

**American Policy in the Maghreb: The
Conquest of a New Region?**

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Summary: Numerous analysts in France and in the Maghreb suggest –and worry– that the United States is showing too much interest in the Maghreb and that it wishes to displace French influence in the area. But what is really happening? What are US interests in the Maghreb? Is it true that the United States aspires to eliminate French and European influence in the region? Is it also true that the United States, through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Millennium Challenge Account seeks to undermine the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process)? The principal assumption in this Working Paper is that the United States is undeniably interested in the area, which has become of strategic importance since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. However, although American interest in the Maghreb is real enough, it is less ambitious and less worrying for European interests, France's in particular, than one may be led to believe. In fact, transatlantic relations in the area are more complementary than competitive.¹

Evolution of US Relations with the Maghreb

For many decades, the United States generally paid little attention to the Maghreb, as American policymakers considered it fell within Europe's zone of influence, France's in particular. However, during certain periods the United States showed greater economic and political interest. There have been at least three periods during which the United States paid particular attention to the Maghreb: the Second World War, the decolonisation period in the 1950s and 1960s and, finally, the conflict in the Western Sahara up until the 1980s. During the Cold War, the United States seldom perceived the Maghreb as a regional entity, despite its geopolitical importance, and preferred to maintain bilateral relations with each individual state. The Maghreb as a regional entity was significant only insofar as the events in the area could have negative consequences on the stability of Southern Europe, NATO's southern flank. Throughout the Cold War period, the main objective was curbing communist influence, in particular that of the USSR, and promoting Western interests. In spite of its close relations with Morocco and Tunisia, America relied on France, the old colonial power, to play a dominant role in the region. Therefore, until the beginning of the 1990s, there was no American regional policy in the Maghreb. But since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Eastern bloc, a regional policy, dictated by the global strategy of the unrivalled American unrivalled, was gradually seen to be taking shape. Thus, since the end of the 1990s, American policy has obviously been favourable to the emergence of a regional entity in the Maghreb, an integrated market economy following the concept of 'trading blocks' or trade zones. Even if Libya was initially excluded from this plan, the United States will now undoubtedly consider its eventual integration into the zone which extends from Libya to Morocco and includes the

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¹ See Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Les Etats-Unis dans l'espace euro-méditerranéen: complémentarité, rivalité et réajustement d'influence', *Géoéconomie*, nr 35, autumn 2005, Paris, p. 65-83.

Western Sahara. Normalisation with Libya since December 2003, the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations and the removal of Libya from the list of states that sponsor terrorism on 15 May 2006 makes Libya's eventual integration in the US scheme a matter of time.

During the period which followed the Cold War, America's interest in the Maghreb increased initially because of the inevitable globalization, but even more so because of the events of 9/11. Hence, since the anti-American attacks, the United States has paid even greater attention to this area, especially since many members of the al-Qaeda terrorist network, of so-called 'Arab Afghans,' are of North African origin. By the end of the 1990s, American politicians were lured by a vision of the Maghreb as a promising regional economic entity. However, the neither-peace-nor-war situation in the Western Sahara continues to be a source of tension in the area and remains the principal point of discord between Algeria and Morocco, the two countries that form the backbone of the process of regional integration. Since its beginning in 1975, the Western Sahara conflict aggravated tensions in Algerian-Moroccan relations, thus making their economic integration difficult as long as the dispute between Morocco and the Sahrawi nationalists remains unsolved.²

US Policy Objectives in the Maghreb

The United-States now supports a type of development favouring long-lasting economic growth in the Maghreb. Officially, 'The United States has an interest in the stability and prosperity of North Africa, a region that is undergoing important changes. In particular, we are seeking to strengthen our relations with Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, and to encourage democratic development and economic reform'.³ Thus, before the events of 9/11, the principal American interest was primarily economic, the indicator of this most clearly being the Eizenstat Initiative or Economic Alliance between the United States and North Africa. Launched in 1999, it was later renamed the American Economic Program for North Africa, whose objective was to reinforce the links between the United States and the Maghreb's three central countries in terms of trade and investments. The goal was twofold: 'to better support the trade between our countries, to incite a greater number of American companies to invest in the area, to create well remunerated jobs [...] and also to encourage the reduction of the internal barriers between the North African countries which have slowed down normal flows of trade between these countries.'⁴ This declaration, coupled with the encouragement for Algeria and Morocco to reopen their land border, closed since August 1994, implicitly expresses the support for the three central Maghreb countries to revive the moribund Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), founded in February 1989. The American Economic Program for North Africa –which now forms part of the Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative (BMENA)– is a constant reminder that the United States wish the Maghreb to become an integrated entity, which will eventually extend eastwards. It is quite likely that, in the long run, the United States would wish to see a North African entity, which would include Egypt –which already has the status of observer in the AMU–, a close ally to the United States that would be used as a link in the chain of normalisation of relations with Israel.

For the most part of the 1990s, the prime US concern in the Maghreb was the extremely unstable situation in Algeria. The country's instability was also the main reason why the United States, following the example of other countries, wished to maintain the *status quo* in the conflict over the Western Sahara. The strong emergence of radical Islamism, the

² Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Algerian-Moroccan Relations and their Impact on Maghrebi Integration', *Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 5, nr 3, autumn 2001, p. 43-74.

³ *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age*, The White House, Washington DC, December 2000. Available at: http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/nss/nss_dec2000_contents.htm.

