

The United States and Maghreb–Sahel security

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Although it never constituted a priority for the United States in the past, in recent years the Maghreb has increasingly become a region of great interest to policy-makers in Washington. This new significance attached to the Maghreb, and its extension in the Sahel, derives from a number of considerations that fall into two broad groups: namely, political and economic/energy interests, and military, strategic and security interests. The first are linked to America's energy needs, and focus on oil and gas in Algeria, Chad and Libya, and perhaps in Mali and Mauritania; they also favour the development of a stronger regional entity, which could provide a potentially important market for US businesses, especially since competition has heightened with China's recent gains in Africa. The second group of motives, which are not totally separate from the first, are related to Washington's refocusing of strategic and security policies since the attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001. These increased the need for new ways of managing issues related to security, Islamism, terrorism and, for a time, democratization. Most area specialists agree that problems of terrorism, illegal migration and trafficking of all kinds are epiphenomena that cannot be understood in isolation from the roots that engender them. And yet, as has often been correctly pointed out, external security assessments of the region focus precisely on the visible part of the iceberg, that is, the spread of terrorism in the region, the risk of illegal migration and criminal networks moving across the Mediterranean towards Europe.¹

While European security policy has consisted of managing bilateral relations with its neighbours in the south to tackle illegal migration and trafficking, the United States has slowly but surely succeeded in creating a security network that brings together the Maghreb and Sahel states. While the threat of terrorism is real—Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) carries out lethal attacks in Algeria and resorts to kidnappings of foreign nationals²—it has nonetheless been exaggerated; according to some, it has actually been fabricated.³ The contention

¹ See Claire Spencer, 'North Africa: the hidden risks to regional stability', Chatham House briefing paper, MENAP BP 2009/01, April 2009, p. 2.

² On 17 June 2009, 20 gendarmes were ambushed and killed by AQIM in Algeria; British national Edwin Dyer, who had been taken hostage along with other tourists, was executed in Mali by AQIM.

³ Some observers have disputed the existence of any such threat, arguing that it has been concocted in order to open a second African front in the war on terror (the first being in Somalia) and to justify a US presence in the region. See Jeremy Keenan, 'Terror in the Sahara: the implications of US imperialism for North and West

in this article is that the real menace in the region stems from poverty, bad governance, lack of democracy, corruption and economic mismanagement. Although the focus here is on the Maghreb, whose macroeconomic performance is relatively satisfactory, it is worth noting that the countries of the Sahel are among the poorest in the world; and it is these very countries that are being assembled in the new US-led security arrangements. On the list of the 100 poorest countries with the lowest GDP per capita, Niger ranks 9th, Mali 24th, Burkina Faso 25th, oil-rich Chad 33rd, Senegal 39th, Mauritania 41st, and even the major oil-producer Nigeria ranks 46th. In comparison, Morocco ranks 71st, Algeria 95th and Tunisia 99th.⁴

Before examining US activities in the region, it will be useful to provide an overview of the major problems that the Maghreb countries are facing.

The Maghreb: review of the situation

The outlook for the Maghreb countries in the late 1990s seemed quite promising. The relative victory of the Algerian security forces against Islamist extremists, the reasonably successful reforms in Morocco, the progressive return of Libya to the community of nations and its commitment to international norms of conduct, the promising moves towards democracy in Mauritania and the economic success in Tunisia provided good foundations for optimism. New leaderships in Algeria and Morocco in 1999 offered further encouragement for positive perspectives. However, the regimes in the five countries that make up the moribund Maghreb Arab Union (UMA), despite claims to the contrary, remain authoritarian. In all of them, the head of state enjoys tenure for life. Morocco has an absolute monarch who has ruled along the same lines as his father, despite earlier hopes for significant liberalization.⁵ In Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, president since 1987, pushed for a constitutional amendment removing term limits and has now announced a bid for a fifth term in office. Libyan strongman Muammar Qadhafi, in power since September 1969, has never permitted a meaningful election. In March 2009, during a visit to Niamey, Niger, where President Mamadou Tandja has also sought, rather unsuccessfully, to rescind term limits, Qadhafi denied that such measures are 'anti-democratic', declaring: 'I am for freedom of popular will; the people must choose who should govern, even if it is for eternity.'⁶ Abdelaziz Bouteflika, inspired by Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, changed the constitution to facilitate his re-election in April 2009.⁷

Because these countries are still governed in authoritarian ways, they have had great trouble achieving political stability, economic development, social unity and

Africa', *Review of African Political Economy* 31:101, 2004, pp. 475–96; Selma Mellah and Jean-François Gèze, 'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb, ou la très étrange histoire du GSPC algérien', *Algeria-Watch*, 22 Sept. 2007, available at http://www.algeria-watch.org/pdf/pdf_fr/gspc_etrange_histoire.pdf, accessed 22 Oct. 2009.

⁴ [http://www.aneki.com/countries.php?table=fb129&measure=GDP per capita&unit=\\$&order=asc&dependen cy=independent&number=100](http://www.aneki.com/countries.php?table=fb129&measure=GDP per capita&unit=$&order=asc&dependen cy=independent&number=100), accessed 22 July 2009.

⁵ Ali Amar, *Mohamed VI: Le Grand Malentendu* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2009).

⁶ *Liberté* (Algiers), 17 March 2009.

⁷ Ahmed Aghrouit and Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Introducing Algeria's president-for-life', *Middle East Report Online*, 1 April 2009, available at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero040109.html>, accessed 2 April 2009.

cultural advancement.⁸ For example, in May and June 2008 riots took place in many cities in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, witness to the lack of legitimacy of the ruling regimes in place and their resistance to change.⁹ No one would dispute that some progress has been made, for example in respect of relative freedom of the press in Algeria and Morocco, or in the remarkable reforms to the family code in Morocco, which gave more rights to women than ever before. However, if one looks at the overall picture, it is rather bleak.¹⁰ The regimes are aware that authentic democratization, no matter how gradual, would reduce their power and force them to become more transparent. They have become adept at organizing regular elections in the hope of gaining a degree of legitimacy; ‘electoral authoritarianism’ has become the norm in the region. Like other authoritarian governments around the globe, the regimes have put in place ‘institutional façades of democracy, including regular multiparty elections for the chief executive, in order to conceal (and reproduce) harsh realities of authoritarian governance’.¹¹ Naturally, these ‘institutional façades of democracy’ are also intended to deflect any criticism from the US and the EU, which periodically make promotion of democracy part of their foreign policy repertoire. In many cases, this has proved successful; indeed, both the French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his predecessor Jacques Chirac have praised Tunisia’s progress in human rights and pointed to other socio-economic successes, when in fact the human rights situation in Tunisia is appalling. Throughout the Maghreb, civil liberties are curtailed; religious freedom is violated; the use of torture has continued and the rights of prisoners are disregarded; gender equality remains a myth, regardless of the reforms that the regimes in Algeria and Morocco have introduced; and in Algeria terrorists have been granted amnesty for their crimes. Corruption has practically been institutionalized in the Maghreb. The oil rent in Algeria and Libya has increased the power of the regimes but also reduced their willingness to bring about meaningful structural changes. In Algeria, in particular, the considerable financial assets acquired in recent years have not encouraged the regime to alleviate poverty and create jobs for young people, many of whom prefer to risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean illegally than to remain in the country; a few join the ranks of jihadists.

