

## Europe's Maghreb Headache

*By Kristina Kausch*

The Maghreb is a region with an enormous disruptive potential for Europe. After the Levant, the Maghreb is now increasingly becoming a stage on which regional and global rivalries are being fought. The main entry point that makes such confrontations possible is political void.

Europe-Maghreb relations are full of strategic and moral dilemmas with no easy solutions. However, a few concrete action points appear inevitable. A more strategic European approach for de-escalation and de-vacuumization in the Maghreb will inevitably need to include a broader and more united engagement Libya beyond the current migration and terrorism prism. Policymakers should devise a forward-looking pan-European approach to migration not only to manage flows, but to pre-empt the weaponization of migration by international partners.

The Maghreb is only 14 kilometers away from Europe and the region is threatening contagious instability along multiple fronts. The flaring Western Sahara conflict is being blocked out in both Europe and the United States, and even the ongoing civil war in Libya earns strikingly little attention compared to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The North African coastline has long been the geopolitically remote corner of the Arab world. But the Maghreb's relative geopolitical isolation is being undone, and at least five factors will accelerate this trend.

First, the Central Mediterranean route via the Maghreb, which has been the main corridor of irregular South-North migration to Europe and the deadliest migration route worldwide since 2016, is not only a major distress to migrants, transit, and receiving countries, but is also increasingly being instrumentalized as a way to put pressure on the EU. Second, the economic and security reverberations of the war in Libya are leaving a lasting imprint on the region. Third, uncertainty surrounding the upcoming leadership change amid financial trouble in Algeria, the Maghreb's regional power, suggests quiet times will soon be over. Fourth, the long-frozen Western Sahara dispute between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front is heating up again, having only recently escaped renewed escalation. Finally, shifts in the global balance of power are evident as Russia has increased its engagement in North Africa at a time of simultaneous indifference from the new U.S. administration.



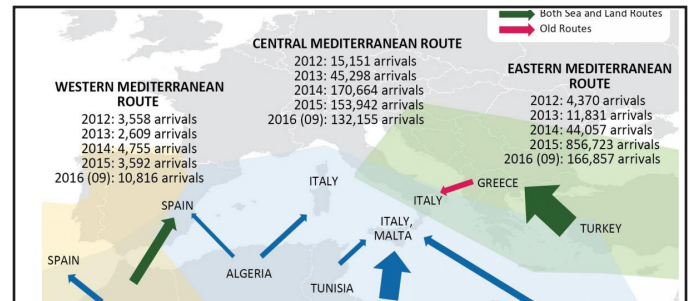
As a result of these mutually reinforcing developments, security spillover from the Maghreb to Europe is likely to take on a new dimension in the coming years. Europe has a keen interest in preventing instability in the Maghreb: the political crisis over irregular migration in the past two years has impressively demonstrated how an actual or perceived external security threat can politically turn around European societies in a very short time.

## Gateway to Europe

The governance vacuum in Libya that turned the country into the first point for African migrants to embark toward Europe has been at the core of recent European policy debates. Libyan authorities' dire control of migration flows, their reliability as a partner, and the attractiveness of Libya as a final destination are unlikely to be significantly improved in the near future. As a result, the country will continue to attract and facilitate South-North migration to Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, the route from the Maghreb to Europe has become the deadliest migration trail in the world, accounting for over half of all migrant fatalities worldwide. Since the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016 and the closure of the Balkan route, a steep decrease of irregular migration via the Eastern Mediterranean corridor (arrivals in Greece fell from 857,000 in 2015 to 167,000 in 2016) was accompanied by increasing numbers for the Central Mediterranean route.<sup>2</sup> Of 5,098 deaths in the Mediterranean in 2016, around 90 percent occurred on the Central Mediterranean route. While migration via the Eastern Mediterranean route largely emanated from war zones in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the Central Mediterranean route is used by migrants from a wider array of African countries, including both conflict and non-conflict countries, headed by Nigeria, Eritrea, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Senegal, Mali, and Sudan.<sup>3</sup> Libya is not the only permeable spot, however. Major migrant flows

pass through Egypt to embark in Libya. The number of migrants on the Western Mediterranean route to Spain has more than tripled in 2016.



