

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Opportunities and Challenges for US- Maghreb Cooperation

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Good afternoon.

It's wonderful to be here at CSIS. Thank you, Jon, for the opportunity to speak to such a distinguished group. Today, I'd like to share some thoughts on the Maghreb, a region that is slowly growing in visibility and importance. It is a region in which I have a deep interest. It is a region that faces many challenges. It is a region for which, I believe, there is also much hope.

I'm here, of course, to speak about Opportunities and Challenges for US-Maghreb Cooperation on terrorism. Before I do, a few observations about the Maghreb. First, the five countries of the Maghreb share much. Centuries ago, the region was united. Even today, from religion to cuisine, the citizens of the five countries have many ties that bind them. And, with only 100 million people across a vast area, there are good reasons for them to come together. For together, the countries and people of the Maghreb are far better able to address their problems. And from poverty to politics, there are problems.

Second, despite the ties, there are also major differences. Indeed, the differences are probably greater than one imagines from a distance. Some of these are the result of history or culture, but some are political. Unfortunately, these disparities, and particularly, the lack of a resolution of the Western Sahara question, block the cooperation and integration the region needs. For the region to achieve real success, the key differences must be resolved or at least bridged. And, I believe, regional organizations, such as the Arab Maghreb Union, must be strengthened.

Third, US interest and engagement has waxed and waned over time. And, the interest of the Maghreb countries in the United States has not always been high. Some of the Maghreb countries have been, at times, in broad opposition to the United States. All of them have degrees of opposition to at least some key US policies. That said, today, from security to commerce, the United States has wide

ranging and important ties to the Maghreb. And, the Administration of President Obama intends to remain engaged. We are actively looking for opportunities to cooperate with our partners in the Maghreb to advance our common interests.

These three overarching observations have an impact on a major challenge for the region: terrorism. Terrorism is clearly a defining problem for the Maghreb. It is one the United States can and is helping with. On the positive side of the ledger, the Maghreb's experience in countering terrorism and extremist activity—particularly since 9/11—is broadly a “good news” story. Having said that, there are serious challenges in each of the five countries. We must not underestimate the intent and the capability of the adversary. And, we must not underestimate some of the challenges in the cross-border cooperation that is essential if terrorism is to be defeated. But, the positive trends in counterterrorism activity and in relationships in the region point toward significant progress in critical areas: intelligence sharing, law enforcement and border security cooperation, aggressive counter-messaging and information operations, and efforts to address the local socioeconomic conditions that terrorists seek to exploit. These have all contributed to the inability of al-Qa'ida to make significant inroads in the region.

Having given you my "bottom line up front," I'd like to spend a few minutes discussing four issues. First, the threat from al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb. Second, the response of the countries of the Maghreb. Third, how the United States can help, with some thoughts on the obstacles and challenges to cooperation. And, finally, the international dimension.

Al Qai'da in the Islamic Maghreb

Today, the biggest terrorist challenge facing the Maghreb is, of course, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, or “AQIM.” Put simply: AQIM rhetorically supports the use of terrorism to establish an Islamic state in Algeria and the region. It has repeatedly stated its intent to bring down regional governments and to expel Western influence from historically Muslim lands. And, of course, it has carried out acts of terrorism.

In terms of statements, strategy, and tactics, AQIM's behavior mirrors that of AQ generally: it uses under or ungoverned spaces to organize, recruit and plan, and to undertake aggressive messaging to build connections with vulnerable local

populations. In addition to conducting low-level attacks in northeastern and southern Algeria, AQIM elements have repeatedly targeted Westerners for kidnapping-for-ransom in the Sahel, and have killed a number of local military personnel, an American NGO worker and a British hostage.

While AQIM and the other affiliated AQ groups have long been of concern to the United States, they have taken on a new significance in the wake of the failed attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab to detonate a bomb on NW Flt 253. The attempted attack made clear that the affiliates, in the case of Flt 253 al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, are fully prepared to attack the United States directly. While we already had many reasons to be concerned about al-Qa'ida affiliates, the attack gave us one more, and a serious one. Whether or not AQIM is working to carry out an attack similar to AQAP, we already know the organization poses a dangerous threat to countries of the region. And, it is a real and immediate threat to American citizens and other Westerners in North Africa. A number of Europeans have been or are now in their hands. And, although AQIM has historically not targeted Americans, the willingness on the part of AQIM to target Westerners gives us another good reason to redouble our counterterrorism efforts in the region.

The Response by the Maghreb

In the face of the threat of terrorism, each of the five countries of the Maghreb has reacted vigorously. Algeria, a strong partner to the United States in global counterterrorism efforts, has stepped up operations against AQIM, with notable success. These efforts have put pressure on AQIM, resulting in a shift of activity to the ungoverned areas of northern Mali and Mauritania. In fact, AQIM faces difficulties in recruiting and increasingly lacks popular support in Algeria. Algeria has become a model of resilience and effort, after emerging from the challenge of a brutal, 12-year civil conflict that may have claimed nearly 100,000 of its citizens' lives.

Libya, facing the threat of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, took the lead in developing new approaches to counterterrorism. Libya undertook serious rehabilitation efforts with members of the group and arguably influenced the group's decision to break its ties with al-Qa'ida. On July 3, 2009, LIFG members

in the UK published a communiqué repudiating the LIFG's merger with al-Qa'ida, stating that it was invalid. In September 2009, six LIFG leaders in Libya's Abu Salim prison issued a 417-page document that renounced violence and said they adhere to a more sound Islamic theology than that espoused by al-Qa'ida. Over 100 LIFG members pledged to adhere to this revised doctrine and have been pardoned and released from prison in Libya. Libya's success, led by Saif al-Islam, is worth further attention and may serve as a model to apply to other extremist groups.