⁸ For a detailed analysis, see Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche and Yahia H. Zoubir, ‘The Maghreb: social, political, and economic developments’, in Mehdi Parvizi, ed., *The Greater Middle East in global politics: social science perspectives on the changing geography of world politics* (Leiden, Boston and London: Brill, 2007), pp. 249–78.

⁹ In Algeria, these recurrent riots, reported in detail by the Algerian press, have affected many regions of the country, including among others Berriane, Chlef, Oran and Ksar Boukhari. The authorities foolishly blamed ‘foreign forces’ for having instigated these disturbances. The riots in Sidi Ifni, Morocco, and Gafsa, in Tunisia, like those in Algeria, resulted from unemployment, especially among young people, the absence of prospects for the future, and the disdainful attitude of the regimes. For more on these events, see Florence Beaugé, ‘Troubles sociaux meurtriers au Maroc et en Tunisie’, *Le Monde*, 10 June 2008; also ‘Maroc: Événements de Sidi Ifni ou l’échec de l’État de Droit’, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15 June 2008, available at <http://reflexionsetautresidees.blogs.courrierinternational.com/archive/2008/06/14/maroc-violences-des-forces-de-l-ordre-a-sidi-ifni-ou-la-poli.html>, accessed 15 June 2008.

¹⁰ For detailed analysis of each Maghreb country, see the chapters by John Entelis (Maghreb in general), Ahmed Aghrout (Algeria), Larbi Sadiki (Tunisia), Greg White (Morocco), Ronald Bruce St John (Libya) and Mohamed Ould-Mey (Mauritania), in Yahia H. Zoubir and Haizam Amirah-Fernández, eds, *North Africa: politics, region, and the limits of transformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹¹ See Andreas Schedler, ‘The logic of electoral authoritarianism’, in Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral authoritarianism: the dynamics of unfree competition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006).

Instead, the regime uses the oil rent to coopt so-called 'opposition parties' into supporting the government.

The regimes in Libya and Algeria, in particular, succeeded in defeating extremist Islamism through cooptation of 'moderate' Islamist parties. Morocco had actually tried the same thing some time earlier in an attempt to prevent the emergence of Islamist extremism; this, however, did not prevent the bombings in Casablanca in 2003. In the case of Algeria, the National Reconciliation of 2005 offered former terrorists not only an amnesty but also the opportunity, with financial backing from the state, to engage in commercial activities. The state of emergency instituted in 1992 remains in place in Algeria, but at the same time the regime continues to stage-manage religion through various concessions made to the strictest interpretations of Islam which underlie the rise of extremism. Regardless of these various measures, the jihadist movement continues to attract young people willing to commit themselves to martyrdom, as seen in Morocco and Algeria; young Libyans and Tunisians join Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and in Iraq, allegedly to serve the cause of God by committing suicide.¹² Despite the destructive jihadist actions, the regimes, which in many ways have been responsible for the emergence of such nihilistic movements, have drawn dividends from the existence of jihadism, not only depicting this movement as a global phenomenon, but also proclaiming themselves as the protectors of Europe and the US against the terrorist menace. Consequently, not only have the Maghreb regimes become part and parcel of the 'global war on terror', but both the EU and the US seem to have concluded that it is preferable to maintain relations with these authoritarian regimes, provided they make some cosmetic changes, than allow Islamists to come to power even if they win democratic elections. This has become a conspicuous policy across the Arab world since the democratic electoral victory of Hamas in Palestine in January 2006.

On the economic front, although the Maghreb countries have much to offer, they have failed to attract enough foreign investment, even compared to other African countries. A recent report captures this reality:

Average annual GDP growth was 2.5 percent over the period 2001–05, a disappointing record in comparison to South and East Asia. Intraregional trade among the Maghreb countries is one of the lowest in the world, and unemployment is high, often above 20 percent. Rigid economic structures, numerous nontariff and regulatory barriers, low productivity, and modest investment levels continue to hinder progress. Moreover, Maghreb countries do not look to their immediate neighbors as markets or sources of supply. Severe political tensions between Algeria and Morocco—which together account for 77 percent of the region's population and 66 percent of the region's GDP—represent a major obstacle to economic cooperation.¹³

¹² Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Contestation islamiste et lutte antiterroriste en Libye, 1990–2007', in *L'Année du Maghreb 2008* (Paris: CNRS, 2008), pp. 267–77. See also Mathieu Guidère, *Al-Qaïda à la conquête du Maghreb: le terrorisme aux portes de l'Europe* (Monaco: Rocher, 2007).

¹³ Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Claire Brunel, eds, 'Maghreb regional and global integration: a dream to be fulfilled', Peterson Institute for International Economics, Oct. 2008, available at: <http://www.iie.com/publications/briefs/maghreb.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2009.

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As the US Ambassador to Algeria David Pearce correctly pointed out, bureaucracy and lack of transparency are among the main reasons for the low level of investment.¹⁴ While this is particularly true for Algeria and Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, though enjoying a more liberal economic system, suffer from similar ills. A major obstacle to development is the absence of an integrated market, which the US has strongly supported. The Maghreb states could greatly benefit from such integration; in 2004, intraregional trade in commodities among Maghreb states was a dismal 1.3 per cent of their total commodities trade. Indeed, economists predict that

a full-fledged free trade area among the Maghreb countries would almost double the extent of commercial relations within the region and might pave the way for future deepening of ties. Moreover, total Maghreb trade would expand by another \$4 billion to \$5 billion (3 to 4.5 per cent) if the European Union and the United States were to separately establish free trade areas with the Maghreb countries and by nearly \$9 billion (nearly 8 per cent) if both were to do so. In this last and most optimistic scenario, total Maghreb inward foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks would increase by \$5.8 billion (75 per cent) and total Maghreb outward FDI stocks would rise by \$3.9 billion. The significant two-way growth in FDI indicates that both the US and EU economies stand to gain from enhanced integration with the Maghreb region. In the best case of an EU–US–Maghreb FTA, a computable general equilibrium (CGE) model predicts dramatic changes. The positive GDP impact reaches 10 per cent in Libya, nearly 8 per cent in Tunisia, 6 per cent in Algeria, and around 4 per cent in both Morocco and Mauritania.¹⁵

And yet the countries in the region themselves are more concerned with the security of their regimes and antiterrorism efforts than with genuine domestic structural reforms at any level. Regional integration, in turn, has been impeded by the lack of resolution of the Western Sahara conflict affecting bilateral relations between Morocco and Algeria, whose common border has remained closed since 1994. Failure to engage in such reforms perpetuates the ingredients for instability.