⁴ Stuart E. Eizenstat, Undersecretary for Economic, Business, and Agricultural Affairs. Third Annual Les Aspin Memorial Lecture, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, 8 March 1999.

chaos envisaged by analysts in the event of an Islamist triumph through the ballot box, as well as the unforeseen consequences of the armed uprising, all reinforced the strategic importance of Morocco. In the eyes of Americans and many Europeans, in particular the French, Morocco was perceived until the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003 as a stronghold because of its alleged internal stability and its geographical situation; most had considered Morocco a bulwark against radical Islamism. The fear of the United States and also of Europe was that the destabilisation of Algeria or Morocco might have unforeseen effects, with terrible consequences for Europe. Hence, a weakened Moroccan government would make possible the rise of radical *jihadi* Islamism within the country, which would then provoke a massive emigration towards Europe. During the Algerian crisis, particularly in the period 1992-97, when terrorism devastated the country, it is thought that around half a million highly-educated Algerians (software engineers, doctors, educators, etc) fled towards Europe and North America. Undoubtedly, the crisis in Algeria is the major event in the 1990s that encouraged the United States to pay much closer attention to the Maghreb.

Morocco: America's Pillar in the Maghreb

Morocco continues to be the pillar of the American presence for US policy in the Maghreb and the Middle East, particularly for the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea and for the peace process in the Near East. With the end of the Cold War, American economic and military assistance had considerably decreased due to congressional budget restrictions. However, Morocco managed to regain shortly afterwards its position as an important ally for several reasons. The first reason was Moroccan support for the Gulf war in 1991, when it sent 2,000 Moroccan troops to Saudi Arabia. The second reason, as already mentioned, was the instability in Algeria. At a time when the Algerian government was fighting for survival and when the spectre of a radical Islamist revolution was hovering over North Africa, Morocco took on its role as a bulwark against anti-Western extremist forces. Thus, the country once again played the role of protector of Western values against 'Islamist obscurantism' after having fulfilled the function of being a bulwark against Communism during the Cold War. King Hassan II's capacity to repress radical Islamist movements in his country enabled him to become a particularly useful agent against these forces. Hassan II, under his title of 'Commander of the Faithful', and accepted as such by part of Morocco's population, was able to encourage a certain stability owing to his ability to institutionalise Islamism, and also to his tolerance towards some of the minority groups by allowing them to be active within the limits which he himself set. Interestingly, it is this aspect which was used in 1994 as a model by American officials, such as the then Assistant Secretary of State, Robert Pelletreau, to negotiate a compromise between the Algerian government and 'moderate' Islamists.⁵ The third reason for America's support for Morocco is perhaps related to the acceleration of the economic reforms and the liberalisation of the market, which included large scale privatisations, an approach which coincides with one of America's ideological objectives. Also significant is the support for Morocco within the US Congress, mainly because it is regarded as less hostile towards Israel. In spite of human rights violations, the United States did not change its policy towards Morocco. Thus, the George W. Bush Administration strengthened economic and military cooperation, especially in the fight against terrorism. For the United States, Morocco also distinguishes itself as a model of democracy within the Arab world. The former American ambassador to Morocco Edward Gabriel said in November 2000 that 'with regard to Morocco, we're very excited about its democratic experiment. We in the US State Department believe that Morocco probably is the best democratic experiment that currently is going on in the Middle East'.⁶ In November 2003, President Bush announced that the United States would take many

⁵ Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Algeria and US Interests: Containing Radical Islamism and Promoting Democracy', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 9, nr 1, March 2002, p. 64-81.

⁶ Available at: <http://usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/peace/archives/2000/november/me1117a.html>.

important measures to reinforce relations with Morocco, in particular the development of economic and military cooperation, as well as measures to combat terrorism. A year later, the United States granted Morocco the status of 'major non-NATO ally'.⁷

Since its independence in 1956, Morocco has received more American financial assistance than any other Arab country except Egypt. From 1975 onwards, when the conflict in the Western Sahara began, Morocco had obtained more than a fifth of total American aid to Africa, with more than US\$1 billion in military aid alone. In 2002, Morocco received 72% of the total American assistance to the three central Maghreb countries. In 2005, aid accounted for 81.8%, nearly US\$58 million.⁸ Military aid has now risen to US\$20 million in order to help Morocco not only to stop clandestine immigration but also, and above all, to be able to protect its borders and to continue the fight against terrorism. More importantly, in 2004 the United States and Morocco signed a bilateral free trade agreement, which entered into effect in January 2006. It is however noteworthy that, in spite of its proven support for Morocco, Washington refuses to recognise Morocco's sovereignty in the dispute over Western Sahara. Indeed, the US made it clear that the trade agreement with Morocco did not apply to the Western Sahara, in order to avoid conflict with American congressmen who are in favour of the holding of a referendum in the disputed territory, but also to avoid hostility with Algeria which supports Sahrawi nationalists and does not recognise Rabat's occupation. Furthermore, the Moroccan requests that the United States impose a solution favourable to Morocco in the dispute have been rejected. In fact, in 2006, the United States repeatedly asked that Morocco make a serious proposal to help solve the conflict. Gordon Gray, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, declared recently that with respect to the Western Sahara 'the United States continues to seek an acceptable political solution, within the United Nations framework, and has no desire whatsoever to impose a solution [...] The Moroccan government has recently expressed its willingness to write up an autonomy plan for Western Sahara; the United States encouraged Morocco to present a credible proposal so that all parties can analyse it'.⁹

The Staggering Progression of US-Algerian Relations

At the end of the 1990s, relations between the United States and Algeria advanced considerably at all levels, compared to what they had been hitherto. The political and ideological antagonism of the past gradually disappeared. The best illustration of this development was the official visit of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to the United States in July 2001. The increasing influence of Algeria within the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union), as well as the growing importance of the Algeria-Nigeria-South Africa axis, did not pass unnoticed in Washington, which may even be an active promoter (compared with the failure of the Omega plan which was supported by Senegal and France, that the Senegalese president, Abdoulaye Wade, tried to link to the NEPAD). Regarding the Western Sahara conflict, American politicians are conscious that its resolution is impossible without Algeria's endorsement. This explains Washington's more balanced, less blatantly pro-Moroccan position in recent years. Furthermore, the United States understood well before 9/11 that it was necessary to cooperate with Algeria with regards to global terrorism. Indeed, in March 2001, the director of the FBI, Louis Freeh, visited Algeria to request the assistance of the Algerian authorities in the fight against Osama Bin Laden's network. The 9/11 attacks accelerated the rapprochement between the two countries, at least regarding cooperation on security matters. Despite of certain reservations, Algeria agreed to join the US-led international coalition. Thus, the Algerian authorities gave a list to Washington of several hundred suspects, militant Algerian

⁷ See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040603-7.html>.

