

INTRODUCTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Smuggling activities along the borderlands of the North African (NA) countries - Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia - have been tolerated by central governments because they have been a way of costless development. But now they have become a menace given as contraband has expanded from arms to people trafficking and the extension of jihadism. To fight these threats requires more cooperation than competition.

This might start with the rejuvenation of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), an organisation created in 1989 by Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania to increase cooperation through greater interregional trade as a way to future economic and may be political integration. The AMU has never been abolished and had been working until the confrontation between Algeria and Morocco.

The European Union could help to integrate border management systems, or at least to coordinate them, because border security depends not only on national capabilities but also on international cooperation. Solutions to border management depends mainly on an North Africa operating environment taking into account the dynamic of the region trading networks that have created deep connections between border communities in neighbouring states. But a note of caution : limiting long standing smuggling of traditional commodities smuggling (fuel, food and

tobacco) in the Maghreb could lead to an increase in radicalisation of people living in the border areas.

With the help of the World Bank and the European Union, the first steps in a comprehensive long term strategy could be:

- a. Connecting the south to the north of the Maghreb countries through road infrastructure
- b. Supporting regional cooperation
- c. Helping the regions close to the existing borders to develop.
- d. Providing coastguards of the regions' states with training and equipment.

See the next page for a country by country update. This paper is based on one written for the Eurodefense Mediterranean Observatory by Ambassador Garcia Munoz, President of Eurodefense-Spain, and submitted to the Bucharest Conference in October 2019. His previous papers published on Defence Viewpoints are "Developments in the MENA area" 16 September 2017 and the "Mahgreb Revisited" mini series 20 November 2017 - 24 November 2017

The outlying regions of the Maghreb in the south, within the Sahara Desert, are part of the old commercial routes along the Sahara and constitute economic spaces with shared identities and are distant sides of national territory. Since independence, the region's states have concentrated economic development and investment in their coastal centres, leaving vast interior regions and borderlands forgotten and marginalized.

The 2400 kilometres of more or less undefined frontiers along Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco have served more as buffer zones created by colonial countries than to mark the sovereignty the states. With poverty rates more than triple than that of the coastal areas, these borderlands have turned to illicit cross-border flows of goods as a source of income for the populations living in those remote regions neglected by their respective governments. It can be said that these marginalized border territories, which are defined by the IMF as the worst performing region of the world economy since 2011, expand from the restless Rif and the south in Morocco to the southern regions of Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

The issue now is that over the last decade border exchanges have expanded including arms, drugs, people trafficking, and are being penetrated by international crime and terrorist networks

like al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as new actors who displace old smuggling patterns and become a wider security threat.

The response of governments has been security approaches more than development programmes that in most cases show the lack of links between the state and its marginalized regions.

It has to be added that the threats of Islamist terrorism, now very active in the whole Maghreb, stem from a lack of cooperation among the affected countries, as well as increasing interstate rivalries and closed borders as in the case of Algeria and Morocco. Their bitter opposing policies over hegemony in the region and the animosity derived from the Western Sahara conflict have blocked progress on many issues that threaten the Maghreb and the Sahel. Today there is a pressing need for cooperation among the countries of the Maghreb to stabilize their own borders and cooperate in order to make their frontiers secure, so allowing the development of those territories to avoid instability, which is a source of problems for Europe. The European Union can play a crucial role in this endeavour.

ALGERIA

For decades, an illusion of relative tranquillity has spread through Algeria's vast peripheral regions. Algeria's south and southeast are largely empty desert regions neighbouring Libya, Northern Mali and Niger. This near emptiness is a counterpoint to the intermittent agitation that has animated the densely populated spaces in the country's north. The Algerian south was suddenly placed at the forefront of national security and public concern with the terrorist targeting of Algeria's energy infrastructure in 2013 at the In Amenas gas facility near the south eastern border with Libya. This strategic economic sector, representing 75 percent of the government revenues, is largely based in the south, which covers more than 80 percent of the national territory but less than 9 percent of the population.

For the inhabitants of the Algerian Sahara, the wealth from the gas and oil in their territory is not employed to improve their living conditions. This exclusion turns people in those areas to illicit flows to survive and increase the complaints against the central government only concerned with security measures. Therefore, contraband has been the only economic activity along the border with Tunisia, Libya and Mali. After 2006 this situation changed when regional terrorist's networks and criminal organizations penetrated the smuggling of petrol, cooking oil, and cigarettes, adding to these illicit traffics weapons, drugs and lately persons.

The frustrations and injustices of these populations of the Algeria south and its periphery have led them to protests, criminality and jihad. One example was when in 2012 the governor of the Illizi province in the south-western of Algeria was kidnaped by locals protesting against poor

living conditions and afterwards he was sold to the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Libya.

The only border of Algeria that is strictly controlled is the closed frontier with Morocco. Algiers has dug trenches, and Rabat a 150 kilometres fence to avoid contraband and human smuggling, besides to stop possible infiltrations of terrorists from Algeria.

MOROCCO

The Moroccan borders are the less exposed to contraband and smuggling in the poorest regions of the north and south due to the security obstacles built by Rabat at its most problematic frontiers. Besides the fence on the Algerian border, the Kingdom has cut the Western Sahara with a trench of 2700 kilometres to prevent Algerian interference with Polisario, and stepped up Moroccan military presence along the Mauritanian border.