While the regimes bear the main responsibility for this situation, outside powers have greatly contributed to the status quo. In order to protect their own interests, challenged by the increasingly conspicuous Asian, mainly Chinese, presence, western powers have strengthened their collaboration with the regimes in the region and have tolerated their authoritarianism. It is within this context that one should look at US policy in the Maghreb and, by extension, the Sahel.

US political and economic/energy interests

For decades, the United States did not perceive the Maghreb as a region of high significance. It maintained strong bilateral political and security relations with Morocco and Tunisia,¹⁶ lucrative commercial relations, especially in the

¹⁴ Quoted in Sonia Lyes, 'Climat des affaires, armement, situation au Sahel et Sahara occidental: les explications de l'ambassadeur US à Alger', *Toutsurlalgerie*, 24 May 2009, available at http://www.tsa-algerie.com/Climat-des-affaires-armement-situation-au-Sahel-et-Sahara-_7027.html, accessed 21 July 2009.

¹⁵ Hufbauer and Brunel, 'Maghreb regional and global integration'.

¹⁶ Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The United States and Morocco: the long-lasting alliance', pp. 237–48, and 'The United States and Tunisia: model of stable relations', pp. 249–61, both in Robert Looney, ed., *Handbook on US–Middle East relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

hydrocarbons sector, with Algeria,¹⁷ and hostility with Libya.¹⁸ Bilateral relations rather than a regional approach characterized US policy. The Algerian crisis of the 1990s resulted in greater US interest in developments in the region, especially over the question of Islamist extremism, which had the potential of spreading to the US allies Morocco and Tunisia. Interestingly, given subsequent developments, until 2001 terrorism in Algeria was not defined as an international phenomenon; most analysts associated it with domestic mismanagement in general and with the authoritarianism of the regime in particular. Hence most countries, and the US in particular, felt that encouragement of the counterterrorist campaign in Algeria risked being perceived as support for an authoritarian, unpopular regime that interrupted a democratic election it was going to lose and repressed all significant political opposition.¹⁹

Following Algeria's presidential election in November 1995 US policy towards Algeria shifted, since by then there was no threat of the regime collapsing. US policy-makers urged Algerian authorities to undertake liberalizing economic and political reforms and to integrate 'moderate' Islamists in the political process. This was part of the 'positive conditionality' that the United States implemented with respect to Algeria.²⁰ By the end of 1999 relations between Algeria and the United States had begun to improve. In July 2001 the two countries signed a Framework Agreement on Trade and Investment (the US has a similar agreement with Tunisia). The accord put in place a consultative procedure on trade and investment that aims eventually to result in a bilateral investment treaty, mutual trade benefits and a double taxation arrangement, and effectively opened up Algeria's profitable oil and gas resources more broadly to multinational corporations. The objective of the agreement was to double the volume of trade and to allow US companies to take a greater share of the Algerian market, especially in hydrocarbons; today the US is the largest investor in that sector. In 2008 trade between Algeria and the United States was worth US\$22 billion.

Since the normalization of relations with Washington, Algeria and Libya have grown in importance to the US primarily because of their hydrocarbon resources. Indeed, Algeria figured prominently in the May 2001 report of the US's National Energy Policy Development Group. The group recommended increased US investment in Algeria's energy sector, to broaden 'our shared commercial and strategic interests', and presidential support for energy producers, among them Algeria, 'to open up areas of their energy sectors to foreign investment', which would facilitate the continuous supply of oil through enhancement of global alliances.²¹

¹⁷ Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The United States and Algeria: hostility, pragmatism, and partnership', in Looney, *Handbook on US–Middle East relations*, pp. 219–36.

¹⁸ Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The United States and Libya: the long road to reconciliation', in Looney, *Handbook on US–Middle East relations*, pp. 262–79.

¹⁹ Yahia H. Zoubir and Louisa Dris-Ait-Hamadouche, 'The United States and the Maghreb: Islamism, democratization, and strategic interests', *Maghreb Review* 31: 3–4, 2006, pp. 259–92.

²⁰ Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Algeria and US interests: containing radical Islamism and promoting democracy', *Middle East Policy* 9: 1, March 2002, pp. 64–81.

²¹ Report of the National Energy Policy Development Group, *Reliable, affordable, and environmentally sound energy for America's future* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, May 2001), ch. 8, p. 18.

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Algeria is important in this regard because of the many new oil discoveries since the mid-1990s. As of January 2009, Algeria boasted an estimated 12.2 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, making it the third largest producer in Africa (behind Libya and Nigeria, with 43.7 billion and 36.2 billion barrels respectively).²² Furthermore, Algeria has the eighth largest natural gas reserves in the world; Libya's, though much smaller than Algeria's, are also considerable. Morocco, for its part, is an important producer of phosphates, an essential commodity for global food production. Morocco controls nearly 50 per cent of the world's phosphate deposits (one-sixth of which come from Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara territory); the kingdom is the third largest producer in the world, behind China and the United States, and the biggest single supplier, the first two keeping their production for their own agricultural and other needs. With the US expected to use up its reserves within 40 years,²³ Morocco can look forward to increased importance. Morocco is not only a non-NATO ally of the US but since 2004 also enjoys a free trade agreement and, like Tunisia, a bilateral investment treaty with Washington. The United States and Libya are discussing the possibility of a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA); in 2008 they signed a science and technology agreement.

In the 1990s the United States was keen on reigniting Maghreb integration. It tried to do so through the Eizenstat Initiative, launched in 1999 as the US–North Africa Economic Partnership and named after its main advocate, Stuart Eizenstat, then Undersecretary of State for Economic, Business, and Agricultural Affairs. The objective of this initiative—later renamed the US–North Africa Economic Program, and now part of the Middle East Partnership Initiative—was

to link the United States and the three countries of North Africa much closer together in terms of trade and investment, to encourage more trade between our countries, to encourage more US companies to invest in the region and create good-paying jobs ... and to encourage the reduction in internal barriers among and between the countries of North Africa which has impeded the normal trade flows between those countries.²⁴

Implicit in this statement was a clear encouragement for the three main Maghreb countries to revive the moribund UMA and for the reopening of the Algerian–Moroccan border. Undoubtedly, from an economic perspective, the United States has made it plain that its business community prefers an integrated Maghreb, which now could include Libya, because it would constitute a much bigger market than the separate national markets. Since the launch of his initiative Eizenstat has been actively trying to revive the UMA, and has identified one of the major factors hindering the realization of an integrated market:

²² <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Algeria/Oil.html>, accessed 21 July 2009.

