

A New Strategy for US Engagement in North Africa: A Report of the North Africa Working Group

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By: Thomas Hill and Sarah Yerkes

Summary: The North Africa Working Group is an ad hoc assembly of more than fifty academics, current and former government officials, and practitioners. The group is chaired by Thomas Hill, senior program officer at the United States Institute of Peace and Sarah Yerkes, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The purpose of forming the North Africa Working Group was to bring together Washington, DC-based researchers and analysts focused on North Africa to challenge the assumptions that have formed the basis of US policy toward the region under successive administrations. The shared feeling among the group participants was that North Africa historically has been underappreciated or overshadowed by other policy concerns and that a more comprehensive explanation of the national security implications of this neglect might prompt US policymakers to increase their attention on the region.

Between March 2019 and January 2020, the North Africa Working Group met formally seven times for off-the-record discussions of issues of importance to North Africa, including security and terrorism, economic growth, migration, current conflicts, democracy and governance, the role of Europe, and global power competition. Each session began with a presentation by US officials working on North Africa or representatives from relevant international organizations. Participants and speakers contributed to discussions with the understanding that their identities would not be disclosed to nonparticipants and that all comments or remarks would be treated according to the Chatham House Rule. The attached report is a summary of the group's key conclusions and policy recommendations, compiled by the group's co-chairs. Co-chairs augmented the formal roundtable discussions with interviews with contacts located in North Africa and elsewhere.

About the Authors

Thomas Hill is the senior program officer for North Africa at USIP. He most recently served as a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution where his research focused on reforming civilian US foreign policy agencies. From 2013 to 2017, he was the senior professional staff member with the House Committee on Foreign Affairs majority staff, covering North Africa. Previously, he was a foreign affairs officer in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the Department of State for nearly ten years, serving in several domestic and overseas assignments.

Sarah Yerkes is a senior fellow in Carnegie's Middle East Program, where her research focuses on Tunisia's political, economic, and security developments as well as state-society relations in the Middle East and North Africa. She is a former member of the State Department's policy planning staff, where she focused on North Africa. Previously, she was a foreign affairs officer in the State's Department's Office of Israel and Palestinian affairs and served as a geopolitical research analyst for the US military's Joint Staff Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate (J5) at the Pentagon.

About the North Africa Working Group

Between March 2019 and January 2020, Thomas Hill and Sarah Yerkes convened dozens of North Africa-watchers in Washington, DC, to discuss US national security interests and challenges in the region stretching from Morocco to Egypt. North Africa Working Group (NAWG) members included current and former US officials from the White House, the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense, and the Office of the US Trade Representative; representatives from the Millennium Challenge Corporation; practitioners working in the region; and scholars, academics, and experts from the World Bank.

The report reflects the outcomes of the North Africa Working Group's discussions, but the positions taken are Hill's and Yerkes's alone and should not be construed to represent the views of the US Institute of Peace, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, or any of the participants' organizations.

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I. Introduction

For decades, US policymakers have paid far less attention to North Africa or the Maghreb (defined herein as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco) than to the rest of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, allowing Russia—and more recently China—to gain a foothold in a strategically important area that includes part of the African continent and neighbors Europe and the Middle East. To avoid ceding further economic, military, and cultural influence to our competitors, the United States should seize the opportunity to prioritize North Africa by working with Europe and through multilateral bodies both to counter Russian and Chinese influence and to support the demands of the people of the region for greater voice and accountability, which will help bring long-term stability there. The region, which is rapidly becoming one of the new front lines in the global competition between great powers, offers the opportunity for the United States to achieve great gain with only modest investment by approaching the region from a fresh perspective, one that moves away from the current dominant focus on counterterrorism, which often overshadows other issues. The emphasis on counterterrorism has created opportunities for Russia and China to expand their influence and presence, potentially limiting US political, military, and diplomatic maneuverability in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Such an investment would also help support one of the core US national security interests, the stability of Europe.

The 2010–2011 popular uprisings—sometimes referred to as the “Arab Spring”—provided the United States with a chance to reorient its engagement with North Africa by focusing on supporting the citizens of North Africa who took to the streets demanding dignity, freedom, and social change; these popular uprisings also opened the door for the United States to work with governments to bring about long-term stability. But the brief uptick in US interest in North Africa following the uprisings waned significantly toward the end of the Obama administration and, with the exception of Egypt, declined even further under the Trump administration.

Ten years after the popular uprisings, the socioeconomic and governance grievances that fueled the 2010 uprisings are still prevalent, and many have even worsened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has thrown regional economies into chaos, increased socioeconomic disparities, highlighted governance failures, and enabled further power grabs by authoritarian leaders. Continuing to overlook North Africa is therefore particularly dangerous today, at a time when many regional economies are performing worse than in 2010 and high levels of corruption, unemployment, and relative deprivation persist, leaving North African citizens angry, frustrated, and hopeless. This instability, or the potential for instability, could topple several critical governments, thereby posing a direct threat to the US goal in the region, which is “not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist

terrorists, not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and . . . contributes to a stable global energy market.”¹

In the case of Libya, the removal of Col. Muammar Qaddafi from power and the subsequent collapse of state institutions has created a chaotic environment in which armed nonstate actors and aspiring regional hegemons engage in escalating violence. Unchecked, this violence threatens to bring several US allies and military partners into direct confrontation, significantly undermining the integrity and military effectiveness of NATO and damaging US interests across the Middle East.

US national security interests would be best served by a new regional strategy that aligns current military and foreign assistance investments, demilitarizes US policy in the region while prioritizing efforts that are better aligned with the demands of the region’s people, prevents conflict between allies, and challenges Russian and Chinese expansion, while working in close step with our European allies and partners, who have crucial economic and historical ties to the region.

The significant economic impact of COVID-19 means that the Biden administration is unlikely to increase foreign assistance spending, especially for nonhumanitarian and global health initiatives. In addition to new financial constraints, US policymakers will continue to divide their attention between competing global priorities and a growing bipartisan desire to reduce US military engagements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. A new US strategy for North Africa should be premised on advancing US interests via multilateral institutions, exercising diplomatic leadership and support for burden sharing. This starts with closer coordination with Europe to augment current levels of direct US investment in the region in the guise of both foreign assistance and diplomatic engagement. By partnering with Europe and stretching our dollars via multilateral approaches, the United States can advance its own interests in the region in an extremely difficult financial landscape.

In this report, we offer the following recommendations for the next administration:

- The grievances that fueled mass protests in North Africa in 2010–2011 remain largely unaddressed. Corruption, the failure of government institutions, lack of transparency, and heavy-handed security force actions persist across the region. With US foreign assistance budgets unlikely to increase, and therefore limited US ability to provide direct support to activists, civil society, and inclusive political processes, the Biden administration should employ diplomatic tools such as public statements and visits to encourage and applaud positive change

¹ Donald J. Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

and advocate for greater engagement from organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has made “anticorruption and integrity” a core focus. In addition, Congress should consider the expanded use of anticorruption tools such as sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act.

- Statist economies in North Africa that rely heavily on the export of natural resources or tourism have been particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Regional governments that previously muddled through now find themselves unable to sustain high levels of public spending or to purchase acquiescence from would-be challengers. Economic stagnation and contraction increase the likelihood of political instability and popular unrest. To support regional allies and prevent the collapse of governments across the region in the short term, the United States should work through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to effectively mitigate the economic challenges and should closely coordinate assistance with Europe to prevent duplication of efforts and stretch assistance dollars further.
- The expanding military presence of Russia in the Mediterranean region and the growing economic and cultural influence of China there pose a threat the United States will find difficult to address without significant new investments and resources. For that reason, the United States should work through NATO to confront Russia and, through such institutions as the OECD and the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement, to counterbalance Chinese investment.
- Terrorism that emanates from North Africa is an immediate threat to US partners in the region, US European partners, and US personnel and facilities. As such, the United States cannot bear the brunt of opposing violent extremism alone. Multilateral initiatives such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union must lead international efforts to address terrorist threats and the underlying conditions that facilitate terrorist recruitment and incitement. The Biden Administration should look for ways to support these multilateral efforts both directly and in parallel with ongoing United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) operations.
- Violent regional conflict in Libya and increasingly potential violent conflicts, such as the long-standing disagreement over Western Sahara and opposition to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), could destabilize neighboring countries and prompt humanitarian crises. In the case of Libya, the conflict threatens to bring several US allies and military partners into direct confrontation. It is unlikely that the United States could act as a neutral or unbiased arbiter to these conflicts, as recent efforts to intervene in the GERD conflict have shown. However, the United States should push multilateral institutions such as the African Union, the League of Arab States, and the UN to play more productive roles in resolving these conflicts.
- The irregular migration of people and the illicit movement of goods (including weapons and drugs) across the North Africa region and into Europe continue to pose a threat to the stability

of NATO and US European allies. Mediterranean maritime interdiction efforts have a limited effect and do not address the root causes or “push” factors that prompt irregular migration. US efforts to improve stability and economic development in the Sahel and Central Africa are inadequate and not to scale of the problem. To address irregular migration through the North Africa region, the Biden administration should advocate for the UN to take a leading role in aligning the efforts of US, European, and international nongovernmental development organizations. The United States should encourage the participation of other member states and push for strong accountability, transparency, and efficiency at the UN, but allow the UN to lead.

Multilateral institutions and closer coordination and partnership with Europe offer the United States the best opportunity to advance national security interests while minimizing real expenditures through burden sharing. Though Europe is divided in its approach and policy toward the region, particularly in Libya, both the European Union and its member states play incredibly important roles throughout North Africa, and the United States can work with one or more European entities on each relevant issue. Such engagement offers US officials a chance to reassert US global leadership at little cost to the United States. There may be some reluctance on the part of US policymakers to work through multilateral institutions if US interests are perceived to be threatened. However, the significant current financial constraints and diplomatic limitations must be acknowledged. Even for the most reluctant policymaker, working through multilateral institutions may be the best option for advancing US interests in North Africa in the current climate in which financial resources are stretched thin and policymakers are reluctant to entrench the United States further in the MENA region.

In this report, we focus on five areas of concern in North Africa that should garner the greatest attention from the Biden administration: democracy and governance, economic growth, security and counterterrorism, long-standing regional conflicts, and irregular migration. In each area there are both tremendous challenges and great opportunities for the United States to protect and advance its national security interests.

II. Democracy and Governance

Each administration has approached governance in the region differently, from President George W. Bush’s “Freedom Agenda,” which made democracy promotion a central focus of its foreign policy in the MENA region with the creation of the Middle East Partnership Initiative, to President Barack Obama’s reluctant embrace of democratization in the region following the popular uprisings of 2011, to, most

recently, President Trump’s quest to slash foreign aid and adopt a more transactional foreign policy.² Today, regardless of one’s views on the merits of democracy promotion as a foreign policy priority, the ability to achieve any of the United States’ stated foreign policy objectives depends on first addressing issues of good governance and the rule of law—the basis for long-term stability and a reduction in violent extremism in the region.

In the nearly ten years since Arab citizens took to the streets to demand an end to corrupt, autocratic rule and exclusionary economies, most of North Africa remains mired in poor governance and lack of accountability on the part of national leaders, both of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The continued success of Tunisia’s transition from an autocracy to a democratic society serves as an inspiration for other North African nations, underscoring that an indigenous and organic demand for democracy can succeed. Similar locally driven reform efforts are under way across the region today, most notably the Algerian protest movement, which stayed in the streets for more than a year and was only sent home because of COVID-19 concerns, and continues to operate in innovative, and virtual ways.

To be sure, the impetus for reform and the sustained public pressure on those in power came directly from the Tunisian people, but the continued rhetorical, technical, and financial support of the international community has been an important factor in Tunisia’s democratic progress so far. The United States devotes a very small percentage of its overall foreign assistance budget to promoting good governance in the region.³ Even rhetorically, the United States has been muted in its support for political reform and good governance in most North African countries. Rather than seeing governance issues like corruption and institutional decay as a threat to dignity and contributing to instability, policymakers tend to focus on the most visible conflicts in the MENA region.

The Biden administration should consider new ways to support agents of change in the region, in particular those actors advocating for the rule of law, transparency and accountability, and institutional effectiveness. In some instances, US support may entail increasing foreign assistance program budgets, but that alone is unlikely to produce the fundamental reforms the region requires. Instead, the Biden administration should increase engagement in multilateral organizations and initiatives that focus on political reform, especially initiatives led by regional actors. Furthermore, the United States should be explicit that the demands of many of the region’s people are in line with US interests. Promoting a

² Rex W. Tillerson, “Remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees” (US Department of State, May 3, 2017), <https://www.state.gov/remarks-to-u-s-department-of-state-employees/>.

³ Andrew Miller, Seth Binder, and Louisa Keeler, “President Trump’s FY21 Budget” (Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2020), https://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/POMED_FY21BudgetReport.pdf.

greater voice for the people and more government accountability and greater transparency will aid stability in the region and help counter violent extremism. It is in the direct interests of the United States to rhetorically and diplomatically support calls for reform. Here in particular, modest investments of time and energy can have substantial payoffs in supporting those pushing for change.

Unfortunately, many multilateral initiatives and organizations have been underresourced and politically marginalized. The United States can enhance the stature and effectiveness of these initiatives and organizations with rhetorical support, engagement, and technical assistance. Pushing these initiatives and organizations to fulfill their mandate and accede to the expectations envisioned during their establishment lessens the financial burden on the American taxpayer. In addition, creating local ownership over local problems increases the likelihood that interventions and programs will be sustainable and locally supported.

