E-Notes

Taking Stock of U.S. Policy Options in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia

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North Africa

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Related program(s)

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The three countries that comprise the Maghreb region — Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia — are bound by important cultural, linguistic, and economic ties, and by a shared history of French occupation. Even after Africa's official decolonization, the Maghreb has remained a close and intense sphere of European, and especially French, influence (and the Maghreb in turn exerts a measure of influence over France). As for the United States, engagement since decolonization has focused on building new economic, inter-cultural, military, and political ties, and collaborating on international diplomatic efforts of mutual interest.

Whatever the ties among the three countries of the Maghreb, what is needed is a sensitive appraisal of each country's own unique trajectory. Algeria, for its part, has remained a behemoth in regional mediation while its changing internal politics has received minimal attention. Morocco has remained a steadfast ally and has ramped up its counterterror cooperation while presenting some human rights conundrums to U.S. engagement. And Tunisia's democratic progress has been marred by economic crisis and increased terror. While for years, the U.S. has engaged North Africa as a geostrategic location insofar as it has facilitated policy elsewhere—whether in the Sahel, the Mediterranean, or the Middle East—the time is ripe to elevate the Maghreb's profile in the minds of American policymakers.

Washington's Treatment of the Region: Three Prisms

Washington's perceptions of the region also have followed their own specific trajectory. First, Washington viewed the region through the prism of the Cold War, which cast Morocco and Tunisia as allies while Algeria, as leader of the non-aligned movement, was viewed with suspicion. Second, after achieving independence from France, the Maghreb came to be viewed by Washington through the lens of the traditional Middle East[1] (no longer falling under the purview of the State Department's Africa bureau, but rather the Near East bureau), and thereby in terms of support for the Middle East peace process. King Hassan II's rejection of pan-Arabism (Arab nationalism ran counter to his interests as a monarch) and Morocco's generally favorable stance on Israel and the peace process cast it as a moderate ally. Tunisia's Habib Bourguiba likewise rejected pan-Arabism not only as naïve but as a pretext for Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser's expansionist fantasies. Meanwhile, Algeria's policy toward Israel was not only much less amenable, but was also rather close to Muammar Qadhafi's regime, with which it also shared links to Nasser and pan-Arabist sympathies.

After September 11, the U.S.-led War on Terror became the third and current prism through which the U.S. dealt with the Maghreb states. Security cooperation became another axis through which Morocco and Tunisia expressed their eagerness to engage the U.S., but it also presented an opportunity for improved relations between the U.S. and Algeria. Undemocratic governance in all three regimes was overlooked in favor of stability and counter-terrorism (CT) efforts; reform efforts and political liberalization have historically been and remain secondary to this.

While stability and counterterror have continued to trump reform, democratization and human rights in the U.S. calculus in North Africa after the 2011 uprisings, the U.S. administration has nevertheless briefly rethought the nature of its support for democratization efforts given the gains that Islamists—understood at the time as potentially threatening to U.S. interests—made in their wake, particularly toward Morocco and Tunisia.[2]

While Algeria appears unlikely to go down a similar road any time soon, its internal politics and regional/geopolitical dynamics are nevertheless unpredictable, and it remains understudied by the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Perceived as implacable and unknowable, and flanked by two diplomatic darlings, Algeria is generally neglected and treated on a need-to-know basis. These differences have served as persistent challenges to crafting a holistic approach to the region and have led successive U.S. administrations to favor a country-based approach.

Algeria: Prospects Despite Limited Leverage

The relationship between the U.S. and Algeria has not been not hailed as often as those with Morocco and Tunisia. Nonetheless, U.S. relations with modern Algeria have had several high points. In 1959, then-presidential candidate John F. Kennedy expressed support for Algerian independence, winning a special place in Algeria's independence narrative (and a major plaza name in Algiers). Algeria also supported major U.S. international diplomatic goals on occasion. Its mediation was invaluable in releasing the U.S. hostages from Iran in 1981. In Africa, Algeria has likewise mediated between Ethiopia and Eritrea; between the Malian Government and its Touareg separatists, brokering the Algiers Accords in 2006; and plays a generally large role in the African Union (AU)—a body to which the U.S. prefers to defer in conflict resolution on the continent.

