

TRANSITION 2021

POLICY NOTES FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Seizing Opportunities and Strengthening Alliances in Northwest Africa

Ideas for U.S. Policy Toward Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia

ROBERT SATLOFF AND SARAH FEUER

February 2021

A decade after a series of uprisings swept across the Middle East, the western edge of the Arab world remains fragile as it copes with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, longstanding economic challenges, and unfulfilled expectations regarding political reform. Morocco, America's oldest Arab ally, is struggling to contain the economic fallout from the virus against a backdrop of persistent, if thus far peaceful, popular protests. Algeria, a major oil and gas producer with which the United States has achieved a certain measure of security coordination of late, was already experiencing its deepest political crisis in recent memory prior to Covid and now faces the additional threat of its economy gradually approaching collapse. Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, is battling an economic deterioration brought about by years of failed reforms and now exacerbated by the virus, leaving many citizens feeling worse off than they were prior to the uprising that sparked the region-wide upheaval a decade ago.



In addition to the domestic challenges confronting each state, a number of regional threats hover over all three. The combustible conflict between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front over the long-disputed territory of Western Sahara entered a new phase of uncertainty following the Trump administration's decision to formally recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. The threat of spillover from the Libyan conflict remains ever present, and all three countries must contend with the menace of jihadist and other armed groups roaming the largely ungoverned Sahel region to the south.¹

As the Biden administration assumes office, therefore, the relative stability of this corner of the Arab world cannot be taken for granted. An exception to an otherwise turbulent Middle East beset by strife, instability, and violence, northwest Africa will require sustained engagement, particularly given the heightened tensions surrounding Western Sahara in recent weeks and the possibility that endemic economic problems could spark unrest as these countries emerge from the Covid crisis. President Trump did not meet face-to-face with any of the leaders of these countries during his term in office. A more active engagement from Washington will be needed in the coming years, especially if the United States is to capitalize on the relatively low-cost, high-reward policy opportunities outlined below, thereby advancing U.S. interests in an arena of rising geostrategic importance.

Strategic Interests and Objectives in the Region

Recent years have demonstrated the extent to which developments in northwest Africa can reverberate across the Arab world, destabilize America's European allies, and implicate America's standing relative to its Great Power competitors. The "second wave" of Arab Spring-like protests, which broke out in 2019, gathered force in Algeria,

where the prospect of a fifth term for the aging and ill President Abdelaziz Bouteflika sparked mass demonstrations that ultimately led to his resignation, a pattern echoed by similar developments in Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon as mass movements targeted the governing elites in those countries. In 2019, Morocco overtook Libya as the leading departure point for migrants crossing into Europe, and by 2020 Tunisians had become the largest contingent of migrants seeking to enter the continent from North Africa. In recent years, northwest Africa has also emerged as a site of increasing Great Power competition. This is seen in the growth of Russian and Chinese involvement along NATO's southern flank, reflected in deepening security ties with Moscow and infrastructure development alongside an increasingly visible public diplomacy push from Beijing, all of which has called into question the traditional U.S. and European dominance across the region.

Given these trends, the incoming administration should prioritize four strategic objectives in its engagement with the countries of northwest Africa:

Strengthen U.S. Allies

Around the world, the United States maintains an interest in supporting the growth and development of stable, prosperous states, governed by the rule of law, animated by a commitment to universal values of freedom, human rights, and democracy, and ready and willing to work with America to advance common objectives. In northwest Africa, such stability has become all the more precious, given recent flare-ups surrounding the Western Sahara conflict, the ongoing activities of armed groups in the Sahel, the downward spiral in Libya, and the persistent challenge of regulating migrant flows to Europe. In coming years, shoring up the stability of these states—especially as they struggle to emerge from the Covid crisis on solid footing—will be crucial to preventing further spillover from the Libyan conflict, enabling the United States to target terrorist networks in the region, and preempting an even greater exodus of migrants northward.

Prevent the Spread of Terrorism

In recent years, the frequency of terrorist attacks across northwest Africa declined as states improved their domestic counterterrorism capabilities, often with U.S. assistance, and the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) removed a key source of inspiration for like-minded groups in the Maghreb. However, lone wolf attacks persist and the socioeconomic and demographic conditions often facilitating terrorist recruitment in these countries remain in place, exacerbated by a pandemic that has damaged the region's already weak social safety nets. Moreover, the civil war in Libya continues to provide space for IS and other jihadist groups to operate, posing a serious threat to bordering Tunisia and Algeria. The Chaambi mountain range along the Tunisia-Algeria border continues to be a zone of jihadist insurgent activity. And notwithstanding the presence of several thousand French and other European troops in Mali, the Sahel continues to offer prime real estate to terrorist organizations. Preventing these groups from penetrating the bloc of states to their west/north and using the people and territories of northwest Africa for operations, transit, recruitment, and financing will remain a high priority.