Why Democracy Matters to the United States

Improving governance in North Africa should be a priority of the Biden administration. While the Biden administration must devote significant attention to repairing democracy at home and restoring faith in our own institutions, this should not come at the cost of simultaneously advocating for human rights and increased freedoms abroad. There is a clear connection between poor governance and instability, which can undermine US national security interests. The region today is at a breaking point, and without serious and sustained efforts to improve governance, the region is likely to further devolve into instability. However, the issue of governance is often approached as a secondary concern, with few diplomatic or financial resources devoted to promoting good governance. Many critics of US foreign assistance funding have adopted the straw man argument that any support for good governance is a slippery slope leading to direct intervention, military occupation, and state-building. This line of argument is often used to justify a laissez-faire foreign policy strategy that favors autocrats in the name of stability and a perception of democracy as a uniquely American and Western form of governance.

The 2011 uprisings across the MENA region came about in large part because of abusive, corrupt, and unaccountable governance and continued erosion of the social contract. Citizens were willing to accept some level of government inefficiency and corruption as long as basic needs and services were provided. When governments were unable to deliver on their end of this social contract, a failure manifested in rising rates of unemployment, low economic growth, and expanding, rampant corruption, public frustration ensued. Today, ten years after the 2011 uprisings, not only are regular protests continuing throughout the more stable countries of Tunisia and Morocco but a massive grassroots uprising is under way in Algeria (and in other Arab states, such as Lebanon and Iraq). These actions show that the people of this region will not stay quiet while their governments fail to deliver.

The social and economic failings of North African governments have also bred a high level of mistrust with public institutions, which are benignly dysfunctional at best and malevolently corrupt at worst. This

is particularly acute at the local level, where states have failed to devolve power adequately to ensure that local governments are empowered and resourced enough to meet local needs. This lack of progress in economic reform or providing a voice for citizens makes North African states vulnerable to social unrest.

In addition, the hopelessness and despair of those who suffer from corrupt and ineffective regimes provides a fertile context for terrorist recruiters. When people are unable to feed themselves or their families or remain without jobs for years on end, they become easy targets for recruitment by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and other terrorist groups and networks that are able to convince vulnerable people they will have a better life as fighters.⁴ As we discuss in section IV, terrorism-promoting groups based in North Africa represent a direct threat to Americans and American interests.

State of Democracy in the Region

There is no question that good governance is a major challenge in North Africa. However, it is also an area where US support and engagement have the potential to play a positive role. While the subregion is home to the only “free” country (Tunisia) in the Arab world, according to Freedom House, the remainder of North Africa performs poorly on all indicators of governance. For example, according to the World Bank’s World Governance Indicators, the countries in North Africa range from the 45th percentile (Tunisia) to the second percentile (Libya) when it comes to voice and accountability. While each individual country has its own challenges, across the region some common trends are evident, such as erosion of freedom of the press and of expression (in 2018 alone, thirty journalists in the region were imprisoned, twenty-five of them in Egypt)—which has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased repression in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt—and a shrinking space for civil society and other forms of grassroots activism. These are issues that the US government has experience helping to mitigate and where effective and committed US leadership could make a real difference in the lives of people across the region.

The state of democracy in each country varies. In Morocco, which is rated partly free by Freedom House, some modest positive changes were made following the 2011 protests, such as the adoption of a new constitution and greater empowerment for an elected parliament. However, several challenges remain in the governance arena, such as judicial independence, freedom of expression, a robust anticorruption

⁴ International Crisis Group, “How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb,” Report 178 / Middle East and North Africa (International Crisis Group, July 24, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/178-how-islamic-state-rose-fell-and-could-rise-again-maghreb>.

effort, and decentralization of power. Morocco, unlike the rest of North Africa, is a monarchy. This has helped Morocco weather the storm of regular popular uprisings. The king has largely stayed above the fray, using his power to dismiss officials or pardon activists while using others as scapegoats for Morocco's problems.

The challenge for US officials in Morocco is to balance pressure for reform with stability. Morocco has long been a US partner in counterterrorism efforts and was one of the few countries to weather the protests of 2011 with little instability. It is in the interests of the United States to ensure that Morocco does not face any major upheaval that could come with ousting the monarchy or other abrupt change. As a result, most US assistance to Morocco is aimed at promoting stability, with little focus on promoting democracy. In 2018, Morocco received \$56.5 million in US foreign assistance, \$7.75 million of that going to democracy and governance, with a large focus on funding Moroccan civil society organizations.

Algeria is in the midst of a popular uprising that has already toppled one of the region's longest-serving autocrats. After more than a year of regular weekly protests (interrupted by the COVID-19 quarantine), the Algerian people and the military-backed government are at an impasse. The protests erupted after former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his intention to run for a fifth term, a move that pushed Algerians frustrated by more than twenty years of rampant corruption, ineffective government, and political opacity into the streets. (Bouteflika resigned on April 2, 2019. After an interim period with an acting head of state, Abdelmadjid Tebboune became president in December 2019.) Protesters are demanding a renegotiation of the relationship between the state, the people, and the military. While the protesters have remained nonviolent, the government has cracked down on public forms of dissent, arresting peaceful demonstrators, journalists, and perceived government critics.

The United States provides very little foreign assistance to Algeria and the recent decision by the Trump administration to formally recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara region⁵ is likely to diminish what little leverage the US did have with Algiers. Any effort by the US to encourage reform through withholding or offering additional funding is unlikely to yield significant results. In 2018 the US government spent \$2.13 million in Algeria, nearly half of which went to humanitarian assistance, with only \$20,000 spent on promoting democracy and good governance. One reason for the low level of assistance is suspicion about many forms of foreign involvement by both the Algerian government and people. As one US official told us, a call by the US government for proposals for civil society support regarding improved democracy and governance received no responses from Algerian NGOs. Thus, in Algeria, the Biden administration will need a delicate approach that considers how popular sentiment

⁵ White House press release. December 10, 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-sovereignty-kingdom-morocco-western-sahara/>.

towards the US may be influenced by the US decision to formally recognize Moroccan claims over the Western Sahara region. As such, the US should seek partnerships with regionally based multilateral institutions and initiatives that have the trust of the Algerian people and government rather than through direct intervention or engagement.

Tunisia has demonstrated significant progress toward democratic consolidation and an eagerness to partner with the United States on additional reforms. In response, in 2018, Congress appropriated \$165 million for aid to Tunisia, including \$44 million for democracy and governance. However, in October 2019, Tunisia elected a new president, who has expressed hesitancy about allowing foreign funding for civil society organizations and appears to be less inclined to court the West than previous governments. While the country has made tremendous progress in the political sphere, Tunisia's forward trajectory is not certain, and should Tunisia's transition fail, so would the symbol of hope that Tunisia's democracy provides to millions of aspiring democrats across the region. In the socioeconomic sphere, the Tunisian people have yet to see improvement in their lives since the revolution and is running out of patience. Many Tunisians have lost trust in the ability of their government to deliver economic and social dignity, as evidenced by an increase in recent street protests and the collapse of Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh's government after only five months.

Libya is a clear-cut case of lack of governance. The ongoing civil war and lack of a functioning central state have made the development of good governance crucial to Libya's success. The United States appropriated \$33 million in 2018 to Libya, \$14.5 million of which went to democracy and governance projects, in particular, preparation for elections that have yet to take place and seem increasingly unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future. Any effort to support a transition to a representative government must go beyond electoral processes to build the institutions and culture that support continued respect for the rule of law.

Governance in Egypt has declined significantly since the 2011 revolution. Today, Egypt is highly repressive, with little space for civil society, independent media, or alternative political views. Egypt regularly ranks among the worst countries in jailing journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, and has jailed and tortured dozens of civil society activists. Egypt is the largest recipient of US foreign assistance in North Africa and one of the top foreign aid recipients globally. However, almost all of Egypt's foreign assistance (\$1.3 billion out of \$1.4 billion appropriated in 2018) goes toward security assistance. Historically, the United States has struggled with balancing a desire to speak out against Egypt's egregious violations of human rights and maintaining close ties to the regime.

Policy Recommendations

The popular revolutions of 2011 caught many regional observers and policymakers by surprise. Diplomats and development programs were ill equipped to respond as quickly or as nimbly as needed. Going forward, the Biden administration should expand existing flexible funding mechanisms, such as

the Human Rights Defenders Fund, to ensure foreign assistance programs are suited to rapidly changing circumstances on the ground. As was clear in the case of Tunisia, the community of democracies should be ready to step in and provide the necessary diplomatic and financial support once a country begins its path toward democratization.

While there is currently no outcry in Algeria for international assistance, if one presents, the international community should be prepared to engage quickly. As previously described, Algeria has a history of suspicion around European and US intentions, feeling that will likely be exacerbated by the Trump administration's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed region of Western Sahara. The Biden administration should consider ways to support reform by working through mutually trusted partners. One avenue of support could include the African Union and the UN in providing support to individuals and Algerian groups working to combat corruption, improve state institutions, and increase transparency and accountability.

In some instances, it may not make sense for US foreign assistance to go through existing multilateral organizations or initiatives either because a more expeditious route is needed or because US interests fall outside the organization's remit. Where this occurs, the Biden administration should consider new funding mechanisms that allow direct transfers to local partners and should develop new and enhanced mechanisms for technical support and capacity building of local groups. The actual support could be provided by the National Endowment for Democracy and its affiliates, such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, which have extensive experience and contacts on the ground in the region.

During the days after the Egyptian revolution, new civil society groups made up of some of the revolutionaries who brought down President Hosni Mubarak were frustrated with the difficulty in accessing US funding.⁶ Some suspected that USAID would only support groups that could demonstrate a strong command of English—something that does not necessarily correlate with the ability to work well in an Arabic-speaking country, where some very effective NGOs lack English-language proficiency.⁷ Rather, US embassies in the region and grantmaking offices within the State Department and USAID should work to identify a broad host of local partners, particularly those who have not received US funding in the past and those based outside regional capitals, both to expand the reach of US assistance and to deliver funds directly to target communities.

⁶ Interviews with civil society organizations, conducted by Sarah Yerkes, in June 2011, in Cairo.

⁷ Interview with USAID official, conducted by Sarah Yerkes, in June 2011, in Cairo.

The Biden administration might also consider adopting a “more for more” principle like the European Union’s, rewarding countries for meeting certain governance benchmarks while withholding assistance from those that do not. Much like the requirements to access the Millennium Challenge Corporation funds, to qualify for which countries must meet several criteria, a positive conditionality approach can help push countries toward adopting good practices (a negative conditionality has largely failed to motivate countries to change their behavior in this space.) Operationalizing the more for more principle need not be limited to foreign assistance but can also be used in diplomatic engagements, by rewarding high performing countries with high-level visits or membership in appropriate international bodies, which many North African countries eagerly seek. Too often, points of US leverage with North African countries are misunderstood.

Practically, the United States should focus its efforts on improving the quality of the media and strengthening the independence of the judiciary of North African states. Access to free and independent media can be a strong bulwark against authoritarianism and corruption and help amplify the voices of citizens. Once the media—traditional, social, or both—are compromised, it is far easier for autocrats to feed the public false information and thwart any political opposition. The judiciary is another key institution that the United States should work with regional states to improve. An independent and functioning judiciary not only helps prevent some of the worst abuses but also helps build the trust that is necessary for a functioning state.

III. Economic Growth

The economies of the North African states vary markedly. Algeria and Libya are almost entirely dependent on revenues generated by energy exports, while Morocco and Tunisia depend on agriculture, tourism, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Despite these differences, all have structural inefficiencies that have resulted in high rates of unemployment, especially among youth, and weak private sector growth. Attempts to reform these economies from within have been slow and have not kept pace with increasing public demands. This situation has led to greater political instability and fueled violent extremism. Successive US administrations and institutions such as the World Bank have advocated for greater regional economic integration, in recognition of the potential transformative economic impact. Unfortunately, regional governments have favored cosmetic economic reforms over the more difficult task of regional economic integration. As a result, the region continues to experience instability and has been the largest contributor of foreign terrorist fighters globally.

The United States has largely abandoned its previous efforts to facilitate greater regional economic integration in North Africa, preferring a bilateral advocacy approach to economic reform. With the notable exception of Tunisia, this approach has yielded limited results and has failed to address the underlying drivers of instability and violent extremism. A bilateral approach is also inadequate to confront the growing economic investments of China and Russia in the region. China’s Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI) seeks to build regional economic integration with a dependency on China, while Russia seeks to expand and exploit economic relationships for its own geostrategic benefit. Both China and Russia have increased their footprint in North Africa over the past decade, with China in particular aiming to expand its investment in infrastructure, technology, and tourism throughout North Africa. It is therefore in the best interests of the United States to reinvigorate its effort to facilitate economic integration across North Africa, thereby limiting the appeal of and necessity for Chinese predatory lending.