²³ Devon Pendleton, 'King of rock', *Forbes Magazine*, 17 June 2009, available at <http://www.forbes.com/2009/06/17/king-morocco-phosphate-business-billionaires-royal-conflict.html>, accessed 18 June 2009.

²⁴ Stuart E. Eizenstat, Undersecretary for Economic, Business, and Agricultural Affairs, Third Annual Les Aspin Memorial Lecture, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, 8 March 1999. See also Yahia H. Zoubir and Karima Benabdallah-Gambier, 'The United States and the North African imbroglio: balancing interests in Algeria, Morocco, and the Western Sahara', *Mediterranean Politics* 9: 1, July 2005, pp. 181–202.

In an effort to combat the terrorist threat, the countries of the region have tightened restrictions on the movement of people and goods at their borders, which has had the unintended consequence of further reducing cross-border commerce in the region and decreasing economic activity. The US and EU likewise have encouraged the Maghreb countries to take anti-terrorism measures, and economic development and integration have consequently been deemphasized. These countries are taking steps to enhance their cooperation on security matters; in my view, these efforts should go hand-in-hand with cooperation on economic matters in order to create greater long-term stability in the region.²⁵

One of the main obstacles to Maghreb regional integration has been the conflict in Western Sahara, which has aggravated the already tense relations between the two major powers, Algeria and Morocco. Geopolitical considerations have led the United States and Europe to play an instrumental role in the persistence of the stalemate, rather than becoming part of a solution that would lead to Maghreb integration.²⁶ It is therefore necessary to look briefly at how the United States has dealt with the question.

The US and the Western Sahara conflict

The US position on the conflict in the Western Sahara rests on its political, military and economic interests in Morocco, the occupying power. Rather than push for free and fair electoral processes based on the principle of the self-determination of the Western Saharan (Sahrawi) population, which from Washington's view would destabilize the monarchy by leading to the independence of the territory, the US has provided steadfast support to the kingdom, a reliable ally. Since the start of the conflict the US has not only sided with Morocco; it was also instrumental in Moroccan colonization of the territory, which Morocco in turn claims as sovereign territory.²⁷ This interference can be explained by the politics of the Cold War, for the US feared Soviet expansion into sub-Saharan Africa, even though Sahrawis never received backing from the USSR.²⁸ Through large-scale economic and military aid, military advisers and logistical assistance, the US undoubtedly tilted the balance of the conflict in Morocco's favour. Morocco was also important as surrogate for US interests in Africa and the Middle East, dispatching its troops to troubled countries and giving the CIA and the National Security Agency wide latitude to operate in the kingdom. Thus, when war in the Western Sahara was raging in 1978, US military aid to Morocco was multiplied 20-fold.

Notwithstanding the geopolitical changes that have taken place since the Cold War, Morocco has retained its strategic importance for the US because, since its independence, the country has played a key role on behalf of the US in various areas. This explains why it has, since the late 1950s, received more US aid than any

²⁵ 'Prospects for greater global and regional integration in the Maghreb', remarks of Stuart E. Eizenstat, Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington DC, 29 May 2008.

²⁶ Hakim Darbouche and Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Conflicting international policies and the Western Sahara stalemate', *International Spectator* 43: 1, March 2008, pp. 91–105.

²⁷ Jacob Mundy, 'Neutrality or complicity? The United States and the 1975 Moroccan takeover of the Spanish Sahara', *Journal of North African Studies* 11: 3, Sept. 2006, pp. 275–306.

²⁸ Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Soviet policy toward the Western Sahara Conflict', *Africa Today* 34: 3, 1987, pp. 17–32.

other Arab country except for Egypt, which has a separate deal under the Camp David Accords. Between the beginning of the war in the Western Sahara in 1975 and 1990, Morocco obtained more than one-fifth of all US aid to Africa, receiving more than \$1 billion in military assistance alone, while economic assistance amounted to \$1.3 billion.²⁹ Since then, that figure has tripled. In 2006, military aid rose to \$20 million in order to help Morocco not only to stop clandestine immigration but also, and above all, to protect its borders and to continue the fight against terrorism. In fiscal year 2007 the Department of State authorized the export to Morocco of defence goods and services valued at \$87,475,761.³⁰

American preoccupation with the survival of the pro-western, ‘moderate’ monarchy—as guarantor of the US and western presence in the area—has overridden other regional concerns. Morocco garners considerable support in the US Congress not only because of the longstanding friendship between the two countries, but perhaps primarily because Morocco is one of the few Arab countries that are friendly to Israel.

The emergence of the ‘global war on terror’ (GWOT) following 9/11 has also strengthened Morocco’s standing in US policy, although neighbouring Algeria is now also perceived as a strategic partner in the region and has become a key actor in the GWOT. Indeed, Algeria has developed excellent military, security, political and economic ties with the United States. Although US attachment to Morocco remains steadfast, this *rapprochement* compelled Washington to pursue a relatively more cautious policy, at least until 2007, when Morocco submitted an autonomy proposal for the Western Sahara. Thus, when Morocco and the United States established a free trade agreement in 2004 (which entered into effect in January 2006), the US made it clear that the FTA did not include the Western Sahara. The United States also called for a political solution ‘acceptable’ to all parties. To Morocco’s displeasure, its demands that the United States impose a solution—one favourable to Morocco—have gone unmet.

The United States gave full support to Morocco’s 2007 autonomy proposal, describing it as ‘a serious and credible proposal to provide real autonomy for the Western Sahara’.³¹ The US also encouraged direct negotiations between the two protagonists without preconditions. Assistant Secretary of State David Welch asserted during a hearing in Congress that he had ‘worked with them [Moroccans] on it [the autonomy plan]’. Whereas he asserted that the Moroccan proposal ‘represents some serious efforts’, he downplayed the Sahrawi counterproposal, stating that it ‘does not seem, in our judgment, to contain new ideas by comparison’.³² By ‘new ideas’, it would appear that Welch meant anything that would circumvent the principles of international law and UN resolutions on self-determination that the Sahrawis put forth to support their claims.

²⁹ Stephen Zunes, ‘Morocco and Western Sahara’, *Foreign Policy in Focus* 3: 42, Dec. 1998, available at: www.fpif.net/briefs/vol3/v3n42mor.html, accessed 2 June 2009.