Contain Great Power Competitors

Russia and China have established a deeper presence across North Africa in recent years, presenting the United States with yet another emerging realm of Great Power competition. Russia is principally motivated by the desire to solidify a foothold in the Mediterranean and thereby challenge NATO's southern flank, countering what has traditionally been a European and U.S. sphere of influence, and securing lucrative contracts in these countries' military, infrastructure, and energy sectors along the way. For China, which recently became Africa's largest trading partner, investments across the continent's northwest corner are a means of furthering Beijing's economic interests in the framework of its One Belt One Road initiative, and these states offer an additional gateway to the ultimate prize of European consumers. Washington

will need to ensure that future Russian and Chinese activity across the region does not undermine U.S. interests there.

Strengthen Maritime Security

Constructive relations with U.S. partners across northwest Africa have been essential to maintaining freedom of operation for the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet, which continues to ensure security for America's NATO as well as non-NATO allies in the region. Positive ties with these states also enable the United States to carry out counterterrorism operations in the region when necessary. In September 2019, for example, U.S. Africa Command conducted airstrikes against IS pockets in southwest Libya, an operation that would have been rendered much more difficult without freedom of navigation across the Mediterranean. And close ties with countries like Morocco have ensured the security of commercial and naval travel through the Strait of Gibraltar. Russia's intervention in the Syrian war in 2015 ushered in a more robust naval presence for Moscow across the Mediterranean, aimed at adding a layer of defense, projecting power, and securing its own commercial shipping lanes. Closely monitoring and, where possible, pushing back against this Russian presence remains a key U.S. interest.

Threats and Challenges

Currently, six main challenges are threatening the stability of northwest Africa and U.S. interests therein:

A Potential Eruption of the Western Sahara Conflict

On December 10, 2020, the Trump administration announced that it had decided to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. (In parallel, the administration announced Morocco would establish full diplomatic relations with

Israel.) Formal recognition of Morocco's claim to the Sahara—a former Spanish colony measuring 102,703 square miles—has long been a goal for Rabat; acceding to Morocco's request broke with U.S. policy toward Morocco's decades-old conflict with the Polisario Front, the group claiming to represent the region's native Sahrawi people. That policy had emphasized the need for a political resolution of the long-simmering face-off through United Nations–led negotiations for a referendum over the region's future, while expressing support for Morocco's 2007 proposal to grant the territory autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. Roughly one month before President Trump's announcement, a brief round of violence had broken out when Morocco launched a military operation in the disputed zone to remove a roadblock the Polisario had erected to protest Morocco's presence in the area.² In response, the Polisario declared an end to a thirty-year ceasefire and announced that the group was now at war with Morocco. A relative calm has been restored, but it is possible the Trump administration's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty will trigger more substantial violence if the Polisario takes up arms again and neighboring Algeria, long the Polisario's patron, feels compelled to step in militarily. War in the Sahara would significantly undermine the stability of both Morocco and Algeria, distracting the two nations from acting on urgent political, economic, and security challenges and providing an opening for terrorist groups in the Sahel to exploit.

Spillover from the Libyan Conflict

Since the overthrow of the regime of Muammar al-Qadhafi in 2011 and Libya's ensuing descent into civil war, Tunisia, Algeria, and (to a lesser extent) Morocco have had to contend with highly destabilizing spillover effects stemming from weapons proliferation and the swelling presence of terrorists using ungoverned Libyan territory to train and launch attacks. Throughout 2018 and into early 2019, the UN-led negotiation process appeared to be making progress, but since the April 2019 resumption of hostilities and growing foreign interference therein, Libya has once again emerged as a hotspot

of chaos and instability radiating outward to neighboring countries. The countries of northwest Africa have been involved to varying degrees in seeking a resolution to the conflict: Tunisia, the site of numerous terrorist attacks linked to Libya, continues to host the UN-led talks; Algeria, with which Libya shares a 615-mile border, recently stepped up its diplomatic presence in the Libyan arena, likely out of a desire to shore up the leadership's domestic legitimacy; and Morocco has hosted numerous rounds of dialogue between the warring factions, both to check Algerian ambitions in the Libyan arena and to reinforce its own position as a regional mediator. Absent an unforeseen breakthrough, the persistent Libyan conflict will continue to threaten the region's stability.

