalia.⁸

In 2006, members of Boko Haram were being trained in Algeria within the ranks of AQIM by Algerian operator Khaled Bernaoui. Similarly, the mastermind of the attack against the United Nations office in Abuja in August 2011, Mamman Nour, was trained by Al Shabaab in Somalia and eventually pledged his allegiance to Ayman Al Zawahiri. On 2 October 2010, Boko Haram called on Nigerians to carry out a Jihad against the state in support of AQIM, and in February 2012, seven militants en route to Mali were arrested in Niger for coordinating with members of AQIM.

4 M. Sabry, “Arms Smuggling Explodes across Egypt-Libya Border”, McClatchy Washington Bureau, 8 Sept. 2011.

5 According to *The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA)*, 125,000 Libyan civilians have been armed.

6 A. Sanders, *Unsecured Libyan Weapons: Regional Impact and Possible Threats*, Civil-Military Fusion Centre, Jan. 2012.

7 A former Libyan diplomat died from torture in February, at least 12 persons detained by the militias were killed between Sept. 2011 and Feb. 2012, and the bodies of 65 people were discovered in Oct. 2011 in a hotel in Sirte serving as the base of operations for Misrata. See the report by Amnesty International, *Militias Threaten Hopes for New Libya*, Feb. 2012.

8 T. Shanker and E. Schmitt, “Three Terrorist Groups in Africa Pose Threat to US, American Commander Says”, *The New York Times*, 14 Sept. 2011.

According to the African Union, Boko Haram is expanding its activities into Central Africa – through Chadian mercenaries trained in Malian AQIM camps – and could spread its Islamic radicalism into North Cameroon and Chad.

AQIM has not yet pledged allegiance to the new leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri, because it is undergoing contestation for leadership among several Sahel emirs. The *communiqué* of Mokhtar Belmokhtar on 11 November, 2011 claiming to have acquired weapons from Libya, has been interpreted as an indicator of his rivalry with Abdelhamid Abou Zeyid. Arguably, Belmokhtar aimed not only at proclaiming the strengthening of his military capabilities, but also to demonstrate to his adversary his newfound superior operational capacity.

The relocation of Al Qaeda networks in Africa

Al Qaeda is searching for vulnerabilities to exploit in the North African and Sahel states. The losses incurred during the spring of 2011⁹ resulted in an erosion of progress to the Asiatic front of Jihad. The “Arab Spring” has constituted a reversal, as it has demonstrated that change can occur in Al Qaeda’s absence. For its survival and the maintenance of its relevance, the organisation now needs newly-increased visibility; this is why it has attempted to become an integral part of the current uprisings. The transfer to Libya of several of the group’s important figures attests to an ongoing rebalancing of the front of Jihad into the Maghreb and the Sahel, and probably toward West Africa through local Arab-African groups.¹⁰

Conclusions

The Libyan crisis has opened a wide range of opportunities to profit from the security and institutional vacuum. The birth of the Movement for Unification and Jihad in West

9 Bin Laden in May 2011 in Habottabad, Abou Hafz al-Shahri in September 2011 in Waziristan, Badar Mansour in Pakistan on 8 Feb. 2012 and Tariq al Dahab in Yemen on 20 Feb. 2012.

10 One militant, formerly detained in Great Britain, was sent in May to Libya by Al Zawahiri, who had already recruited 200 men from the east of the country. Another militant was arrested in the region between Pakistan and Afghanistan while attempting to join forces in Libya. See J. Burke, “Al Qaeda Leadership Almost Wiped Out in Pakistan, British Officials Believe”, *The Guardian*, 25 Dec. 2011.

Africa, which has claimed responsibility for the abduction of three European humanitarian workers in the Rabouni refugee camp, demonstrates the diversification of active cells in the region. The escape of Islamic extremists from Egyptian prisons and the freeing of Libyan Islamists foreshadowed the redevelopment of radical movements seeking to influence forthcoming political developments.

Considering the developments of internal crises and strategic issues, centre-periphery problems will be at the heart of future developments in Libya, as in other countries. As emphasized by Pack and Barfi, “Libya is not prepared for the shock that the periphery will impose on the centre. Forty-two years of the Qaddafi regime has deprived the country of all institutions for mediation [...]. The centre requires new connections at the local level and robust institutions to be put in place [...]. Rebuilding the link between the periphery and the centre has become the number one priority.”¹¹ That is precisely what appears to be emerging if one notes the formation of more than 40 parties and more than 200 civil society organisations, within which there are representatives from the Amazigh, the Toubou and the Tuareg running for election in the Constituent Assembly in the summer of 2012.

Finally, at the regional level, the expansion of vulnerable areas and the increasing sources of tension and instability along the shoreline of the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Guinea, either by political protest, or by the intensification of criminal activities and the resurgence of terrorist networks, all represent problems stemming from the “Arab Spring”. The accumulation of persistent, multifaceted threats contributes to the fragility of the economy, and is a contributing factor to the deterioration of the security situation and the *sine die* prolongation of political transitions.

March 2012

11 J. Pack and B. Barfi, “In War’s Wake: The Struggle for Post-Qadhafi Libya”, *Policy Focus* No.118, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Feb. 2012.

Table: Incidents related to the proliferation of arms deriving from Libyan stockpiles

Date	Location	Incident
12/06/11	Nigerian-Libyan border	640 kg of explosive detonators seized
26/08/11	US Department of State Press Secretariat	Localisation of several stocking chemical weapons sites, among which Yellowcake
18/09/11	Libya	Disappearance of 500 missiles capable of shooting down a fighter plane at an altitude of over 11,000 feet during the looting of an arsenal
21/09/11	Tunisia Bir Znigra, 20 km from the Algerian border	Clashes between the Tunisian army and an unidentified armed group
22/09/11	Libya, Jofra	Discovery of a rebel stockpile of chemical weapons
06/11/11	Nigerian-Libyan border	The Nigerian security forces destroyed a convoy of weapons coming from Libya. The implicated armed men were majority Tuareg Malians from Libya en route to Niger
11/12/11	Tripoli	Out of 20,000 portable anti-air missiles (Man-Portable Air Defense System, or MANPADS), 5,000 have been destroyed by teams of contractors
09/02/12	Tunisia Bir Ali near Sfax	Clashes between the Tunisian military and members of an arms trafficking network (20 people implicated)
20/02/12	Algeria In Amenas, 50 km from the Libyan border	Discovery by the Algerian army of a cache of Libyan missiles buried in the desert: 15 SA-24 missiles, 28 SA-7 missiles and ammunition
21/02/12	Tunisia Ras Jedir Border post	Tunisian customs seized two trucks from Libya transporting 80 tons of ammonium nitrate
22/02/12	Tunisia	Dismantling of an Al Qaeda cell that planned the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Tunisia: 12 people arrested
22/02/12	Algeria	Algerian security services investigate three armed Libyans, who had penetrated Algerian territory for their membership in AQIM

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NB: This article expresses only the opinions of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the GCSP. This Policy Paper is the English version of L. Aïda Ammour, "Nouveaux défis sécuritaires en Afrique du Nord après le 'printemps arabe'", *GCSP Policy Paper* 2012/4. Translated from French by Charles Simpson.

About the author

Laurence Aida Ammour is an Associate Researcher at *Les Afriques dans le Monde* at the Institute of Political Studies, Bordeaux and a consultant in international security for *Géopolisudconsultance*.

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