³⁰ www.state.gov/t/pm/64727.htm, accessed 2 June 2009.

³¹ US Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, media note, Western Sahara, 2006/274, 11 April 2007.

³² C. David Welch, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, ‘US policy challenges in North Africa’, statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington DC, 6 June 2007, available at: <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2007/86511.htm>, accessed 30 June 2007.

Until the end of the Bush administration the official US position, at least publicly, showed a degree of commitment to international legality, leaving it to a number of diplomats to state that the Moroccan autonomy plan was 'serious and credible', but at no stage had the State Department, as a government institution, openly declared its support for the Moroccan plan as 'the only realistic solution'. Indeed, not until 1 May 2008 did the State Department pronounce publicly its support for the Moroccan autonomy plan in the following terms: 'An independent Sahrawi state is not a realistic option. In our view, some form of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only realistic way forward to resolve this longstanding conflict.'³³ Obviously, the US could not impose the Moroccan autonomy plan by force, although some former officials, such as David Welch and Madeleine Albright, have suggested that the new Obama administration should do just that.³⁴ The argument these former officials put forward is that Maghreb integration is essential, and since conflict in the Western Sahara is the main impediment to this process, the US should therefore take the lead and impose the Moroccan autonomy plan.

There is no indication that President Obama concurs with this approach or that he would risk not only alienating Algeria, an important partner in the GWOT, but putting the US in a difficult legal position, for such a move would be in breach of the international legal position set out in existing UN Security Council resolutions relating to the Western Sahara. Not only that, but such disregard for self-determination by the Sahrawis might result in exactly what most concerned people wish to avoid: the resumption of hostilities or the emergence of Sahrawi militants who might join the ranks of jihadists in the region. The Moroccan government has sought, rather unsuccessfully, to link Al-Qaeda and the Sahrawi nationalist movement, POLISARIO,³⁵ but this potentially self-fulfilling prophecy will not be in the interest of the region, not even for Morocco.

It remains to be seen whether the Obama administration will provide the highly experienced US diplomat Christopher Ross, the UN Secretary General's special representative, with the necessary leverage to carry out his peace mission. The question facing the US is whether this 'frozen conflict' and the status quo are preferable to a lasting solution which might not be in the interests of its Moroccan ally. In June 2009, it appeared that the US had moved away from supporting the Moroccan autonomy plan; the fact that Obama did not mention the autonomy plan in his letter to King Mohamed VI has been interpreted as a reversal in US

³³ US Department Spokesperson, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2008/may/104268.htm#security>, accessed 31 May 2008.

³⁴ <http://www.potomac-institute.org/publications/studies/NorthAfricaPolicyPaper033109.pdf>, accessed 2 April 2009. For an excellent rebuttal of the report, see Jacob Mundy, <http://concernedafricascholars.org/the-potomac-sais-report-on-north-africa/>, accessed 20 April 2009.

³⁵ In March 2007, for instance, Moroccan Minister of Justice Mohamed Bouzoubab accused POLISARIO of collaborating with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a baseless accusation which angered Algerians. See 'Le Maroc accuse le POLISARIO de lien avec Al-Qaeda', *L'Expression* (Algiers), 12 March 2007; see also <http://www.meknes-net.com/actualites/Article,5923,.html>, accessed 21 July 2009. Moroccan lobbyists sought to convince members of Congress in Washington of such links (author's interviews with US officials, 2007 and 2008).

policy on the question.³⁶ Citing diplomatic sources, a report suggested that ‘The United States no longer supports or endorses the Moroccan autonomy plan ... Instead, the administration has returned to the pre-Bush position that there could be an independent POLISARIO state in Western Sahara.’³⁷ US officials refused to confirm or deny such reports, stating only that the US encourages the parties to pursue dialogue under United Nations auspices.³⁸ Undoubtedly, by referring to international legality, which in the case of the Western Sahara would include the option of independence, Obama is in line with the values he promised to espouse. However, it is too early to judge whether a shift in policy on the Western Sahara has occurred. The US is most likely to decide between the status quo and a solution to the conflict, even one unfavourable to Morocco, on the basis of which outcome would best serve its objectives in the region. Morocco has powerful friends in Washington, but Algeria has become of strategic significance.³⁹

What is certain is that while the United States has failed so far to assist either in bringing about a *rapprochement* between Algeria and Morocco, which have been engaged in a dangerous arms race,⁴⁰ or in resolving the Western Sahara conflict, it has nonetheless succeeded in integrating the Maghreb countries in a closer security arrangement that forces them to cooperate with each other.

From democratization to securitization: US security policy in the Maghreb–Sahel

In the aftermath of 9/11, democracy promotion in the Arab world dominated the US foreign policy agenda. US policy-makers made explicit the correlation between democracy promotion and stability, on the one hand, and strategic interests, on the other.

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.⁴¹

³⁶ In the letter, Obama stated: ‘I share your commitment to the UN-led negotiations as the appropriate forum to achieve a mutually agreed solution ... My government will work with yours and others in the region to achieve an outcome that meets the people’s need for transparent governance, confidence in the rule of law, and equal administration of justice.’ Cited in ‘Obama reverses Bush-backed Morocco plan in favor of POLISARIO state’, *World Tribune*, 9 July 2009, available at http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2009/af_morocco0547_07_09.asp, accessed 15 July 2009.

³⁷ ‘Obama reverses Bush-backed Morocco plan in favor of Polisario state’.

³⁸ See <http://www.elmuhajer.com/statedepartment.php>, accessed 15 July 2009.

³⁹ The US has expressed interest in substantially developing military cooperation with Algeria, in addition to the already strong ties in various sectors. See Sonia Lyes, ‘Les USA veulent élargir leur coopération militaire avec l’Algérie’, *Toutsurlalgerie*, 5 July 2009, available at http://www.tsa-algerie.com/Les-USA-veulent-elargir-leur-cooperation-militaire-avec-l-Al_7367.html, accessed 6 July 2009.

⁴⁰ See *El Watan* (Algiers), 12 May 2009.

⁴¹ ‘President Bush discusses freedom in Iraq and Middle East’, remarks by the President at the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, Office of the White House Press Secretary, 6 Nov. 2003.

In fact, both the US and the EU equated the 'enduring security' of the American and European peoples with the promotion of 'a world of democratic and well-governed states'.⁴² Furthermore, they both stressed their 'shared commitment to promoting democracy' as 'one of the fields where ... [they] can do, and should do, even more together'.⁴³ Nevertheless, this joint emblematic pledge never resulted in a cohesive viable strategy. The EU and the US tend to pursue their own, often divergent, approaches in confronting the challenges emanating from the 'democratic deficit' that has pervaded the region. More recently, democratization has tended to take a back seat; it is no longer mentioned as a condition for good relations with regimes in the South. Security issues have become paramount.

