



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

MAGHREB STRATEGIC TRENDS

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Egypt

Widespread protests keep the tension high

In the second half of January, many protests, organized by the opposition parties, have taken place in the main cities of Egypt to the point that President Mohamed Morsi has declared a state of emergency and a curfew in Port Said, Suez and Ismailia. At least 54 people have died in five days of bitter clashes between anti-government protesters and the security forces.

At first, the protests were set off by the second anniversary of the revolution, and then by a verdict of a Port Said court that imposed a death sentence upon 21 local football fans for their role in a deadly unrest.

During the riots a new group of masked young men, called the Black Bloc, has emerged. This new group, made up mostly of anarchists and common criminals, is new in the Egyptian scene.

On January 29, Egypt's military chief and Defence Minister, Abdul Fatah Khalil Al-Sisi warned the protesters of a potential "collapse of the state" under the weight of its uproar, heightening also the prospect that the country's military might be forced to intervene.

Mr Al-Sisi, was appointed by Mr Morsi to head the military last August, and is probably far more loyal to the Muslim Brothers than any previous general. The evaluation on the basis of the current elements is that the likelihood of a coup in the very short term is low.

Morsi's cabinet reshuffle ahead of parliamentary elections

After Morsi's victory in the referendum for the approval of the constitutional charter (December 2012), the competition between Islamic and liberal forces has restarted in the run-up to the Egyptian parliamentary elections expected in spring. On the 6th of January, President Mohamed Morsi reshuffled his cabinet replacing 10 ministers, including those for Finance and the Interior, increasing the Islamist presence (+ 8 posts for the Muslim Brotherhood). The move came a day ahead of a planned visit by a top International Monetary Fund official to discuss an impending \$4,8 billion loan. Morsi's government is facing a large budget deficit and the value of the Egyptian pound is dropping rapidly.

Salafist parties have called on the government to implement a system of Islamic banking, which would ban interest on loans. On the contrary, Mr Morsi's economic model appears to be more neoliberal and he is surrounded by free market economists. His government has accepted the IMF consensus and it is expanding privatisations.

On the other side, the opposition parties remain deeply divided, increasing the probability of losing elections. Liberals, leftists, secularists and old-regime loyalists have pledged to run

as a single party in the parliamentary elections, but the lack of a strong leadership will probably compromise any effort to compete with the Muslim Brotherhood.

After the protests, the National Salvation Front (NSF), which was formed last November to oppose the Constitutional charter, met for the first time (01/1/2013) to press in vain President Morsi to form a national unity government in order to stop street violence. On the 31st of January, the opposition parties announced to give up violence during a meeting convened by the head of the al-Azhar University, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb.

The NSF is not as strong as it can appear. It is indeed splintering over economic policy and whether the members of Mubarak's government should be accepted on the ballot list. For instance, Amr Moussa, who is part of the NSF, was also a foreign minister under Mubarak's regime. This is a thorny matter for the opposition, especially after an Egyptian court ordered the retrial of Hosni Mubarak on 13/1/2013.

The Muslim Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice Party are organizing internal elections to select their candidates, while on the radical Islamist side the Salafist Al-Nour Party held an emergency meeting on January 9 to elect its new leader Mustafa Khalifa, after Imad Abdul Ghafoor defected from the party for establishing its new Salafist party, al-Watan (9/1/2013). The new head of al-Nour Party confirmed that talks are underway between Islamist forces to form an alliance in the upcoming elections.

Al Watan party will probably make an alliance with the controversial Salafist, Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, leader of the Development and Construction Party and al-Asala party. The split between the most important factions of Salafist movement and the numerous charity projects sponsored by the Muslim Brotherhood for the Egypt's poorest people will build a higher consensus for Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party.

The next parliamentary elections will mark the end of the transitional political process, and, if the Muslim Brotherhood will control both parliament and the presidency, it would be able to shape a new Egypt. In fact the other battleground for the Muslim Brothers is the control of the bureaucracy and the religious sphere as well.

Mr Morsi and his allies are trying to exert some control over the country's institutions but the bureaucracy's resistance, mostly made up of liberals and secularists, could prevent the Islamists from consolidating their power and imposing their ideology.

Moreover, regarding the religious sphere, the only way to exercise the authority of the state is to put the mosques under the authority of the ministry of Religious Affairs. But probably imams would not appreciate being turned into civil servants. And, in the end, if religion will be identified with the state, there is a serious possibility that the unpopularity of the government will affect religious institutions as well.