Poor Economic Integration Fuels Violent Extremism

The unfulfilled expectations of the 2011 uprisings, particularly economic improvement and inclusion, continue to drive terrorist recruitment. The expansive informal sector that thrives on the borders between North African states is interconnected with the criminal economy that supports terrorist groups. In Tunisia, terrorist groups like Ansar al-Sharia have sought to recruit from border regions where the local economy “is dominated by smuggling and state authority is relatively weak.... Likewise, the poor urban periphery of major cities—whose inhabitants often are originally from the south and interior—is another important source of recruits.”⁸

Furthermore, it is estimated that approximately 27 percent of the nearly 30,000 foreign fighters who went to Syria were from North African states.⁹ Until recently, ISIS’s most active affiliate network was in Libya. Successful counterterrorism operations have significantly weakened ISIS fighters from much of North Africa, but the grievances that gave rise to ISIS and made the region a fertile environment for recruitment remain unaddressed, most notably the perception of relative economic deprivation among youth.¹⁰ And while the causality between poverty and jihadist recruitment is not as direct as some would suggest, the perception of relative poverty resulting from structural injustices does feature prominently.¹¹

To address these issues, North African governments have sought to grow their economies through various interventions, but successes have been limited and unresponsive to the demands of the so-

⁸ International Crisis Group, “How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb,” Report 178 / Middle East and North Africa (International Crisis Group, July 24, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/178-how-islamic-state-rose-fell-and-could-rise-again-maghreb>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Economic Challenges across the Region

The Egyptian government was forced into an IMF program in 2016 after support from Gulf states proved unsustainable. In response to the proposed IMF reforms package, the Egyptian government floated the national currency, which resulted in a 50 percent devaluation overnight. Energy subsidies were reduced, but subsidies on food increased. While the government has touted the improvements resulting from the reform program, in many economic indicators, including official unemployment figures, the country's external debt has doubled since 2015.

The hardships resulting from Libya's dependence on hydrocarbon export and the global decline in price per barrel have only been compounded by nearly eight years of violent conflict. The collapse of all state institutions and competition between parallel governments for power have left the country crippled, with growth projected to be negative in 2020 (minus 0.6 percent).^a Budget deficits average 10 percent of GDP, and necessary economic reforms remain unimplemented.

In Tunisia, the government continues to struggle to institute necessary but politically unpopular reforms, including lowering subsidies and reducing public sector spending. Economic growth has been sluggish, under 3 percent for the past three years, and the poverty rate has risen to nearly 15 percent. The country's economic debt is more than 100 percent of GDP, which has forced the government to work through the World Bank and IMF for relief.

Algeria's hydrocarbon industry historically made up 95 percent of the country's export earnings and nearly 60 percent of the total budget, but the ongoing political transition and declining oil prices have left the government unable to sustain decades of public sector spending and subsidies. Foreign reserves have shrunk by more than \$100 billion since 2014. Unemployment is officially at 11 percent, but youth unemployment is estimated at 27 percent for Algerians under the age of thirty, who make up nearly two-thirds of the country's 41 million population. A culture of rent-seeking has left the country's public and private sectors corrupted, and 60 percent of the economy is in the informal sector.

Morocco's economy is the most diverse in the Maghreb region but still operates below potential, and unemployment hovers around 10 percent.^b The government has chosen to orient its economy toward Europe, acting as a gateway to sub-Saharan Africa. Like its neighbors, Morocco faces major structural impediments to economic growth, including aligning human capital with the needs of the private sector; "rationalizing and optimizing" the social protection system, which costs more as a percentage of GDP than in other middle-income countries; and, reducing youth unemployment—80 percent of the country's unemployed are between the ages of 15 and 34.^b

Notes:

a. See the Libya country page on the World Bank website: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/libya/overview>.

b. USAID, "Enhancing Youth Employability," last updated December 21, 2020, <http://www.usaid.gov/morocco/factsheets/employability-youth-enhanced>.

called Fourth Industrial Revolution, which features advanced technology in the workplace and a prevalent use of artificial intelligence. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic growth across the region was below 2.4 percent, with a projected growth rate of only 2.7 percent in the medium term, and these numbers are expected to be worse once the full economic effects of the pandemic are clear;

average GDP per capita growth has been close to zero.¹² These growth indicators do not appear to have improved since the popular revolutions of 2011, and today North Africa remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. According to the IMF, “The share of intraregional trade is less than 5 percent of North African countries’ total trade, substantially lower than in all other regional trading blocs around the world.”¹³

Regional integration is arguably more viable today than in the previous decades owing to opportunities presented by the pressures in Algeria, the transition in Tunisia, tumult in Libya, and reforms in Morocco. A regional approach that integrates the economies of North Africa would be transformative, potentially resolving many of the long-term problems that have restrained economic growth and fueled the perceptions of relative economic deprivation that facilitate terrorist recruitment. According to the IMF, integration of regional economies could increase growth in each country by an average of 1 percent in the long term. This growth would make North Africa more attractive to foreign direct investment; reduce the costs of intraregional trade, capital, and labor movement; and increase efficiency of resource allocation.¹⁴ It would also make North Africa more resilient to exogenous shocks and market volatility while helping lay the foundation for the eventual establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area.¹⁵

Expanded interregional trade through economic integration would allow the region to create a market of nearly 200 million consumers with a regional GDP in excess of \$360 billion. Regional per capita GDP would exceed \$4,000 in nominal terms and about \$12,000 in purchasing power parity terms.¹⁶ An integrated market would also be more attractive to foreign direct investment, increase technology transfer, and expand regional value chains, and would allow links to global value chains. Because of the geographic location of the region, it is reasonable to assume that North Africa could achieve its long-stated goal of becoming an investment hub and trade center linking Europe to sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps most important, greater regional integration would force governments to institute structural

¹² Alexei Kireyev et al., “Economic Integration in the Maghreb: An Untapped Source of Growth” (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tarik Oumazzane, “An Assessment of the Economic and Political Impacts of the Agadir Agreement: Promoting Peace and Stability in the Middle East and North Africa” (Nottingham Trent University, 2018).

¹⁶ Alexei Kireyev et al., “Economic Integration in the Maghreb: An Untapped Source of Growth” (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

reforms to remove market inefficiencies and corruption, problems that directly contribute to the perception of relative economic depravity and marginalization.

For nearly four decades, North African states have made few, mostly ineffective efforts to better integrate their regional economies, despite a recognition of the obvious benefits. The reluctance of governments to lower protective barriers on politically sensitive sectors, to increase opportunities for labor movement, and to resolve long-standing territorial disputes has contributed to these failures. Several high-profile attempts to create regional free trade agreements (FTAs) have demonstrated a desire for greater integration but not a willingness to implement necessary reforms. In 1989, the Arab North Africa Union was established to promote cooperation among regional states but has been dormant for years; a North Africa Free Trade Agreement was signed but never ratified by member states in 2010. Attempts to develop the Greater Arab Free Trade Area have proven unsuccessful. The last multilateral FTA signed in the MENA region was the 2004 Agadir Agreement, which included Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan, but it too failed to significantly increase relative economic integration.¹⁷

Successive US administrations also have recognized the importance of increasing economic growth in North Africa both as a means of opening up new trade and investment opportunities for US businesses and as part of the larger effort to reduce the drivers of radicalization and terrorism. The connection between relative economic depravity and terrorism was identified in the *9/11 Commission Report*, echoing arguments made by the CATO Institute and others.¹⁸

Under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the United States sought to make trade and investment in Africa a central component of any strategy toward the continent, within both sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. In May 2003, President Bush announced the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) initiative, intended to create an FTA within a decade “to bring the people of the Middle East into an expanding circle of opportunity, to provide hope for people who live in that region.”¹⁹ At the time, US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick outlined a series of steps that would be taken to realize President Bush’s vision, including “resolving outstanding disputes” and “negotiating comprehensive Free

¹⁷ Tarik Oumazzane, “An Assessment of the Economic and Political Impacts of the Agadir Agreement: Promoting Peace and Stability in the Middle East and North Africa” (Nottingham Trent University, 2018).

¹⁸ Mary Jane Bolle, “Middle East Free Trade Area: Progress Report” (Congressional Research Service, February 8, 2005).

¹⁹ George W. Bush, “President Bush Presses for Peace in the Middle East.” Remarks by the President in Commencement Address at the University of South Carolina, University of South Carolina, May 9, 2003 (White House, May 9, 2003), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030509-11.html>.

Trade Agreements that would be combined into a sub-regional and ultimately a single MEFTA.”²⁰ Unfortunately, protectionist regional states made economic integration negotiations difficult and the Bush administration prioritized precious political capital for Operation Iraqi Freedom, leaving the MEFTA effort to atrophy.

Under President Obama, the United States sought to implement a “trade not aid” policy, declaring that “People [in Africa] are not interested in just being patrons or being patronized and being given aid—they're interested in building capacity.”²¹ The Trump administration’s “business first” emphasis rhetorically echoes that of the Obama era.

In December 2018, the Trump administration unveiled its economic policy for Africa, embodied in the Prosper Africa initiative. The initiative identifies expanding trade and investment opportunities on the continent as the top priority. The Prosper Africa initiative was unveiled in a speech by the National Security Adviser John Bolton who stated:

The [Africa] strategy addresses three core U.S. interests on the continent: First, advancing U.S. trade and commercial ties with nations across the region to the benefit of both the United States and Africa. We want our economic partners in the region to thrive, prosper, and control their own destinies. In America’s economic dealings, we ask only for reciprocity, never for subservience.²²

Despite bipartisan support and the launching of several high-level initiatives, economic growth, especially through regional economic integration, has not been prioritized. To date, the United States has signed an FTA with only one African country, Morocco.

North African governments periodically have been seized with the idea of regional economic integration, but these efforts are often short-lived and high on rhetoric but short on action. In January

²⁰ Robert Z Lawrence, “Introduction,” in *A US-Middle East Trade Agreement: A Circle of Opportunity?*, Policy Analyses in International Economics 81 (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2006), https://www.piie.com/publications/chapters_preview/3969/01iie3969.pdf.

²¹ “Barack Obama: How Will Africa Remember Him?,” *BBC News*, January 18, 2017, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38649362>.

²² John R. Bolton, “Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration’s New Africa Strategy” (White House, December 13, 2018), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>.

2018, the Moroccan government (with the IMF, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and the Arab Monetary Fund) hosted representatives from more than 20 countries in the MENA region, including all North African countries, for a regional conference titled “Opportunity for All: Promoting Growth, Jobs, and Inclusiveness in the Arab World.” Two months later, forty-four African countries became signatories to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, “the largest free trade agreement aimed at liberalizing intra-African trade goods and services once implemented.”²³ All North African countries are signatories to the AfCFTA agreement, with both Egypt and Algeria having ratified the agreement. Unfortunately, AfCFTA remains a largely notional idea, with few results to its credit. The Biden administration should consider ways to reinvigorate the AfCFTA initiative.

Threats to US Interests from Revisionist States

Without economic growth, the economies of North Africa are too weak to resist predatory offers of investment and trade from China and Russia, which have interests contrary to those of the United States. China’s BRI in North Africa is an attempt to facilitate greater regional integration but in such a manner as to benefit Beijing first and foremost. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt have all signed partnership agreements with China; China is the largest trading partner of both Algeria and Egypt, relationships described as “comprehensive strategic partnerships.”²⁴ Chinese investment in North Africa is principally focused on securing access to oil and gas, which are in abundance in Algeria and Libya. But the BRI also includes infrastructure development, important technical assistance, cultural partnerships, and trade facilitation, covering issues of broader cooperation.

China also sees North Africa as an expanding market for its exports. As one expert notes, “China’s exports to the North Africa have increased dramatically since the early 2000s, reaching about \$14 billion in 2016 (12 percent of the Maghreb’s total imports), compared with less than \$5 billion a decade earlier (8 percent of total imports).”²⁵ Since at least 2017, China has outpaced the US in trade with Africa, as has the European Union.

While Chinese investment in infrastructure may ultimately benefit US firms and corporations, these investments are typically made without precondition or transparency. Chinese investment schemes may

²³ Alexei Kireyev et al., “Economic Integration in the Maghreb: An Untapped Source of Growth” (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

²⁴ Adel Abdel Ghafar and Anna Jacobs, “Beijing Calling: Assessing China’s Growing Footprint in North Africa,” Policy Briefing (Brookings Doha Center, September 2019).

²⁵ Alexei Kireyev et al., “Economic Integration in the Maghreb: An Untapped Source of Growth” (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

reinforce rather than reform corrupt local business practices, thereby discouraging US firms and other international firms from investing, undermining the arguments made about the universal benefits of improved public utilities. In addition, some Chinese BRI investments have saddled countries with significant new unanticipated debt.²⁶ In the case of North Africa, governments can ill afford to absorb more debt as they grapple with high levels of youth unemployment.

China's economic investments also carry a political cost for the United States. Chinese investments increase economic dependency on Beijing, creating leverage that China could use to undermine US interests at the UN and more broadly.²⁷ China's authoritarian model of governance mixed with economic growth empowers regional autocrats and undermines US efforts to promote free markets based in the rule of law. This is especially troubling as China seeks to deepen its economic ties to the two countries with the largest militaries on the continent, Algeria and Egypt, which are both governed by autocratic regimes. The United States should also be concerned about China's investments in telecommunications infrastructure, specifically 5G networks, which could be used as a backdoor into the security services and government operations of North African states.

In the case of Russia, military engagement in North Africa is opening the door to greater economic investment and political influence. Russia has a basing agreement with Egypt and has historically been the largest supplier of arms to Algeria. Additionally, the conflict in Libya has allowed irregular Russian forces to operate, which may evolve into a long-term presence. Russian objectives in North Africa are not limited to trade and investment: it is clear that the Kremlin seeks to be the primary arms supplier in the region and, in the case of Libya, for Russian companies to benefit from any postconflict reconstruction effort.²⁸ North Africa also offers an African entry point for Russia to move into the Sahel and points further south.