Morocco continues to aggressively target terrorist activity within its borders. It was a target, for example, in 2003 and again in 2007 when commercial establishments, a Jewish community center and the US Consulate and American Center in Casablanca were targets of attack. Tunisia is acutely aware of the threat of AQ, having suffered a major attack on a synagogue in April 2002. It has consistently placed a high priority on combating domestic and regional extremism and terrorism. Mauritania has also been the target of AQIM attacks and is committed to the effort to combat the group.

In the actions of each of the five countries in the Maghreb, we see positive momentum, giving us reasons to be hopeful. First and foremost, the unilateral efforts of the Maghreb countries remain aggressive and constant. Each of the governments has adapted to the changing nature of a nimble and determined adversary. In addition, the cooperation between and among these countries has been improving. Given the differences I mentioned earlier, this cooperation is far from perfect, but it is improving. We must continue to encourage this trend.

One measure of the success of the Maghreb countries is found in AQIM's current situation. Under pressure, AQIM has been unable to conduct a large-scale attack since 2008. The organization appears financially strapped, and a recent increase in hostage-taking is clearly an attempt to raise revenue. AQIM has failed to establish a viable presence in Morocco, Tunisia, or Libya. Despite an increase in the recruitment of Mauritians, which is troubling, the Muslim populations of the region do not appear, generally, attracted to the extremist ideology espoused by AQIM.

US Assistance

While the Maghreb governments have had some success in combating AQIM and terrorism, there remains much to be done. The threat is serious. Responding to the commitment of the governments in the region, and with them in the lead, the United States has sought to provide appropriate assistance at appropriate times. Our aid has come in a wide range of areas, including military, intelligence and economic.

One important example of US aid is the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership – or TSCTP – a multi-year assistance program coordinated among the State Department, DOD, and USAID. The program aims to provide nearly \$150 million in training and development assistance to the Trans-Sahara region for the next several years. TSCTP is meant, in part, to help local governments ramp up their counterterrorism capabilities. We hope it will leave behind a cooperative framework that bolsters intergovernmental connections, training, and counterterrorism activity.

Bilaterally, the United States also has ongoing training assistance with Libya and Morocco via our Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program (ATA). Our ATA programs provide counterterrorism help to police forces, from management improvements to tactical training. Libya and Morocco together received over \$500,000 in specialized ATA police training for nearly 90 officers over the past fiscal year. And, several weeks ago, we re-started our ATA Program with Algeria. Working with the Department of Defense, we have also used the “Section 1206 Authorities” to bolster Maghreb countries capabilities in such areas as maritime security, general border security, and border monitoring capabilities.

Beyond direct counterterrorism aid, over the past several years we have bolstered cooperation at the political level through the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). As in TSCTP, our discussions with AMU country representatives attempt to approach the counterterrorism challenge and priorities in North Africa from a broad perspective. We address not only training and equipment issues, but also such challenges as public diplomacy and economic development.

This latter challenge, economic development, is major. The very high regional unemployment rate of 16 percent, combined with a massive youth bulge where

more than one third of Maghreb's population is under the age of 15, creates an ideal environment for the proliferation of extremist ideologies and terrorist organizations. By promoting jobs, increasing growth, eliminating barriers to trade, and integrating economies, the Maghreb governments will help counter home-grown extremism. The US Government helps in this effort and engages the countries of the Maghreb in senior policy dialogues. We provide technical assistance to encourage private sector-led growth, and a wide range of other help.

Efforts are currently underway to expand the ties between the private sectors in the United States and those in the North African nations through the creation of private sector networks, innovation and leadership incubators, and the launching of investment promotion programs.

So there is already a great deal of counterterrorism cooperation, both large and small, underway between the United States and the Maghreb. I do not want to paint, however, too rosy picture. There are serious challenges. The issues vary by country, but broadly speaking, for the United States they include concerns about human rights, slow progress on democracy and limited capacities. From the perspective of the countries of the Maghreb, of course, the United States is not always the perfect partner either. They have their share of concerns about our policies and actions, which sometimes limit their willingness to accept our help.

International Engagement

Finally, I should note that the United States is not alone in its efforts to engage with and assist the Maghreb countries on terrorism. Other countries, including France, Italy and Spain, have strong ties to the region. Close to the Maghreb geographically, and in some cases with large expatriate populations, they are committed to the fight against terrorism. The European countries offer equipment, training and a wide range of development programs that are essential to meeting the challenge. The United States coordinates closely with our European allies, both capital to capital and on the ground through embassies.

Conclusion

One final thought to conclude: for the foreseeable future, AQIM will pose a threat to the Maghreb and Sahel. But while AQIM will continue to carry out attacks and

kidnappings, it does not pose the same level of threat that some groups do in other regions. Considerable credit goes to the commitment of regional governments to counter the threat, and to the absence of widespread support for the ideology of extremism. While the relative difficulties faced by AQIM at this moment offers hope for the future, we must not be complacent. The governments of the Maghreb, rightly, take this threat seriously. The United States, as a friend and ally, must continue to do the same.

For whatever the uncertainties about the future we do know this: to succeed in combating AQIM we must remain vigilant and smart. And, we must continue to build and strengthen our cooperation and coordination with our North African partners. We must collect and share intelligence. We must enhance capacity, both our own and our partners. We must plan and train together. We must be ready to respond nimbly to a crisis. For it is only through the hard, slow work of counterterrorism cooperation and capacity building, that we will ultimately succeed. And succeed we must, for the future of the people of both the Maghreb and the United States.

Thank you.