⁸ These figures were calculated from the statistics provided by the US Department of State Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005.

⁹ Gabriela González de Castejón, 'Entretien avec Gordon Gray', *Revue Afkar/Idées*, nr 9, winter 2006, p. 15.

Islamists who had taken refuge in Europe and America, and also offered their cooperation on security matters and in exchanges between secret services. President Bouteflika paid a last visit to Washington on 5 November 2001, whose focus was mainly on the global war against terrorism. Algerians obtained positive political results during the visit: support for the fight against terrorism in Algeria, support for the OAU's Algiers Charter on the fight against terrorism, condemnation of violent take-overs of power in Africa and endorsement of Algeria's diplomacy in Africa and the Mediterranean. The CIA, the FBI and the NSA (National Security Agency) continue to request assistance from Algeria, which has acquired invaluable experience in fighting terrorism. More importantly still, while refusing to sell certain types of weaponry to Algeria, the United States agreed to provide effective equipment to the Algerian security forces, making it possible to eliminate the 'residual' armed militant groups in rural areas. This of course made it possible for Algeria to break the military embargo to which it had been subjected since the cancellation of the electoral process in January 1992. Today, however, the United States is willing to consider requests for the purchase of weapons that Algeria might make. Indeed, following his visit to Algeria in February 2006, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared that the US was studying the possibility of selling sophisticated weapons to Algeria, saying that 'they have things we desire and we have things we can be helpful with'.¹⁰

The Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs C. David Welch stated during his trip to Algiers in March 2006 that 'should Algeria strengthen its military cooperation, including the purchase of weapons, the question would be studied thoroughly'.¹¹ Undoubtedly, Algeria might be interested in purchasing some sophisticated weaponry from the United States but this would not amount to much, especially after the purchase from Russia, its traditional supplier, just a few weeks previously, of 4.7 billion dollars worth of weapons in lieu of the reimbursement of Algeria's debt to Russia. Regardless, there is no evidence that Algerians expressed an interest in purchasing new military, lethal equipment from the United States. However, the issue of arms purchases is quite an interesting development knowing that for almost a decade, due to the tacit embargo to which they were subjected, Algerians had to supply themselves from alternative markets in the former communist bloc, South Africa and Turkey. Of course, this rapprochement between Washington and Algiers would not have been as easy without the increasingly important regional role that Algeria could play in the safeguarding of security in the Mediterranean, a vital area for the Atlantic Alliance. NATO, having recognised the importance of the relationship which exists between Euro-Atlantic security and stability in the Mediterranean, established a programme of cooperation, as well as joint operations in the Mediterranean with Algerian forces, following Bouteflika's visits in December 2001 and in December 2002 to NATO headquarters in Belgium. Those visits were followed by frequent trips made by high-ranking Algerian military officers to NATO headquarters.

From an economic point of view, relations between Algeria and the United States experienced a remarkable growth. In July 2001, the two countries signed a framework agreement on trade and investment, establishing a consultation procedure which gave way to a bilateral investment agreement, mutual commercial concessions and an agreement on double taxation, enlarging access to the Algerian oil and natural gas resources to multinational corporations. The objective of the agreement is to double the volume of exchanges and to make it possible for American companies to acquire a greater part of the Algerian market, in particular with regards to hydrocarbons (by taking into account the fact that the United States is currently the largest investor in this sector) with US\$4.1 billion¹² –whereas France, Algeria's principal economic partner, invests only US\$500 million –mainly in the hydrocarbons sector. During his visit to Washington in July 2001, Bouteflika had hoped that US investment in Algeria would double in 2005. It seems

¹⁰ Will Dunham, 'US boosting ties with Algeria: Rumsfeld', *Reuters*, 12 February 2006.

¹¹ Cited in Faycal Metaoui, 'Visite de David Welch en Algérie', *El Watan*, Algiers, 15 March 2006.

¹² This figure is provided by the US State Department. See: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/8005.htm>.

however that in the last few years, American companies have also become interested in other sectors outside the energy sector, such as finance, pharmaceutical products, telecommunications and data processing. However, in spite of this positive evolution, American investments, except for the hydrocarbons sector, remain insignificant. Algeria's instability during the 1990s partly explains the low level of American foreign direct investments (FDI); however, the slowness of the economic reforms, the obsolescence of certain infrastructures, and the heavy bureaucracy are just a few reasons which have discouraged American investors. Yet, it should be noted that North Africa in general does not attract a great share of the world's FDI, totalling merely US\$5 billion each year. Algeria, however, succeeded all the same in attracting US\$3.4 billion in 2004, that is to say double the figure of 2003, most of which is in the hydrocarbons sector. There is no doubt that economic relations between Algeria and the United States are going full steam ahead. In fact, the United States became Algeria's leading customer and its third biggest supplier in the first quarter of 2005.¹³

Algerian-American cooperation is gradually extending to other fields, such as those associated with parliamentary activity or the management of banks. In January 2006, for example, a delegation of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), visited Algeria to share expertise with Algerian legislators. The aim of the delegation, which falls within the context of the US Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), was to evaluate, on the basis of what had been accomplished up until then, what projects were likely to appear in the new programme of cooperation for the biennium 2006-07. Another NCSL delegation, led by Republican Senator Steve Rausschenberger made a visit to Algiers in May 2006.

