North Africa

Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

Souhaïl Belhadj and Riccardo Bocco
Translated by Natasha White

Introduction

Since the popular uprisings in Tunisia in 2010, the states of North Africa – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya – have been struggling to contain the destabilising effects of the 'Arab Spring'. The crisis in Libya feeds this climate of regional instability through the activities of numerous transnational armed groups operating along the southern borders of Tunisia and Algeria in the Sahara desert. The cross-border traffic of goods and weapons facilitated by these illicit networks has increased to concerning levels, and the states of the Maghreb must face up to the infiltration of jihadi sub-groups of Al-Qaïda.[1] Such is the case in Algeria, but most starkly in Tunisia – a country weakened by its dwindling national security apparatus. Such a situation is conducive to regional instability and insecurity, and reinforces fears of increased interventionism by foreign powers in North Africa.

To combat these ever-present threats of civil war and disorder, the North African governments have been pressured, each in their own way, to instigate political reforms. To date, no state is sure to master these change processes, not even Morocco or Algeria who have otherwise managed to establish a limited and controlled political opening.

Despite the uncertainty that weighs upon the evolution of the regime, the Tunisian government has nevertheless adopted an original path of political transition. It is banking on the establishment of a local democratic governance system, in order to increase the inclusion of Tunisian citizens in the state and to improve cohesion among the political elite. The emergence of a decentralised and pluralist power system among Tunisian communities would lay the roots for a future democratic state. The advance of Tunisia along this transition path could, therefore, present a role model for other countries in the Maghreb, in

[1] M. Kartas, 'On the Edge? Trafficking and Insecurity at the Tunisian–Libyan Border', Small Arms Survey, 2013, Working Paper n° 17.

doing so encouraging both regional stability and political development. In Libya, for example, where the Kadhafi state has been replaced in many provinces by armed militia, the state restructuring process could be inspired by Tunisia's experience.

The United Nations (UN), in cooperation with the European Union (EU), could play a supporting role in the stabilisation and political development of a troubled North Africa. The implementation of new models of political participation and regional integration are clearly orientated along these lines. The development of autonomous and pluralist local institutions, as well as the establishment of a consensus on a joint North African security policy could offer two potential paths out of the crisis.

Challenges to building peace in North Africa

In the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings, the environment of instability and political hostility has further deteriorated. Transnational armed trafficking and jihadi groups were able to profit from the disorganisation of the Tunisian security forces and the collapse of the Libyan state.[2] These groups have also strongly reinforced their presence in the border regions in collaboration with Al-Qaïda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Tunisia and Libya were particular targets of armed attacks and bombings by movements such as Ansar al-shari'a. But Algeria has also revealed signs of weakness in the face of a growing jihadi threat, as evidenced by the kidnappings in 2013 from the gas production sites in the south. Finally, Morocco is exposed to both Saharan and Sahelian jihadism, particularly following the break-out of war in Mali after the Tuareg insurrection and, later, with the jihadi-led uprising, involving groups such as al-Qaida, Ansar al-dine and Mojwa (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa).

Political instability and a poor security situation persist in North Africa, thus hampering any political and economic development. The causes are numerous, linked both to processes of state formation and the type of governance regime adopted in each case. Algeria and Libya have developed economies based upon oil and gas rents. Internal struggles to reinforce control over these resources have consequently produced highly fragile political equilibriums. Libya's fragility is further weakened due to a society that does not have a long established state tradition. Moreover, the mode of government proposed by Kadhafi during his rise to power was based upon a 'dismantling' of the monarchic state.[3] In comparison to Libya, Tunisia and Morocco have recognised some form of governmental stability over a much longer period. Their governmental structures were further reinforced by a rapid extension of bureaucracy during the colonial period. Tunisia and Morocco are thus more resilient than Algeria and Libya to destabilising factors, be they internal or external.[4]

While they differ according to historical trajectory, colonial heritage and thus internal political equilibriums, the North African states still have some structural features in common, symptomatic of the difficulties they all witness in surmounting the profound crises they face. Throughout the region, leaders have exercised a highly centralised and sovereign state power. At a national level, this has lent to corruption and an unequal distribution of resources, while at a regional level, it has hindered the constitution of a security cooperation and coordination agency. The North African governments have, therefore, found themselves without solutions to a

---

[2] ICG (International Crisis Group), *La Tunisie des frontières: jihad et contrebande*, Rapport Moyen-Orient/Afrique du Nord n°148, 2013 ; ICG, *Tunisie : violences et défi salafiste*, Rapport Moyen-Orient/Afrique du Nord n°137, 2013.

[3] R. Bocco, *L'État "contourné" en Libye: tribalisme, clientélisme et révolution dans une économie pétrolière*, 1998, *Genève-Afrique*, 26: 2.