The Muslim Brothers will face serious dilemmas if they want to extend their influence in this way because they could stiffen social resistance.

Morsi's foreign policy

President Morsi has been particularly active in the realm of foreign policy. The Pentagon proceeded with the delivery of 20 F-16 combat aircraft to Egypt, a fact that in the eyes of Egyptians has been seen as a vote of confidence by the US Administration.

As far as Syria is concerned, President Mohamed Morsi expressed his support to the Syrian revolution, adding that President Bashar al-Assad's has no place in Syria's future. He sees Mr Assad and the Alawite sect close to the end, and foresees an increasing role of Syria's Sunni Islamists, including the Muslim Brothers, in the new regime.

Concerning the conflict in Mali, Mr Morsi has expressed his opposition to France's intervention, saying its actions there would create a "new conflict hotspot" that separates the Arab North from its African neighbours to the South. Here the Muslim Brotherhood fears that Salafist parties could better exploit the opposition to France by the Egyptian public or that there could be a of backlash, as it happened in the Algerian hostage siege.

The 9th of January the leader of Fatah, President Mahmoud Abbas, met with Khaled Meshal, chief of HAMAS, at the invitation of Mr Morsi in an effort of reconciliation.

Despite the ongoing crisis in the country, the 30th of January President Morsi made his first official visit to Berlin, seeking foreign investment and to convince Europe of the country's democratic credentials.

ALGERIA

The conflict in Mali and the role of Algiers

The crisis in Mali is becoming a serious challenge for the stability and the security of Algeria.

In December, French President François Hollande paid a state visit to ~~Algiers~~ where he announced a new strategic partnership among equals with Algiers. This declaration was made just a few days later than the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) had unanimously approved Resolution n. 2085, authorising an African-led military force to repel the Islamist militants from Northern Mali.

Even though Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika had warned against a French military intervention in Mali, he allowed France the full use of the air space for air transport to Mali and deployed a covering force along its porous border (13/1/2013). Algeria shares a 2.000

km desert border with Mali and is worried that a military offensive could push al Qaeda militants into Southern Algeria, triggering also a refugee crisis if displaced Malian Tuaregs head North.

In fact the ongoing intervention in Northern Mali could have been possible without Algerian military but not without its approval.

The 16th of January some Islamist militants abducted more than 100 hostages, including many western workers at the Tigantourine natural gas facility near In Amenas, a city close to the border with Libya. The Algerian Interior Minister Daho Ould Kabila rejected all negotiations with the militants and the Algerian security forces began a military intervention against the terrorists that left 89 people died between captives and hostage-takers, 37 of which were foreign hostages from eight countries.

The British Prime Minister, David Cameron at first had expressed disappointment with the Algerian government's handling of the situation but then described the situation as "ungoverned space". The British Foreign Secretary, Mr William Hague, added that the Algerians had moved quickly to intervene because they believed that the lives of all the hostages were in "great and immediate danger", as the hostage-takers were planning to blow up the entire gas complex. France also defended the Algerian response to the situation. President Barack Obama also backed the Algerians. The family members of US diplomats in the country have been encouraged to leave the country.

On January 30, Mr David Cameron paid a state visit to Algiers for security talks, the first-ever for a British Prime Minister since the Algerian independence in 1962.

The biggest impact of the hostage tragedy is on Algeria itself, which relies on energy production for 95% of its exports and more than 60% for its total revenues. The instability of the country can compromise international investments and strengthen the Islamist opposition against an ailing president, ruling the country since 1999.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar has increased terrorism in the Sahel?

During the attack against the gas facility, the terrorists were well-trained and armed with recoilless rifle, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and several medium and light machine guns largely looted from the then-Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's arsenal.

The attackers took advantage of the vacuum of authority in Libya to plan the attack and then came across the border to conduct the assault, enjoying tactical surprise due to the proximity.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar has claimed the overall responsibility for this mass kidnapping. According to a senior Algerian official, several Egyptian members of the assailing squads were the same that also took part in the deadly attack against the US Consulate in Libya in September 2012.

In December 2012, Belmokhtar, one of the most important jihadist leaders, announced the creation of a new combat unit, called al-Mouwakoune Bi-Dima (Those Who Sign with Blood), threatening immediately both France and Algeria.

The name he chose for his new combat unit was also the same one originally used by a group of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) behind the hijacking of the Air France plane.

In a video issued in December, when he allegedly distanced himself from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Belmokhtar also pledged his loyalty to Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar and al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, without mentioning the AQIM leadership.