Tunisia: American Nudge for a Democratic Opening

Since its independence in 1956 and up until 2003, Tunisia had a privileged position on the list of countries friendly to the United States. The exemplary American-Tunisian friendship was threatened only once because of the Israeli bombardment of the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in Tunis in 1985.¹⁴ Tunisia's pro-Western position proved extremely attractive, as did its model of political, economic and social development. In the 1990s, American policymakers presented Tunisia as an example of a success story: reforms, market liberalisation, secularism, the promotion of women's rights, the unconstrained use of birth control and the elimination of illiteracy. During that decade, the State Department even presented the Tunisian Islamist movement as being much more moderate than the Algerian FIS. Moreover, the United States favours Tunisia for security reasons as proved by the number of joint military operations carried out each year. During the decade-long Algerian crisis, Tunisia, just like Morocco, benefited from strong American support in order to prevent the propagation of radical Islamism and also to dissuade Libya from any attempt to destabilise its Tunisian neighbour. Taking into account its strategic importance, Tunisia has managed to escape, at least publicly, criticism regarding the serious problems of violation of human rights. In contrast with the criticism of the Algerian government by the United States during the 1990s, Tunisia was spared because, like Morocco and Egypt, it justified repression in the name of maintaining the stability and the survival of the government against 'radical' Islamist forces hostile to the Western world. Tunisians benefited from the instability in Algeria to justify their repressive measures against not only Islamist opposition but against all opposition in general.

¹³ 'Les Etats-Unis, premier client de l'Algérie au premier trimestre 2005', *Agence France Presse*, 24 April 2005.

¹⁴ The US Ambassador to Tunisia during that period, Peter Sebastian, told the author in 1987 in Washington that President Habib Bourguiba, though very close to Americans, was on the brink of breaking off diplomatic relations with the US. In Sebastian's words: 'I used all my talent as a diplomat to dissuade him from doing so'.

Two recent exceptions to American indulgence towards the Tunisian government are notable. During his visit to Tunisia in November 2003, the former Secretary of State Colin Powell criticised the violations of human rights in Tunisia. In February 2004, President Bush said to a baffled Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali that it was necessary for Tunisia to undertake reforms in the areas of freedom of the press and of the legislative system, both legal and electoral. However, apart from these specific reprimands, Tunisia continues to benefit from Washington's support, particularly from the Defense Department, whose leaders wish to maintain Tunisia on the side of the United States. Of course, following the example of other Arab governments, Tunisia benefited from the events of 9/11 and their aftermath and thus succeeded in obtaining support from the United States through its participation in the global fight against terrorism, help to Iraq, recognition of the Iraqi Council of government and participation in peacekeeping operations. Tunisia also played the 'Israeli card' to attenuate criticism from the US and in February 2005 invited the then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to come to Tunisia. This tactic recalls that used by King Hassan II when he invited the Prime Minister of Israel, Simon Peres, to Morocco in the summer of 1986, an invitation whose objective was to regain America's favour following the Treaty of Oujda (1984-86) between Morocco and Libya, a treaty which irritated Washington because of the latter's enmity with Tripoli. In Washington, Tunisia still benefits from strong support from Congressmen, impressed with Tunisia's social system, but also in the Defense Department, which lobbies the White House and the State Department to soften criticisms of Ben Ali's authoritarian government.

Libya: The Startling Rehabilitation of the 'Rogue' State

Undoubtedly, it is American-Libyan relations that have experienced the most extraordinary evolution over the last few years, that is, since 1999. After decades of animosity and head-on confrontation, the two countries, in a very short time, have greatly advanced the normalisation process.¹⁵ The final settlement in 2003 regarding the Lockerbie affair (the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in December 1988 over Scotland, which was attributed to Libya) constituted the starting point, followed by Libya's startling announcement at the end of December 2003 that it renounced its programmes of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Cooperation concerning WMDs opened the way to the normalisation of diplomatic relations. The United States and Libya are currently in negotiations to widen the discussions connected with policies on Africa, terrorism, human rights and economic reforms in Libya. Washington would like to have Libya use its influence in Africa by taking 'positive' action: abstain from interfering in the domestic affairs of certain African countries, moderate Mugabe's politics in Zimbabwe, restrain certain opposition groups and temper certain Islamic groups, as was the case when in the summer of 2000 Libyan mediation succeeded in securing the release of Western hostages held by the Islamic group of Abu Sayyaf on the Island of Jolo in the Philippines. There are indications that Libyans are following this new direction.

The United States and Libya have also discussed oil and commercial questions which have resulted in extremely lucrative deals for American companies, which have carried out ceaseless lobbying with the US authorities throughout the 1990s to lift the embargo and for the companies to be able to resume their activities in Libya. The return of American companies to Libya has accelerated in recent months. Hence, in December 2005, Exxon Mobil Corp signed agreements for the exploration and the production of oil with the Libyan National Oil Company (NOC). But it was not until May 2006 that the United States announced that it decided to renew full diplomatic relations with Libya and to remove Libya from the list of countries that support terrorism. Libya has many enemies

¹⁵ See Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The US and Libya: From Confrontation to Normalization', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, nr 2, summer 2006, p. 48-70; Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Libya in US Foreign Policy: From Rogue State to Good Fellow?', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23, nr 1, February 2002, p. 31-53; and Ronald Bruce St John, *Libya and the United States-Two Centuries of Strife*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2002.

in Washington, especially among the neo-conservatives, who would have liked to punish the Libyan government for its past deeds. Shortly after the events of 9/11, at the same time as the decision was taken to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, some of them contemplated the possibility of retaliating against Libya. Conscious that the United States could attack the countries that had helped terrorist groups even in the distant past, Qaddafi made every effort to dissociate his country from terrorism and to normalise relations with the United States, an objective which he had pursued unsuccessfully since the early 1990s. During his speech of 31 August 2002, celebrating his 33rd year in power, Qaddafi declared that 'we must conform to international legality, even if this legality has been distorted and imposed upon us by the United States; otherwise, we will be slaughtered'.¹⁶ However, it should be noted that Libya's decision to abandon WMD and to normalise relations with the United States and Europe was not the result of the war in Iraq as was declared by some members of the Bush administration.¹⁷ In fact, Colin Powell himself concluded after Libya's decision in December 2003 to give up its weapons of mass destruction that diplomacy and persuasion under several US administrations is what enticed Libya to make such a decision.¹⁸ Although Qaddafi's government reduced its assistance to terrorist groups, it also decided to use its relations and its influence over these groups to push forward Libya's interests. And it is precisely its ability to influence international Islamist groups, in particular through the missionary association Al-Dawa Al-Islamiyya, which made it possible for Libya to be included in America's list of countries active in the fight against terrorism. Therefore, following the example of other Arab governments, Libya could legitimately declare that it had been fighting such movements on its territory for three decades now.¹⁹