[4] For the last three decades, the principle destabilising factors for countries in the Maghreb have been: Islamist opposition; territorial and border conflicts between Morocco and Algeria, and between Libya and Tunisia; and armed groups trafficking goods and weapons in the Sahara/Sahel region under the guise of political claims.

deteriorating political and social situation in hinterland areas. They have similarly proved themselves ineffective – even powerless – in treating transnational security problems.

In general, the history of the contemporary North African states showcases the difficulty in establishing a model that reconciles both political and economic development. The Barcelona Process – tasked with overcoming this double challenge through Euro-Mediterranean cooperation – revealed its limits. The substance of the 'Euro-Med' partnership was a source of disagreement,[5] regarding both the 'political conditionality' clause, considered by the North African governments as a form of interference in their internal affairs, and the plans to develop a free trade zone. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean Union – a regional integration process following on from the Barcelona Process – has come to a complete standstill.[6] A development path combining economic and political liberalism has not, therefore, come to fruition in North Africa.

Today, only the Moroccan and Algerian regimes appear to be little rattled by the wave of protests ignited by the 'Arab Spring'. Morocco has managed to defuse an explosive political and social situation by reactivating a process of political reforms.[7] Mohammed VI initiated constitutional reform by evolving the regime towards a more consensus-based monarchy. The project really gained momentum in the aftermath of the '20 February Movement', a coalition of multiple protest groups. The Moroccan reform facilitated an expansion of parliamentary rights and a system wherein an elected political majority can govern under supervision of the King. In comparison to Morocco, Algeria has not agreed to liberalising the regime. Nevertheless, the Algerian authorities have surpassed certain social expectations by redistributing oil revenues towards local development economies, for example youth employment and investment agencies.

However, despite these advances, the impacts of political reform in Morocco and socio-economic reform in Algeria remain insufficient while the leaders continue to restrict pluralism through highly centralised political and administrative structures. In doing so, the leaders have delayed the implementation of a decentralisation project at a local level. Yet, for thirty years, this project has represented a demand by local political and administrative elites, as well as of civil society, in both Morocco and Algeria. The delaying of its implementation has, therefore, sparked fears of a forthcoming confrontation between society and the regime.

If this were to be the case, the Moroccan and Algerian powers would adopt defensive policies to secure their positions. They thus would not seek to resolve the territorial conflict over Western Sahara that undermines their bilateral relations, as this would require a reopening of the Algeria-Morocco border that has been shut since 1994.

More generally, this situation has prevented the implementation of a North African institutional framework, an indispensable tool to coordinate the intelligence services, armies and political leaders in combatting the destabilising effects of transnational armed groups' attacks. The implementation of such a regional framework would contribute towards limiting the infiltration of Libyan jihadiis towards Tunisia and Algeria. Moreover, it would have helped to prevent the destabilisation of the Malian state, as well as the proliferation of non-state armed groups across

[5] A. Baghzouz, 'Du processus de Barcelone à l'Union pour la Méditerranée : regards croisés sur les relations euro-maghrébines', *L'Année du Maghreb*, V, 2009.

[6] A. Baghzouz, 'Le Maghreb et l'Europe face à la crise du Sahel : Coopération ou rivalités?', *L'Année du Maghreb*, IX, 2013.

[7] J-N. Ferrié and B. Dupret, 'Maroc : réformer sans bouleverser' in *Afrique du Nord, Moyen-Orient 2012-2013. Printemps arabe : trajectoires variées, incertitudes persistantes*, F. Charillon and A. Dieckhoff (eds.) (Paris : La documentation Française, 2012).

the Sahel region. In the absence of such a regional framework, we can expect a resurgence of Algeria-Morocco's geopolitical rivalries, as well as difficulties on behalf of the Tunisian authorities in securing the border with Libya. The current Libyan political leaders – who continue to lack the benefits of coordinated security assistance from their Maghreb neighbours – are failing to put an end to the militia groups' violent factionalism that is undermining the country's unity. The difficulties experienced so far by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) bear witness to the (im)possibilities of implementing its mandate.

In summary, highly centralised state politics and weak regional integration of security policies have combined to prolong a climate of hostility across North Africa. In such a context, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) could be an important partner in the fight against terrorism and international organised crime. Moreover, given that North Africa is an important transit or final destination for sizeable migration movements from sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) states therefore receive much pressure from the EU to contain the waves of migrants and refugees, and manage the foreign populations in their territories. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should, therefore, accompany the North African States in establishing national asylum systems and safeguarding protection spaces, particularly in Libya and Algeria (e.g. for the Sahrawi refugees). Neglecting the migration impact would equate to the potential sparking of another factor of socio-political instability.