The cases of Egypt and Morocco are particularly relevant. In 2019, Egypt and Russia entered into an agreement to establish an economic industrial zone. According to Egyptian pro-regime media, Egypt and Russia have been negotiating nearly \$7 billion in Russian investments in the Russian Industrial Zone

²⁶ Weizhen Tan, "China's Loans to Other Countries Are Causing 'Hidden' Debt. That May Be a Problem," CNBC, June 11, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/12/chinas-loans-causing-hidden-debt-risk-to-economies.html>.

²⁷ Princeton Lyman, "China and the US in Africa: A Strategic Competition or an Opportunity for Cooperation?" (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.), https://www.cfr.org/content/thinktank/ChinaandUS_Africa.pdf.

²⁸ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Growing Influence in North Africa," *Atlantic Community* (blog), February 26, 2019, <https://atlantic-community.org/russias-growing-influence-in-north-africa/>.

project in the East Port Said region.²⁹ Russia and Egypt have also agreed to allow Russia to build the country's first nuclear power plant. As with China, increased Russian economic investment creates political leverage for Moscow and increased opportunities for political alignment between autocracies. Egypt has already backed Russian engagement in Syria, and the two countries appear to be coordinating in support of the Libyan warlord General Khalifa Haftar.

Similarly, Morocco and Russia recently completed their seventh round of talks under the Joint Cooperation Committee, pledging to expand trade and investment between the two countries. Morocco's King Mohamed VI visited Moscow in 2016, which opened the door to signing a \$2.2 billion deal in 2019 to allow the Russian state development bank VEB to finance an oil refinery in Morocco.³⁰ The rapprochement between Rabat and Moscow has allowed the Russians to engage, albeit only marginally so far, on the Western Sahara conflict.³¹

Policy Recommendations

Regional economic integration would be the most transformative intervention to address the underlying causes of political instability, terrorism, and persistent economic underperformance. The failure of North African governments to address long-standing structural deficiencies has facilitated cronyism and the perception, as well as the reality, of relative economic deprivation. This situation has created an environment that enables radicalization and terrorist recruitment. Independent efforts by governments to address economic challenges have produced minimal results.

Increasing regional economic integration and economic growth serve the people of the region first and foremost, but there is also a distinct US national security interest. An economically integrated North Africa is a better marketplace for US goods and trade, and economic integration would necessitate the types of structural reforms that would help remove the factors that have permitted decades of corruption and inefficiency. The governments in the region have allowed coordination problems to stymie attempts at regional integration, ultimately hurting themselves in the long term. In light of regional governments' inability to overcome self-imposed impediments to regional economic

²⁹ Hanan Mohamed, "Establishing Russian Industrial Zone in Egypt Comes into Force," *Egypt Today*, February 1, 2019, <http://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/64142/Establishing-Russian-Industrial-Zone-in-Egypt-comes-into-force>.

³⁰ "Russia's VEB Signs Deal to Build Two Billion Euro Refinery in Morocco: Report," Reuters, October 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-morocco-refinery-idUSKBN1X22KG>.

³¹ The impact of the Western Sahara conflict on the region and US interests is covered more in section 5 in this report.

integration, the United States must step in to take a leading coordination role. Such an effort would require US diplomatic agencies to prioritize regional economic integration and could necessitate new institutional configurations within the State Department, including, potentially, the creation of a special envoy position that would be dual-hatted as a senior official in the US Trade Representative's office. Any bureaucratic realignment would also need the full support of the White House so that levers of influence could be brought to bear to push the governments of North Africa to remove barriers to progress.

The failure to prioritize economic reform in North Africa creates openings for China and Russia, two countries that have been opportunistic in strengthening their political leverage with regional governments through strategic economic investments. The deepening ties between regional capitals and Moscow and Beijing undermines strategic relationships that the United States has spent decades cultivating. This should raise concerns among US policymakers and their European allies.

IV. Security Threats

General Thomas Waldhauser, the former commander of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM), testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2017 that “instability in Libya and North Africa may be the most significant near-term threat to U.S. and allies’ interests on the [African] continent.”³² Political turbulence and weak (or nonexistent) state institutions create opportunities for terrorist organizations to flourish and open corridors for the flow of people and illicit goods into Europe. While the 2017 National Security Strategy acknowledges these threats, the document prioritizes the need to confront Chinese economic expansion.³³ In this way the United States downplays the potency of terrorism and irregular migration while underappreciating the military threats posed by China and Russia.

In late 2019 the Pentagon announced plans to draw down AFRICOM forces,³⁴ signaling a renewed focus on great power competition in Asia and elsewhere. Former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper stated that

³² “United States Africa Command 2017 Posture Statement,” statement of Gen. Thomas Waldhauser before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Waldhauser_03-09-17.pdf.

³³ Donald J. Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

³⁴ Diana Stancy Correll, “Pentagon Examining a Reduction of the US Footprint in West Africa,” *Military Times*, December 26, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/12/24/pentagon-examining-a-reduction-of-the-us-footprint-in-west-africa/>.

the United States should not expend its limited resources to counter militants who “lack the demonstrated ability and intent to attack the United States on its own soil.... None of the terrorist groups operating in West Africa [and North Africa] meet this heightened assessment standard.”³⁵ However, this assessment assumes that ISIS has been defeated and is no longer a threat³⁶—a false assumption, as was made clear by the terrorist attack on the US embassy in Tunis in early March 2020.³⁷ The proposed reduction in USAFRICOM forces also demonstrates a lack of appreciation for the security implications of China’s and Russia’s expanding military presence on the continent.

We argue here that significant threats to US national security interests emanate from North Africa and should receive greater attention from the Biden administration. The socioeconomic conditions that make the region a fertile ground for terrorist recruitment and incitement remain unaddressed, as discussed in the previous section, and although ISIS may no longer control territory in the region, ISIS sympathizers and related terrorist groups such as AQIM are flourishing. In addition, the expanding military presence of China and Russia threatens US interests in the region and could undermine strategic alliances such as NATO.

Violent Extremism Has Not Been Eliminated

The terrorist threats emanating from North Africa are the consequence of decades of poor government performance, limited economic opportunity, rampant corruption, and institutional decay. Frustration with the inability of regional governments to address these problems boiled over in 2011, leading to popular revolutions that toppled three of the five regimes in power in North Africa. Despite these highly visible and destabilizing popular uprisings, reform has been slow. As a result, the social and economic factors that have made the region so fertile for terrorist recruitment and incitement remain unaddressed. The 2017 National Security Strategy specifically points to weak (or nonexistent) government institutions and high levels of corruption as significant drivers of violent extremism.³⁸ After

³⁵ Helene Cooper et al., “Pentagon Eyes Africa Drawdown as First Step in Global Troop Shift,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/24/world/africa/esper-troops-africa-china.html>.

³⁶ Ellen Mitchell, “16 Times Trump Said ISIS Was Defeated, or Soon Would Be,” *The Hill*, March 23, 2019, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/435402-16-times-trump-declared-or-predicted-the-demise-of-isis>.

³⁷ Elian Peltier, “Suicide Bombers Attack Near U.S. Embassy in Tunisia,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/world/europe/us-embassy-tunisia-bomber.html>.

³⁸ Donald J. Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

Domestic Terrorism Threatens the Region

In Tunisia, the grievances that prompted the popular unrest in 2011 remain largely unaddressed. Perceived economic deprivation, the unemployment or underemployment of significant numbers of youth, and high levels corruption persist. As a result, Tunisia continues to grapple with the threat of homegrown terrorism that targets both Tunisian and American interests. In October 2018, an unemployed female college graduate detonated a suicide vest after being radicalized online.^a In June 2019, two suicide bombers attacked Tunisian security service officers, killing two.^b In March 2020, two suicide bombers attacked the US embassy, killing a policeman and injuring six others.^c

Tunisia is not the only Maghreb state struggling to deal with domestic terrorism. Egypt has been fighting a low-intensity conflict against insurgents in the Sinai for years. From 2011 to 2014, the terrorist organization Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis waged a campaign against the central government before officially pledging allegiance to ISIS in 2014 and rebranding itself as ISIS-Sinai Province. In public statements following the terrorist attacks in Egypt, the Egyptian government has not distinguished among various violent extremist groups, blurring the distinctions between “Muslim Brotherhood,” “ISIS,” and “Islamist”; many Egypt analysts disagree with using these terms interchangeably. Nevertheless, terrorist attacks are not uncommon and are often perpetrated by Egyptians who became radicalized in Egypt. There have been notable terrorist attacks since 2015, including the downing of a Russian passenger jet, killing 224 people; two attacks on popular tourist hotels in Hurghada (in 2016 and 2017); and two terrorist attacks on tourist buses (in 2018 and 2019).

An estimated 1,600 Moroccans are believed to have traveled to Iraq/Syria and an additional 300 to Libya to join ISIS. Nevertheless, domestic terrorism inside Morocco has been rare.^d The notable recent exception is the beheading of two Scandinavian hikers by three ISIS-inspired terrorists in 2018. Similarly, in Algeria, domestic terrorism is almost nonexistent. The last major terrorist incident in Algeria was in 2013, when militants linked to al-Qaeda took hostages at the gas facility in Amenas. The ensuing battle to release the hostages resulted in the deaths of forty staff—mostly foreigners—and at least twenty-nine militants. In Libya, domestic terrorism can be hard to distinguish from the ubiquitous violence associated with the ongoing conflict. Terrorism in Tunisia and Egypt has been sporadic but conspicuous.

Notes:

a. Fadil Aliriza and Declan Walsh, “Suicide Bombers Attack Security Forces in Tunisia,” *New York Times*, June 27, 2019, <http://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/27/world/africa/tunisia-suicide-attacks-tunis.html>.

b. Guillaume Guguen, “Double attack in Tunis: ‘There are people who don’t want a stable Tunisia’,” *France 24*, June 30, 2019, <http://www.france24.com/en/20190629-tunisia-terrorism-dual-suicide-attack-tunis-stability-essebsi-tunis-police-security>.

c. Al Jazeera, “Tunisia: Suicide attack targets US embassy,” *Marc 6*, 2020, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/6/tunisia-suicide-attack-targets-us-embassy>.

d. See Thomas Renard, ed., “Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia,” *Egmont Paper no. 107*, Egmont Institute and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, April 2019, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/04/EP107-returnees-in-the-Maghreb.pdf>.

the 2011 uprisings, political vacuums and ineffective security services have allowed opportunistic violent extremists to recruit and incite new terrorists.

The current US strategy of dealing with violent extremism in Libya through kinetic action has proved to be effective only in the short term. In 2016 the United States launched air strikes to eliminate an ISIS training camp in Sabratha, killing forty-three militants.³⁹ Two years later, USAFRICOM was forced to launch a similar air strike against an ISIS training camp in southern Libya, killing eleven militants and destroying three vehicles.⁴⁰ A little less than a year later, the United States once again launched air strikes against an ISIS camp in southern Libya, killing forty-three militants—roughly one-third of the terrorist group’s membership in the country.⁴¹ Each strike has resulted in removing terrorists from the battlefield, but the situation in Libya, and indeed throughout North Africa, continues to produce terrorists and terrorist sympathizers, outpacing USAFRICOM’s strike capacity. The ability of ISIS and terrorist organizations to regroup and replenish their ranks rapidly raises serious doubts about the long-term effectiveness of the current US strategy.

Foreign Fighters Remain a Threat to US Interests

Following the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, President Trump tweeted, “We defeated 100% of the ISIS caliphate.”⁴² While ISIS may no longer control the large swaths of territory it once did, many of those who traveled to Iraq and Syria as foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) remain at large and pose a direct threat to US and allies’ national security interests.

The Maghreb is estimated to have contributed close to 30 percent of all the foreign fighters who have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS, with Tunisia outpacing all countries globally and contributing around 6,000 fighters. Morocco is estimated to have contributed 1,200, Libya and Egypt 600 each, and

³⁹ Ahmed Elumami and Aidan Lewis, “U.S. Air Raid Hits Islamic State in Libya, 43 Dead,” Reuters, February 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/libya-security-idUSKCN0VS1A5>.

⁴⁰ United States Africa Command, “U.S. Conducts Precision Airstrike in Libya,” press release, United States Africa Command, November 30, 2018, <https://www.africom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/31409/u-s-conducts-precision-airstrike-in-libya>.

⁴¹ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Drone Strikes Stymie ISIS in Southern Libya,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/world/africa/drone-strikes-isis-libya.html>.

⁴² Donald J. Trump, “We defeated 100% of the ISIS caliphate and no longer have any troops in the area under attack by Turkey, in Syria. We did our job perfectly! Now Turkey is attacking the Kurds, who have been fighting each other for 200 years....” Twitter, October 10, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1182387197066039298>.

Algeria 170.⁴³ While official statistics are not accessible (or reliable), by some estimates, 2,900 Tunisian⁴⁴ and more than 500 Moroccan FTFs had returned to their countries of origin as of 2018 (there are no reliable recent estimates for the number of returning Algerians, Libyans, or Egyptians).⁴⁵ Of those returning from Libya and Egypt, it is likely that the majority have joined local ISIS branches and affiliates, though some may have traveled to Iraq and Syria.