A Power Vacuum and Economic Deterioration in Algeria

With the onset of Covid, a yearlong protest movement in Algeria (known as the Hirak), which had managed to unseat Bouteflika in 2019, was forced to suspend its weekly demonstrations. The pandemic thus provided an opportunity for Bouteflika's successor, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, to begin consolidating power, even as large segments of the population continued to view his election as illegitimate. In October 2020, Tebboune contracted Covid and was transferred to a hospital in Germany, leaving the military to proceed on its own with a planned constitutional referendum in early November, which was ostensibly intended to mollify the Hirak by, for example, imposing term limits on the presidency. Still, low voter turnout spoke to the public's ongoing frustration with the country's system of governance in which power remains concentrated among an opaque group of military officers, intelligence officials, business elites, and politicians derisively known among Algerians as *Le Pouvoir* (The Powers That Be). Alongside the growing political uncertainty, the pandemic accelerated the downward spiral of Algeria's economy, a combined result of overreliance on rents from oil and gas sales, declining foreign currency reserves, and unsustainable spending. Although Tebboune

briefly returned to Algeria in late December, he has since been rehospitized in Germany. The rudderless political situation and the prospect of further economic deterioration for Europe's third-largest supplier of natural gas are increasing the chances of serious instability in Algeria, an eventuality that would carry far-reaching implications for regional security.

Terrorism and Radicalization

Although terrorist attacks across northwest Africa have become less frequent in recent years, particularly since the defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria, the threat remains—not only for the countries themselves but for America's European allies to the north as well. In 2018, for example, Morocco stood out as the only Middle East country other than Iran to experience an uptick in terrorist attacks when two tourists were killed by jihadists who had pledged allegiance to IS. In March 2020, two suicide bombers exploded themselves near the U.S. embassy in Tunis, killing one police officer, and six months later IS claimed responsibility for a knife attack that killed a member of the Tunisian National Guard. Then, in October 2020, a young Tunisian man who had been radicalized back home arrived in France and carried out a terrorist attack that killed three civilians in Nice. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb announced that Abu Obaida Yusuf al-Annabi, an Algerian national believed to be residing in Algeria, had assumed leadership of the organization five months after French forces had killed his predecessor in Mali.

In addition to the threat of radicalization within these countries, the substantial presence of armed extremist groups in the Sahel constitutes a serious threat to the stability of northwest Africa. In March 2020, the Trump administration appointed the first-ever U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel in recognition of the region's growing importance as a source of instability, and in particular its emergence as a haven for violent extremists. In 2020 alone, more than half a million people were forced to flee their homes in Mali and Niger due to attacks by

armed groups on both civilian and military targets. A reminder of the threat to U.S. interests came in October 2020, when U.S. Special Forces rescued an American hostage in Nigeria from captors who had planned to sell him to armed terrorist groups in the area. Growing linkages between terrorism, organized crime, and the trafficking of humans and illicit goods suggest the ground will remain fertile for extremist groups for the foreseeable future.

Russian and Chinese Inroads

America's Great Power competitors are increasingly active in all three northwest African countries, but the Russian and Chinese presence is most extensive in Algeria. A decades-long relationship between Moscow and Algiers has centered on security ties and investments in Algeria's hydrocarbon industry. For example, Russia provides approximately 75 percent of Algerian military equipment, including major end-items such as jets, bombers, air-defense systems, submarines, and surface ships. In 2018, Algeria's state-run oil company, Sonatrach, signed a contract with Russia's Transneft for an eighteen-month oil transport development project, building on an earlier agreement between Sonatrach and Russia's Gazprom for hydrocarbon exploration and production in western Algeria. Meanwhile, in the last decade China overtook former colonial power France as Algeria's main import origin, and 40,000 Chinese workers are currently living in the country, working in infrastructure, resource extraction, and telecommunication sectors. Following the Covid outbreak, fifteen medical missions and more than forty medical professionals arrived from China to assist in providing medical care. Significantly, several hundred Algerian military officers train in China each year.

Beyond Algeria, Russia and China have more recently made overtures to Morocco and Tunisia. In 2016, for example, Russia and Morocco signed a "strategic partnership" agreement to enhance bilateral trade and cooperation in various fields; since then, trade between the two countries has increased and agreements have been signed

involving Morocco's fishery, agriculture, energy, civilian nuclear, educational, and media sectors.³ Prior to the Covid crisis, Russia had become the third largest provenance of visitors to Tunisia, contributing to a 45 percent boost in tourism revenues—a significant figure given that tourism accounts for roughly 8 percent of Tunisia's GDP. China, meanwhile, signed an agreement with the Tunisian government in 2018 to develop the Zarzis port, and a 2019 memorandum of understanding between the two countries set the stage for additional Chinese investments in highway, railway, and infrastructure projects. Following the Covid outbreak, China donated medical equipment, and an ensuing partnership between a Tunisian tech firm and a Chinese drone company brought Chinese drones equipped with temperature sensors and loudspeakers to Tunisia to help enforce pandemic-related lockdowns. These examples point to a clear determination by Russia and China to deepen their presence across northwest Africa, an eventuality that could ultimately challenge America's (and Europe's) traditional dominance in the region.