Moreover, Algeria has slowly risen in importance in terms of U.S. geostrategic and economic interests. Particularly with the rise of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Murabitoun, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar ad-Din, Boko Haram, and various fringes pledging allegiance to ISIS throughout the Maghreb and the Sahel, the relationship with Algeria has renewed importance. The U.S. rightly pursues counter-terrorism efforts with both Morocco and Algeria in intelligence and military training, but balancing the two relationships has been challenging at times given the strained relations between the two countries.

Generally, however, unlike with Morocco and Tunisia, relations between the U.S. and Algeria have been far from rosy. Some fundamental principles underlying Algerian foreign policy often put it at odds with that of the United States. Algeria's foreign policy position—marked by economic nationalism, non-alignment, national sovereignty, nonintervention, and support for liberation struggles in the global south—is formed by its long, painful battle against the entrenched French occupation. Where Algeria is suspicious of American hegemonic interests in the region, the U.S. has perceived a hostility and intransigence on the part of the Algerian authorities. The U.S. has often viewed Algeria as being aloof, and its Russian arms purchases are a source of concern (even if Algeria has diversified its suppliers of late), especially where there is little doubt that Algeria has long wished to weaken U.S. and French domination in the region. For Algeria, "playing both sides" is defended as simply being in the spirit of non-alignment.

Algeria remains guarded, again unlike Morocco and Tunisia, about the extent to which it welcomes U.S. development programs through USAID[3] and other development organizations, although it allows some MEPI[4] funds to be administered through the American embassy for initiatives that will benefit Algerian citizens, and promote democracy. The Algerian military and intelligence apparatus—both powerful and reportedly omnipresent—is known to be less-than-enthusiastic than those of its neighbors regarding an American presence in its territory. Its reliance on oil rents bolsters this belief that it need not accommodate foreign interests to the extent of its oil-poor neighbors, whose domestic and foreign policies are often shaped by aid conditionality and a general reliance on favorable economic and political relations with Western powers.

The Algerian regime is interested in keeping radical Islamism at bay, and in maintaining stability through a degree of continuity due in part to its own recent history of terrorism and violent internal conflict. These interests align with those of the U.S. While the U.S. foreign policy establishment has resolutely left behind the Cold War paradigm in exchange for a focus on terrorism, Algeria's behavior still vacillates between active cooperation with the U.S. on counter-terror operations and Cold War-era aloofness. The former is evidenced by cooperation in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and the Flintlock joint military exercises,[5] which sees Algerian participation in a regional military cooperation program organized by the U.S. The latter is demonstrated in Algiers' hesitance to expand engagement with Western powers beyond military cooperation. Indeed, its misgivings about any Western presence within the Algerian territory are part of a mindset that goes beyond the state apparatus and affects the citizenry as well.

Algeria enters a period of political uncertainty with the imminent passing of aging President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. (Source: Ricardo Stuckert/PR -Agência Brasil)

Nowadays, however, one can detect a thaw in attitudes toward the U.S. among Algerian officials, marked by a trend toward pragmatism. Seeing that its lack of economic diversification is unsustainable, the Algerian government is aware it must alter its course and its engagement with economic powers. Indeed, the history of close U.S. (and EU) relations with Morocco and Tunisia helps them support relatively more diversified economies that rely on foreign investment, tourism, and exports. Morocco especially enjoys a positive image in Washington due to its shrewd and pointed soft-diplomacy efforts. Even in the realm of cultural exchange, Algeria is slowly but surely coming around; in August 2016, the U.S. Embassy inaugurated the long-awaited American International School in Algiers.

