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STRATEGIC TRENDS

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MAGHREB

Terrorism concerns, border policies and the Maghreb integration

The 6th of February Tunisia completed a 200-km fence along its border with Libya. In a statement, Tunisian Defence Minister Farhat Hachani said that the fence would dissuade terrorist groups to move across the frontier, reducing smuggling. The fence represents a response to escalating threats. Late last year, terrorist groups carried out two main attacks in Tunis and Sousse, jeopardizing Tunisia's transition and tourist sector.

Both attacks were claimed by the Islamic State (IS, Dawla) organization and may have been planned in a training camp in Sabratha, Libya, just 90 km away from Tunisian borders. Born from the ashes of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Dawla found fertile ground in Libya where political turmoil and the ongoing fragmentation of the country is nurturing jihadist groups. Failed or failing states like Libya, Iraq and Syria generally lack central control: terrorist groups take advantage of this power vacuum and expand, focusing on border areas.

The United States' airstrike in Sabratha confirmed the dangerous association between failing States, border porousness and IS' strategy. The 19th February raid targeted Noureddine Chouchane, a leading IS

operative and Tunisian national, considered the mastermind of the terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse. Even though the alleged killing of Chouchane could be considered an important success in the campaign against IS, collateral effects were relevant. As shown by the operation precedent of “Inherent Resolve” in Iraq and Syria, a counterterrorism strategy based exclusively on air strikes is ineffective. Furthermore, it is likely to increase terrorist groups’ trans-border movements, causing growing concerns and raising suspects among neighbouring States.

State’s response to this strategic dilemma consisted so far in sealing their borders. Apart from the fence between Tunisia-Libya, similar developments are occurring elsewhere. Following different terrorist infiltration attempts, on 17th February Algeria raised its alert level to red along its eastern border, establishing new checkpoints and deploying drones to monitor the Illizi wilaya (province) bordering Libya. Further west, in January Algeria completed a 170 km fence along its border with Morocco. Morocco reciprocated, raising a 3 metres wall to stop illegal migrants. Borders between Algeria and Morocco have been closed since 1994, after the Marrakech terrorist attack for which Rabat blamed Algiers.

In addition to terrorism concerns, strained relations between Maghreb States contribute to these border policies, preventing regional integration. On 17th February 2016 the 27th anniversary of the *Union du Maghreb Arab* (UMA, composed by Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania) was marked by conciliatory messages between Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and king Mohamed VI of Morocco. However, considering recent developments and the strict correlation between terrorism, security vacuum and border policies in the region, it is likely that UMA will need more time to achieve better results.