Source: IOM<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, North African governments are increasingly prepared to make full use of the leverage potential that comes with the gatekeeper role. On February 17 hundreds of migrants managed to cross the border from Morocco into Ceuta, Spain's North African enclave, following scarcely veiled threats by the Moroccan government that it would no longer control migration if certain expectations regarding the EU's posture toward Western Sahara were not met.

In the face of these developments, the EU has taken swift action. The measures, however, largely aim at containing rather than managing flows. As the subject of migration has come to acquire the quality of a decisive electoral theme within the EU, and the electoral year 2017 constitutes a make-or-break moment for the future of the Union, the EU's short-term containment approach appears in a different light. Beyond the German federal elections in September 2017, however, a reassured EU is likely to be mandated to devise a more comprehensive common migration management.

While South-North migration is at the center of European concerns regarding the war in Libya, the regional reverberations go far beyond.

<sup>1</sup> Mattia Toaldo, "After Warsaw: A 3-Point Plan to Manage Migration Through Libya," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 12, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Missing Migrants Project."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

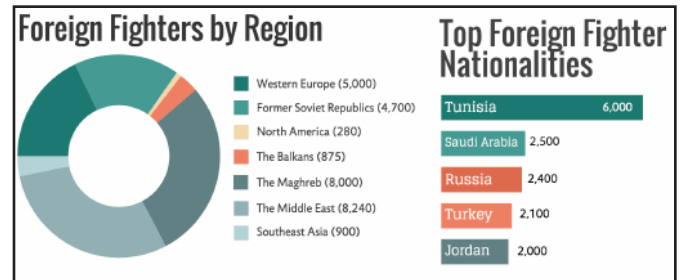
<sup>4</sup> International Organization on Migration (IOM), "Assessing the Risk of Migration Along the Eastern and Central Mediterranean Routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries," 2016.

## Shockwaves of the War in Libya

Among the many reverberations of the Libyan conflict that began in 2011 are the spread of militant extremism, contraband, and trafficking across North Africa; the impact of Libyan refugees in neighboring countries; and the additional pressure the conflict put on the already strained economies of countries in the Maghreb.

The expansion of the self-proclaimed Islamic State group to North Africa and the revival of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have been among the most significant side effects of the war. Libya's development into North Africa's hub for ISIS in combination with permeable borders, militia rule, tribal divisions, contraband, and the post-Gaddafi arms bazaar have posed a serious security challenge, in particular to Tunisia's fragile democracy. Contacts and cooperation between Libyan and Tunisian militants have been flourishing since 2011 via the open political space in Tunisia and the establishment of civil strife-torn Libya as a sanctuary for militant fighters from across the region. Libya-based militants have armed and trained the perpetrators of the three major terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015. Terrorist activities in Tunisia prior to 2015 have been mainly linked to Algeria-based extremist groups, particularly AQIM, which has the experience, skills, and resources to acquire and smuggle weapons and stage operations. At the Tunisian-Algerian border, al-Qaeda affiliated militants have been waging a war against the Tunisian authorities since 2012.<sup>5</sup> Adding to Algeria's longstanding al-Qaeda challenge, the security vacuum in Libya has helped to also spread ISIS in Algeria, though the group has not been able to establish a physical stronghold there. The removal of ISIS from its Northern Libyan territorial stronghold of Sirte in December 2016 is only a temporary victory, as ISIS fighters have begun to rearrange in training camps in the country's West. Moreover, the largest worldwide share of foreign fighters joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq has originated in the Maghreb. The return of these fighters after the fall of the group's

physical caliphate is likely to further exacerbate the Maghreb's extremism challenge that produced these fighters in the first place.



Source: Soufan Group<sup>6</sup>

Closely linked to the spread of militant extremism is the trafficking along porous border areas and the contraband networks that have provided an ideal habitat for radical militants to flourish. Where borders are controlled by militants, smugglers are obliged to cooperate with them for access, thereby building an alliance between jihadist militancy and organized crime. Unlike the Algerians, the Tunisian security forces lack both the necessary equipment and the required level of training and professionalism to effectively guard the borders. The shortcomings in border management result in a security vacuum that is easily exploited by both jihadists and contraband cartels. The challenge is further complicated by the absence of suitable counterpart institutions on the Libyan side, and the high dependency of economically marginalized border communities on informal cross-border trade.