Moreover, Algeria and the U.S. have enjoyed positive commerce and trade relations, with significant American investment in the oil and gas industry, and in the last few years, in pharmaceuticals, aviation, desalination, IT, telecommunications, biotechnology, financial services/banking, etc. In 2004, the Bush administration designated Algeria a beneficiary for duty-free treatment per the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP). Nevertheless, the U.S. has maintained pressure on Algeria to reform its prohibitive foreign investment laws; something Algeria has been slow to do given its principles of economic nationalism.

In spite of shared interests, Washington's policy focus and priority in the Maghreb region suffers a knowledge gap in respect to North Africa's largest country. Algeria has earned the reputation of the sleepy giant, if not because of any real inertia, then due to an opacity to American observers and a seemingly underwhelming amount of U.S. policy options. While Morocco is praised for its much-vaunted stability, "moderate" Islam, and attendant soft de-radicalization efforts, Tunisia is commended for the opposite: for flouting post-2011 norms by birthing a pluralist landscape with relative success. And whereas Morocco and Tunisia's multi-level engagement (political, democratic, economic, developmental, and cultural) with the U.S. provides policy openings, the same is not true in Algeria.

Protest movements and contentious politics around the region have received renewed attention in recent years, as the 2011 uprisings changed the landscape of political contestation across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). However when Algeria's *contentious politics* receives mention, the discussion begins and ends with the region's "first" Arab uprising over twenty years ago, referencing Algeria's 1988 political opening which led to an Islamist victory, whose cancellation sent the country reeling into an unspeakably violent conflict through the 1990s, and left the citizenry traumatized to this day. This approach obscures Algeria's last decade that has seen a rapid evolution in which political actors were (and are) contending with new challenges, and responding to political openings. The otherwise robust discussions on the changing nature of contemporary movements in the MENA region, changing civil society attitudes, and the implications for governance in the region and for U.S. foreign policy, often tend to omit Algeria, presumably because the uprisings "passed it by." Understanding contemporary Algerian politics and society on its own terms—not solely through the lens of the rest of the Middle East—remains critical.

One key challenge in Algeria will continue to be deepening cooperation on trade, intelligence, pre-emptive counterterror operations, and corrective military action, while also contending with Algeria's concerns about sovereignty. This is particularly true where the primacy of sovereignty in Algeria's foreign and domestic policy remains the key reason it does not allow foreign military bases on its territory, limits cultural exchange, only allows military over-flight rights in special cases, maintains a hostile foreign investment climate in spite of economic inefficiencies, and has refused arms purchases that require end-use monitoring. Deeper, targeted, smarter partnerships with Algeria can leverage its constructive role in maintaining stability and brokering peace in the North Africa/Sahel region. During his nomination for Commander of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), General David Rodriguez noted:

> Algeria's military is the most capable of any country in North Africa. As such, I view Algeria as a regional leader, capable of coordinating the efforts of the Sahelian countries to address transnational security threats. Algeria shares our concerns with the situation in northern Mali.

> Their knowledge of conditions on the ground in northern Mali is invaluable to the U.S. To ensure continued Algerian cooperation on northern Mali, any military solution must be United Nations authorized, internationally supported, and use African forces [...] I would continue to encourage Algerian regional leadership through regional exercise and conference participation, senior leadership engagement and high-level bilateral dialogues. (2013)

He went on to hail Algerian military and intelligence prowess and its ability to severely degrade terrorist capabilities domestically and at its borders.

A second challenge is in democracy promotion. Knowing its limits in a country averse to foreign intercession, U.S. administrations have tended to limit pressure on this topic in comparison with Morocco and post-2011 Tunisia. Understanding the societies and political cultures of countries with whom we work is crucial for formulating informed foreign policy. This is where U.S. foreign policy cannot afford the knowledge gap regarding the Algerian political landscape: the U.S. must consistently be apprised of, and reassess, how and whether to encourage reform and democratization.