Libya is a rich producer of oil and could become a key partner of the United States in the global fight against terrorism. Although some members of Congress remain opposed to Libya's rehabilitation, the United States did nonetheless decide to re-establish full diplomatic relations with Libya and to remove it from the list of states that sponsor terrorism. The removal from the list opens the door for close US-Libyan cooperation. And, for the time being, the US does not seem to be too concerned about the nature of the Libyan regime or of the flagrant violations of human rights in Libya. The Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs C. David Welch recently said 'that our commitment to our citizens, to human rights, and to the President's Freedom Agenda, is unwavering',²⁰ but improvement of Libya's human records was far from being a condition for its rehabilitation. In fact, analysts of US policy are coming to the conclusion that the United States is progressively abandoning its 'liberty' doctrine, which George W. Bush has boasted about in various speeches.²¹

The Maghreb: Regional Entity within the Framework of American Foreign Policy

The main goal for the United States is to develop close political, military, economic and security cooperation with the Maghreb states. An examination of official statements, press conferences and various government documents shows that the United States is trying to

¹⁶ Cited in *Agence France Presse*, Tripoli, 31 August 2002.

¹⁷ Ronald Bruce St John, "'Libya Is Not Iraq': Preemptive Strikes, WMD and Diplomacy', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, nr 3, summer 2004, p. 391-392.

¹⁸ Colin L. Powell, 'Diplomacy Properly Understood', *State Magazine*, May 2004, p. 2. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/32314.pdf>.

¹⁹ See Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Libye: Islamisme radical et lutte antiterroriste', *Revue Maghreb-Machrek*, nr 184, summer 2005, p. 53-66.

²⁰ C. David Welch, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Remarks at the USLBA/MEI Policy Conference: 'The Path Forward', 23 June 2006. Available at: <http://us-lba.org/welchremarks.htm>.

²¹ Amr Hamzawy and Michael McFaul, 'The US and Egypt: Giving up on the "liberty doctrine"', *International Herald Tribune*, 3 July 2006. The authors argue that 'from Libya to Iran to Azerbaijan, the Bush administration appears to have downgraded the importance of democracy promotion.'

set up an economic alliance with the Maghreb by accelerating structural reforms within each country, by offering a greater role to the private sector and by dismantling intra-regional barriers, which are obstacles to trade and investment. Americans are also conscious of the importance of oil and natural gas in the area, in particular in Algeria and Libya. In this context, the conflict over the Western Sahara has taken on a new dimension since its persistence remains a major obstacle in achieving America's regional policy objective. This is why, in November 2003, President Bush insisted on the need for Algeria and Morocco to find 'creative and pragmatic ways to solve their differences'.²² However, this insistence does not fully take into account the positions of the different actors, particularly Algeria's, and as long as both France, and to a lesser degree, the United States, continue to support Morocco, the *status quo* in the Maghreb will most likely prevail. It is thus essential that the Western Sahara conflict be solved fairly and rapidly, in order to permit long-lasting development in the Maghreb. It is certain that the United States' fear is to see the area become a base for recruitment and activities of the al-Qaeda network, thus constituting a real danger to Europe, since many of the al-Qaeda recruits come not only from North Africa but also from the suburbs of European cities. Only three days before the attacks in Madrid on 11 March 2004, the Deputy Commander for the European Command (EUCOM), General Charles Wald, declared that al-Qaeda was in the process of establishing its presence in North Africa.²³ The most important signal of change on a multilateral level to counter this potential and other threats was the pursuit of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, which unites countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia around the same table. The integration of Algeria in the Mediterranean Dialogue represents a major change because it marks an important metamorphosis of the principles which Algeria had defended so resolutely since its independence in 1962. As for the Tunisian and Moroccan governments, their relations with the United States were reinforced even more.

In 2002, President George W. Bush stated in the United States *National Security Strategy Report*, 'We will continue to encourage our regional partners to take up a coordinated effort that isolates the terrorists. Once the regional campaign localizes the threat to a particular state, we will help ensure the state has the military, law enforcement, political, and financial tools necessary to finish the task'.²⁴ The execution of such a decision consists in establishing tactical alliances and logistical bases throughout the globe. Thus, in 2004, the Commander of the United States European Command, General James L. Jones, affirmed that just like Morocco and Tunisia and the new members of Eastern Europe, other nations could provide invaluable training bases for American military forces.²⁵ These simple bases, with runways, barracks and electricity, even if of a temporary nature, could be used by expeditionary forces for several months if necessary. States previously isolated on the international scene, such as Algeria (1992-99), would receive weapons and training and could even become the axis of American military interests in the area. 'We are interested in being able to land at bases in Algeria with our aircraft, or train together [...] We think we have a lot to learn from the Algerians',²⁶ declared General Charles Wald. This declaration came at a time when the United States outlined plans for the deployment of troops abroad, more especially as a substantial reduction in the troops stationed permanently in Germany and in other Western European countries had been expected. This reflected the so called 'forward posture' and 'forward

²² 'George Bush appelle l'Algérie et le Maroc à faire preuve de créativité et de souplesse pour régler leurs différends', [George Bush calls on Morocco and Algeria to be creative and flexible to resolve their differences], *Associated Press* (Rabat), 20 November 2003.