US foreign as well as security policy has undergone a transformation since the events of 9/11 and the war in Iraq in 2003. Policy is no longer centred on regions and structured around alliances but is determined by key issues, adapted to specific problems, and finally put into practice with tailor-made coalitions depending on the mission. In other words, the tendency is towards flexible coalitions for varying missions, but always under US overall command. Global issues, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, energy security, and economic and political reform, as well as what one might term 'selective demands for democratization', occupy the list of priorities. US policy-makers suggest that since these phenomena are global in nature, the fight must be global, with appropriate regional applications. George W. Bush announced in the 2002 US National Security Strategy report that 'We will continue to encourage our regional partners to take up a coordinated effort that isolates the terrorists. Once the regional campaign localizes the threat to a particular state, we will help ensure the state has the military, law enforcement, political, and financial tools necessary to finish the task.' With respect to the southern Mediterranean, this translates into establishing new priorities which must be tackled with or without the help of partners. It is precisely this perspective that explains current US involvement in the western Mediterranean, especially in the Maghreb, and also in the Sahel.

After 9/11, the principal aim of the United States in the central Maghreb has been to develop a closer military, security and economic partnership with these states. New impetus was given to the development of relations between the US and the Maghrebi governments, particularly Algeria (especially since 2001), Mauritania (since 2002), Morocco (since May 2003) and Libya (after December 2003). Thus, on 22 and 23 March 2004 the US European Command organized a two-day meeting in Stuttgart which brought together the heads of armed forces in the Maghrebi states (Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) and those of the Sahel countries (Chad, Mali, Niger and Senegal) in order to coordinate efforts in the fight against terrorism. It was a real achievement by the US to gather around the same table a large number of officials from countries whose strategic and defence interests are incompatible, and to persuade them to coordinate their antiterrorist

⁴² See e.g. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/nss2006.pdf>, accessed 5 July 2007; *The European Security Strategy*, Dec. 2003, available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>, accessed 12 July 2009.

⁴³ José Manuel Barroso, EU-US summit press conference, Vienna, 21 June 2006.

operations. According to some US officials speaking off the record, Algeria authorized US elite troops to penetrate Algerian territory to track terrorist groups and to continue monitoring operations.

The United States' interest in the Sahel, a region where sub-Saharan Africa meets North Africa, covers both security/military and economic interests. Washington perceives the Sahel as a vulnerable area because of its low demographic density and its permeable borders. US decision-makers assert that terrorist groups, local as well as international, devote themselves to all kinds of smuggling, including of weapons, and recruit new members among the local populations. According to senior security officials in Washington, Islamist terrorist groups, the most active being the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), renamed in 2007 Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, represent a threat to this area, which has more than 100 million inhabitants.⁴⁴ The area was and continues to be regarded as 'the new front in the global war against terrorism'.

The appointment by Obama of General James Jones as National Security Advisor is a clear indication that the Obama administration has subscribed to its predecessor's views on African security in general and on the Maghreb–Sahel in particular. Jones, a prominent commentator on African security matters, has made it clear that 'African security issues will increasingly continue to directly affect our homeland security' and that 'North Africa and, in particular, the Pan-Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, provides opportunities to Islamic extremists, smugglers and other insurgent groups'.⁴⁵ Thus since 2002 the US has sought 'to facilitate cooperation among governments in the region (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Senegal and Nigeria) and strengthen their capacity to combat terrorist organizations',⁴⁶ but also to prevent terrorist groups from establishing bases in this region as they succeeded in doing in Afghanistan before 9/11. It is with this twin objective in mind that at the end of 2002 the United States launched the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), a programme with a budget of more than US\$8 million (substantially increased under its successor partnership), in order to train specialized troops in the fight against terrorism in Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. In 2003/4 American special forces of the European Command (EUCOM) were detached to train the security forces of these nations. Following this, indigenous forces of Chad and Niger fought the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) members in their respective countries.

⁴⁴ Statement of General James L. Jones, United States Marine Corps Commander, United States European Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 7 March 2006, available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2006_hr/060307-jones.pdf, accessed 21 July 2009. General Charles Wald, Deputy Commander for the European Command (EUCOM), US Air Force, expressed similar views: see 'Algeria unveiled: the US shows interest', Suburban Emergency Management Project, Biot report 219, 1 June 2005, available at http://www.semp.us/publications/biot_reader.php?BiotID=219, accessed 21 July 2009.

⁴⁵ Chris Scott, 'Obama announces James Jones as National Security Advisor', 1 Dec. 2008, available at <http://www.one.org/blog/2008/12/01/obama-announces-james-jones-as-national-security-advisor/>, accessed 21 July 2009.

⁴⁶ 'Eliminating terrorist sanctuaries: the role of security assistance', William P. Pope, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, Washington DC, 10 March 2005, available at: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/43702.htm>, accessed 21 July 2009.

US decision-makers believe that the PSI program, completed in early 2004, was a real success; a follow-up was implemented under the title of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative or Partnership (TSCTI or TSCTP), which in effect replaced PSI, with the objective of reinforcing local capacities to fight terrorism in the area, and consolidating and institutionalizing cooperation between the security forces across the region. TSCTI officially started in June 2005 with Exercise Flintlock 2005, which was repeated two years later as Flintlock 2007. In November 2008 14 nations participated in Flintlock 2009, 'developed as a joint multinational exercise to improve information sharing at the operational and tactical levels across the Saharan region while fostering increased collaboration and coordination'.⁴⁷ The mission is now for US special forces to provide training for their counterparts in seven Saharan countries, teaching military tactics, and to prevent alleged terrorists from setting up sanctuaries in that region.

During his speech at a conference on terrorism held in Algiers in February 2005, co-sponsored by the United States, the African Union and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the US ambassador-at-large for counterterrorism, Henry Crumpton, declared:

We envision a multi-faceted, multi-year strategy aimed at defeating terrorist organizations by helping to strengthen regional counterterrorism capabilities, by enhancing and institutionalizing cooperation between your security forces and ours and *most* importantly, by promoting economic development, good governance, education, liberal institutions and democracy. Through broad policy success we discredit terrorist ideology and deny them the recruits they need, while providing these erstwhile recruits opportunity and hope.⁴⁸

Citing Al-Qaeda's presence in the Maghreb–Sahel region, the United States has intensified its own activities in this zone. Thus, on 6 February 2007, Bush declared that the US would create a new military command for Africa, known as Africa Command or AFRICOM. On 1 October 2007 AFRICOM gained the status of a sub-unified command under the European Command; it was scheduled to be fully operational as a separate unified command no later than 1 October 2008. AFRICOM is headed by a four-star African American general, William E. 'Kip' Ward. As one expert on US military activities in Africa, Daniel Volman, has observed, the United States is 'making [Africa] into another front in its Global War on Terrorism, maintaining and extending access to energy supplies and other strategic raw material, and competing with China and other rising economic powers for control over the continent's resources'.⁴⁹ According to this view, the United States prefers to avoid direct military involvement and instead to use friendly regimes, preferably those rich in natural resources, to serve as proxies. In Volman's words, 'the hope that the Pentagon can build up African surrogates who

⁴⁷ For details, see Maj. Eric Hilliard, 'Multinational exercise sparks change for Africa', American Forces Press Service, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=52031>, accessed 21 July 2009.