The 2015 attacks on the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the beachfront hotel in Sousse, Tunisia, were carried out by Tunisians who had traveled to Libya to train with ISIS. By some estimates, 70 percent of all Tunisians arrested for jihadist-related matters received training in Libya.⁴⁶ The Bardo Museum attack resulted in twenty-two fatalities; thirty-eight people died in the Sousse attack. Both attacks directly targeted European and Western tourists.

Because of the sensitivities around FTFs, it's perhaps unsurprising that regional governments have not been forthcoming with information on the activities of FTFs who have been repatriated; it is unclear how many have continued to engage in terrorist recruitment, incitement, or violence. In general, North African governments have been slow to develop comprehensive approaches to dealing with returning FTFs.⁴⁷

With the exception of Morocco, regional governments have not established institutions and policies to facilitate reintegration. In many cases, existing laws are not sufficient to deal with returnees, many of whom are often suspected of links to ISIS but are not prosecuted owing to a lack of sufficient evidence. The current practice of incarcerating suspected or known FTFs in general prison populations creates opportunities for FTFs to radicalize others. Once released from incarceration, these suspected or known FTFs often return to the same communities where their radicalization first occurred. In the case of Libya,

⁴³ Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq" (New York: Soufan Center, December 2015).

⁴⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," Policy Notes 55 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018).

⁴⁵ Thomas Renard, ed., "Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia," Egmont Paper 107 (Brussels: Royal Institute for International Relations, April 2019), <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/04/EP107-returnees-in-the-Maghreb.pdf?type=pdf>.

⁴⁶ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Foreign Fighters in Libya," Policy Notes 45 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018).

⁴⁷ Thomas Renard, ed., "Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia," Egmont Paper 107 (Brussels: Royal Institute of International Relations, April 2019), <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/04/EP107-returnees-in-the-Maghreb.pdf?type=pdf>.

the country's ongoing political turmoil and communal violence have created opportunities for FTFs to operate with near impunity, and to train and reequip to carry out future attacks both inside and outside Libya.

The Pentagon estimates that there are approximately 800 FTFs with European citizenship currently in prisons across northern Syria,⁴⁸ but more than 5,000 are estimated to have traveled to Iraq and Syria since 2014.⁴⁹ A large percentage of these FTFs were probably killed on the battlefield, but many have avoided capture and remain a threat. In 2017, the European Union estimated that 30 percent of those FTFs who had traveled from Europe to Iraq and Syria had returned home.⁵⁰ Those who make it back to Europe often have acquired combat experience and skills, leading to disastrous ends. The 2015 attack in Paris, which killed 129 people, including an American citizen, and the 2016 attack in Brussels, which killed thirty-one people, including two American citizens, were both carried out by returning FTFs.

The 2017 National Security Strategy identifies the defeat of terrorist organizations and “others who threaten U.S. citizens and the homeland” as a core objective. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, it is clear that returning FTFs remain a threat to American citizens and installations, yet the United States has not engaged North African governments to develop a regional approach to a shared problem.

Revisionist States Are a National Security Threat to US Interests

China and Russia have rapidly expanded their military ties with Africa; in the case of Russia, the Kremlin is increasing its military presence in Libya and Egypt. Between 2014 and 2018, 49 percent of all arms exported to North Africa came from Russia, the largest arms supplier during that period, and 10 percent came from China, the third largest exporter of arms to North Africa. USAFRICOM has tried to compete with China and Russia by billing itself as “the partner of choice,” suggesting that its motives are to “help

⁴⁸ Glenn A. Fine, “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress,” Media Defense, June 30, 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/06/2002167167/-1/-1/1/Q3FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF.

⁴⁹ Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York: Soufan Center, October 31, 2017), <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf#page=10>.

⁵⁰ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families* (Radicalization Awareness Network, European Commission, July 2017), https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf.

counter extremist groups [that] rob Africans of their future.”⁵¹ North African countries import only 15 percent of their arms from the United States.⁵²

Chinese investment in the region is more comprehensive than is often acknowledged. China blends “trade and investment deals and cultural exchanges with arms sales, medical assistance, troop training, anti-piracy drills and other programs.”⁵³ For years, China has signaled its intention to expand its military cooperation alongside its economic and trade development programs. In 2015, President Xi Jinping pledged to provide \$100 million of “free military assistance” to the African Union in the next five years “to support the building-up of the Africa standby force and the African force for crisis rapid response.”⁵⁴ In 2018, China hosted its first China-Africa Defense and Security Forum (now called the Peace and Security Forum), which builds on China’s stated desire to expand military training and exchange programs. The forum brings tens of thousands of African military personnel to China for workshops and mutual cultural appreciation.⁵⁵

Much of US interest in Chinese military expansion in Africa has focused on Djibouti, where China established its first overseas military base in 2017, but China’s military presence is growing across all of North Africa. In 2016, China surpassed France as Algeria’s largest exporter, and Algeria is now China’s third largest arms buyer globally.⁵⁶ Algeria and China enjoy warm bilateral relations rooted in a similar

⁵¹ Diana Stancy Correll, “How AFRICOM Plans to Counter Russian, Chinese Influence in Africa,” *Military Times*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/01/20/how-africom-plans-to-counter-russian-chinese-influence-in-africa/>.

⁵² Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018” (SIPRI, March 2019), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018.pdf.

⁵³ Lina Benabdallah, “China-Africa Military Ties Have Deepened. Here Are 4 Things to Know,” *The Monkey Cage*, *Washington Post*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/06/china-africa-military-ties-have-deepened-here-are-4-things-to-know/>.

⁵⁴ Zhang Tao, “Monthly Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on September 28” (Beijing: Ministry of National Defense, September 28, 2017), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/focus/2017-09/28/content_4793398.htm.

⁵⁵ Lina Benabdallah, “China-Africa Military Ties Have Deepened. Here Are 4 Things to Know,” *The Monkey Cage*, *Washington Post*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/06/china-africa-military-ties-have-deepened-here-are-4-things-to-know/>.

⁵⁶ Karim Mezran and Daniel J. Samet, “China Has Quietly Carved Out a Foothold in North Africa,” *Diplomat*, July 26, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/china-has-quietly-carved-out-a-foothold-in-north-africa/>.

worldview that is deeply suspicious of foreign influence, especially from the West, and a steadfast commitment to state sovereignty.

Expanded military cooperation between China and Morocco should be especially alarming to US policymakers. A Major Non-NATO Ally of the United States, Morocco buys the bulk of its weapons from the United States,⁵⁷ and the two countries conduct annual joint military exercises.⁵⁸ Despite robust US-Morocco relations, China is actively seeking to expand its military-military cooperation with Rabat. Chinese military vessels have already made port calls in Casablanca (and Algiers),⁵⁹ and Morocco has signed several bilateral agreements with China, including “a strategic partnership [based] on mutual respect, equality, and interests.”⁶⁰

China has made similar overtures to Tunisia, another Major Non-NATO Ally and reliable US security partner. The defense ministers of China and Tunisia met in 2019 and reaffirmed their mutual desire to strengthen military-military cooperation.⁶¹ Previously, China provided Tunisia with grant funding to procure Chinese weapons.

Russia has also expanded its military influence and presence in parts of North Africa. In 2019, Russia hosted African heads of state in Sochi for the first-ever Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum. In North Africa, Russia’s largest military expansion in the region has been in Libya. In the aftermath of the NATO-led intervention, Russia began sending military advisers into the country.⁶² Over time, the Russian military presence has expanded to include snipers, artillerymen and precision guided munitions

⁵⁷ Safaa Kasraoui, “US State Department Approves \$985 Million Military Sale to Morocco,” *Morocco World News*, September 13, 2019, sec. Politics, <https://www.morocccoworldnews.com/2019/09/282507/us-state-military-sale-to-morocco/>.

⁵⁸ United States Africa Command, “African Lion,” <https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/exercises/african-lion>.

⁵⁹ China Military, “Chinese Naval Ships Visit Morocco,” *China Military Online*, January 26, 2018, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-01/26/content_7922876.htm.

⁶⁰ Saad Guerraoui, “Morocco Establishes ‘Strategic Partnership’ with China,” *Arab Weekly*, May 15, 2016, <https://thearabweekly.com/morocco-establishes-strategic-partnership-china>.

⁶¹ China Military, “China, Tunisia to Strengthen Military Training Cooperation,” Xinhuanet, May 30, 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/30/content_9518641.htm.

⁶² Tarek Megerisi and Mattia Toaldo, “Russia in Libya, a Driver for Escalation?” *Sada* (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 8, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/66391>; and Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Lin Noueihed, “Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role—Sources,” Reuters, March 14, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive-idUSKBN16K2RY>.

operators, fixed-wing aircraft, and front-line troops.⁶³ The Kremlin has been reluctant to publicly acknowledge a Russian presence in Libya and has denied that private military contractors, such as the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, are operating there.⁶⁴ US intelligence officials estimate there are more than two thousand Wagner Group private military contractors in Libya, though they were removed from front-line positions in November 2019.⁶⁵ The expanding Russian military presence in Libya, like that in Syria, provides Moscow with the ability to influence internal politics and the regional balance of power.

Russia has also increased its influence in Egypt. Following the 2013 coup d'état that brought Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power in Egypt, Russia has exploited fissures in the US-Egyptian relationship. Recently, Russia offered to sell twenty Su-35 fighter jets to Egypt, despite US objections,⁶⁶ and in 2017 Russia signed a basing agreement with Cairo to allow Russian aircrafts to use the existing airbase near the Egypt-Libyan border.⁶⁷ Similarly, Algeria and Russia enjoy a very close relationship, especially with respect to military-military cooperation. Algeria has one of the largest defense budgets in Africa and purchases the overwhelming portion of its military equipment from Russia. Algeria accounts for half of all Russian arms sales to Africa.⁶⁸ While the United States has made attempts to turn Algiers toward

⁶³ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War," *New York Times*, November 5, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html>.

⁶⁴ Maria Tsvetkova, "Exclusive: Russian Clinic Treated Mercenaries Injured in Secret Wars," Reuters, January 7, 2020, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSKBN1Z61A7>.

⁶⁵ Abdulkader Assad, "Army Official: Russian Wagner Group Mercenaries Have Started Pulling Out of Tripoli Frontlines," *Libya Observer*, January 12, 2020, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/army-official-russian-wagner-group-mercenaries-have-started-pulling-out-tripoli-frontlines>.

⁶⁶ Theresa Hitchens, "US Threatens Egypt With Sanctions for Russian Arms Deals," *Breaking Defense*, November 19, 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/11/us-threatens-egypt-with-sanctions-for-russian-arms-deals/>.

⁶⁷ John Vandiver, "Russia Launches Air Defense Drills in Egypt in Sign of Growing Influence in Region," *Stars and Stripes*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/russia-launches-air-defense-drills-in-egypt-in-sign-of-growing-influence-in-region-1.605202>.

⁶⁸ Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Cautious Calculus in Algeria," *Sada* (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 22, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78667>.

Washington, USAFRICOM has described that effort as “crawl, walk, run,”⁶⁹ an acknowledgment that it will take time to expand cooperation between the two countries.

Policy Recommendations

The 2017 National Security Strategy calls for the United States to work with partners to deny terrorists sanctuary, to increase border security both between North Africa and the Sahel and between North Africa and southern Europe, and to address the underlying grievances that make the region susceptible to insecurity. Unfortunately, the application of this strategy has narrowly focused on political stabilization through bilateral economic growth, trade, and investment alongside targeted military strikes to eliminate terrorists. The proposal to reduce USAFRICOM’s footprint on the continent reflects a global pivot away from counterterrorism efforts and toward great power competition in Asia and elsewhere.

These decisions suggest that the current US strategy underappreciates the significant threats that still emanate from North Africa. The drivers that made the region the largest point of origin for FTFs in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, such as high levels of youth unemployment, lack of effective governance, and feelings of despair and hopelessness, remain. Attacks in Paris and Brussels have already shown that returning FTFs remain a direct threat to America and its allies. In general, North African governments are unprepared to deal with the returning FTF problem, and the United States should consider ways to improve institutional capacity (including through training and education for North African judiciaries, focused on reforming judicial courts and legal codes) and to develop demobilization, deradicalization, and reintegration programs.⁷⁰

As the continued existence of terrorists in Libya shows, air strikes and kinetic action alone are not sufficient. Since April 2019, the Libyan conflict has arguably become more complicated with the introduction of Syrian mercenaries, Russian private military contractors supported by the Kremlin, and the threat of Egyptian regular forces intervening directly. For much of 2019, many international observers and Libyans called on the United States to use its considerable leverage with the various external combatants to broker a peace; however, the equities of some external actors have increased considerably in recent months. While the United States could theoretically still assert its leverage, the

⁶⁹ Maggie Ybarra, “The Politics of Selling Weapons to Algeria” (Washington, DC: Center for the National Interest, March 7, 2019), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/politics-selling-weapons-algeria-46362>.

⁷⁰ Thomas Renard, ed., “Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia,” Egmont Paper 107 (Brussels: Royal Institute for International Relations, April 2019), <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/04/EP107-returnees-in-the-Maghreb.pdf?type=pdf>.

cost in political capital and potential military investment makes US intervention unlikely if not unwise. This is not to say that the United States should wash its hands of Libya, condemning the Libyan people to conflict and self-interested external actors.