Opportunities for building peace in North Africa

The Tunisian crisis sparked in December 2011 is evidence of weakening of regional state structures and a synonym of broader regional instability. Yet, a strengthening of state structures must not lead to a return to authoritarianism. The reorganisation of state institutions in the region must instead work towards deepening the level of political participation and representation. This process must begin at a local level, as it is here that these institutions have revealed their most profound weaknesses.

In fact, the Tunisian uprisings that served to catalyse other 'Arab Springs' originated in rural regions. The towns of Sidi Bouzid, Regueb and Souk Jadid in the centre of the country, for example, were the first to rise up and did so long before the movements touched the capital, Tunis. The central powers were unable to prevent their regional and municipal representatives in these hinterland regions from stepping down amidst pressure from the protesters. Using their local representatives as scapegoats, they justified their actions by claiming that they were 'wrongly elected' or, in other words, collaborators of Ben Ali's regime. The same occurred with other local representatives,[8] including governors, delegates and sector leaders.

These forced defections led to a *de facto* suspension of the provincial political and administrative machine. Although the leaders of the machine were equipped with few resources and did not posses exclusive powers, they nevertheless coordinated a grouping of social networks – family-based, professional and economic systems. At a local level, they therefore constitute a reliable and organised connection to the government and presidential powers. As such, they function as agents of political consensus between the central state and local elites. The collapse of the regional government significantly weakened the local wings of the party in power, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). No longer in a position to activate non-militant networks – these networks relying more upon opportunism than ideological support – the RCD was unable to organise counter-forces in support of the President and government.

---

[8] The French 'territoriale' has been translated into English as 'local'. See later examples: "local administration" from the French 'administration territoriale' (p.5) and 'local governments', from the French 'collectivités territoriales' (p.6).

The Tunisian government was no longer supported by the Tunisian Labour Union (UGTT), which up to that point had followed a logic of conciliation with the government.[9] The UGTT therefore participated from a very early stage in the popular movement through the leanings of its local antennas.

The participation of the UGTT in the protest movements and the weaknesses of the local administration combined to provide a tipping point in the Tunisian crisis. The Tunisian government, deprived of support from its two local intermediaries, was unable to negotiate an agreement with the protestors. No longer playing their intermediary roles, the UGTT and the local administration contributed to the disruption of everyday order. This was clearly demonstrated by the fact that the transitional government, formed after the ousting of Ben Ali, prioritised reactivating these institutional networks in an effort to re-establish political authority.

New compromises and arrangements between social groups must, therefore, be established in any response directed towards solving recurring issues such as: the replacement of political and economic leaders; wealth and revenue redistribution; property rights; and the establishment of appropriate tax rates. In firmly inscribing the principle of democratic governance and local participation in the Constitution, Tunisia has taken an important and perhaps decisive step in the right direction.

Required support for building peace and the role of the UN

Support for a peacebuilding project in North Africa must unfold in two directions: (1) assistance for states in the region in their evolution from highly-centralised authoritarianism to decentralised democracies; and (2) encourage the regional integration process through the implementation of a North African security organisation.

The UN, particularly through the UN Development Programme (UNDP), is in a position to accompany existing powers in increasing their levels of political participation and representation, particularly at the local level. This accompaniment must be undertaken in partnership with the EU, who has been engaged in the region for twenty years thanks to the Euro-Mediterranean partnerships. The primary European objective of installing an economic free trade zone is not adapted to the current situation nor to the heightened political instability. Consequently, it is important to concentrate UN efforts, in partnership with the EU, on peacebuilding and security. In addition to support for the Tunisian transition model, this involves the roll-out of a cooperation strategy with the UMA to coordinate regional security policies.

Of all the North African regimes shaken-up by the 'Arab Spring', the Tunisian state appears to be the most advanced in the transition process. If the Tunisian elites manage to consolidate the current transition process and reinforce control over the territory, security will improve across the Sahara and, by extension, the Sahel too. The Tunisian process must prioritise following-up on the demands of the population and elites regarding the implementation of local democratic governance structures. This project of political, social and administrative development can also apply in other North African countries in response to the dangers that threaten national cohesion, including: civil war and partitioning; bomb threats from armed groups; interference from foreign powers; and the decay of local political institutions.

---

[9] L. Chouikha and V. Geisser, 'Retour sur la révolte du bassin minier. Les cinq leçons politiques d'un conflit social inédit', *L'Année du Maghreb*, VI, 2010.

UNDP is already engaged in Tunisia through its 'democratic governance' programme. Yet, beyond electoral assistance missions and justice reforms, emphasis must be placed on the 'management of local interests by elected representatives'. This principal, advocated by the UN and the World Bank, entertains the idea that the Tunisian citizens must have access to new and viable benefits. The application of this principle must over time favour the expansion of citizens' rights, without any specific intervention from the state or new wave of top-down reforms. Following this hypothesis, it is the local governments that create and maintain the dynamic since they are no longer at the service of a particular authoritarian leader, clique or party.