²³ Giles Tremlett, 'US sends special forces into North Africa', *The Guardian*, 15 March 2004.

²⁴ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, Washington DC, September 2002. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2002>.

²⁵ Anthea Jonathan, 'US eyes North Africa', *Politics*, 10 March 2004. Available at: http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/News/0,,2-11-1447_1496197,00.html.

²⁶ Giles Tremlett, 'US sends special forces into North Africa', *The Guardian*, 15 March 2004.

presence' regional strategy developed by the US military.²⁷ This also formed part of the plans aimed at improving political and military relations with the Middle East and North Africa, within the context of the redefinition by the Atlantic Alliance of new threats (terrorism, border security, drug trafficking, illegal immigration and regional instability). This American interest in the Sahel region is related to the Maghreb countries. In this context, even Libya will certainly be included and likely to benefit from military cooperation with the United States. Indeed, in April 2005, General Wald affirmed that a re-establishment of military relations with Libya would largely support the United States in its effort to counterattack the forces of instability in North Africa.²⁸

The United States and Security in the Maghreb/Sahel

Since the events of 9/11, the principal aim of the United States in the central Maghreb is to develop a closer military, security cooperation and economic partnership with those states. The 9/11 events reinforced the development of relations between the United States and the Maghrebi governments, particularly Algeria (especially since 2001), Mauritania (since 2002), Morocco (since May 2003) and Libya (after December 2003). Thus, on 22 and 23 March 2004 the US European Command organised a two-day meeting in Stuttgart which brought together the heads of the Maghrebi armed forces (Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) and those of the Sahel countries (Chad, Mali, Niger and Senegal) in order to coordinate efforts in the fight against terrorism. It was a true exploit on behalf of the United States which succeeded in gathering around the same table a large number of officials from countries whose strategic and defence interests are incongruous, and to convince them to coordinate their antiterrorist operations. According to sources that wish to remain anonymous, Algeria authorised American elite troops to penetrate Algerian territory to track terrorist groups and to continue monitoring operations. It remains to be seen whether relations between Algeria and the United States will develop in sectors other than security and hydrocarbons. For the moment, despite rhetoric from both sides, it does not seem that cooperation is as thorough as one is led to believe, especially on the political level. Algeria's position on the Palestinian issue, the Western Sahara, Syria and on other questions of an international nature, is often in opposition to America's. Only time will tell; however, rumours persist that the United States is interested in a military base in Algeria, one that would be run by the Algerians themselves, which the US would use only in case of major antiterrorist action against al-Qaeda elements in the Sahel.²⁹

The United States' interest in the Sahel, a region where Sub-Saharan Africa meets North Africa, covers two dimensions: security/military and economic. Washington perceives the Sahel as a vulnerable area because of its low demographic density and its permeable borders. American decision makers affirm that terrorist groups, local as well as international, devote themselves to all kinds of smuggling, including weapons, and recruit new members among the local populations. According to Washington, Islamist terrorist groups, the most active being the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), affiliated with al-Qaeda, represent a threat to this area which has more than 100 million inhabitants. The area is now regarded as 'the new front in the global war against terrorism', and thus the objective of the United States is 'to facilitate cooperation among governments in the region (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Senegal and Nigeria) and strengthen their capacity to combat terrorist organisations',³⁰

²⁷ See:

http://www.oft.osd.mil/library/library_files/document_377_National%20Military%20Strategy%2013%20May%2004.pdf.

²⁸ Robert Burns, 'General: US Gains From Ties With Libya', *Associated Press*, 21 April 2005.

²⁹ B. Takheroubt, 'Rumsfeld relance l'idée d'une base US au Sud', *L'Expression*, Algiers, 6 February 2006.

³⁰ 'Eliminating Terrorist Sanctuaries: The Role of Security Assistance', William P. Pope, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Testimony Before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on

but also to prevent terrorist groups from establishing bases in this region as they succeeded in doing in Afghanistan before 9/11. Thus, it is with this objective in mind that at the end of 2002 the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) was launched, a programme with a budget of more than US\$8 million, but which substantially increased since, in order to train specialised troops in the fight against terrorism in Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. In 2003-04, American Special Forces of the European Command (EUCOM) were detached to train the security forces of these nations. Following this, native forces of Chad and Niger fought the GSCP members in their respective countries. American decision makers believe that the PSI programme, completed in early 2004, was a real success; a follow-up is being implemented under the name of Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), which in effect replaced PSI, and whose objective is to reinforce the capacities to fight terrorism in the area, to consolidate and institutionalise cooperation between the security forces in the area.³¹ TSCTI officially started in June 2005 with Exercise Flintlock 2005. The mission is for US special operations forces to provide training for their counterparts in seven Saharan countries, teaching military tactics, and to prevent terrorists from setting up sanctuaries in that region.³² The original cost of this programme was US\$100 million. In April 2005, General Wald declared that he hoped that the programme's budget would reach at least US\$30 million in 2006 –it was only US\$5 million in 2005– and US\$60 million or more per annum for several years after 2006. The TSCTI is part of a long-term regional and bilateral strategy. During his speech at the conference on terrorism, co-sponsored by the United States, the African Union (AU) and the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, held in Algiers in February 2005, the US Ambassador-at-large for Counterterrorism, Henry Crumpton declared that, 'We envision a multi-faceted, multi-year strategy aimed at defeating terrorist organisations by helping to strengthen regional counterterrorism capabilities, by enhancing and institutionalising cooperation between your security forces and ours and *most* importantly, by promoting economic development, good governance, education, liberal institutions and democracy. Through broad policy success we discredit terrorist ideology and deny them the recruits they need, while providing these erstwhile recruits opportunity and hope'.³³

From 8 to 20 February 2004, the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS), created in 1999 within the Washington-based National Defense University (NDU) 'as an instrument, for Africans and their international partners, for collective reflection on the essential strategic challenges with which Africa is confronted with regards to security,' brought together 120 senior officials and civil servants in charge of the defence of the majority of African countries (42 in total). It also hosted American and European representatives of regional and international organisations and civil services. The questions of security, the fight against terrorism, civilian-military relations, the role of the military and democracy and defence budgets constituted the themes of this important meeting. In his welcoming speech of 9 February, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz recalled that the Pan Sahel Initiative as well as the antiterrorist initiative in East Africa constituted the key elements of American security policy on the African continent: 'We view our real military capability in the context of our partnerships with our many friends and allies around the world. When the United States acts in the world we do not act by ourselves but as part of a community of states, and we see our strength multiplied by the contribution of others and our interests advanced when the interests of others are advanced'.³⁴

International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, Washington DC, 10 March 2005. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/43702.htm>.