Morocco: The Traditional Ally

The kingdom has been the more obvious ally in several respects since independence, and officials from both nations frequently reference Morocco as "the first" to recognize U.S. independence (though a treaty of friendship was signed with the Dey[6] of Algiers in 1795 as well). After independence, Morocco's Hassan II (r. 1961-1999) fostered close relations with both the U.S. and with Europe in the interest of military protection and economic growth. He reveled in his position as a broker for pro-U.S. policies in the region; he served as a silent mediator in the Middle East peace process and in U.S. tensions with Libya's Qadhafi. Yet to this day, the kingdom tends to play all diplomatic cards: though Hassan II leaned west, Morocco remained technically non-aligned; its support for the Palestinian cause has not eroded its quietly good relations with Israel (an attempt to balance domestic politics with its foreign policy). Morocco has recently cozied up to China, an expression of this diplomatic opportunism (which some in U.S. policy circles have mistakenly interpreted as a pivot).

The U.S.-Morocco relationship has also revolved around trade after signing a Free Trade Agreement in 2004. While this has boosted already-warm relations between the two countries, it is not without critics on the domestic scene, especially among labor interests who question the extent to which Moroccans are benefiting.

Morocco has also determined to make itself indispensable in the U.S.-led war on terror. King Mohammed VI collaborates closely with U.S. intelligence in preventing attacks on the Strait of Gibraltar and on activity along Morocco's border and the Sahel. In 2004, Morocco was rewarded with designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally. More recently, Morocco has hoped to add value to U.S. CT efforts by employing softer de-radicalization approaches such as highly publicized imam-trainings, diplomatic initiatives and campaigns in U.S. and EU capitals to spread "moderate Moroccan Islam" through the Maghreb and Sahel, and the use of female guides or *mourchidat* to spread messages of moderation to youth and families. As I have argued before, the fruits of these efforts are yet to be reaped and have other motivations as well. Moreover, it is not clear the extent to which peddling this state-led religious discourse can take root and be popular in the most problematic parts of Morocco, in particular in the urban margins where foreign fighter recruitment tends to be high.

Some of the hiccups in U.S.-Morocco relations have centered around the issue of the Western Sahara. While the U.S. does not recognize Morocco's claim to the disputed region, Washington does not actively contest it, it does not recognize the Western Sahara government, and it supports Morocco's autonomy plan for the region, which is implemented under a broader decentralization plan for the entire country. In 2013, then-U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice called for a human rights monitoring clause to be added to the UN peacekeeping mission known as MINURSO. Morocco responded by making clear that under no circumstance would it allow monitors into the territory and cancelled the regular joint-military exercises, leading the U.S. to abandon the proposal.

Morocco has behaved similarly toward the EU and its member states (like the U.S., the bloc takes an intentionally vague position on Western's Sahara's status), recalling ambassadors and launching diplomatic rows over perceptions of pro-Western Sahara policy. For both the U.S. and the EU, this policy ambiguity arises from the need to sustain Moroccan cooperation on counter-terror (and clandestine migration in the case of the EU) while not contravening stated values of human rights, democracy, and decolonization. Successive UN efforts to resolve the situation have floundered, with all proposals from partial autonomy to a temporary full autonomy leading to referendum, rejected by all sides[7] (Morocco, the Polisario Front,[8] and Algeria). The impasse over the Western Sahara continues to serve as one of the biggest obstacles to counterterror cooperation and improved economic relations among the Maghreb states.

This issue remains a key challenge for U.S. policy toward Morocco. A second U.S. policy challenge lies in the conundrum of promoting democracy in Morocco's hybrid authoritarian system, which combines personalism, clientelism, and economic predation with nominally democratic institutions, like parliament. (Indeed, studies have shown that introduction of nominally democratic institutions can bolster authoritarian continuity, and in the North African context specifically, attendant methods of cooptation have, *inter alia*, permitted several regimes to "weather" the 2011 uprisings.) The U.S. has opted to promote civil society organizations in Morocco and to support Morocco's stated goals of gradual reform. Instability in other parts of the region make gradualism, as opposed to sudden regime change, appealing for the United States.