⁴⁸ Henry Crumpton, Ambassador-at-Large for Counterterrorism, 'US official praises African Union's counterterrorism efforts', available at <http://usinfo.state.gov/af/Archive/2006/Mar/03-70981.html>, accessed 31 March 2006. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Daniel Volman, 'AFRICOM: what is it and what will it do?', *Review of African Political Economy* 34: 114, Dec. 2007, pp. 737–44.

can act on behalf of the United States is precisely why Washington is providing so much security assistance to these regimes and why it would like to provide even more in the future'.⁵⁰ In order to achieve its objectives, which also include counteracting China's growing regional presence, Washington has devised, in addition to the military sales programmes, numerous other instruments. In addition to the joint military exercises (Flintlock 2005 and 2007) and the TSCTP, one can cite the International Military Education and Training Program, the African Coastal and Border Security Program, the Excess Defense Articles Program, the Section 1206 Fund (from which both Algeria and Morocco have received funds), and the Joint Task Force Aztec Silence (JTFAS), which gathers intelligence using a squadron of US Navy P-3 'Orion' aircraft.

However, despite all these efforts, the United States has failed to find a country to host AFRICOM, mostly because of the local regimes' fear of a backlash from their populations, opposed to US policies across the Arab world. While waiting to find a host, the US has opted in the meantime for 'a distributed command' that aims to be 'networked' in different countries in various African regions. This was confirmed by General Ward during his visits to Morocco (and Tunisia) in late May 2008: 'US Africa Command is intended to provide African nations and regional organizations with an integrated Defense Department coordination point to help address their security and developmental needs. At present, three different US regional military headquarters maintain relationships with countries in Africa.'⁵¹ This being said, it appears that Morocco did in fact offer to host AFRICOM, but the United States refused because Morocco proposed that in exchange the United States imposes the autonomy plan in the Western Sahara.⁵²

Undoubtedly, the Maghreb–Sahel region is slowly moving towards the US's security ambitions for it, although Russia still plays an important role as an arms supplier and the US still does not have military bases there (though see below).⁵³ However, this position is not without serious consequences, for, as some analysts have noted, wherever there is a US military presence, jihadists emerge. For instance, Tunisia, which was spared from jihadist attacks after the assault on tourists in Djerba in 2002, witnessed further Islamist attacks in December 2006 and January 2007.⁵⁴ It is precisely during that period that Salafist groups proclaimed the birth of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) with the aim of regrouping fighters from across the Maghreb–Sahel region. Furthermore, there is now considerable

⁵⁰ Volman, 'AFRICOM'.

⁵¹ US Army General William E. 'Kip' Ward, Commander of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), visited Rabat, Morocco, on 28–29 May, 2008: <http://rabat.usembassy.gov/>, accessed 5 June 2008.

⁵² 'Maroc, sous la plage ... les pavés', Réseau d'information et de documentation (RITIMO), April 2009, available at http://www.ritimo.org/dossiers_pays/afrique/maroc/maroc_geopolitique.html, accessed 21 July 2009.

⁵³ Military cooperation and bonding between US and Maghrebi troops is an ongoing occurrence. This is a totally new phenomenon with respect to Algeria. For cooperation in the desert between Algerian and US soldiers, see Robert D. Kaplan, *Hog pilots, blue water grunts: the American military in the air, at sea, and on the ground* (New York: Random House, 2007).

⁵⁴ 'Tunisia says intercepted gunmen were Islamists', Reuters, 12 Jan. 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL1291143920070112>, accessed 21 July 2009; see also Dominic Moran, 'Tunisian clashes a warning', International Relations and Security Network, 15 Jan. 2007, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=52796>, accessed 21 July 2009.

debate as to the real nature of the jihadist threat in the Maghreb–Sahel zone. While no one disputes the fact that this region boasts all kinds of trafficking (in drugs, small arms, cigarettes, food products, people), terrorism has hitherto been only a small part of the blend. Some critics argue not only that the US presence in the region is a destabilizing factor but that the US has ‘fabricated’ or greatly exaggerated the terrorist threat in order to maintain its presence—now to be institutionalized through AFRICOM—and achieve its goals of controlling the region’s hydrocarbon resources and warding off China’s advance in mineral-rich Africa. According to this view, the United States connived with the Algerian intelligence services to fabricate the Al-Qaeda threat in the Sahara.⁵⁵ While these assertions are hard to prove, it is clear that there is a great deal more security cooperation between the United States and the authoritarian regimes of the region than was formerly the case; according to US officials, this is ‘the new front in the global fight against terrorism’, an analysis that provides the rationale for the various programmes and instruments mentioned above.

The Pentagon has sought to obtain access to bases in Mali and Algeria, to conclude agreements to refuel its planes in Senegal and Uganda, and to initiate programmes of military assistance and training. If successful, the establishment of transit bases in the Maghreb and the Sahel region would permit intervention all over the African continent and secure control over ‘the arc of instability’ presumed to stretch from Afghanistan to the Gulf of Guinea, passing through the world’s main oilfields. The question of US bases in the Algerian desert—to combat Islamist groups affiliated to AQIM—has been puzzling, since both sides deny their existence,⁵⁶ despite evidence to the contrary.⁵⁷ A close analysis of US military objectives in the region, however, demonstrates that the US military does not require permanent bases as in the past, or that those bases be identified as American bases. What is important is that US troops can utilize transit bases whenever the need arises.⁵⁸ Hence, in March 2004, P-3 ‘Orion’ aircraft from the squadron of the US Navy based in Sigonella, Sicily, were reported to be operating from the southern Algerian base at Tamanrasset to monitor and gather intelligence on the movements of Algerian Salafist guerrillas working in Chad. This intelligence was then used to inform Chadian troops fighting the guerrillas.