Instead, the United States should work with other allied European states that are not party to the conflict to empower the UN. The current UN mission to Libya (UNSMIL) is limited in its mandate and unsupported by UN member states. The United States should advocate for an expanded UNSMIL mandate, potentially including a peacekeeping mission, with a more senior-level leadership structure. In addition, the United States should fulfill its pledge to enforce UN arms embargoes, sanction persons (including US citizens) who violate restrictions in support of militias, and use the international banking system to consolidate core state institutions.

A strategy focused on confronting revisionist states such as China and Russia must be led by NATO and other similar multilateral security arrangements. Chinese and Russian aggression in North Africa threatens Europe and regional allies; as such, the burden of confronting these threats should not rest solely with the United States. Acting through ad hoc security and military partnerships is neither sustainable nor efficient. Instead, the United States should seek to animate existing but underutilized multilateral organizations such as NATO to confront Chinese and Russian influence, which is expanding at the expense of the United States and Europe.

The misperception that North Africa is not relevant to the competition between great powers potentially exposes US national security interests to Russian and Chinese aggression. Chinese and Russian military hardware sales are increasing even in countries historically dependent on US supply chains. In the case of Libya, Russian irregular troops are playing a decisive role in determining the outcome of the ongoing civil war, potentially giving the Kremlin enormous leverage over Mediterranean regional security matters.

V. Regional Conflicts

North Africa is a region plagued by long-standing inter- and intraregional conflicts that impede economic integration and create instability, which terrorists and other criminal elements exploit. Frozen or cold peace conflicts have the potential to become violent and fracture fragile states. Unresolved disputes over territory and control of water resources prevent states from marshalling coordinated responses to such transnational challenges as irregular migration, terrorist recruitment, and violence. For the United States, these enduring conflicts pose a direct threat to US and allies' national security interests in the region.

Specifically, three conflicts in North Africa warrant greater attention from the Biden administration: the ongoing battle for control of Libya, the continued territorial dispute over Western Sahara, and the escalating tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian

Renaissance Dam. While Libya is the only active violent conflict of the three, both the situation in Western Sahara and the conflict over the dam have the potential to become violent if not addressed.

The ongoing conflict in Western Sahara makes it difficult for the United States to strengthen relations with both Rabat and Algiers and remains a significant impediment to regional economic integration.⁷¹

The competition for water resources, especially in the upper Nile region, threatens to become the starting point of a war between strategic military partners of the United States. And Libya's status as a failed state immersed in a broader regional conflict creates opportunities for enemies, both state and nonstate actors, to threaten the United States. All three conflicts have direct implications for US national security interests that are frequently underappreciated or overshadowed by other regional conflicts, such as those in Syria and Iran, but deserve greater US focus and diplomatic investment. And in all three, a modest level of US diplomatic engagement could yield great gains for US national security interests.

Why Libya Is a problem for the United States

Libya has been beset by violence since 2011 when a popular revolution, supported by NATO, toppled long-time dictator Muammar Qaddafi. The ensuing nine years have seen waves of increased violence punctuated by major battles. These include the United States' support of militias to turn back ISIS in the city of Sirte in 2014 and the recent battle for Tripoli, during which the warlord General Khalifa Haftar tried unsuccessfully to wrest control of the capital from the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). The United States has repeatedly stated that all parties to the conflict need to recognize that "there is no durable military solution to the Libyan conflict."⁷² Nevertheless, external actors continue to act in ways that exacerbate the Libyan conflict and undermine UN-led peace efforts.⁷³ The repeated violations of UN arms embargoes by US partners and allies, include France, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, and the provision of weapons, funding, propaganda

⁷¹ Aziz Allilou, "Morocco Declares Christopher Ross Persona Non Grata in 'Western Sahara,'" *Morocco World News*, November 8, 2015, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/11/172144/morocco-declares-christopher-ross-persona-non-grata-in-western-sahara/>.

⁷² David Schenker, "Statement by David Schenker, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs," https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/021220_Schenker_Testimony.pdf.

⁷³ Lipika Majumdar Roy Choudhury et al., "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011)" (United Nations Security Council, December 9, 2019), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2019_914.pdf.

messaging, and military personnel to proxies, have fueled the conflict, increasing the threats to US national security interests in the region.

Libyan institutions, which were already weak under Qaddafi, have been crippled by the ongoing violence. Even the security services have become a self-interested institution and fractured along tribal and regional lines. This has allowed militias and terrorist organizations to take control of Libyan military stockpiles and launch attacks within Libya and in neighboring countries.⁷⁴ AFRICOM has repeatedly carried out strikes on terrorist training camps and targets, but these military interventions have not eliminated the terrorist threat in Libya or prevented it from spilling over into the Sahel region.⁷⁵ In October 2019, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Libya “risks becoming the main terrorist hub in North Africa where this disease [terrorism] may spread into other countries and continents.”⁷⁶ Similarly, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned in January 2020 that “Libya has been a center, a cancer for arms export and fighters export ... and the most worrying impact is, of course, with the Sahel and Lake Chad. And more and more these things are interlinked.”⁷⁷

Large sections of the country are permissive environments for smugglers and traffickers.⁷⁸ According to the International Organization for Migration, 355,000 Libyans have been internally displaced by the ongoing conflict, and there are nearly one million irregular migrants, many of whom are attempting to travel on to Europe.⁷⁹ In January 2020, more than half of all migrants who landed in Italy had departed from Libya. Migrants who remain in Libya are often subjected to deplorable conditions. For those in

⁷⁴ Margaret Coker, “Arms from Libya Used in Algeria Raid,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323301104578255792137222984>.

⁷⁵ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Drone Strikes Stymie ISIS in Southern Libya,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/world/africa/drone-strikes-isis-libya.html>.

⁷⁶ “Lavrov Says Libya Risks Becoming Key Terrorist Hub in North Africa,” *Libyan Address Journal*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.addresslibya.co/en/archives/51269>.

⁷⁷ “UN’s Guterres Warns of ‘Impact’ on Sahel Region from Libya War,” *Al Jazeera*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/gutteres-warns-impact-sahel-region-libya-war-200123160921373.html>.

⁷⁸ US Embassy in Libya, “2019 Trafficking in Persons Report—Libya,” June 20, 2019, <https://ly.usembassy.gov/2019-trafficking-in-persons-report-libya/>.

⁷⁹ “Libya,” International Organization for Migration, <https://www.iom.int/countries/libya>.

detention centers, women and unaccompanied minors experience high rates of sexual abuse and exploitation. Instances of forced labor and slavery have also been reported.⁸⁰

In Europe, the increase in irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa through Libya has stoked xenophobic fears, leading to a surge in support for ultranationalist and antidemocratic political parties.⁸¹ Often, these parties have espoused platforms that undermine European political, economic, and military cohesion, thereby threatening the foundation of NATO. No state would benefit more from a weakened NATO than Russia, which is a partial explanation for Russia's expanding engagement in Libya.

For years, Russia has sought to align itself with actors on all sides of the Libyan conflict. Both Prime Minister Serraj and General Khalifa Haftar have made visits to Moscow and met with high-ranking Russian officials. However, in 2016, Russian support started to favor Haftar and his Libyan Arab Armed Forces; Russia began producing Libyan currency (dinars) for banks in eastern Libya to use, in this way creating a parallel financial system to the one controlled by the internationally recognized government based in Tripoli. In the last three years, Russia has delivered more than \$7.7 billion in new Libyan currency.⁸² In September 2019, Russia began inserting private military contractors, including the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group as military advisers, snipers, and front-line soldiers.⁸³ Russia also deployed advanced aircraft and launched precision guided missile strikes and artillery in support of Haftar's assault on Tripoli. The increased Russian involvement initially looked to be decisive and could have given Haftar the advantage his forces needed to take Tripoli, and indeed Libya, if not for Turkish intervention on the side of the GNA.

Though Libyan energy accounts for a small percentage of the world's supply, Europe receives over 85 percent of all of Libya's crude exports: 23 percent of Ireland's oil imports come from Libya,⁸⁴ and Italy

⁸⁰ Casey Quackenbush, "Libyan Slave Trade: Here's What You Need to Know," *Time*, December 1, 2017, <https://time.com/5042560/libya-slave-trade/>.

⁸¹ Ashok Swain, "Increasing Migration Pressure and Rising Nationalism: Implications for Multilateralism and SDG Implementation," UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, June 2019, 32.

⁸² Rinat Sagdiev and Aidan Lewis, "Supplies of Banknotes from Russia to East Libya Accelerated This Year," Reuters, October 29, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/29/supplies-of-banknotes-from-russia-to-east-libya-accelerated-this-year-a67960>.

⁸³ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War," *New York Times*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html>.

⁸⁴ Andrés Cala, "Europe Rethinks Dependence on Libyan Oil," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 23, 2011, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2011/0223/Europe-rethinks-dependence-on-Libyan-oil>.

and France are also heavily dependent on Libyan oil. For Italy, 22 percent of consumed crude oil and 13 percent of gas come from Libya; for France, Libyan oil constitutes 16 percent of total crude oil consumption. Foreign energy companies such as Italy's energy company ENI, France's Total, Spain's Repsol, and Austria's OMV not only depend on Libyan resources but also are the largest foreign companies, regardless of sector, operating inside Libya. In 2017 the Russian energy company Rosneft signed a cooperation agreement with the Libyan National Oil Corporation in a deal seen by many as a Russian attempt to gain greater control over Libyan oil production.

Through private military contractors and direct military support, Russia has established itself as one of the principal foreign actors in the country, alongside Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and France. The presence in Libya of Russian regular and irregular troops—closely associated with the Kremlin—gives Moscow the ability to potentially influence the flow of oil, energy resources, and migrants from Libya to Europe. Russia could leverage its Libyan presence to exploit cleavages in the NATO alliance and interfere in international energy markets. As such, Russian influence in Libya is a direct threat to US and allies' national security interests.

Unlocking the Western Sahara Conflict

The status of Western Sahara, a disputed region in the Maghreb territory of North and West Africa, remains one of the continent's longest unresolved conflicts. A UN peacekeeping mission, MINURSO (Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), operated in Western Sahara for nearly thirty years, but attempts to resolve the conflict have failed, leading several UN special envoys to resign in frustration.

The Sahrawi people have sought independence in the region since the early twentieth century and claimed the territory in the name of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976. However, the territory had been claimed by Morocco at the end of the Spanish colonial period in 1956 and was occupied by Morocco in 1975, when 350,000 Moroccans were escorted by Moroccan troops into the territory. The ensuing battle left Morocco in control of 80 percent of the territory and a fledgling SADR in the remaining 20 percent. From 1975 to 1991, the Moroccan government fought the Western Sahara War against the Polisario Front (Sahrawi independence movement forces, supported by the Algerian government).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the United States played a significant role in trying to resolve the Western Sahara conflict, leading to the proposed "Baker Plan." The UN mission, MINURSO, which was

established to administer a referendum whereby the people of Western Sahara would choose between independence and integration with Morocco has failed in its charge.⁸⁵

Under the Trump administration, it appeared that a diplomatic breakthrough might be possible due to increased US pressure, specifically on the Moroccans. In 2018, National Security Adviser John Bolton, who had helped draft the Baker Plan, threatened a US veto of MINURSO's mandate renewal in the UN Security Council if the combatants didn't make progress toward a referendum. Ambassador Bolton's pressure resulted in the first significant peace negotiations between the parties in more than six years, and a second round of negotiations began several months later.⁸⁶

However, that progress stalled following a series of resignations, including Bolton's and the UN secretary-general's envoy Horst Köhler's. These critical departures coincided with the Algerian political transition, which installed a caretaker government in Algiers, inwardly focused and unempowered to engage in Western Sahara negotiations. In April 2020, rumors began to circulate that secret negotiations between the US, Morocco, and Israel would yield a grand bargain whereby the Moroccans would normalize relations with Israel in exchange for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. These rumors prompted street protests across Morocco from those who saw normalization with Israel as a betrayal of support for the Palestinian cause.⁸⁷ The Moroccan government was quick to dismiss the rumors as untrue. Prime Minister Saad Eddine El Othamni was quoted as saying, "we refuse any normalization with the Zionist entity because it encourages it to go further in violating the rights of the Palestinian people."⁸⁸

Despite public statements to the contrary, the rumors of a grand bargain proved to be true when the White House issued a proclamation on December 10, 2020 recognizing "Moroccan sovereignty over the

⁸⁵ United Nations, "MINURSO / Mandate," United Nations Missions, n.d., <https://minurso.unmissions.org/mandate>.

⁸⁶ Nicolas Niarchos, "Is One of Africa's Oldest Conflicts Finally Nearing Its End?," *New Yorker*, December 29, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-one-of-africas-oldest-conflicts-finally-nearing-its-end>.

⁸⁷ Yahia Hatim, "'Normalization is Treason': Moroccans Demonstrate in Support of Palestinian Cause," *Morocco World News*, September 19, 2020, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2020/09/319575/normalization-is-treason-moroccans-demonstrate-in-support-of-palestinian-cause/>

⁸⁸ Jules Crétois, "Despite US pressure, Morocco will not normalize relations with Israel," *The Africa Report*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/40963/despite-us-pressure-morocco-will-not-normalise-relations-with-israel/>

entire Western Sahara territory.”⁸⁹ This proclamation will undoubtedly increase tension between the Algeria and Morocco and slow the thaw between the US and Algeria. It is possible that the US proclamation prompts Algeria to seek a more robust relationship with either Russia or China.