Lagging Economic and Political Reform

As publics across the region reflect on the last decade, many citizens in northwest Africa face worsening economic conditions and unfulfilled expectations regarding the political reform they thought the uprisings would deliver. The Covid crisis exacerbated and accelerated preexisting trends that were already fueling social unrest. Youth unemployment in these three countries, for example, has increased since the pandemic struck—official figures for Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia hover around 22 percent, 30 percent, and 36 percent, respectively.⁴ Until the outbreak, each country had seen varying degrees of social protest in response to the bleak economic outlook, growing perceptions of corruption, and general frustration over the slow pace of reforms. In some instances, not even the virus managed to quell such protests. Consider Tunisia, where despite the political liberalization of the last decade, widespread

dissatisfaction over the lack of jobs and the impact of lockdown measures led to an 80 percent increase in protests between May and June 2020 alone, some of which ended in violent clashes with the police. After several months of relative calm, riots erupted in January 2021, hundreds of protestors were arrested, and the military was deployed across the country as a swelling number of mostly young Tunisians took to the streets expressing frustration at the country's economic deterioration. As these states emerge from the Covid crisis in the coming year, the economic damage could be highly destabilizing to the extent citizens remain unconvinced that their governments possess the will and capacity to bring adequate relief to struggling population segments.

Precisely what form such instability takes remains to be seen, but two possibilities bear mention. The first is that as populations become vaccinated and the virus's potency presumably declines, populations will once again take to the streets, picking up where they left off in early 2020. At that point, leaderships will face a choice as to how to respond, and their decisions will likely determine whether the confrontations turn violent. (There is also a chance that elements of the protest movements themselves will abandon the nonviolent approach seen thus far, raising the prospect of a harsh state response.)

The second possibility is that these countries' dire economic conditions will propel new waves of migration northward, in which case America's European allies will face a situation that could be highly destabilizing. Since 2017, when Italy's imposition of stricter coast guard controls resulted in migration flows shifting westward, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have seen significant increases in attempted crossings to Europe.⁵ In 2019, for example, 30,000 people were stopped and turned around trying to reach Spain through the border crossing with Morocco; and in the first five months of 2020 alone, aspirants trying to reach Italy from Tunisia jumped by 150 percent compared to the previous year, while three times as many people were turned around trying to depart illegally from

Algeria's shores than the year before. Given that another refugee crisis reminiscent of the Syrian waves would have devastating implications for Europe, likely crushing Europe politically, the matter of refugee/migrant flows from northwest Africa will warrant sustained attention in any future U.S.-Europe discussions of regional security.

Policy Recommendations

To advance U.S. interests in the region—bolstering the stability of states, preventing the spread of terrorism, countering the influence of Russia and China, and ensuring security across the Mediterranean Sea—the Biden administration should pursue a number of policies in both the bilateral and regional arenas. In contrast to many other areas of the Middle East, northwest Africa offers a realm in which relatively modest investments of American diplomatic capital, economic aid, and security assistance can yield substantial returns, and the point of departure for the incoming administration's bilateral engagement will, for the most part, be not one of tension but rather of opportunity. Seizing this opportunity will ensure that the United States can preserve its interests in northwest Africa.

U.S.-Morocco Relations

The U.S. bilateral relationship with Morocco (population 36 million) is the most extensive of the three, reflected in the kingdom's designation since 2004 as a "major non-NATO ally," a free trade agreement signed in 2006, two successful Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compacts totaling more than \$1 billion over the last decade, and growing security cooperation. Since 2008, the countries have conducted an annual military exercise (African Lion) bringing together more than 900 Moroccans and 1,200 Americans for training in aerial logistics, amphibious operations, and other areas; in 2020, the exercise (canceled due to

Covid) was to have included an additional 3,000 military personnel from Egypt, Mauritania, Tunisia, several European countries, Canada, and Australia. Morocco has also hosted Phoenix Express, an annual exercise conducted by U.S. Naval Forces Africa with North African partners—including, notably, Algeria—and European allies to improve interoperability and promote regional stability. Not surprisingly, Rabat celebrated President Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in the Sahara. A key challenge for the incoming administration will be to preserve and build on U.S. equities with the kingdom while also mitigating the potentially destabilizing effects of the sovereignty recognition. Uncertainties surrounding King Mohammed VI's health could also introduce instability, reinforcing the need to continue helping the country remain on solid footing. In this vein, the Biden administration should pursue the following policies:

- **AFFIRM SUPPORT FOR BOTH WESTERN SAHARA RECOGNITION AND UN MEDIATION/PEACEKEEPING IN THE DISPUTED REGION.**

There is no contradiction between recognizing Morocco's claim to Western Sahara and backing the mission of a new UN mediator that Washington should urge the secretary-general to appoint, along with the continued deployment of UN forces to preserve a tense peace in the area. While the Biden administration may not have chosen the path of Sahara recognition to help secure Morocco-Israel diplomatic relations, to reverse that decision now would undermine relations with two key allies and begin a presidential term by repudiating a key commitment of its predecessor, raising precisely the same doubt about U.S. credibility and consistency that the Biden team often critiqued about Trump administration foreign policy. At the same time, Washington should encourage Morocco to fulfill the potential of ties with Israel by moving as swiftly as possible to establish embassies, exchange ambassadors, and explore the full range of economic, cultural, educational, technological, and other partnerships that will redound to the long-term benefit of the Moroccan people.