Indeed in 2011, Morocco had its own protests. The pro-democracy movement, known as the February 20 Movement, or M20, called for more transfer of power from the king to parliament. Mohammed VI quickly averted further turmoil by announcing a referendum on constitutional reform, which

brought direct election of the parliament's lower chamber and granted the prime ministership to the political party winning a plurality in parliament. The Justice and Development Party (PJD), Morocco's leading legal Islamist party, won and put forth the country's first Islamist Prime Minister, Abdelilah Benkirane.

Prime Minister of Morocco Abdelilah Benkirane (Source: WikiMedia Commons)

These developments have done little to wrest the economy, military, judiciary, and even parliament from the king's grip. In fact, the expansion of nominally democratic institutions had the aforementioned effect of entrenching Mohammed VI's favor and providing him a scapegoat—policy successes were attributed to royal vision and failures to a laggard parliament. Combined with the tightly managed media and imagery surrounding the king and keeping him above the fray, grievances of the Moroccan populace, which resemble those of citizens across the region, have not translated into contempt for the monarch. This was partly responsible for the fragmentation of the 2011 protest movements, whose mimicry of the "down with the regime" slogans throughout the region proved irrelevant to the Moroccan context.

A third policy challenge involves Morocco's high volume of fighters to ISIS and other extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. Upwards of 3,000 Moroccans have joined ISIS since 2011, and Morocco now faces the added challenge of a closer ISIS hub, Libya. Like Algeria and Tunisia, Moroccan mosques are tightly monitored and administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and religious education is controlled and is uniform nationwide. Nevertheless, identifying Morocco's drivers of participation in trans-border and transnational violent extremism has been a persistent challenge: some cite poverty, unemployment, and economic incentives; some ideology and spiritual disenchantment; some cite humiliation and hopelessness. But in spite of far-reaching research, causes remain as yet too variant and diverse, even contradictory, thus difficult to pin down and address.

While the U.S. and Morocco are already vigorously collaborating on de-radicalization, too much time, resources, and effort are spent on the PR surrounding the initiatives. Instead, robust research on prison de-radicalization, successful models of extremist reintegration, and the specific conditions in Morocco producing this high number of ISIS recruits might be a better use of resources. This is especially true as Morocco's (and Tunisia's) high recruitment numbers are yet unexplained, as identical drivers exist in Algeria whose ISIS numbers are in the low hundreds.

Tunisia: A Fast-Moving Target

In 1799, the United States concluded its first agreement of friendship and trade with Tunisia, and established the first American consulate in Tunis in 1800. The U.S.-Tunisia relationship has also enjoyed a consistency since Tunisia's independence, even if security cooperation has been much more prioritized since 9/11 (much to the chagrin of some Tunisians).

These generally good relations with Tunisia over the decades have had moments of strain. Tunisia's erstwhile president, Habib Bourguiba, accused the U.S. of involvement in the 1985 Israeli special operations bombing of the PLO headquarters and in the 1988 assassination of the PLO chief deputy, both of which took place on its territory. Convinced Israel could not have carried out so precise a strike, he accused the U.S. of collusion—which the U.S. denied—in what was perceived as Israeli aggression against Tunisia. Other differences such as former president Ben Ali's wish to end Libya's diplomatic quarantine in the 1980s, while the U.S. wished to maintain pressure on Qadhafi, as well as Tunisia's support for Iraq in the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and the increasing U.S. criticism of Ben Ali's worsening authoritarianism, all served to drive intermittent wedges between the two allies. To be sure, at this time, the U.S. avoided public denunciations of the state of Tunisian human rights and restricted criticism to private and high-level discussions, avoiding any discussion of broader political reform.

During the Ben Ali period, the U.S. wrestled with how to engage an increasingly sclerotic regime that had lost touch with (as well as legitimacy among) the Tunisian people in spite of a good record in economic development and a willingness to ally with the United States on key interests. This was particularly stark where the regime had been, on some level, a guarantor of socially liberal domestic policies (such as religious tolerance, and women's issues) and of success in public service provision and economic diversification. The regime would not tolerate counsel or critique, external or domestic, using the law enforcement apparatus to control society and crush dissent.