³¹ For more information, see: <http://www.up.ac.za/academic/cips/Publications/Col%20CD%20Smith%20Jr.ppt>.

³² See: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/tscti.htm>.

³³ Henry Crumpton, Ambassador-at-Large for Counterterrorism, 'US Official Praises African Union's Counterterrorism Efforts'. Available at: <http://usinfo.state.gov/af/Archive/2006/Mar/03-70981.html>.

³⁴ Paul Wolfowitz, Africa Center for Strategic Studies Senior Leader Seminar, Washington DC, 9 February 2004. Available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2004/sp20040209-depsecdef0863.html>.

Thus, it is obviously necessary to associate other nations in operations in which the United States is implicated and for which preparation and harmonisation are prerequisites for their success. Units of approximately 200 troops of the 10th Group of the American Army Special Forces were deployed in Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger in order to train the armies of these countries in the fight against terrorism and to improve their coordination with the American armed forces. It is precisely this type of coordination that in practice enabled them to dismantle Algeria's Abderrezak 'El Para' group in Chad. It is indeed because of the support of the US Navy and their P-3 air monitors that the Chadian troops succeeded in destroying this group and arresting its leader.³⁵

The new approach of the United States towards Mauritania is interesting. The official aim is bringing together Mauritania and America for the 'stabilisation' of the Sahel and putting a complete stop to actions of the 'salafist groups related to al-Qaeda'. However, this interpretation differs not only from that of the Mauritanian opposition, but also from some highly regarded think tanks. For the Mauritanian opposition, there is no terrorist danger which would threaten the security of the country. Mauritania, which had very good relations with Saddam Hussein's government, had, well before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, already distanced itself from Baghdad in order not to be within Washington's firing range. Hence, it is as a sign of a pledge towards the United States that the government decided to establish relations with Israel in October 1999. The Israeli ministry of Foreign Affairs reckoned at the time that 'both Israel and the United States view the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Israel and Mauritania [...] as a milestone in the promotion of normalisation, which is widely seen as the goal of the peace process which has evolved since the Madrid Conference.'³⁶ But, in fact, this relation with Israel is one of the main reasons that brought the Arab nationalists and Mauritanian Islamists closer together. And it is for this reason also that an observer of African affairs declared that one must not confuse the legitimate claims of the opposition, on the one hand, and terrorists and coup plotters, on the other. According to Princeton N. Lyman, 'The US has to be especially careful that we do not become partners in a political process that drives people into the arms of Islamic extremists'.³⁷ Furthermore, Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya's government, overthrown in August 2005, felt threatened by the growing opposition to his rule, and hence, indirectly, Washington intervened to support him. His successor, Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, was careful not to alienate the opposition, to guarantee a democratic process and to maintain good relations with both the United States and Israel.

In the long term, the Pentagon aims to obtain access to bases in Mali and Algeria, to conclude agreements to refuel its planes in Senegal and Uganda and, finally, to initiate programmes of assistance and training. The establishment of bases in the Maghreb and the Sahel region would permit intervention all over the African continent and secure control over 'the arc of instability', which stretches from Afghanistan to the Gulf of Guinea, whilst passing through the main oil fields around the globe.

In the Maghreb, Morocco and Tunisia also benefit from an important level of aid from the United States. Morocco benefits from State Department programmes such as the ATA (Anti-Terrorism Assistance) and the TIP (Terrorist Interdiction Program). In 2004, the United States had already granted US\$6.5 million to Morocco to train Moroccans in the

³⁵ Jason Beaubien, 'The U.S. Military's Growing Role in Africa', *National Public Radio, All Things Considered*, 11 October 2004. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4079474>.

³⁶ Available at:

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/About%20the%20Ministry/MFA%20Spokesman/1999/Israel%20and%20Mauritania%20to%20Establish%20Diplomatic%20Rela>.

³⁷ Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on Africa Hearing on 'Fighting Terrorism in Africa', by Princeton N. Lyman, Ralph Bunche Senior Fellow and Director of Africa Policy Studies, Council on Foreign Relations, 1 April 2004. Available at: <http://www.cfr.org/publication.html?id=6912>.

fight against terrorism. The TIP was reinforced in 2005 to help Moroccans in the areas of security and protection of the ports, airports, terrestrial and porous borders. The programme's budget will treble by Fiscal Year 2007, reaching US\$12 million.³⁸ As seen above, cooperation with Algeria remains one of the most important aspects of bilateral relations since 9/11. This cooperation is centred on the exchange of information, military cooperation and the monitoring of the transfer of funds. However, it remains difficult to confirm or deny that the United States has established an NSA listening base in the Algerian desert, even if Americans as well as Algerians deny the existence of such a base. What is certain though is that American officials insist that Algeria has become 'extremely important to the United States'.³⁹