The relationship between Belmokhtar and global jihad goes back more than 20 years. After his paramilitary training in Pakistani camps in 1990s, he went back to Algeria to join the Armed Islamic Group (GIA, in French). During the civil war (1991-1999), the rebels splintered into different groups, and some of them refused to sign the 1999 peace accord. One of them, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Comfort, slid from insurgency into criminal activities, like taking hostages for ransom and one of its members was Belmokhtar.

Despite a decade of international anti-terrorist activity in Sahel, the Algerian inquiry into the assault at the gas plant revealed that the risk level is much higher than thought. The attack namely was carried out by a multinational group that included Algerians, Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, two Canadians, a Frenchman and a Malian.

Morocco

New political reforms in sight

Although the wind of the Arab Spring did not touch Morocco, the King Mohammed VI has opened up the political system to some degree, allowing moderate Islamists to share power in the ruling coalition government.

Some analysts think that the changes are superficial and the political order is managed by the same elites close to the monarchy that have ruled for decades; while others are convinced that a gradual process of democratization under the king's guidance is the most feasible route to lasting change, development and stability. Anyway, the king's popularity is not easy to know due to the fact that a survey on this issue is illegal.

Despite the fact that the new government includes only one female minister. Bassima Hakkaoui (minister for Solidarity, Women and Family), the government is rather inclined towards liberal reforms and is broaching two very sensitive subjects in the Muslim world: abortion and rape marriage.

Ms Hakkaoui declared that the government was considering holding a national referendum on abortion. The bill on the matter will be under scrutiny by the main parties before a national referendum.

The 23rd of January the government announced also a plan to change the penal code in order to outlaw the traditional practice of rape marriage. This decision was prompted by the shock the public opinion expressed last year after the suicide of a 16-year-old girl who was forced to marry her alleged rapist.

The future of “Justice and Charity” movement after the death of its leader

The death of Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine at the age of 84 has sparked a debate on the future of the Justice and Spirituality movement (al-Adl Wal Ihsane) and its new leadership since last December.

Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine founded the movement in 1981 and was a strong opponent of the monarchy, combining Sufism and politics to the point that a Sufi-inspired Islamist movement has represented the most potent opposition to the monarchy since the 1980s.

His death has left many political analysts asking what direction the still non legalised opposition will take. The interim successor is Mohamed Abbadi, the current head of the movement’s guidance council and number two in the movement ~~in the shape of~~.

Many analysts think that this movement is the only opposition organization capable of mass mobilisation against the monarchy. For instance, during the funeral in the centre of Rabat, tens of thousands of Moroccans took part but the official media have partially ignored the event.

The real strength of this movement dates back to the inception of the revolts across the Middle East in 2011, when Yassine’s movement joined its forces with Morocco’s pro-democracy 20 February (20F) movement, putting pressure on the king to undertake political reforms.

After these protests, legislative elections took place and the Justice and Development party (PJD), won a majority of seats. The king also ratified constitutional reforms that limited some of his powers, although critics say that the king and his advisers, not the elected government, remain the real source of power.

In the near future, the Yassine’s death could either reduce the movement’s political might or change its position on the monarchy. Moreover, the new leadership could decide to be registered as a legal political party, playing a more important political role in the kingdom.

The conflict in Mali and its repercussions

The conflict unfolding in Mali between armed Islamists and the international military coalition led by France seems far distant from Morocco. But the members of al-Qaeda are

working to foster ties with far-away extremist groups, recruiting Moroccan jihadists to bring into Mali. In late December, the Moroccan law enforcement broke up an al-Qaeda cell in Fez. Although Morocco doesn't share border with Mali, the main aim of the cell was to enrol and recruit young Moroccans who have embraced jihadist ideas, in order to send them to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) camps. As confirmed by the Ministry of Interior, the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other regional terror organizations have intensified activities aimed at undermining stability in Morocco. In particular, the AQIM and its allies, the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad (MUJAO) and Ansar al-Sharia in the Islamic Maghreb are now attractive to new Moroccan jihadists. The Moroccan government has conducted successful security operations dismantling several terror cells, and now with the ongoing conflict in Mali, the security of the country has been put on high alert. As some analysts have stressed, thanks to the easy traffic and the lack of border control between the neighbouring countries, AQIM over time has been able to create a solid nucleus in the Sahel for all these young jihadists. This problem emerged during the latest crisis of hostages in Algeria, and the same attack could take place in Morocco as well, where the terrorist groups could aim at destabilizing the country. For the fear of a spillover of the extremism from northern Mali, the Moroccan government supports French military intervention in Mali, even though it has no plans yet to send its own troops.