Unfortunately, the Western Sahara conflict has been a significant obstacle to greater Moroccan-Algerian cooperation and trade; the recent proclamation by the US will not ease those tensions. The unwillingness to resolve the conflict has been detrimental to both Morocco and Algeria and to other states in the region, undermining efforts to promote regional economic integration. According to the *Economist*, “Had Algeria and Morocco honored their agreement back in 1989 to form an economic union, along with Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania, they would be among the Middle East’s largest economies. Their poor border regions would be booming crossroads. Over the decade to 2015 ... their two economies would each have almost doubled in size.”⁹⁰ Instead of shared economic growth, however, Algeria remains almost entirely dependent on its export of oil and gas resources, which account for 20 percent of GDP and 85 percent of total exports.⁹¹ Such reliance on a single sector and lack of economic diversification have been devastating for Algeria in the wake of globally declining energy prices.

For the United States, removing the impediments to regional economic integration should be a priority and the Biden administration will be challenged to find a way to repair its relationship with Algeria in light of the Trump proclamation. As previously outlined, regional economic integration is the single most transformative intervention that could be undertaken to reduce the drivers of violent extremism and political unrest.⁹² The United States has long desired a new relationship with the government of Algeria, a country that has traditionally been close to Russia, and improving the bilateral US-Algeria relationship will be difficult for the Biden administration. The December 10 proclamation makes it difficult for the Biden administration to unrecognize Moroccan claims over the Western Sahara without damaging the US-Morocco relationship. Conversely, if the Biden administration accepts the proclamation and adopts

⁸⁹ White House statement. December 10, 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-sovereignty-kingdom-morocco-western-sahara/>

⁹⁰ Marsa Ben Mhidi, “Morocco and Algeria Keep Building More Barriers,” *Economist*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/07/27/morocco-and-algeria-keep-building-more-barriers>.

⁹¹ OPEC, “Algeria,” OPEC, 2020, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/146.htm (accessed March 30, 2020).

⁹² See Section II, “Economic Growth” on economic growth in this report for more on the importance of regional economic integration.

the Trump administration policy, it will be very hard for the US and Algeria to build trust.⁹³ The Biden administration will need to facilitate an end to the Western Sahara conflict in a way that appeals to all parties, including the Sahrawi people, if it intends to implement a broader regional strategy. Regional economic integration, expanded military-military cooperation, and a fostering a pro-American posture are now more difficult to achieve following the December 10 proclamation.

Averting War between Egypt and Ethiopia

In 2011, Ethiopia announced its intention to begin construction on Africa's largest hydroelectric dam near its border with Sudan on the Blue Nile. The dam would fulfill Ethiopia's desire to be the biggest power exporter in Africa, generating an estimated 6,000 MW. However, further downstream, the Nile provides 90 percent of Egypt's freshwater supply and is the country's economic engine. Egypt remains largely rural and heavily dependent on the agricultural sector, which accounts for 17 percent of the country's GDP and 20 percent of its foreign exchange earnings. Nearly 55 percent of Egypt's population is reliant on farming for a livelihood.⁹⁴

The Nile River Basin flows through eleven countries, and an agreement made in 1959 governs the distribution of Blue Nile water between Egypt and Sudan but does not include Ethiopia. Egypt sees the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam as a potential existential threat, and government officials have repeatedly claimed that filling the dam too quickly could increase instances of drought, eliminate more than one million jobs in the agricultural sector, and reduce economic production by \$1.8 billion annually.⁹⁵ The UN has warned that Egypt could run out of water by 2025 and that the country is currently below the UN's threshold of water poverty.⁹⁶ Water scarcity in Egypt has been a growing problem as a result of antiquated irrigation practices, pollution, climate change, and a steadily growing population; the GERD project has only added to Egyptian fears.

⁹³ Maggie Ybarra, "The Politics of Selling Weapons to Algeria" (Washington, DC: Center for the National Interest, March 7, 2019), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/politics-selling-weapons-algeria-46362>.

⁹⁴ Nihaya Khalaf, "Greening the Egyptian Economy with Agriculture" (Middle East Institute, September 12, 2017), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/greening-egyptian-economy-agriculture>.

⁹⁵ "Factbox: Key Facts about Ethiopia's Giant Nile Dam," Reuters, November 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-dam-factbox-idUSKBN1XG21L>.

⁹⁶ Maged Srour, "Water Scarcity and Poor Water Management Makes Life Difficult for Egyptians," *Interpress Service News Agency*, September 27, 2018, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2018/09/water-scarcity-poor-water-management-makes-life-difficult-egyptians/>.

In September 2019, Egyptian president el-Sisi asked President Trump to mediate between the three parties after negotiations broke down earlier in the year.⁹⁷ That invitation led to a series of discussions that suffered a setback in late February when Ethiopia walked away from negotiations. Ethiopia stated that it did not agree with US characterizations of what had been agreed to thus far and would not participate in the next round of negotiations.⁹⁸ Ethiopia has been concerned throughout the dialogue process that the United States would not be a neutral arbiter and would instead pressure Ethiopia to make concessions to Egypt.

If a peaceful resolution to the GERD dispute is not reached, the conflict could lead to war. In Egypt, the dam is frequently characterized as a threat to national security. Following the 1978 Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat stated, “The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is the Nile water.”⁹⁹ In 2013, then-president Mohamed Morsi plotted with politicians about ways to sabotage the dam. More recently, President el-Sisi has said he would “never” allow Ethiopia to impose a “de facto situation” by operationalizing the dam without an agreement.¹⁰⁰ Egyptian officials have been quoted as saying, ominously, that “all options are on the table, but we prefer dialogue and political means.”

For the United States, both Egypt and Ethiopia are important regional allies. Egypt is one of the largest recipients of US foreign assistance (US \$83 billion since 1946)¹⁰¹ and enjoys deep military-military cooperation. President Trump has referred to President el-Sisi as a “friend” and “real leader,” and has said that the United States and Egypt “have a long-term, great relationship. It’s better than ever

⁹⁷ “Trump Says Talks on Nile Dam Dispute ‘Went Well,’” *Al Jazeera*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/trump-meets-african-dignitaries-nile-dam-dispute-191106195315437.html>.

⁹⁸ Patsy Widakuswara, “No Deal From US-Brokered Nile Dam Talks,” *Voice of America*, February 29, 2020, sec. Africa, USA, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/no-deal-us-brokered-nile-dam-talks>.

⁹⁹ Alex De Waal, “Sisi Goes to Addis Ababa,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2015, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/opinion/sisi-goes-to-addis-ababa.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Samy Magdy, “Egyptian Media Urges Military Action against Ethiopia as Nile Talks Break Down,” *Times of Israel*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-media-urges-military-action-against-ethiopia-as-nile-talks-break-down/>.

¹⁰¹ Jeremy M Sharp, “Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations” (Congressional Research Service, November 21, 2019).

before.”¹⁰² US relations with Ethiopia are also close, with some suggesting that Ethiopia is “America’s closest ally on the continent.”¹⁰³ Last year, the US ambassador to Ethiopia announced that the United States would be “embedding senior government officials at key Ethiopian economic ministries and operations for a sustained period of time.” Ethiopia has received more than \$4 billion in foreign assistance since 2014, and the largest percentage of remittances comes from the Ethiopian diaspora living in the United States.¹⁰⁴ If war between the two did break out, the United States could be obliged to negotiate a difficult peace or worse, pushed to engage directly in yet another conflict in the MENA region. For the United States, both outcomes could carry an unnecessary financial burden and potentially the loss of military material.

Russia has also seen the GERD dispute as an opportunity to expand its influence in the geostrategically important Red Sea region. On the margins of the Russia-Africa summit in October 2019, Russia discussed the GERD dispute with the Egyptian president and Ethiopian prime minister and offered to act as an intermediary to the parties.¹⁰⁵ The setbacks to the talks administered in Washington in February could provide an opening for Russia to insert itself as an alternative third-party negotiator. Russia, like the United States, understands that the Red Sea region is a critical maritime route through which it can project power across Africa and the Middle East. Russia has already established outposts in Eritrea and has made efforts to engage Sudan.¹⁰⁶

Policy Recommendations

Long-standing regional conflicts prevent economic integration, threaten stability in fragile states, and create opportunities for terrorists and criminal elements to carry out operations. In Libya, uncontrolled

¹⁰² Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump and President El-Sisi of Egypt before Bilateral Meeting, New York, NY” (White House, September 23, 2019), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-el-sisi-egypt-bilateral-meeting-new-york-ny/>.

¹⁰³ “How Did US and Ethiopia Become So Close?,” *BBC News*, April 8, 2019, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47203691>.

¹⁰⁴ “The Ethiopian Diaspora in the United States,” RAD Diaspora Profile (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, July 2014).

¹⁰⁵ “Russia Ready to Broker Egypt-Ethiopia Renaissance Dam Talks,” TASS, October 23, 2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1084758>.

¹⁰⁶ Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russian Moves in the Gulf and Africa Have a Common Goal” (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 28, 2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russian-moves-in-the-gulf-and-africa-have-a-common-goal>.

borders and security vacuums allow terrorists, smugglers, and traffickers to operate with impunity across large areas of the country. Targeted military interventions are a short-term solution and do not address the underlying instability, which is fueled by self-interested Libyan militias and external actors. In Western Sahara, the recent US proclamation recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory will increase tensions between Morocco and Algeria and undermine US efforts to be seen as an honest broker. The Biden administration will need a nuanced strategy to build trust with Algerian while maintaining the Moroccan confidence. Construction of the GERD is perceived as a critical threat in Egypt but as a national priority in Ethiopia. The dispute has threatened to escalate into war, which would pit two of America's most important African allies against each other.

In Western Sahara, the United States will need to expand the basket of incentives available to entice cooperation from Algeria and the Sahrawi people. The December 10 proclamation affirms the unequivocal US support for the Moroccan position in Western Sahara; however, the Biden administration could choose to adopt a more neutral tone toward Western Sahara. Regardless, the Biden administration will be forced to create new enticements for Algeria and Morocco to work together on issues of mutual interest, principally regionally economic integration. To facilitate a greater set of rewards, the Biden administration will need the help of international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF as well as the European Union to invest significantly in a long-term solution for the stateless Sahrawi people and regional development. International financial institutions may also prove critical in helping Algeria avert total economic collapse, as outlined in the section three of this report. Although the opportunity for peacefully resolving the Western Sahara conflict has become more challenging, it is no less important. Resolving the Western Sahara conflict could unlock decades of stalemate between Morocco and its neighbors, facilitating more cooperation on terrorism and regional economic integration.

The escalating tensions over the GERD threaten to boil over into direct military conflict. In light of the equities of the US allies involved, particularly Egypt and Ethiopia, resolving this conflict peacefully should be a priority for the United States. However, the United States is unlikely to be seen as a neutral third party to any negotiations, and so it should support multilateral organizations such as the African Union as they seek to create "African solutions to African problems." The AU has taken the lead in bringing Ethiopia and Egypt together, and if it is able to demonstrate an effective role as mediator, that could open up opportunities elsewhere on the continent for locally driven conflict resolution. The United States should do all it can to support the AU in its efforts in this regard.

For too long, these conflicts have been characterized as distant or indirectly related to US national security interests. In fact, these conflicts threaten the stability of several important US partners and perpetuate the cycles of violence that create instability and have dangerous second-order effects for US national security interests. In addition, these conflicts create an opening for increased Russian

intervention, advancing the Kremlin’s agenda, which seeks to undermine US and European efforts in northern Africa and the southern Mediterranean region.

VI. Migration

There is no question that migration is a major issue, one that has humanitarian, economic, political, and security implications for North Africa. The region’s proximity to Europe—with only nine miles separating Morocco and Spain, and 146 miles separating Tunisia from Italy—and the lack of traditional border control regimes in Libya have made the region an attractive transit point for sub-Saharan Africans heading north, as well as a temporary home for those who can’t make it to Europe. Additionally, there are high numbers of North Africans who are fleeing the violence in Libya or seeking employment or a better life in Europe. These individuals thus seek either regular or irregular migration across the Mediterranean. And, though the number of migrants leaving North Africa’s shores has dwindled over the past three years, regular and irregular migrants continue to leave the area en route to Europe or North America in high numbers.

Regular migration is also contributing to poor service quality and delivery as highly educated and highly skilled North Africans seek employment in Europe or North America, leaving the region with a dearth of engineers, doctors, and other highly skilled professionals. Exacerbating the problem, Africa’s population is expected to double in next generation to more than two billion people, meaning the strains on resources will be exponentially higher.¹⁰⁷ Add to that climate change, which is making some areas uninhabitable and thus forcing people to leave their homes, and the migration problem is clearly one that will only get worse, not better, over the coming decades. Despite these troubling signals and the serious humanitarian and socioeconomic implications for the region, the United States has largely ceded work on this issue to Europe, which, because of its geographic proximity to North Africa, is directly affected by migration from and through North Africa. Though the United States is in frequent communication and coordination with our European partners, the US government must recognize the potential threat to US national security interests should North Africa and Europe fail to adequately address the social and economic issues driving the migration wave and the resultant humanitarian crisis.

What Does Migration Look Like?