- LEVERAGE SAHARA RECOGNITION TO PUSH FOR KEY DOMESTIC REFORMS AND EFFECTIVE AUTONOMY FOR THE DISPUTED REGION.** Having granted Rabat a prize it sought for decades, Washington should capitalize on the goodwill earned to work with Morocco to fulfill longstanding commitments to effective autonomy in the Sahara region and to reduce several potential drivers of social unrest throughout the kingdom. On the former, after gaining vital recognition of its position in Sahara, now is precisely the time for Rabat to expand local authority in the region and empower local leaders and peoples in line with its laudable autonomy proposals. At the same time, Washington has the enhanced standing to pursue candid, private consultations with Rabat on two areas of concern: corruption and curbs on press freedom. Given that both issues have fueled social protests in recent years, the monarchy should have an interest in taking effective measures to reduce the former and scaling back on the latter. Moreover, the widespread public support of the palace's achievement—securing American recognition of sovereignty in the Sahara—should give the Moroccan leadership more room to respond to popular demands for greater openness and to ease some of its authoritarian tendencies. Relatedly, one by-product of the Covid crisis has been a greater devolution of governance responsibilities from Rabat to the localities, a trend Washington should encourage as a means of increasing accountability and improving the provision of public services.
- CHANNEL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE TO PROGRAMS TARGETING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT.** Eighty percent of Morocco's unemployed population is between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four, and prior to the pandemic the kingdom was creating less than 50 percent of the jobs needed to keep up with the growing working-age population. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has supported various projects aimed at increasing employment opportunities for this cohort, but more can be

done, particularly in spurring private sector development and supporting entrepreneurship. Washington should also be thinking of ways to capitalize on Morocco-Israel diplomatic relations to boost relevant sectors of the Moroccan economy, including tech, tourism, and telecommunications. The ultimate goal should be to increase employment opportunities for Moroccan youth, since the alternative could well mean unrest in the near term. Relatedly, unspent funds from the latest MCC compact are due back to the United States by 2022—Washington should grant a yearlong extension on those funds in light of the Covid crisis.

- ENCOURAGE AND EXPLOIT MOROCCO'S PRESENCE IN AFRICA.** King Mohammed VI has devoted considerable energy in the last twenty years to cultivating Morocco's diplomatic, financial, and security presence throughout West and sub-Saharan Africa. Morocco has also invested heavily in key sectors across the continent such as telecommunications, banking, and phosphates. Given that Africa, and the Sahel in particular, is increasingly a locus of terrorist militancy as well as an area of growing Russian and Chinese involvement, Morocco's ability to project power as a stabilizing force will only become more important to U.S. regional interests in the coming years. Washington should therefore welcome the kingdom's involvement across the continent and devise its assistance—especially in the security and economic realms—with greater consideration for how such aid can further Morocco's ability to serve as a regional stabilizer.

U.S.-Algeria Relations

Of the three countries in northwest Africa, Algeria (population 44 million) has traditionally been the least inclined to embrace ties with the United States—the combined result of a more general aversion to the West since the country's anti-colonialist struggle against the French, longstanding ties to Russia, and a self-sufficient hydrocarbon economy that limited the influence Washington

might have gained through economic assistance. However, recent years saw certain improvements in bilateral security coordination, and Algiers has begun to convey signs of a greater, if still modest, openness to deepening the relationship. Debates in Algeria surrounding foreign investment remain highly charged, but following an early 2020 hydrocarbon law to reduce the tax burden for international oil companies and after long-delayed changes to the “51/49” rule dictating majority-Algerian ownership for companies operating within the country, Algeria’s state-run oil company, Sonatrach, signed MOUs with ExxonMobil and Chevron.

Despite these hopeful signs, U.S. recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty in the Sahara was interpreted as a hostile move in Algiers, and it will likely translate into a difficult reception for the incoming administration. Nevertheless, the new team should consider the current situation a moment of opportunity to improve U.S.-Algeria relations and, in so doing, strengthen the U.S. strategic position in northwest Africa.