Attention paid to Tunisia has thus surged since the uprisings, where its anti-government protests in December 2010 toppled this regime, and catalyzed regime change in the region. Middle East policy circles have watched Tunisia's political evolution with bated breath, and political ties

between Tunisia and the U.S. have morphed. From occasionally strained but friendly, stable, and primarily trade-focused—with Tunisia doing the majority of its trading with the U.S.—relations shifted to where the U.S. had to quickly contend with how to encourage Tunisia's fledgling democracy in spite of a sure advancement of Islamists (namely, the Ennahda party), whose political-social values, on their surface, seemed to contradict those of the United States.

Washington's space to encourage democratic reform, human rights, and to shift from foreign military financing (FMF) to more innovative methods of security/intelligence engagement became easier after the revolution. Although to be sure, Ennahda has been reticent about reform initiatives. Like other Islamists in the region, concerns were primarily regarding foreign sponsorship, informed by perceptions that reforms were not domestically-conceived, but dictated by American strategic interests. Citing U.S. interventionism throughout the region and beyond, Ennahda was concerned that U.S.-led reform efforts in the realms of educational reform, 'lifestyle'-related civil liberties, and women's issues would destroy the religious and familial fabric.

Some in the U.S. foreign policy community called on the Obama administration to isolate Ennahda and support the secular contenders, seeing its victory as a hindrance to U.S. interests. Ultimately, however, the U.S. government recognized that this too-early-to-tell fearmongering could itself jeopardize American interests in Tunisia and in the region and isolate its citizens. Instead, the U.S. decided to back the transition and to work with any democratically elected party in Tunisia.

Since 2011, the U.S. government has provided additional billions in direct aid and three rounds of loan guarantees to lessen the shock of the economic crisis and to support economic reform and small/medium enterprises (SMEs). Security cooperation was further expanded after Tunisia suffered swelling extremist violence starting in 2012, when the U.S. ramped up security assistance intended to help Tunisia secure its borders and improve its counter-terror and intelligence gathering. The War on Terror has thus become somewhat of a two-way street in the relationship with Tunisia, with improved relations ironically hinging on increased bouts of terror in the new democracy. In November 2015, the U.S. announced the inauguration of the U.S.-Tunisia Joint Economic Commission, intended to build on the U.S.-Tunisian Strategic Dialogue, their Joint Military Commission, and the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement—and in 2015, Tunisia joined Morocco as a Major Non-NATO Ally.

The evolution of political Islam in Tunisia has provided analysts and policymakers new paradigms and policy options in thinking about Islamist forces. Debates have raged in U.S. policy circles on the extent of Ennahda's moderation (in conjunction with debates over how to define this moderation), and Ennahda itself has positioned itself as a moderate alternative to extremists and secular autocrats. And the party's recent abandonment of "political Islam" in favor of "Muslim democracy" has reinvigorated debates about Ennahda as just another pragmatic political actor glad to revise its ideology and mission in the interests of vote-maximization, or as an opportunistically moderate Islamist movement whose dreams of a caliphate are yet to be revealed.

Most recently, the Tunisian government has been mired in political impasse and the growing pains of a fledging democracy with few resources to support it. Blamed for the laggard reforms set to ease popular tensions about the mounting economic crisis, lingering unemployment and security issues, Habib Essid was removed from the prime ministership following the parliament's no-confidence vote in August 2016. His removal and the search for a cabinet compounded delays in responding to public calls to improve service-provision, rectify regional inequality (southern economic disenfranchisement is a perennial problem in all three Maghreb countries), job creation, and improved security.