Three types of migration are leaving an impact on North Africa. (1) Forced migration and internal displacement, largely driven by conflict in sub-Saharan Africa and in Syria and Libya, has a dominant role

¹⁰⁷ Haim Malka, “Maghreb Migration: Ready or Not” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 10, 2018), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/maghreb-migration-ready-or-not>.

as people flee their home countries. (2) Irregular migration, largely driven by socioeconomic factors, may occur when people are frustrated by their inability to provide for their families or access quality services such as health care and education, and therefore seek a better economic situation for themselves or their families, primarily in Europe. (3) Labor migration entails the movement of people seeking employment in another location because they are unable or unwilling to find employment at home, but they do not seek to migrate permanently.

To fully understand the scope of migration in North Africa, the matter must be further analyzed in terms of two related issues: North Africa as a transit point for sub-Saharan African and other non-North African migrants seeking to reach Europe, and migration undertaken by North Africans engaged either in forced migration from the conflict in Libya or in irregular or labor migration because of high rates of unemployment and socioeconomic marginalization. While sub-Saharan African migrants traditionally passed through North Africa quickly, seeking transit either by boat from North African shores or by land routes east, today tougher border security measures in Europe and tighter visa restrictions have left more and more sub-Saharan African migrants stuck in North Africa for the long term. This is causing a strain on what are already insufficient resources and a broken social contract, with governments unable to deliver adequate employment or meet basic social and economic needs to both the citizens of North Africa and the resident migrants.

The cases of Morocco and Libya are particularly illustrative of these challenges. Morocco has been a common transit point on the journey to Europe as migrants need only cross the nine-mile-wide Strait of Gibraltar or enter into one of the two Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla—the only place where Europe shares a land border with Africa—to make it into Spain, where they are afforded protections not found in Morocco. But the continued hardening of the border surrounding Ceuta and Melilla, which is now one of the most fortified borders in the world, has resulted in migrant camps in the forests outside Melilla where some migrants live for years, awaiting a chance to rush the border into Spain.¹⁰⁸ As a result, in 2019, a third of migrants arriving into Spain by land and sea were Moroccan (7,200), followed by 2,900 from Guinea and 2,900 from Algeria.

Around 700,000 sub-Saharan African migrants reside in Morocco, and Morocco and Spain have a shared interest in keeping sub-Saharan Africans—and Moroccans—from entering Spain outside the formal legal process. Europe provides Morocco with security assistance and aid to support job creation and services

¹⁰⁸ Johnny Harris, “Europe’s Most Fortified Border Is in Africa,” *Vox*, December 5, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/a/borders/spain-morocco>.

and to address irregular migration.¹⁰⁹ As it has become more difficult for migrants to leave Morocco, the Moroccan government has “indicated a willingness to adopt integration measures and policies that respect migrants’ rights so long as migrant-origin countries continue to support Morocco in its 40-year conflict over the Sahara.”¹¹⁰ Morocco has occasionally regularized large groups of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa (24,000 in 2014 and 28,400 in 2017), providing them with work permits and access to social services. However, this has failed to adequately address the large community of migrants or the social antipathy toward them.

Prior to 2011, migration from Libya was largely contained. The European Union and its member states had adopted a quid pro quo attitude with Libya toward cooperating on migration, exchanging funding and technical equipment or training in return for promises to reduce unauthorized maritime departures.¹¹¹ However, since 2011, the instability in Libya has had a significant impact on migration throughout North Africa. During the initial conflict in 2011, there was an uptick in Libyans fleeing the country. However, most of them were believed to have returned to Libya by 2012, with some remaining next door in Tunisia or in Europe.¹¹² Of the small number of Libyans who reside abroad today, most are found either in Italy (36 percent) or the United Kingdom (16 percent). The bigger impact of the ongoing conflict in Libya is on the 653,800 migrants living inside Libya as of February 2020, including 135,530 from Niger, 103, 291 from Chad, 100, 368 from Egypt and 76, 911 from Sudan.¹¹³ In 2011, there were more than 2.5 million migrants living inside Libya, but most of them were pushed or forced out of Libya by conflict or loss of economic opportunity, fleeing primarily to Tunisia (45 percent) or Egypt (32 percent). According to Mercy Corps, up to 30 percent of the population in southern Libya are of undetermined legal status, which fuels discrimination in employment and services and contributes to ethnic and tribal tensions. Noncitizens without national identification numbers cannot access basic

¹⁰⁹ Driss El Ghazouani, “A Growing Destination for Sub-Saharan Africans, Morocco Wrestles with Immigrant Integration,” Migration Policy, July 1, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/growing-destination-sub-saharan-africans-morocco>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Luca Lixi, “After Revolution, Tunisian Migration Governance Has Changed. Has EU Policy?,” Migration Policy, October 17, 2018, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/after-revolution-tunisian-migration-governance-has-changed-has-eu-policy>.

¹¹² MPC Team, “Libya,” Migration Profile (Migration Policy Institute, June 2013), <https://www.iom.int/countries/libya>.

¹¹³ International Organization for Migration, “Libya’s Migrant Report: Round 29.” January-February 2020, <https://migration.iom.int/reports/libya-%E2%80%94-migrant-report-29-jan-feb-2020>.

services; register births, marriages, or deaths; hold certain jobs; receive state salaries; vote; or run for office.¹¹⁴ Today, Libyans who leave the country tend to head west through North Africa or north to Europe, seeking stability and economic opportunity.

Three Reasons the United States Should Care about Migration

The issue of migration should resonate with US policymakers for three reasons: humanitarian concerns, stability, and assisting our allies. First, both migration through and migration from North Africa is becoming a growing humanitarian issue. While there are far larger refugee crises with greater humanitarian costs (such as the ongoing Syrian civil war), the North African migration issue is associated with severe human rights abuses and has contributed to the deaths of migrants. As migrants become trapped in North Africa and unable to get to Europe, they are more likely to take drastic measures, such as engaging in deadly sea voyages or paying human traffickers, which delivers them into slavery at the hands of those who seek to exploit their desperation. In early 2018 the UN and the European Union raised alarm over the horrific conditions for migrants transiting in Libya, calling attention to the practice of slavery that persists there.¹¹⁵

Second, the influx of people into North Africa both reflects the paucity of good governance in sub-Saharan Africa and has the potential to create further instability as local residents and migrants fight over scarce resources. Nearly all countries in the region suffer from economic malaise, with rising inflation, declining purchasing power, and official figures putting unemployment at 15.5 percent in Tunisia (a figure that is expected to rise to 20 percent because of the COVID-19 pandemic), 11.1 percent in Algeria, 9.8 percent in Morocco, and 11.4 percent in Egypt.¹¹⁶ People across the region, particularly youth, feel excluded from the political process and, in the cases of Egypt and Algeria, have taken to the streets in recent months to demand their voices be heard. Furthermore, structural inequality has left certain regions marginalized, such as Morocco's Rif, which experienced significant popular unrest in 2016, or the interior and the south of Tunisia, which have seen recurring bouts of protests that have caused direct economic harm to the state, creating frustration and anger. Additionally, regular migration, particularly by highly skilled workers, leaves North African states with a dearth of qualified

¹¹⁴ US Department of State, "2019 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Libya," <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/libya/>.

¹¹⁵ Stephanie Nebehay, "Executions, Torture and Slave Markets Persist in Libya: U.N.," Reuters, March 21, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-rights-idUSKBN1GX1JY>.

¹¹⁶ Heritage Foundation, "'2020 Index of Economic Freedom / Egypt,'" <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/egypt>.

professionals, leading to a further decrease in the quality of services. For example, since the revolution, more than 94,000 highly skilled Tunisians have left the country.¹¹⁷

Finally, while the migration issue has a more direct impact on Europe than on the United States, it is imperative that the US government continue to work closely with our European friends and allies both to protect the human rights of asylum seekers and refugees and to ensure that North African and European governments have the resources they need to support refugees and asylum seekers and provide adequate border security to decrease irregular migration. The United States and Europe must also invest in good governance and economic progress throughout the African continent to improve the conditions for Africans in their home countries and prevent the need for migration in the first place. Such investment should also be directed toward mitigating the effects of climate change.

Policy Recommendations

While the challenges of managing migration will continue to be a top priority for European governments, the United States can play an important supporting role, addressing both the causes and consequences of migration. First, the United States should augment European efforts to provide financial support for North African countries, particularly Morocco and Tunisia, by providing humanitarian assistance to existing migrant populations within their borders. This assistance should include regularizing some migrants, as Morocco has begun doing, and providing access to education, health care, and employment for both regular and irregular migrants. One way to address the underlying economic causes of migration is to work toward “integrating skilled labor from sub-Saharan Africa to address the Maghreb’s own brain drain.”¹¹⁸

Second, the United States should engage both the US private sector and local private sectors in MENA region countries to provide employment, job training and financial assistance to migrant populations. Several large US companies were founded by migrants, who could serve as role models and help with building capacity of local migrant populations in the region.

Third, the United States can work with the UN, as well as with local human rights and humanitarian groups, to communicate the perils of the journey across the Mediterranean, particularly for unaccompanied minors.

¹¹⁷ Haim Malka, “Maghreb Migration: Ready or Not” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 10, 2018), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/maghreb-migration-ready-or-not>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Fourth, the United States can assist North Africa and Sahel governments in working together to collaboratively address the irregular migration coming from sub-Saharan Africa. While Africans will need to lead on addressing the push factors that send migrants north of the continent, the United States and Europe can help facilitate conversations among relevant stakeholders.

Finally, the United States should work to ensure that migration policy programming is integrated into ongoing efforts at security sector reform and criminal justice reform to ensure that migrants are afforded appropriate protections and are not subjected to human rights abuses at the hands of police and military officials.

VII. Conclusion

Historically, policymakers have underappreciated the importance of North Africa to US national security interests. Developments in the region are frequently overshadowed by the threat of direct military confrontation with Iran, significant military deployments to Iraq, economic interests in the Gulf, and long-standing diplomatic efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even on the continent of Africa, North Africa is eclipsed by major health and development programs in sub-Saharan Africa. This benign neglect fails to recognize that North Africa represents an opportunity for the United States to make good on its stated vision of promoting peace, stability, and prosperity, ensuring individual freedom, and building lasting partnerships.¹¹⁹ Contrary to conventional wisdom, North Africa is a locus of the great power competition pursued by Russia and China that is threatening to undermine the democratic world order. As Assistant Secretary of State David Schenker stated last year, the threat from Russia and China in the MENA region is “more subtle” but “just as worrying” as the threat from Iran.¹²⁰

Since the end of World War II, the United States has not been the dominant external economic or political player in the region (with, perhaps, the exception of Egypt); that role has been filled by Europe, especially France. While the United States has maintained bilateral security relationships with Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, it has often allowed Europe to take the lead so that it can focus resources on the Levant and Gulf—an acknowledgment of Europe’s geographic proximity to North Africa, colonial legacy, economic and military interests, and web of human ties. That broader outlook on the region may not

¹¹⁹ David Schenker, “Update on Current US Strategy toward the Region,” paper presented at a conference, “New Strategic Visions and Power Competition in the Middle East,” Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, October 8, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/new-strategic-visions-and-power-competition-in-the-middle-east/>.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

change especially as the United States grapples with the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Biden administration can appreciate the importance of North Africa without significant shifts in foreign assistance or military engagement by reinvigorating multilateral organizations and initiatives that can be deployed to the region. This is a region where a clear and coherent engagement strategy—supporting multilateral bodies, increasing coordination with Europe, and shifting away from a militarized or counterterrorism-driven assistance strategy toward supporting those demanding reform—costs little but can go far toward addressing the region’s challenges and countering the rise of Russia and China there.

Unfortunately, many of the international multilateral efforts to spur development, counter terrorist threats, expand economic growth, and address corruption have been underresourced and are politically weak. The United States has favored bilateral engagements rather than a regional or multilateral approach. While there are certainly times when unilateral action is warranted, the rise of both China and Russia in the region, the complexity of the challenges at hand, and the limitations of the United States’ own capacity necessitate that the United States reconsider engagement in multilateral fora. This is especially true in North Africa, where many of the identified challenges and opportunities have a direct impact on US allies in Europe and the African continent.

As the US National Security Strategy states, “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.”¹²¹ In his October 2019 presentation at the Atlantic Council, Secretary Schenker promised that the United States would “push back forcefully” against China when it threatened US interests. We are already seeing China do this directly across North Africa, where the Russian and Chinese governments are seeking to gain a greater foothold in the region, either militarily or economically. Thus, in order to achieve the US national security goal of minimizing threats from aspiring great powers, the United States cannot ignore this region.

The decision to pivot toward confronting China and Russia globally should not come at the expense of security from violent extremism. The territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq has not diminished the long-term threat of terrorism. Thousands of former FTFs have left Iraq and Syria and returned to North Africa, posing a direct threat to US installations and citizens. In addition, the political, economic, and social deprivations that made North Africa a fertile environment for terrorist recruitment and incitement

¹²¹ Donald J. Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

remain unaddressed. The United States should expand its engagement with European states and host nations to increase programs that demobilize, deradicalize, and reintegrate terrorists and terrorist sympathizers; incarceration is not a panacea.

North Africa is home to several strong US partners, including two Major Non-NATO Allies. To preserve those relationships and prevent Russia and China from gaining further regional influence, the United States should leverage its current position as a global thought leader to push for greater freedom and accountability in the region and prevent further instability. North Africa is suffering from decades of poor and ineffective governance, rampant corruption, high levels of unemployment, and other poor socioeconomic conditions that fueled the 2011 uprisings and have the potential to lead to even greater instability. It is therefore clearly in the American national security interest to reconfigure our engagement with North Africa.

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