Two realities define the context for this sense of opportunity. First, there is a growing recognition in the Algerian defense establishment that the country’s stability is intimately tied to regional security, focusing attention on the country’s potential role in helping stabilize Libya, Mali, and other regional hotspots. Second, the economic deterioration amid persistently low oil prices and the havoc wreaked by the pandemic have reinforced the understanding among Algerian policymakers that they must open up the economy if the state is to avoid collapse. Both trends offer openings to demonstrate that Algiers has much to gain through cooperation with Washington.

If the Biden administration is prepared to offer relatively modest economic and security inducements to signal its intent and goodwill, it may find Algiers ready to “agree to disagree” on Sahara recognition, withhold any tangible military support for Polisario fighters, and counsel the Polisario leadership to pursue solely diplomatic means to

achieve its goals. This could form the basis of an Algerian willingness to explore a range of cooperative security and economic initiatives with the United States.

A number of policies bear consideration:

- **WHEN IT COMES TO SECURITY COOPERATION, THINK SMART, THINK REALISTIC, AND THINK STRATEGIC.** Although Russia is likely to remain Algeria’s dominant military partner for the foreseeable future, Algiers is determined to demonstrate that it is not wholly reliant on Moscow, and Washington should be exploiting this narrative. The United States may not be able to sell Algeria major military end-items, but it can demonstrate to the Algerians the superiority of U.S.-made equipment and zero in on specialty equipment—particularly cyber-related items and unmanned aerial vehicles for border security—that Algeria would be keen to purchase. Given Algeria’s networks on the ground, there is room to increase U.S. coordination in locating additional al-Qaeda high-value targets across North Africa and the Sahel. Additionally, Algiers has an appetite for expanding military-to-military contacts via the International Military Education and Training program, and the Algerians have expressed an interest in joining the National Guard’s State Partnership Program, in which both Morocco and Tunisia have participated for over a decade. The new administration should also prioritize the sale—or even gifting—to Algeria of maritime Excess Defense Articles such as frigates and patrol boats. This would signal Washington’s commitment to the partnership, convey U.S. interest in deepening security cooperation, and demonstrate a willingness to counter Russia in the region through stronger relationships.
- **CAPITALIZE ON THE ALGIERS INTERNATIONAL TRADE FAIR TO ENHANCE COMMERCIAL TIES.** In June 2021, Algiers will host its annual International Trade Fair, the largest multisector trade event in Africa. This year, the United States is slated to be the “guest

of honor,” following China and Russia in years prior, and the event will offer an especially hospitable opportunity for American companies to meet potential Algerian partners. The Biden administration, working alongside the U.S.-Algeria Business Council, should take advantage of the opportunity to promote this private sector engagement, especially since there is room for U.S. companies to compete with Chinese and Russian firms in the hydrocarbon, power generation, and defense sectors. For example, geologists have concluded that Algeria has tremendous shale gas potential, and Algerian officials are increasingly focused on exploiting the country’s reserves in the south, the sort of task in which the United States—not Russia—has a distinct competitive advantage.

- **PROMOTE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC ENGAGEMENT.** Seventy percent of the Algerian population is younger than thirty, and the vast majority of the country’s youth are either in school or under- or unemployed. This younger generation is not as inward-looking as their parents and grandparents, and they are chiefly interested in education and jobs. There is a particularly strong demand among this cohort for English-language instruction, and in apparent recognition of this trend, the Ministry of Higher Education announced a plan to replace French with English at the PhD level in the coming year. In 2020, a delegation from Columbia University’s Teachers College visited Algeria to explore the possibility of partnerships. But the number of Algerian students studying in the United States remains among the lowest in the Middle East and North Africa, and by and large America is absent in terms of public outreach. Given the strong demand for English-language programming and education, the incoming administration should strive to increase educational and scientific ties, both in terms of increasing support to educational and cultural programming inside Algeria and expanding opportunities for worthy Algerians to come to the United States for undergraduate and graduate study.

U.S.-Tunisia Relations

The United States has a strong interest in seeing Tunisia (population 12 million) continue on its path toward democratic consolidation, especially since the country’s democratic gains over the last decade remain fragile. Political instability—the country has seen three prime ministers and as many cabinet reshuffles in the last four years—has undermined Tunisia’s ability to implement much-needed economic reforms, and the country’s dire economic predicament could spur a reversal of its democratic gains if either an aspiring autocrat or a populist demagogue capitalizes on widespread frustration to seize power. In the last four years, the Trump administration requested deep cuts in U.S. assistance to the struggling Arab democracy—in the context of broader cuts in foreign aid—conveying the impression that the White House did not consider Tunisia’s success a priority. Those cuts were not implemented, thanks to bipartisan support for Tunisia in Congress, but a request for assistance commensurate with the levels disbursed by Congress in fiscal years 2019/20 and 2020/21 (\$241.4 million in both years) would go a long way toward reversing the impression that the United States no longer maintains an interest in Tunisia’s stability. Likewise, inviting Tunisia to participate in the Biden administration’s proposed Summit for Democracy in 2021 would send a strong message of support. In addition, the new administration should consider three steps:

- **EXPEDITE AN MCC COMPACT.** Since December 2016, the Millennium Challenge Corporation’s board of directors has repeatedly reselected Tunisia as eligible to receive a compact in order “to encourage economic growth and reduce poverty.” Progress has stalled, in part due to the political turnover in Tunis over the last four years, but the pandemic has only increased the need for such assistance. The proposed compact would focus on spurring private sector business and ameliorating the country’s water scarcity. Given the tremendous success of the MCC program in nearby Morocco, and Tunisia’s

consistently demonstrated commitment to democratic governance, there is no reason the MCC compact should not go through. The Biden administration should therefore exert pressure on the MCC to expedite the approval process and ensure that funding can begin.

- **BEGIN NEGOTIATIONS FOR AN FTA.** The idea for a free trade agreement with Tunisia first surfaced in 2012, in the context of Congressional efforts to help the newly emerging democracy reduce barriers to trade and thereby bolster its economy. Trade between Tunisia and the United States has tripled in the last twenty years, reaching \$1.2 billion in 2018 (the last year for which figures are available)⁶—a huge amount for Tunisia but negligible in terms of the U.S. economy. In March 2020, Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) presented Senate Resolution 506, calling for the negotiation of an FTA with Tunisia, a gesture that suggests strong remaining bipartisan support for such a move. Notwithstanding frequent government turnover and related inefficiencies on the Tunisian side, the Biden administration can build on this momentum and use the mechanism of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement—which held its eighth round of talks in 2019—to convene the relevant stakeholders and begin negotiations for an FTA.
- **CHANNEL SECURITY ASSISTANCE TO POLICE TRAINING, PRISON REFORM, AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE PROGRAMS.** In recent years, the U.S. assistance package to Tunisia has been evenly divided between security and nonsecurity accounts, a reasonable allocation that should continue. On the security front, U.S. assistance has already been demonstrated to improve Tunisian police conduct, particularly during episodes of heightened social unrest. Given that the emergence from Covid could bring with it a return of mass demonstrations, the police response will be crucial to determining whether such demonstrations turn violent; as such, U.S. assistance should continue

to target this arena. Additionally, in recent years Tunisia has seen the return of an estimated 900–1,500 fighters from Iraq and Syria, but the prison system is overwhelmed and there are deep concerns about recidivism among previously radicalized individuals. The United States should therefore be channeling assistance to Tunisia’s prison management. Finally, to bolster the community resilience programs already being implemented by Tunisian civil society to reduce the socioeconomic drivers of extremism, U.S. assistance packages should include conditional direct cash transfers to especially vulnerable families.

Regional Engagement Across Northwest Africa

In addition to the bilateral measures recommended above, the Biden administration can pursue a number of regional policies that would shore up stability and preserve U.S. interests across northwest Africa:

- **SQUARE THE CIRCLE ON WESTERN SAHARA.** Fear that U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in the Sahara could provoke a broader regional conflagration has prompted some to urge the new administration to reverse or at least suspend the move. However, reversing or suspending the Trump administration’s commitment would carry huge costs. It would not only jeopardize implementation of the Morocco-Israel agreement to establish full diplomatic relations and, in the process, anger two of America’s deepest and most longstanding allies, but it would also start the Biden team’s tenure by doing precisely what it critiqued its predecessor for doing—reneging on a duly made presidential commitment. Though Sahara is a faraway issue, the reverberations of any renunciation of a presidential commitment, especially one made to allies, would have consequences across the region and around the world. This would be especially foolhardy since



circumstances do not require it—indeed, there is no reason Washington cannot maintain its new policy of recognizing Moroccan sovereignty and also put its weight behind diplomatic efforts to achieve a negotiated resolution of the dispute. A wiser approach is to recognize that a moment of opportunity exists to improve America’s strategic posture across the region—deepening the partnership with Morocco, nurturing a budding relationship with Algeria, sustaining the democratic impulse in Tunisia, and, along the way, using these ties to counter terrorism and blunt expansionist designs by Great Power competitors.

Specifically, even while it reaffirms the Sahara recognition move, the Biden team should still undertake due diligence on aspects of its implementation that were hurried or overlooked entirely by its predecessor. This includes, for example, a full security review of the implications of the decision for regional security, including the operations of U.S. Africa Command. In parallel, it should reaffirm support both for a negotiated resolution to the Sahara dispute and for the ongoing operation of the UN peace-keeping mission (MINURSO) there; push for the appointment of a new UN envoy to the Sahara, a position now unfilled for eighteen months; and make representations to Rabat that giving real substance to its commitment to regional autonomy in the Sahrawi province must go hand in hand with the diplomatic benefits of U.S. recognition of its sovereignty. (A credible political process on autonomy will also likely reduce the chances that the Polisario will resort to violence and diminish any sympathy for the front should it pursue that negative, destabilizing route.) Finally, to nourish the strategic opportunity in northwest Africa, the incoming administration should find time in the overloaded international schedules of senior policymakers to give both Morocco and Algeria the personal attention needed to lubricate this delicate but hopeful process.