Ousted Prime Minister of Tunisia Habib Essid

(Source: Moumou82/Flickr)

And there is arguably little the U.S. can do about the conflicts of interest among members of the political class who have blocked potentially beneficial reforms (President Beji Caid Essebsi was close to the Ben Ali regime and has been reticent to allow reforms which could threaten the financial interests of his business contacts). However, the U.S. might consider improving aid to Tunisia's parliament. Unlike American senators and congressmen, Tunisian MPs lack the staff and programmatic support required to allow them to focus on legislation. Moreover, because its democracy is so new, many MPs simply lack the training required to legislate, another potential area of support on the part of the U.S.

As of 2016, Tunisia is important to the U.S. in several respects, and as future administrations consider engagement in Tunisia, several points are worth underscoring. First, Tunisian foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria constitute one of the largest contingents to the region today, numbering between 6,000 and 7,000. Like Morocco, identifying Tunisia's drivers of extremism has been a persistent challenge. In addition to factors like poverty, unemployment, and economic incentives, some cite the increased latitude radical groups (like Ansar al-Sharia) have enjoyed after Ben Ali's ouster, and containment of

Libyan spillover has been a key strategy. Moreover, while Tunisian emigration to ISIS swells and thereby threatens U.S. interests, it is unclear the extent to which "indigenous" extremist groups (like the Okba Ibn Nafa battalion) are a direct threat to U.S. security.

Second, in a conundrum many regimes face—balancing tight security with civil liberties—the U.S. must determine the best way to cooperate with the police and security sector without relaxing their accountability. Indeed, Tunisians are yet awaiting justice regarding the police's heavy hand during the Ben Ali era, and the U.S. has leverage to insist on security sector reform, and possibly corrective measures that address grievances in transitional justice. U.S. administrations might consider making aid and counterterror assistance conditional on this, while taking stock of its democracy promotion efforts and its effects.

Final Thoughts

Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia each present similar challenges to U.S. interests, while their contexts—therefore our approaches—differ: Morocco has adhered to its strategy of being a stalwart ally; Algeria's alliance remains complicated by a hesitation to avail itself of external policy counsel; and Tunisia has upended its once stable authoritarian bargain and remains a rapidly changing landscape.

We are likely to continue our policy of rhetorical support for democracy and better governance and to adhere to assistance through MEPI and USAID programs, while giving the greatest support to those countries that back our counterterror efforts.

We should be wary of casting Maghreb countries' attempts to act in their own best interests as "pivots" from the U.S. A Russian arms purchase or a handshake with China is not a shirking of U.S. ties. Given that the relationships offer a specific exchange of spoils, there is no need to expect an all-or-nothing alliance. Moreover, this logic assumes that we are the only two axes through which the Maghreb engages globally, while the giant in Maghrebi foreign policy is the EU, owing to deep economic ties, migration policy, and the Maghrebi diaspora.

Finally, while the major U.S. interests may be similar in the region—counterterrorism, trade, and democracy/human rights— this uniformity has not allowed us to treat the region as a bloc.

Because of the key differences outlined in this essay, the U.S. is right to take a careful country-by-country approach and begin raising the profile of the region in our strategic planning.

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[1] Interestingly, while the three Maghreb countries fall under the purview of the State Department's Near East Bureau , it is the Pentagon's US Africa Command (AFRICOM) that liaises with the Maghreb while the remaining Middle East countries liaise with US Central Command (CENTCOM).

[2] While Tunisia continues to transition, the opening following its uprisings were much more comprehensive than the partial political liberalization that took place in Morocco.

[3] United States Agency for International Development

[4] The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)

[5] Flintlock is a ground and air force exercise aimed at greater counterterrorism, and combat skills, planned by AFRICOM to build capacity and improve collaboration among African security forces in protecting civilians, stabilizing the region and limiting haven to violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and providing a context for enhanced engagement among TSCTP countries.

[6] Dey is a title of the rulers of Algiers Regency, Tunis, and Tripoli during Ottoman rule from 1671 onwards.

[7] Known as Baker plans I and II, named for James Baker, who was the Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Western Sahara from 1997 to 2004.

[8] The Polisario Front is the Saharawi rebel nationalist movement. See "The EU, Morocco, and the Western Sahara: a chance for justice" (June 2016) for more.