Migration from Libya has strained infrastructure and social cohesion notably in Tunisia, the only neighboring country that has not sealed its border with Libya. February 2015 estimates from different government sources of the number of Libyan refugees ranged between 1 million and 2 million, equivalent to roughly 10 percent of Tunisia's population. While most refugees arrived during the outbreak of violence in 2011, the recent escalation of the conflict in

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Zelin, "ICSR Insight: The Tunisian-Libyan Jihadi Connection," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, July 6, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," The Soufan Group, December 2015.

Libya has once more reinforced the flow. Tunisians complain about rising prices for housing, strains on public services and, in particular, Libyan residents' consumption of subsidized goods.<sup>7</sup> A new large wave of displaced migrants in the event of intensified fighting in Western Libya would be a further blow to Tunisia's fragile domestic equilibrium.

The macroeconomic impact of the Libya crisis has hit Tunisia the hardest. While bilateral trade with Libya makes up only 3.1 percent of Tunisia's total foreign trade, alterations of flows between the complementary economies have a high impact. According to a 2014 study, "a correlation analysis of [...] Libya and Tunisia over the period 1995–2013 reveals a close relationship between their GDP levels."<sup>8</sup> During the 2009 financial crisis, the dynamism of Tunisian exports toward Libya, boosted by bilateral trade facilitation measures, helped compensate for Tunisian losses on the European market. Following the breakdown of the Libyan economy, in 2013 and 2014 Tunisia's GDP shrunk by around 3.7 and 3.8 percent respectively. Moreover, until recently, Libya supplied more than 25 percent of Tunisian fuel needs at a preferential price, a quota that is unlikely to be held up now that Libyan oil output is down to 300,000 barrels per day. In addition, before 2011, around 1.8 million Libyan tourists went to Tunisia each year, a figure that dropped by 30 percent after 2011. To this adds the halt of remittances of the 100,000 Tunisians working in Libya prior to the conflict, providing 0.56 percent of Tunisia's GDP in 2012).

“ ***In Algeria, the security impact of the Libyan governance vacuum is direly felt at a peak of political vulnerability.*** ”

Keen on countering the damaging influence of external players such as Russia, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey on Libya's domestic cohesion,

<sup>7</sup> Omer Karasapan, "The Impact of Libyan Middle-Class Refugees in Tunisia," Brookings Institution, March 17, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Situation Brief: The Libyan Conflict and its Impact on Egypt and Tunisia," August, 2014.

since 2015 Tunisia has worked with Algeria, and to some extent Egypt, in a joined diplomatic initiative to stabilize Libya. In Algeria, too, the security impact of the Libyan governance vacuum is direly felt at a peak of political vulnerability.

## Algeria's Succession-Reform

### Conundrum

For many years, analysts have been speculating about the odds of a destabilization of Algeria following the end of ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's reign. The outlook of a managed succession provided the background for the 2011 ouster of autocratic rulers in several Arab countries. In late March 2017, the first TV images of Bouteflika in months, showing him speechless and confused, raised serious doubts over his ability to govern and strongly suggested that the leadership change is already underway.

While the presidential succession of the Algerian leader remains opaque, the formal leadership change alone will barely suffice to generate revolutionary turmoil in Algiers. The memory of the 1990s civil war, the experience and repressive capacity of the Algerian military, the lack of a broader protest movement, the unpopularity of Algeria's legal Islamist parties, and the tragic aftermath of regime change in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, are among the arguments most frequently evoked in favor of Algerian continuity.<sup>9</sup> Although recent reforms have strengthened the presidency, power is still mainly held by the military, which reduces the likeliness of a political disruption by means of a presidential succession.<sup>10</sup> Although a power struggle may arise within the military, the need to preserve shared interests is likely to prevail over personal rivalries.

