



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

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MAGHREB

Morocco's counter-terrorism diplomacy

The 16th of January the French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, announced a visit in the kingdom of Morocco in the coming months. The purpose of his trip was to soothe tensions between Paris and Rabat and establish confidence after the diplomatic row of the last year, but in February a high-level bilateral meeting was postponed.

In February 2014, Morocco interrupted all the judiciary cooperation with France, after the head of Rabat's Interior Security (Direction générale de la surveillance du territoire), Abdellatif el-Hammouchi, was accused of tortures and abuses while he was in France during a state visit. The prosecution notification by the French police directly to the Morocco ambassador's residence in Neuilly-sur-Seine, was intended as a violation of the diplomatic protocol. Morocco in general resented of President Hollande's proximity to Algeria, perceived as opposite to Rabat's interests, especially on Western Sahara issue. However, in the long term cooperation between France and Morocco is supposed to return normal.

The main factor explaining French government's change of attitude towards Rabat is the urgent need of counter-terrorism coordination. After the Paris attacks of January 7th and 8th which caused 17 dead, terrorist risk level has become extremely high in France, specifically in the regions of Ile-de-France and Alpes Maritimes. Different counter-terrorism operations across the European continent have disclosed that the countries most affected by the increasing terrorist risk have a large Arab community, mainly

composed by Maghreb immigrants. Therefore, it is in the interest of European governments, and of France in particular, to benefit from better relations with North Africa, strengthening the security cooperation.

This urgent need is shared also by Maghreb countries. Morocco in particular is facing a growing threat by jihadist groups: on January 26th Moroccan authorities arrested an Algerian national, supposed to be a member of Jund al-Khilafah, an Islamic State affiliated militant group responsible for the death of a French tourist in September. Moreover, Moroccan Justice Ministry said that 1.212 Moroccans have joined the Islamic State and 147 of those have returned home in the last months. These are the main reasons of the new Moroccan counter-terrorism foreign policy, which was disclosed early in December also by the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Iran. On December 20th in fact, Teheran appointed Mohammad Taghi Moayed as the first ambassador in Rabat in five years. Despite the fact that Morocco has been more discreet about its rapprochement with the Islamic Republic, Rabat is much more interested in having good relations with Iran. Apart from the new fundamental changes in Teheran (the new President Hassan Rouhani is seen as a more reliable partner than Mahmoud Ahmadinejad), the Iranian regime is considered as an unavoidable player in the fight against the Islamic State.

Volatile Libya resume talks

Ongoing instability favoured the expansion of terrorist activities in Tripoli. On January 17th a bombing at the Algerian embassy wounded three guards and seven days later attackers in a car opened fire at Libyan police outside UN offices. However, the worst attack occurred the 27th of January when five foreigners and four guards were killed in Corinthia Hotel: the Islamic State's (Dawla) Tripoli Province claimed the attack, which has been named 'Battle of Abu Anas al-Libi', an al-Qaeda operative captured by US security forces who died 22 days before. More in general, starting from its stronghold of Derna, Dawla is taking advantage of the chaos in the country to expand its presence.

The increasing terrorist risk underlines the importance of peace negotiations between Libyan factions. Following several setbacks in the first weeks of the month, UN-brokered peace talks finally took place on January 14th in Geneva amid high expectations. However, the participants were mainly from the internationally recognised House of the Representatives based in the eastern city of Tobruk, whereas Tripoli's opposite Parliament (General National Congress - GNC) announced it had not been consulted about the details of the talks, thus deciding not to take part.

The situation continues to be volatile: in order to facilitate negotiations, on Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity coalition announced a ceasefire (18th of January), after the same step was taken by Libya Dawn two days earlier. Further external pressures are expected in the coming weeks and these initiatives could contribute also to facilitate talks between the two main factions: during a visit of Nouri Abusahmain in Istanbul, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu advised GNC head to take advantage of UN efforts.

Algeria: economic adversities and social effects

In January, Algeria continued to struggle with its economic problems, mainly driven by the fall in the oil price in the world markets. The government stated that the economy will grow in the next years: Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal affirmed that the country will achieve a 7% GDP increase by 2019. Despite the announcements however, the situation is increasingly worsening. On January 12th the visit of the Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in Algiers, invited by the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, was the occasion to discuss the budgetary problems the two countries are facing because of the low oil price on the international market. Both countries stressed their will as OPEC members to invert the price trend, creating an opposition front to Saudi Arabia, and involving in this coalition other countries such as Russia and Iran.

In the meanwhile, the diversification of Algerian economy is increasingly far to come. Sonatrach plans to invest \$70 billion in the next 20 years to exploit the shale gas in the southern desert were halted after huge public opposition over environmental concerns. Protests in the In Salah oasis forced the government to announce on January 18th that plans to drill the country's abundant shale gas reserves have been scrapped.

All these factors will have important effects on the country's economy. Following the public sector hiring freeze of December 2014, new austerity measures were introduced including the postponement of several planned urban tramway and railroad projects, while the planned expansion of Algiers airport will be financed through bank loans, rather than being State-funded. More in general, Algeria's government efforts showed the impellent necessity to move from a social to a liberal economy. Notwithstanding, it is likely that the end of social spending will have its social effects in terms of increasing protests and opposition by the population, especially in case of more stringent austerity measures.