- **BOLSTER THE U.S. NAVY’S SIXTH FLEET.** In July 2020, U.S. Navy Adm. James Foggo III, the outgoing commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and of the Joint Allied Force Command in Naples, Italy, warned that Russia’s recent advances into the Mediterranean must be stopped if the United States is to preserve freedom of navigation in those waters. The incoming administration should heed Admiral Foggo’s warning and bolster the navy’s Sixth Fleet, either by deploying additional ships in the Mediterranean or enlisting ships in regional exercises while they are transiting to their ultimate destination of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf. Such measures would signal both to Russia and to America’s North African partners that the United States intends to remain the dominant Great Power in the region.
- **REVERSE PROPOSED AFRICOM CUTS, STRENGTHEN THE COMMAND.** In the last year, the Trump administration weighed substantial cuts to the U.S. Africa Command as part of a planned rebalancing away from counterterrorism and toward greater competition with Russia and China. But such reductions would severely undercut America’s ability to contain and degrade terrorist networks in West Africa and the Sahel, where the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have been rebuilding and pose a serious threat to U.S. partners in the northwest corner of the continent. The Biden administration should reverse course and bolster the combatant command. Relative to their comparatively low cost, AFRICOM’s operations have an outside impact on partner nations’ stability, including by providing the security necessary for State Department, USAID, and other assistance mechanisms to operate effectively. When it comes to northwest Africa in particular, strengthening AFRICOM would create opportunities to bring together Algerian and Moroccan counterparts for regional exercises and other engagements aimed at enhancing these states’ counterterrorism cooperation,

mitigating the hostility between them, and thereby preserving regional stability.

- **LEVERAGE AMERICA’S INFLUENCE WITH RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS.** Collectively, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank can provide much-needed technical assistance and financial support to regional states, while also pushing reluctant local parties to consider practical suggestions for regional cooperation. Ultimately,

while the United States need not provide heavy resources (in American terms), it can leverage its substantial influence within these organizations to drive the IMF and World Bank to increase their involvement and improve their work in supporting the countries of northwest Africa. Such a strategy would have the additional benefit of strengthening the Biden administration’s multilateral approach to the making of foreign policy, bringing the firepower of these institutions to bear on the region’s challenges. ❖

The authors would like to thank their Washington Institute colleagues Patrick Clawson, David Pollock, Charles Thépaut, and Ben Fishman for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. Sarah Yerkes was also gracious enough to offer comments on an earlier version. Elise Burr and Ranwa El-Kikhia provided excellent research assistance. Special thanks go to Jason Warshof for his editorial work. Finally, the authors are grateful to the fine diplomats serving at U.S. embassies in Rabat, Algiers, and Tunis—as well as Washington-based officials in the State Department and Pentagon—who provided invaluable insight in the preparation of this paper. Needless to say, all errors are of the authors’ own making.

NOTES

1. The Sahel refers to the geographic zone in Africa between the Sahara Desert to the north and the Sudanian savanna to the south. Stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, the region includes parts of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Ethiopia.
2. Sarah Feuer, “Violence Erupts in Western Sahara,” PolicyWatch 3402, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/violence-erupts-western-sahara>.
3. Laila Zerrou, “Maroc-Russie: Un Partenariat ‘Win-Win,’” *Aujourd’hui Le Maroc*, October 12, 2017, <https://aujourd’hui.ma/actualite/maroc-russie-un-partenariat-win-win>.
4. “Unemployment, Youth Total (% of Total Labor Force Ages 15–24) (Modeled ILO Estimate),” International Labor Organization, for Morocco: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=MA>; Algeria, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=DZ>; and Tunisia, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=TN>.
5. See data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, “Mediterranean Situation/Spain,” <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5226>.
6. Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, “Joint Statement of the U.S.-Tunisia Trade and Investment Council,” May 28, 2019, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2019/may/joint-statement-us-tunisia-trade-and>.



The Authors



ROBERT SATLOFF is the executive director of The Washington Institute, where he holds the Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. He is the author of the best-selling book *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*, based on research he conducted in North Africa and across the Middle East.



SARAH J. FEUER is the Rosenbloom Family Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics. Her 2018 book, *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia*, was published by Cambridge University Press. Dr. Feuer currently is also a research fellow at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW | WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG
©2021 THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.