Despite these premises, the leadership succession remains a threshold moment to question a governance model that is no longer able to deliver. Through a

<sup>9</sup> Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, "Apocalypse, Not!," Carnegie Endowment, February 1, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Abdallah Brahimi, "Algeria's Military Makeover," Carnegie Endowment, April 10, 2016.

buy-off policy sustained by energy revenue, Algeria's authoritarian rentier system has been able to navigate the storm of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Energy revenue enabled the regime to amass large foreign currency reserve, maintain a slow but stable economic growth, retain a bloated public sector and subsidise social goods such as food, housing, fuel, public transport and cheap loans.<sup>11</sup> Hydrocarbons account for 95 percent of Algerian exports and two-thirds of the state budget.<sup>12</sup> For 2017 the Algerian state budget is at \$63 billion, just over half the \$110 billion of 2015.<sup>13</sup> The two-legged strategy the Algerian regime has so far been used to keep dissent at bay — swift crackdowns on dissent and paying off the interest groups that nurture the protests — is now likely to be jeopardized. The crash of the oil price since mid-2014 has been eroding the regime's power base, and accelerated the decline of an already weakened Algerian energy sector suffering from lack of foreign investment and poor infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> The coincidence of leadership change with low energy prices helped trigger the 1990 upheaval, the suppression of which eventually engulfed the country in civil war. Today, the coincidence of leadership uncertainty with the rupture of the Algerian governance model triggered by low energy prices builds destabilizing political momentum for Algeria, and the broader region.<sup>15</sup>

“**The *pouvoir* hopes to market a prospective successor as a reformer who will continue the first timidly enacted measures of modernization.**”

11 Intissar Fakir, Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, “Running Low: Algeria's Fiscal Challenges and Implications for Stability,” Carnegie Endowment, February 11, 2016.

12 The World Bank, “Algeria's Economic Outlook – Spring 2016.”

13 Idriss Jebari, “Algeria's Discontented Middle Class,” Carnegie Endowment, January 19, 2017.

14 Fakir / Ghanem-Yazbeck, op cit.

15 Aurèlia Mañé Estrada, Laurence Thieux, Miguel Hernando de Larramendi, “Argelia en la encrucijada: condicionantes, tendencias y escenarios,” Fundación Alternativas, February 16, 2017.

Under the pressure of low revenue, the state has been facing the inevitability of public spending cuts and other austerity measures. Reforms enacted have included an increase of the existing value-added-tax, as well as price increases for consumption products such as fuel, alcohol, tobacco, tires, and administrative services.<sup>16</sup> The *pouvoir* hopes to market a prospective successor as a reformer who will continue the first timidly enacted measures of modernization, enabling it to postpone sensitive subsidy cuts and the bulk of much-needed structural reforms to after the succession — a risky gamble.<sup>17</sup> Time is running out as under the current spending levels, Algeria's foreign currency reserves is estimated to last little more than a year.<sup>18</sup>

Aware of the time bomb it rests on, the *pouvoir* has been testing different options for limited political opening as a valve for popular discontent, such as the January 2016 constitutional amendments. However, it is doubtful whether those limited concessions will suffice to contain discontent as public spending cuts become fiercer and the army will increasingly need to revert to crude repressive measures. The long-standing assumptions about Algerian stability may slowly erode as the collective memory of the 1990s civil war fades among Algeria's youthful population and, simultaneously, the ratio between grievances and the government's financial appeasement capacity becomes ever less favorable.<sup>19</sup> State legitimacy as a fatherly provider has further suffered as the lack of resilience of the Algerian economy against price shocks has highlighted the decades of mismanagement and stalled reforms that the state stands responsible for. While a climate of discontent spreads the country, in the eyes of the *pouvoir*, its shortage in cash has turned protests into a serious security risk. A clash between these opposing poles seems inevitable.<sup>20</sup>

16 Jebari, op cit.

17 Riccardo Fabiani, “Paving the Way for Bouteflika's Succession,” Carnegie Endowment, February 17, 2016.

18 Fakir / Ghanem Yazbeck, op cit.

19 Ibid

20 Jebari, op cit.

While Algeria struggles domestically, its regional rival Morocco is well-placed to take advantage of its neighbor's moment of fragility.