Tunisia

The Troika government towards a cabinet reshuffle

Tunisia's political process has been going on at a slower pace than Egypt's since the beginning of the revolution. Fifteen months after the formation of the so-called Troika government, a coalition made up of the leading Islamist party Ennahda, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Ettakatol), Tunisia has still neither a new constitution nor an independent electoral commission. In the meantime, the emergence of a new opposition party, Call for Tunisia (Nidaa Tounis), founded by the former Interim Prime Minister till 24th December 2011, Beji Caid el-Sebsi, and other liberal and progressive parties, such as the Popular Front, the Republican Party (Al-Joumhouri) and the Democratic and Social Path (Al-Massar), are putting pressure on the power of Ennahda and its allies. The first rift among the ruling coalition came up from the political bureau of the Ettakatol that may consider withdrawing from the ruling Troika coalition, if there is not decision-making in the new government as well as the involvement of more political parties in the next cabinet reshuffle. Some pundits think that the Ettakatol will not withdraw from the government, but they are just putting pressure on the government to keep their positions and not lose any of its ministerial posts. Anyway, the cabinet reshuffle – originally scheduled for January 14 – has been postponed due to continued negotiations within the Troika. Ennahda has not yet introduced effective new economic policies, putting the coalition government under intense political pressure. These failures by Ennahda party are corroding the popular and political consensus to the point that almost 20 members of parliament have defected from the two secularist parties who

share power with it, reducing the coalition majority in the constitutional assembly to just nine votes.

In this context, the Ennahda has been negotiating with the opposition parties such as the Republican Party, the Democratic Alliance, the Wafa Party and representatives of the Freedom and Dignity bloc to enlarge the coalition government. But Al-Joumhour, the Democratic Alliance and the Wafa Party have already expressed various reservations about their association with the Troika government; while the Minister of Health and potential number two in Ennahda announced that the parliamentary Freedom and Dignity bloc is the only one willing to join the government.

Some analysts think that Ennahda takes time to hold sway in the state's institutions and so can achieve either a form of authoritarian model of state or a form of religious dictatorship along the lines of the Iranian model. The latter interpretation is based by the increasing number of Salafist-controlled mosques and Koranic schools in the country as well as the authorization of wearing the Niqab for women. From this perspective, some pundits think that Ghannouchi is opposed to the cabinet reshuffle and he only seeks to advance towards his plans for Tunisia.

On the other side, President Marzouki has showed a degree of disagreement toward the Ennahda-led government, calling also for its dismissal and the replacement by a cabinet made up of technocrats, within a sort of national unity government. If this will take place, it could include a presidential council allowing for rotation of various presidents (such as Ghannouchi, bin Jafar, Marzouki, Essebsi and Chebbi), each holding office for six months. Moreover, this will delay the elections scheduled for June 2013 and would require re-drafting the interim constitution.

“Sheratongate” shakes the Ennahda’s image

A series of embarrassing leaks published by a Tunisian blogger have damaged the credibility of the Ennahda party. The blogger, Ms Olfa Riahi posted some bills from the Sheraton Hotel in Tunis showing that Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem – the son in law of Ennahdha party leader, Rached Ghannouchi – had charged expensive rooms to the ministry account, in an apparent misuse of public funds. While days later, Ms Riahi went public with another leak, indicating that Mr Abdessalem had received a one million dollar gift from the state of China directly into ministry coffers, which would be in violation of budget and oversight laws. Ennahdha has reacted with heavy-handed lawsuits that some see as abusing a judiciary, which remains subject to the Ennahdha-controlled Ministry of Justice.

Alliance for Tunisia: The main challenger to Ennahda?

The new opposition party, Call for Tunisia (Nidaa Tounis), has emerged in recent months to challenge Ennahda and it has rallied much support under an anti-Islamist platform. Opposition parties say that the ruling coalition has not yet proposed any election law, neither economic development plan nor social policies. Critics say that the delay of any reform is only an attempt by Ennahda and Congress for the Republic to pass

unconstitutional and anti-democratic laws in order to exclude Tunisians and deprive them of their most basic rights. Beji Caid Essebsi is accused by Tunisia's ruling coalition of regrouping former regime officials and seeking to undermine the government. The supporters of this group regularly clash with backers of the ruling Islamist Ennahda party. In particular, the leader of Nidaa Tounes has blamed the trouble on the pro-Ennahda, League for the Protection of the Revolution, which has as main aim to block any attempt by old-regime figures to make a comeback in politics.