In Tunisia, civil society organisations have promoted decentralisation and the reform of local administrations. In doing so, they have associated themselves with a broad platform of civil servants, jurists, past and new local leaders, as well as delegates from the Constitutional Assembly. The objective being that local institutions will no longer constitute a tool of corruption or other dishonourable behaviour for rulers, but as a tool for political development.

In summary, if the state and local governors opened-up to all types of organisation, including mass popular parties, a virtuous cycle of opportunity for claiming individual political rights and the guarantees of public liberty would be unleashed. Through this process, political development and political stability goes hand-in-hand, as a reorganisation of local power structures implies that new agreements on wealth distribution are sealed both between elites, and between elites and the general population. Such agreements could also lead to a new balance of political and economic interests from the state all the way down to the local level. The UN Office for North Africa of the Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), in particular, could help to strengthen the capacity of member states to formulate policies in support of economic and social transformation in the Maghreb.

In Morocco, support is required for the 'regional progress' programme initiated by Mohammed VI in 2010. The UN is already engaged in the process through UNDP; however, although this vast project was presented as crucial for the political development of the Kingdom, only very tentative advances have been made. In fact, the Moroccan government is yet to submit a draft Organic Law to parliament – the true beginnings of a regional autonomisation process and local political pluralism.

In Algeria, the authorities have not questioned the country's centralised politics and adopt the concept of 'local democratic governance' solely for rhetorical purposes. Yet, the constitution of an 'autonomous local space for political representation and public action' appears to be a response that is well-adapted to both developmental needs and the stability requirements emphasised by the Algerian people during the recent presidential elections.

UN engagement regarding stabilisation in Libya must first focus on re-establishing the security situation. But this project is proving to be a challenge while the states in the region object to delegating any sovereignty to a North African regional organisation. The UMA has not lived up to its promises to improve the political or economic situation and remains paralysed, notably regarding the Algeria-Morocco territorial dispute. The recent initiatives launched by Tunisia in 2012, followed by Algeria and then Morocco in 2014 have not yet benefited from a true dynamic of cooperation, but are nonetheless evidence of revived political interest in regional integration. Once again, the UN and EU must adopt a coordinated approach to encourage the North African states to consider a regional security agreement. Resources much be mobilised with a view to eventually aligning the regional leaders on the content and form of a security

policy. Although currently stagnant, the UMA could serve as a sample institutional framework to facilitate the implementation of regional inter-state policies.

References

Z. Benhamouche, *Algérie l'impasse* (Paris: Publisud, 2011).

R. Bocco, P. Harrison and L. Oesch, 'Recovery' in V. Chétail (ed.) *Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: a Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

S. Carapico, *Political Aid and Arab Activism: Democracy Promotion, Justice, and Representation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

J-F. Daguzan, 'Armées et société dans le monde arabe: entre révolte et conservatism', Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, Note n° 5/13, 2013.

ICG (International Crisis Group), *L'exception tunisienne : succès et limites du consensus.* Rapport Moyen-Orient/Afrique du Nord n°37, 2014.

S. Kouttroub, 'Printemps arabe et nouvel ordre géopolitique au Maghreb', *L'Année du Maghreb*, IX, 2013.

A. Larif Béatrix, 'L'État tutélaire, système politique et espace éthique' in M. Camau, *Tunisie au présent : Une modernité au-dessus de tout soupçon?* (IREMAM : Aix-en-Provence, 1987).

T. Neethling and H. Hudson, *Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development in Africa: Concepts, Role-players, Policy and Practice*, (New York & Cape Town: UN University Press, 2013).

About the authors: Souhaïl Belhadj is a researcher at the Centre on Conflict, Development & Peacebuilding (Graduate Institute, Geneva). His current research concentrates on the political transition process in Syria and Tunisia, with a focus on the recomposition of political institutions. In 2013, he published the book, La Syrie de Bashar al-Asad. Anatomie d'un régime autoritaire (Belin 2013). **Riccardo Bocco** is Professor of Political Sociology at the Graduate Institute, Geneva. His main geographical area of focus has been the Near East, particularly Jordan, Israel/Palestine and Lebanon. His thematic focus has been on development policies and statebuilding; humanitarian aid and refugees; and monitoring the impact of international aid on civilian populations. Previously, he was Director of the French Centre for Research on the Contemporary Middle East, based in Amman, and Research Director at the Graduate Institute, Geneva. During the 2000s, he led large-scale research projects on international aid in the Near East for several UN agencies. His present research focuses on peacebuilding processes and 'Dealing with the Past' policies in the MENA region.