## Reawakening Conflict in Western Sahara

Following the 1991 ceasefire that turned a 16-year armed conflict between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front into a frozen one, Western Sahara has become an essentially forgotten conflict. Over the past years, Morocco has consolidated its geopolitical profile in Africa, and as a valued partner and bridge for Western governments, both of which have increased Rabat's leverage. At a time when a domestically troubled Algeria is heading toward economic and political crisis, Rabat senses a moment of opportunity.

In February, upon intervention of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, Morocco withdrew security forces from the Guerguerat buffer zone between Mauritania and Morocco-held Western Sahara, thereby avoiding an escalation of hostilities after months of tense stand-off. Following Morocco's recent readmittance into the African Union (AU), Rabat is more likely to revert to retaliation measures, and could use its overwhelmingly superior military power to take full control over Western Sahara, where Saharawi youth is increasingly keen on taking up arms.<sup>21</sup>

Morocco's renewed efforts to push the balance in the Sahara conflict in its favor also display the conflict's disruptive potential in the AU, and regional affairs more broadly. Morocco has lobbied hard to gather regional powers' support for their claims over Western Sahara, to the chagrin of supporters of Saharan self-determination such as Algeria, South Africa, and Nigeria. Morocco's ability to stir up AU meetings

via its refusal to accept the participation of Saharawi delegates foreshadows a power struggle and potential stalemate within the AU, at the likely expense of the body's central role in regional crisis management.

Morocco's increased regional leverage is also illustrated in the EU's ongoing dilemma over an EU–Morocco agricultural agreement. EU–Morocco relations are icy since a European Court of Justice declared the agreement may not include the territories of Western Sahara, thereby putting into question the entire commercial relationship between the EU and one of its closest partners, and in turn, enhancing Morocco's incentive to reduce its dependence on the EU market and accelerate its bet on emerging economies in Africa. Since an appeal was rejected in December 2016, the ruling put the EU in an unfavorable leverage position with Morocco, despite the tacit acceptance of several EU member states of Morocco's desire to retain the status quo over Western Sahara.

Although Morocco's main allies in the EU (France, Spain, Belgium, and Portugal) stay silent on the Sahara and support Morocco in all major fora, the EU will eventually have to comply with the ruling. A second ruling on an EU–Morocco fisheries agreement is expected towards the end of 2017, complicating EU–Morocco relations even further.<sup>22</sup> In February, Moroccan agriculture minister and Palace confidante Aziz Akhannouch insinuated in a statement that if the verdict was applied, Morocco might consider turning a blind eye on irregular migration to the Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla on Moroccan soil.

**“ Rabat is more likely to revert to retaliation measures, and could use its overwhelmingly superior military power to take full control over Western Sahara.”**

21 Ignacio Cembrero, “Veillée d’armes au Sahara Occidental,” TSA Algeria, February 26, 2017.

22 Ignacio Cembrero, “España teme ser la primera víctima de la tensión entre Marruecos y la UE,” El Confidencial, February 13, 2017.

In the wake of Rabat's unusually heavy 2016 fallout with UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon over the latter's pro-Saharawi statements, Russia has taken a closer interest in Western Sahara. Morocco has turned to buy military equipment from Russia, causing uproar in Algeria, Russia's first client in the Maghreb and Morocco's rival. Experts say Morocco's decision to strengthen its military and diversify its arms suppliers was motivated by developments in the Western Sahara conflict, at a moment of Algerian vulnerability. Moscow has signaled its support of Morocco's position. However, Russia's abstention on a Western Sahara UN Security Council vote in late April 2016 (two days after a visit by the Algerian prime minister to Moscow), and a meeting of Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Putin's Special Representative for the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov in Moscow on March 24, 2017 ahead of an important UN Security Council vote in April, show that in the event of conflicting interests, Algeria remains Russia's prime partner in the Maghreb. A reheating of the Western Sahara conflict could well become the next issue of contention between Russia and the West.

