



403

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NORTH AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN STRATEGIC INTERESTS COINCIDE

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Tunisia and Algeria today share one key objective with their European neighbours which lie across the Mediterranean – that of preventing Libya, in the words of the Algerian prime minister Abdelmalek Sellal, from turning into “Libyanistan”. This is the first time in more than half a century that leading European countries and the US share a strategic interest in stabilising North Africa.

In the wake of the Isis led suicide attack on the Tunisian boarder town of Ben Guerdane on 7th March, the only Arab country which is on the path to democracy, Tunisia, needs all the military hardware and training its European and American friends can muster. It should get them free of charge. That the US will supply a state of the art electronic surveillance system for the Tunisian-Libyan frontier is welcome. The country’s western neighbour, Algeria, has been steadfast, since the fall of Ben Ali five years ago in helping the Tunisia security forces to fight domestic terrorist groups, notably in the Châambi mountains close to the boarder between the two countries.

Were Isis to gain a real foothold in Tunisia, the repercussions would be felt far and afar - in Algeria and, across the Mediterranean, in Italy, Spain and France. The EU has learnt from bitter experience that measures to help stabilise southern rim countries must be preventive and, if possible avoid European or American boots on the ground. The responsibility to help Tunisia lies squarely with the Europeans. As President Barack Obama made clear, the days of European free riding on American military hardware are over. He reflected that he “had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya’s proximity, being invested in the follow-up.” They were not and the growing mayhem in Libya is partly the result of Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron’s gung-ho behaviour. Nor did the EU do anything much to help Tunisia in 2011 when over a million refugees poured flooded Tunisia. An estimated 500,000 Libyans live in Tunisia today.

Tunisia has a small army whose respect for democracy and fighting capacity it is proud off. But it is small and short of modern weapons. The country’s economy is not doing well, buffeted by the uncertainty which followed the fall of Ben Ali, the injury its important tourist sector suffered after terrorist attacks in 2015 and the strikes which continue to cripple its phosphate and fertiliser sector, a major source of foreign income.

Transitions to democracy are long term affairs and especially difficult to manage in such a strife torn region. However critical one might be of the management of Tunisia's economy since 2011, it should be obvious to policy makers in Brussels that were Isis to establish a base in the country, not only would democracy be stopped in its tracks but the flow of refugees from southern rim Mediterranean countries to Italy would turn into a flood. Algeria would be badly destabilised and probably Morocco. Spain would be directly concerned. The refugee crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean has shaken Europe to its very foundations. So have the recent terrorists attacks in Paris and Brussels. Europe simply cannot continue treating North Africa as its forgotten frontier.

Algeria has acted, for the past five years as the de facto guarantor of Tunisia's security, the armed forces and intelligence services of both countries working closely together. Algeria is determined to prevent Isis gaining ground in the region as this would threaten its south-east which suffered a severe blow three years ago when terrorists from Libya tried to torch the gas field of Tigentourine. Akram Khariief, arguably the keenest observer of Algerian security affairs, explains that Africa's largest country faces two security threats: one is domestic with most terrorists (700-1200) concentrated in the Kabyle mountain range due east of Algiers. Others which operated further south have been sucked into neighbouring Mali, Niger and Libya, pushed out by the massive redeployment of the Algerian army from the country's western boarder with Morocco to its frontiers with Tunisia, Libya and Mali.

Isis fighters originate in Tunisia and Morocco, to a lesser degree in Algeria. Networks of Moroccans trying to cross Algeria on their way to Libya have been recently dismantled and flights from Algiers to Tripoli stopped. Other recruits to Isis in its Libyan base of Sirte include Chechens, Afghanis, Pakistanis and Sudanese, although a majority are from the Maghreb.

Security cooperation between Algeria and the US is good as it increasingly is with European nations, not least the UK. Algeria was given advance notice of US strikes against the Libyan town of Sabratha last month and its army supplies French military vehicles engaged in the Berkhane operation in Mali with fuel. The country has emerged as the lynchpin of the fight against Isis in North Africa. Its armed forces are professional, its intelligence capacity and knowledge of tribal networks across the region unrivalled. The collapsed in the price of oil and the bitter infighting around the succession of an ailing president certainly cloud the future but it is doubtful whether they seriously impair its capacity to fight Isis. Its diplomats remain, in the eyes of their American, European and Arab peers, of high calibre.

Europe is learning that it must talk to Algeria and Tunisia as equals. It must forge a joint security policy in what is a very complex region. Unilateral Western interventions, most of which in the Middle East have ended in disaster in recent years are a thing of the past. That past stretches back to Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798. A new policy of security partnership between Europe, the US and North Africa is in the making, notwithstanding the fact that the EU has long given up any pretence of trying to bring Algeria and Morocco closer on finding a solution the international legal status of the Western Sahara. The US is trying, France simply blocking any attempt the United Nations makes to move matters forward.