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NATO's Strategic Direction towards Tunisia

Speaking on 11th July at the Plenary Session of the 28th NATO summit in Brussels, the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced that Madrid was interested in taking the lead of NATO's training mission in Tunisia. Sánchez, who replaced Mariano Rajoy in early June, welcomed NATO's recognition of the southern region as a source of risks [*President of Government stresses recognition by NATO of importance of southern flank as source of new challenges*, 11 July 2018, La Moncloa]. He also offered Spain's assistance in case of an urgent evacuation of the UN staff in Libya. Sánchez said that the Spanish amphibious forces based at the Rota Naval Base in Cádiz could be used to carry out the extraction of about 30 staff of the UN Support Mission in Libya if needed, responding to a request of the UN Secretary General António Guterres.

Sánchez' remark brought again the issue of NATO's interest in stabilising Tunisia under the spotlight. Relations between the Alliance and Tunis have been seesawing in the past months. Recent setbacks included misunderstandings about the establishment of an Intelligence Fusion Centre in Tunisia [Umberto Profazio, *Projecting stability beyond NATO's borders: an Intelligence Fusion Centre in Tunisia*, July 2016, Maghreb Strategic Trends, NATO Defence College Foundation]; and Tunis' rejection of a NATO grant of US\$3,7 million for the establishment of a joint command centre.

Both developments cast a shadow on the security cooperation between NATO and Tunis [Umberto Profazio, *Tunisia's reluctant partnership with NATO*, 6 July 2018, International Institute for Strategic Studies]. As a result, both parts agreed on adopting less ambitious programmes, such as the Defence-Capacity Building (DCB) package, a tailored-set of initiatives aimed at reinforcing intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities to project stability in partner countries.

The training mission mentioned by Sánchez is part of the DCB package for Tunisia approved by the Brussels Summit in July. According to El País, both the training mission and the eventual extraction of UN staff from Libya would be coordinated by the new NATO Strategic Direction South (NSD-S) Hub based in Naples, Italy, and created in 2017. The centre will improve awareness and understanding of

security challenges; support collection, exchange and management of information and coordinate NATO's activities in Middle East and North Africa. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the NSD-S Hub's full operation capability (FOC) at the Brussels Summit, moving ahead with the North Atlantic Alliance's plan to project stability on NATO's southern flank. The hub is directed by Br.-Gen. Roberto Angius of the Italian army, but Madrid plans to play a key role in the new institution, claiming the leadership of NSD-S' first on-the-ground operations [Miguel González, Lucía Abellán, *España liderará la nueva misión antijihadista de la OTAN en Túnez*, 11 July 2018, El País]. Apparently this development seems to go beyond the initial Hub's initial mandate, mission and 3 C approach (Connect, Consult, Coordinate).

The training mission will further develop Tunisia's defence capacities in the areas of cyber defence, disposal of IEDs and enhanced transparency in resource management.

However, in the first phase, the assistance will focus on the training of Tunisian Special Forces to fight against terrorism. Despite the most recent successes against jihadist groups, the terrorist threat is still high, in particular in the most remote western region along the border with Algeria. On 8th July the ambush against a police unit in Ghardimou, Jendouba province, highlighted once again the resilience of terrorist groups in this area. At least six security forces' members were killed in the attack, which was later claimed by the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, a terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) [*Tunisie: al-Qaïda revendique l'attentat contre le services de sécurité à la frontière algérienne*, 9 July 2018, Tout sur l'Algérie].

Faced with the terrorist threat growing along its borders, Algeria shares Tunisia's concerns and is willing to increase its contribution to the stability of its eastern neighbour, enhancing the bilateral security cooperation. After a deal in 2014 to secure its border with Tunisia and share intelligence, in 2017 Algeria signed a security cooperation agreement with Tunisia. In the immediate aftermath of the Ghardimou attack the Algerian Minister of Interior Noureddine Bedoui also visited the Oum Teboul border crossing in the el-Tarf wilaya, saying that Algeria's security depends strictly upon Tunisia's one.

Furthermore, Algerian press sources reported a visit by an Algerian military delegation in Tunisia, in which both parts agreed to establish a joint operations centre to fight against terrorism [*Lutte antiterrorist: Alger and Tunis créent un centre d'opération mixte*, 16 July 2018, Algérie Patriotique].

The unconfirmed news raised suspicions. Algeria has been always wary of Western States' influence in neighbouring countries, a heritage of its anti-colonial struggle and part of its non-interventionist foreign policy. For this reason, it has presumably opposed NATO's proposal of an Intelligence Fusion Centre

and its offer for a joint command centre in Tunisia [Umberto Profazio, *NATO's limited leeway in North Africa*, 5 July 2018, ISPI].

At the same time, Tunisian authorities are aware of the need to maintain a close security cooperation with Algeria, the only reliable partner along its borders after 2011. For all these reasons, the announcement by Algerian press of a joint operations centre could represent a disturbing manoeuvre aimed at put some distance between Tunisia and NATO once again.

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