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## Russian Revisionism Eyes the Maghreb

Although Russia's claims that its primary goal in the Middle East is to contain ISIS have been refuted by its military record in Syria, the Syria intervention has been a great success for Russia in upgrading its geopolitical weight on the world stage through the Middle Eastern backdoor. Russia's increasing

engagement in Libya, therefore, has raised questions on whether Moscow's support to Bashar al-Assad in Syria was a blueprint for similar endeavors in other parts of the Arab world.

The timing for Moscow to extend a winning strategy and broaden its reach from the Levant to North Africa is perfect. Adept at exploiting timely vacuums, the Russian air campaign on Aleppo started on the U.S. election night when the world's eyes were fixed elsewhere. Following the inauguration of Donald Trump as president in January 2017, indications amass that the United States will largely leave the field in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to Russia. The Trump administration appears to share Moscow's preference for anti-Islamist strongmen and is keen on refocusing U.S. efforts in MENA on countering terrorism, away from broader nation-building measures. The European Union, in the meantime, is struggling with internal disintegration and the prospects of a make-or-break election year, in which it is unlikely to undertake major forays in its neighborhood.<sup>23</sup>

Russian analysts have underlined that Russia's Middle Eastern engagement has been about a tactical reassertion of Russian global positioning and its interests in its Eurasian regional environment, rather than about its narrower interests in the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> If the Syria intervention has been a way of bolstering Russia's global role by leveraging Moscow's local influence to outplay the West, Russia's involvement in Libya may serve similar ends with notably less financial and political investment. Although securing a central role in Libya's broader economic and political reconstruction is doubtlessly attractive, functional incentives such as arms sales, oil contracts and port/air access, even more than in Syria, seem too narrow goals to make a heavy political gamble in Libya worthwhile. For the West, losing oil or arms contracts in the Maghreb would be a mere nuisance

<sup>23</sup> Tarek Megerisi, Mattia Toaldo, "Russia in Libya: A Driver for Escalation?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 8, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: Back to a 'Grand Strategy' or Enforcing Multilateralism?" Politique Étrangère, IFRI, Summer 2016.

compared to the establishment of Russia as a major geopolitical competitor in the Maghreb that would reduce European influence at its doorstep and enhance the EU's geopolitical dependency on the Kremlin's moods.

The Kremlin's role in Libya has grown fast since mid-2016. Following Putin's fervent opposition against the 2011 NATO intervention, Moscow established ties with both the Tobruk government and its rival in Tripoli. More recently Moscow deepened ties with Khalifa Haftar, the UN-backed government's main rival, who controls most of Eastern Libya, including key oil installations. Russia formally maintains support to the General National Assembly (GNA) in Tripoli and the goal of Libyan unity, while de facto throwing its full support to Haftar and the Tobruk-based government.

Western criticism of Russian support to Haftar stayed without consequences, thereby indirectly encouraging further Russian unilateralism. Haftar has visited Moscow several times since mid-2016, and a visit to Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov in January 2017 showcased Russian

backing at a crossroads moment when the Haftar was advancing toward Tripoli to challenge the Sarraj-led GNA. February 2017 reports that Russia stationed special forces and drones at the Egypt-Libya border, denied by the Kremlin, raised U.S. and European concerns over a Moscow-backed escalation of the Libyan conflict.<sup>25</sup>

Moscow's support for Haftar, however, is not just about Russia's quest for Libya, but also for Egypt. Next to Algeria the other North African geopolitical

heavyweight with a long history of partnership with Russia, Moscow has sought opportunity at a moment of strained US-Egypt relations. Moscow's backing of Haftar alongside Cairo shows support for al-Sisi in an area of great concern to the Egyptian president in which U.S. support has fallen short. Aside from Libya and Egypt, Russia is extending ties in other North African countries, too. Battle-proven Russian arms plus intelligence assistance are attractive when fighting insurgencies and terrorism, especially as Moscow's offer is broader and deeper than what the United States and EU (both of whom are reluctant to share intelligence data) are offering.<sup>26</sup>

## Filling the Voids in Maghreb Stability

The brief review of five challenges faced by the Maghreb suggests that these are intimately linked and mutually reinforcing. In order to prevent a further destabilization of the Maghreb, Europe — beyond the traditional Maghreb patrons France, Spain, and Italy — must conceive the Maghreb as a key region in which the future stability within the EU is at play. That is a first step, the second is more difficult.