Caid Essebsi claims that the local committees take orders from both Ennahda and the Congress for the Republic. Moreover, rising indignation over the violence allegedly instigated by the League has come also from the General Tunisian Labor Union (UGTT). Ennahda has denied any institutional link to the League, but Islamist veterans of Ben Ali's prisons, are common among local committee members.

At the beginning of January the founder of Nidaa Tounes, Beji Caid Essebsi met with the leaders of Al Joumhour and Al Massar to discuss a united political front among the three parties. Although both parties, Al-Massar and Al Joumhour, discussed to join Nidaa Tounes, the Popular Front party refused to enter into such a coalition for competing in the next elections.

On January 29, al Joumhour, Nidaa Tounes, and Al Massar officially announced the formation of a united political alliance, called Alliance for Tunisia, which will support a single presidential candidate and a parliamentary list in the upcoming election. In this way the alliance will try to counter Ennahda's political supremacy.

Libya

The growing insecurity

More than a year after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, security in Libya remains in disarray. The widespread of weapons and military equipment, looted during the Gaddafi's fall and distributed among a number of organizations largely connected with the radical Islamic groups, is emerging as a problem with more repercussions than the mere geographical scale of Libya. For instance, in Benghazi, the central government has struggled to control rival armed factions since the uprising. Attacks on US, British, Italian and United Nations properties and personnel highlight the precarious security. So, following the latest assassination attempt on Italy's Consul Guido De Sanctis, the interim government has considered of imposing a curfew in Benghazi and probably in other cities, once the General National Council (GNC) approves the measure.

In the country is raising fears of a dangerous security vacuum. The Italian government has temporarily closed its consulate in Benghazi and pulled its staff out of the country. The United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia have followed suit just a few days later due to an alert released by the British Foreign Office on a specific, imminent threat to westerners linked to French military intervention in Mali. On January 31, British

Prime Minister David Cameron made unannounced visit to Tripoli and during the same day, two Improvised Explosive Devices have been thrown over the wall of an unused United Nations Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) compound in the capital. Moreover, the central authorities have announced a new visa policy requiring all foreigners to obtain visas before entering the country.

Many criminal groups are engaged in smuggling arms and drugs, theft, human trafficking and smuggling cars for personal profit. While others groups, such as the Salafists, are pursuing the imposition of stricter interpretation of Islamic law in the country.

At the end of December the first major attack against a Coptic church took place in the western city of Misrata. The small communities of Egyptians, Greeks and Italians, who account for most of the Christian minority, can become also an easy target for the Islamist extremists in the long run. Libya's new rulers are also struggling to impose their authority on a myriad of armed groups, who helped oust Gaddafi last year but have yet to lay down their arms.

Libya and Egypt are planning to set up a joint commission with the sole aim to coordinate the extradition of pro-Gaddafi elements who are currently taking refuge in Egypt. While, on the other side, the Prime Ministers of Libya, Algeria and Tunisia during a trilateral summit have agreed on to enhance security along their common borders in an attempt to fight the flow of arms, drugs and organized crime in a mostly desert region. The meeting was held a few days ahead of the Algerian hostage crisis. In the aftermath of the siege, the Libyan authorities have been accused by media reports of using the south-western Al-Waigh military base, close to Libya's border with Niger, as a launching pad for attacks on neighbouring countries. Prime Minister Ali Zeidan promptly denied the allegations, saying that the country will not allow to be used for attacks that threaten the security of its neighbours. Due to the increasing violence, drugs and weapons trafficking and an influx of illegal immigrants, last December, Libya's General National Congress ordered the temporary closure of the country's porous borders with Chad, Niger, Sudan and Algeria and declared seven southern areas restricted military areas.

The new political system is still in gestation

The political process is going too slow. The largest parliamentary coalition has boycotted many times the national congress, protesting at delays in forming a committee to draft the country's first constitution. The same difficulties for the Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, who is struggling to form a government. For instance, Ali Aujali, former ambassador to the United States, designated by the Mr Zeidan as Ministry of Foreign Affairs has rejected the appointment.

Clashes and accusations among politicians are becoming ordinary. The Defence Minister, Mohammed al-Barghathi, has accused his former deputy, Siddiq al-Ghaith, of trying to assassinate him during an attack on his convoy in the city of Tobruk, in the eastern Libya.

The country has about 140 tribes and influential large families, as a consequence, the tribal divisions within the country are emerging as a potent hurdle for the formation of a stable government.