But despite these obstacles the smuggling of drugs and people are a source of income for the population living in the south, in the edge with the Saharan desert, and in the northwest in the Rif region where social tensions have increased, in contrast with the rich Northwest areas along the Mediterranean and the Atlantic shores. The increase of illicit activities along the borders, therefore, has justified the government's militarization of the border and its closing down of cross-border trade, but this has only served to exacerbate corruption, underdevelopment, and inequality.

The erection of security walls has not stopped the illicit flow of all products between Algeria and Morocco. The most organized trafficking networks have moved from trafficking in the highly lucrative petrol trade to the smuggling of cigarettes, medicines, migrants, and drugs. Those that suffer the most are the majority of contrabandists who lack the resources and connections to circumvent state control or buy off border agents.

Government efforts to ease social tensions and mitigate the evolving threat of terrorism have been directed toward the Rif and the southwest. The increasing reach of violent extremist organizations and criminal networks operating in neighbouring Sahel countries have turned the focus of Rabat to the governments of Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in order to get close to the Sahel G-5 to become a strategic security actor for itself, taking into account that Algeria is absent from the SG-5.

Morocco's two main contributions to this group are military and religious training. On the security front, in September 2017 Rabat outlined via the then-foreign Minister Bourita that it would assist the SG-5 in managing border security, and promised to counter radical Islamic teachings in the broader area. During the International High-Level Conference on the Sahel in Brussels in February 2018, Moroccan delegates explored a number of areas of collaboration, including border control, food security, social development, military training, and religious training for imams. In June 2019, Morocco has promised support for a SG-5 joint force to counter counterterrorism and combating transnational crime.

The Moroccan government has been trying for years now to develop an economic strategy to solve the Northeast's and South isolation through investments. While important progress has been made, the isolated communities in Morocco's periphery remain a potential threat for further instability and still are dependent of smuggling and illicit traffic.

TUNISIA

Illicit flows in its frontiers allow the populations living in the southeast and south a minimum standard of living where poverty rates reach 26–32 percent in rural areas. Despite the reforms and elections after the upheavals of 2011 not much has changed for the people in those areas. The expectations rose after the municipal elections of 2018, but the political power struggle in the capital and in the developed north has hindered any development of the southern regions of Tunisia. The period since Ben Ali was ousted has not led to significant improvements in the economic situation of the border regions. Outside the wave of government hiring in the early days after the revolution and timid efforts to attract investors to these remote regions, their economic difficulties show no sign of improvement.

This growing separation between the state and its periphery is dangerous, threatening to

perpetuate hard-line security approaches. Security in the borders has disrupted traditional cross-border markets and trade networks that have led to the transformation of Tunisia into a transit route between Algeria and Libya for the trafficking of cannabis, stimulant drugs and alcohol. The old contrabandists of legal commodities that have experienced a significant decrease in profits have turned in the last eight years to criminal networks to improve the living conditions in that area which in turn poses a threat to the Tunisian transition. The encroachment of criminal activity has been accompanied by a similar intrusion of terrorist groups that have committed terrorist attacks since 2013. The government has adopted a security approach and militarized the frontier with Libya but this security-first approach has hit imposed harsh reality on communities whose livelihoods depend on the free movement of people and goods. For example, the trans-border dimension of social and tribal relations between Tunisia's southeast and Libya's west makes any disruptions to cross-border trade an explosive affair - 2015 saw massive protest for the closure of frontiers between the two countries.

The rising militarization of the border seems to have the opposite effect of that intended. Instead of effectively curbing criminal activity and the trafficking of harmful substances, a militarized border has created more openings for corruption. The government is seen as blocking one of the few sources of revenue available to border communities.

LIBYA

The borders of Libya with Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger Tunisia and Algeria are in a state of chaos as an aftermath of the lack of a strong government and the disintegration of the country. The old trade routes that crossed Libyan soil have been disrupted because contraband has changed its pattern and because Libyan borders are a free zone for internal and foreign militias, according a report of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). Rebel Sudanese groups are an active presence in the lawless south where there also are Chadian militias that operate freely along the frontier. In the rest of the country national militias and groups are everywhere and continue to run rampant in areas where there is a nominal government like in Tripoli. A report by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in April concluded that "the Presidency Council and the GNA have become a mere façade, behind which the armed groups and their associated interests are calling the shots".

The presence of foreign militias on Libyan soil has increased the number of weapons and ammunition, fostering the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, Islamists militias and even the Islamic State. These paramilitary groups that are established in the vast province of Fezzan have had a negative influence with the tribes and upset the fragile standard living, a by-product of the

tolerated contraband.

The alignment of some Arab countries like Egypt, the UAE, Turkey and Qatar coupled with Western actors like Italy and France that try to capitalize their interest in Libya are a source of increasing fragility not only in Libya but also in other North African countries. The terrorist attacks, religiously motivated, in Tunisia and Algeria have been prepared in Libya, despite the barrier of 200 kilometres erected along the Tunisian border.

The stakes are that the national as the foreign fighting militias are only involved in the Libyan precarious situation looking for material gains, which they may obtain.

The terrorist activities and the odd smuggling that now is replacing the old camel trade routes that crossed the North African borders have been altered and the communities and tribes that depend on smuggling of cheap goods and commodities are negatively affected by the hardened borders. The political, military and terrorist outlook in Libya has been harming the normal development of illicit but tolerated smuggling activities that have helped to develop most of the southern regions of the country.

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