The main transatlantic dilemma in the Maghreb is that a region with an enormous disruptive potential for Europe, which Europeans were the most influential external players until recently, after the Levant increasingly becomes a stage on which regional and global rivalries are being fought. The main entry point that makes such confrontations possible is political void.

This means that Europeans, having a clear economic and diplomatic head start in the Maghreb, need to devise policy in ways that do not allow major vacuums to emerge. It certainly means that Europe — or leading EU member states — will need to engage in areas that would otherwise not count among the bloc's immediate priorities. Europe needs to make sure it

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<sup>25</sup> Kathrin Hille, "Russia's Middle East Ambitions Grow with Syria Battlefield Success," *Financial Times*, January 19, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> John C.K. Daly, "Closer Military Ties Between Russia and the Maghreb," *The Arab Weekly*, May 9, 2016.



remains attractive as a primary partner in its Southern Flank, or it will be outmaneuvered — and ultimately, weakened — by global and regional disruptors such as Russia, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey. Europe's moral standards are often a liability to its ability to pre-empt geopolitical voids in its neighborhood. Russia has filled many slots that others have deliberately rejected, such as deploying troops to save an allied Syrian dictator or propping up a general who seeks to establish himself as the next Libyan strongman. To be sure, the EU is not intent on building its neighborhood into a sphere of influence, nor has Europe alone the desire or capacity to fill all the voids. But in essence, to minimize disruptive powers' playing field in the Maghreb in the face of U.S. indifference, Europe would have to establish itself as the main security provider in its Southern periphery.<sup>27</sup>

The big unknown remains the degree to which the United States will get involved in the Maghreb, a region Trump has never mentioned during his campaign. As core U.S. security interests in the Middle East are not rooted deeply in the Maghreb, a U.S. focus there is unlikely. Most observers now see more elements of continuity than disruption in U.S. Middle East policy, in particular in what looks as a forceful return to partnerships with authoritarian strongmen. Echoing the sentiments of the American public, Trump has frequently stressed his reluctance to involve the U.S. military in Arab wars, and his determination to step back from former presidents' forays into nation-building and regime change. Moreover, Trump's background and campaign pledges suggest that he will project U.S. foreign policy first and foremost as trade policy.<sup>28</sup> All this seems to suggest that rather than filling vacuums, the Trump administration will be busy creating them. The silver lining of Trump's indifference to the Maghreb is that it will necessarily push Europeans toward greater leadership in ensuring the stability of its Southern Flank.

Europe–Maghreb relations are full of strategic and moral dilemmas with no easy solutions. However, a few concrete action points appear inevitable. A more strategic European approach for de-escalation and de-vacuumization in the Maghreb will inevitably need to include a broader and more united engagement Libya beyond the current migration and terrorism prism, especially since U.S. President Trump's statement in May that there would be no role for the United States in Libyan stabilization and nation-building measures. Avoiding escalation and governance vacuums should involve a timely boost to European efforts in regional powers' crisis management capacity. This would include full support to regional diplomatic initiatives such as the Tunisian–Algerian proposals on Libya. It would require a major mediation effort to bring the competing regional powers Algeria and Morocco to revive diplomatic ties and scale down their rivalry in a fast-changing geopolitical environment. Finally, another inevitable measure beyond the 2017 electoral year will of course be a strategic, forward-looking pan-European approach to migration. Effective valves to reduce migration pressures including legal ways into the EU are needed not only to manage flows, but also to pre-empt the weaponization of migration by Europe's international partners and challengers alike. Emmanuel Macron's victory in France's May 2017 presidential elections highlight his need to deliver effective, lasting solutions for migration, which was the number one concern for 75 percent of Le Pen voters. The Maghreb is 14 kilometers away from Europe. Trying to sit any of these challenges out will backfire, sooner rather than later.

<sup>27</sup> See also Sven Biscop, "A strategy for Europe's Neighborhood: Keep Resilient and Carry On?" Real Instituto Elcano, January 16, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Perry Cammack, "Picking Up the Middle East Pieces," *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Winter 2017.

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