The major question, of course, is: in addition to military activities, what is the prevention that the Pan-Sahel Initiative or the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative is supposed to ensure? What can special operation forces do against poverty, disease, corruption, lack of education, antidemocratic rule and rulers and extremism in this impoverished region? One can only concur with the analysis contained in the recent International Crisis Group (ICG) report, which argues that heavy-handed US military response to the emergence of small Islamic terrorist groups in the Sahel could prove counter-productive and would invigorate the rise of Islamic militancy in this poor and remote region of West Africa. The ICG asserts convincingly that 'the Sahel is not a hotbed of terrorist activity [but] an area in which weak states constitute attractive targets for terrorist or criminal organizations'.⁴⁰ In this context, a number of experts consider that resorting to military means alone would yield counter-productive results. In order to counterbalance this military response and to avoid counter-productive results, the US Agency for International Development launched educational initiatives, while the State Department introduced a programme for airport security, and the Department of Treasury intervened to tighten up money-handling controls in the region.⁴¹

The US administration seems to have drawn some conclusions from its experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, where American soldiers face violent opposition from the local populations. American officers have now augured a new approach: Instead of mobilising a heavy US military presence in given areas of intervention, the new programme consists of dispatching Special Operations forces to countries like Mali and Mauritania in West Africa to train their soldiers and supply them with pickup trucks, radios and global-positioning system equipment. According to General James Jones, no US forces have been committed to combat in Africa. Involvement has primarily consisted of training and advisory teams. The hope, of course, is that American influence will be effective without being conspicuous.

Conclusions

The events of 9/11 changed the Maghreb's geopolitical situation because not only did it encourage the bringing together of the Maghrebi states with the United States but it also made the latter take a greater interest in the area, which, from a security point of view, now extends to the Sahel region. It should be underlined however that, whereas the Maghrebi governments quickly sought to be integrated in an international coalition to fight terrorism, which also enabled them to justify their repression and their violations of human rights in the name of this same fight, these actions in fact increased the latent anti-Americanism in the area. One should not conceal the division which exists between rulers

³⁸ See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/summary.10001110.2005.html>.

³⁹ Author's interview with senior State Department official, Washington DC, 15 February 2006.

⁴⁰ ICG Report, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?*, Report nr 92, 31 March 2005. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?!=1&id=3347>.

⁴¹ Donna Miles, 'New Counter-terrorism Initiative to Focus on Saharan Africa War on Terror', *American Forces Press Service*, 1 June 2005.

and ruled with regard to the perception of the United States. For example, whereas the Moroccan government firmly condemned the 9/11 attacks, the public's reaction was different: although it was horrified by these attacks, Moroccan public opinion, like others in the region, blamed the United States because of its policy in the Middle East, in particular its unrestrained support for Israel against the Palestinians, as well as the embargo and the repeated attacks against Iraq. The war against Iraq in March 2003 did nothing but accentuate anti-Americanism in the area. The intentions of the American government to propagate democracy in the Arab world through the BMENA initiative are perceived in this area as a plan which aims to impose a 'ready-made democracy' which actually, according to this same opinion, dissimulates one main objective: the subjugation of the Arab and Muslim people to American and Israeli hegemony. Moreover, to support governments who do not take their practices from democratic principles does nothing but increase the frustration of the Maghrebi populations who reckon that the area suffers from a lack of justice, social development and education, all necessary conditions to assure the legitimacy of the governments. The Arab Human Development Report 2004 confirms this observation.⁴²

There is no denying that Algerian-American relations have developed considerably over the last few years. However, in spite of Algeria's strategic, economic, and political importance to American policy in the Maghreb, the United States still remains much more sensitive to Morocco's interests than to Algeria's. Historical, ideological, political and military reasons provide the explanation for such a state of affairs. US support for colonial France in the 1950s had a negative, long-lasting influence on US-Algerian relations long after Algeria's independence in 1962. The misunderstandings and disagreements which characterised Algerian-American relations for nearly 30 years created a mutual mistrust between decision makers of the two countries which have only recently started to dissipate. Whether it is Algeria's support for national liberation movements, or frictions over the conflicts in Palestine and the Western Sahara, this prevented the development of close relations between the two countries in the past and partly explains the hesitation for a much more solid rapprochement. Notwithstanding the new pragmatism of Algeria's foreign policy,⁴³ the stance taken by Algeria often runs against the current of America's policy, especially with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or to the Western Sahara conflict because of the historical experiences of Algerian nationalism, but also for reasons of national security with respect to the Western Sahara. But, whatever their disagreements, a mutual respect between Algeria and the United States does exist. One must remember the crucial role played by Algeria in 1980 in the release of the American hostages held in Iran. More recently, in April 2005, Algeria tried to act as a mediator between the United States and Iran to solve the latter's differences on the question of Iranian nuclear power.

The growing interest of the United States in the Maghreb has repercussions for Europe but also for the Maghrebi states which might now try to use the United States as a counterweight in their relations with the European Union, especially with France. Morocco's Free Trade Agreement with the United States is a case in point. Yet European countries, especially France and Germany, gained points with the Maghreb, at least on the public opinion level, as a result of their opposition to the war against Iraq. In spite of the excellent relations between the Maghrebi governments and the United States, the same cannot be said about the populations, who display an undeniable anti-Americanism. It is unlikely that state relations can generate similar feelings in Maghrebi public opinion despite the public relations campaign started by the Pentagon in February 2005, whose aim is to influence Maghrebi public opinion by projecting a positive image of American policy and objectives. If the Bush Administration decided to launch another attack against

⁴² *Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World*, UNDP, New York, 2005.

⁴³ Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The Dialectics of Algeria's Foreign Relations from 1990 to the Present', in Ahmed Aghrout (ed.), *Algeria in Transition: Reforms and Development Prospects*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 151-182.

an Arab or Muslim country, it is certain that America's image in the region would suffer even more. Moreover, the economic, political, security and cultural relations between the Maghreb countries and the European Union are much closer than with the United States. While there exists undoubtedly a division of labour in the Maghreb between the United States and Europe, it is unlikely that the United States can establish a predominant position in the region. Although the US is willing to allocate relatively important budgets for security purposes, it is quite doubtful, however, whether it is willing to invest significant amounts of money for the Maghreb-Sahel region's much-needed economic and social development.

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