⁵⁵ Jeremy Keenan, ‘Waging war on terror: the implication of America’s “new imperialism” for Saharan peoples’, *Journal of North African Studies* 10: 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2005), pp. 610–38; Jeremy Keenan, ‘Security and insecurity in North Africa’, *Review of African Political Economy* 33: 108, June 2006, pp. 269–96; see also ‘L’Expert marocain Mohamed Drif à *El Khabar*, “Washington utilise Al-Qaïda comme un épouvantail pour implanter Africom au Maghreb”, *El Khabar* (Algiers), 24 May 2008.

⁵⁶ Ghada Hamrouche, ‘M. Mohammed Bedjaoui l’a affirmé hier “Pas de bases militaires étrangères sur le sol algérien”’, *La Tribune* (Algiers), 4 March 2007. Former US Ambassador to Algeria Robert Redford declared that the US had not asked Algeria for a US military base there: see Fayçal Oukaci, “Washington n’a pas demandé à établir une base militaire en Algérie”, *L’Expression* (Algiers), 5 March 2007, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Mustafa Barth, ‘Sand castles in the Sahara: US military basing in Algeria’, *Review of African Political Economy* 30: 98, Dec. 2003, pp. 679–84; Jeremy Keenan, ‘Military bases, construction contracts and hydrocarbons in North Africa’, *Review of African Political Economy* 33: 109, Sept. 2006, pp. 601–8.

⁵⁸ See Anthea Jonathan, ‘US eyes North Africa’, *Politics*, 10 March 2004, available at http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/News/0,2-11-1447_1496197,00.html, accessed 5 Jan. 2005; Giles Tremlett, ‘US sends special forces into North Africa’, *Guardian*, 15 March 2004.

In November 2006 the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security, Peter Rodman, corroborated the above analysis during a visit to Algiers: ‘The United States does not want military bases in Algeria. We wish to increase the capacities of the local forces, not to open bases. We are interested in a strategic and military partnership, the training of officers and security cooperation, joint military exercises, exchange of information, purchase of military equipment, and exchanges between our officers.’⁵⁹ Off the record, a US State Department official admitted to the author in November 2007 the existence of at least one operational base in southern Algeria, confirming what some analysts had already documented.⁶⁰ Strictly speaking neither side is being untruthful, since legally the base in Tamanrasset is Algeria’s, but the US can use it upon request. What is certain is that Algeria has vowed not to allow the establishment of a permanent base or to host AFRICOM.

Cooperation with Algeria has been one of the most important aspects of US bilateral relations in the region since 9/11. This cooperation is centred on the exchange of information, military cooperation and the monitoring of the transfer of funds. However, Morocco and Tunisia also enjoy a significant level of US security assistance. Morocco benefits from State Department programmes such as the ATA (Anti-Terrorism Assistance) and the TIP (Terrorist Interdiction Program). As early as 2004 the United States granted US\$6.5 million to Morocco to train troops in the fight against terrorism. The TIP was reinforced in 2005 to help Moroccans in the areas of security and protection of ports, airports and terrestrial and porous borders. By fiscal year 2007 the programme’s budget had trebled, reaching US\$12 million.⁶¹

In recent years, the United States and Libya have developed military and security cooperation. The two countries have cooperated in the ‘global war on terror’ and counterterrorism activities since September 2001, but the most remarkable evolution concerns military cooperation. This began in earnest after the US rescinded Libya’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism in June 2006. Although not publicized, this development resulted in the signing at the Pentagon in January 2009 of a historic pact on defence cooperation. The non-binding accord means that the two countries now have military-to-military relations and collaborate in such areas as peacekeeping, maritime security and counterterrorism. The agreement has encouraged both sides to discuss the sale of military equipment. At this stage, the Libyans are primarily interested in Humvees. Libyan military personnel will be sent to the US under the International Military Education and Training programme which is usually only granted to allied and friendly states. Today, the US is calling for closer military ties with Libya. This is undoubtedly a remarkable development as far as US–Libya relations are concerned. However, it does not bode well for democracy promotion in the region since one of the

⁵⁹ Fayçal Oukaci, ‘Washington disposé à armer l’ANP’, *L’Expression*, 11 Nov. 2006, p. 2. See also Carmen Gentile, ‘US eyes Algeria as key partner in war on terror’, *ISN Security Watch*, 15 Dec. 2006, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=17052>, accessed 18 Dec. 2006.

⁶⁰ Barth, ‘Sand castles in the Sahara’; Keenan, ‘Military bases’.

⁶¹ See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/summary.10001110.2005.html>, accessed 12 Dec. 2009.

most authoritarian regimes has been rehabilitated without having to concede on political liberalization.⁶²

The major question, of course, is: putting military activities aside, what is the preventive outcome that schemes such as the PSI or the TSCTI are supposed to ensure? What can special forces do against poverty, disease, corruption, lack of education, antidemocratic rule and rulers, and extremism in this impoverished region? One can only concur with the analysis contained in the 2005 International Crisis Group (ICG) report, which argues that a heavy-handed US military response to the emergence of small Islamic terrorist groups in the Sahel could prove counterproductive and might even invigorate the rise of Islamic militancy in this poor and remote region of West Africa. The ICG asserts convincingly that 'the Sahel is not a hotbed of terrorist activity [but] an area in which weak states constitute attractive targets for terrorist or criminal organizations'.⁶³ In this context, it is undeniable that resorting to military means alone is likely to yield counterproductive results. In order to counterbalance this, the US Agency for International Development has launched educational initiatives, while the State Department has also introduced a programme for airport security, and the Department of Treasury has intervened to tighten up money-handling controls in the region.⁶⁴

The US administration has drawn some conclusions from its experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, where American soldiers face violent opposition from the local populations. US officials under the Obama administration have carried on Bush's policy in Africa: instead of mobilizing a heavy US military presence in particular areas of intervention, the new programme consists of dispatching special forces to countries such as Mali and Mauritania to train their soldiers and supply them with pickup trucks, radios and global positioning system equipment. According to General Jones, no US forces have been committed to combat in Africa. US deployment has primarily consisted of training and advisory teams. The hope, of course, is that American influence will be effective without being conspicuous. David Pearce, US ambassador to Algeria, has confirmed this policy. In June 2009 he insisted that, should the governments in the region solicit the United States, Washington would be willing to provide them with the necessary assistance in the fight against terrorism: 'It's a huge, difficult region to control without regional cooperation.'⁶⁵

Thus one should not expect much change regarding AFRICOM and US security policy in the Maghreb–Sahel region under the new administration in Washington. President Barack Obama is convinced that the policy put in place

⁶² On US–Libyan military cooperation, see 'United States, Libya sign historic pact on military cooperation, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=11784842&Itemid=348, accessed 13 Aug. 2009; 'US wants greater military cooperation with Libya: Feltman', AFP, 26 July 2009, http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/2009072/pl_afp/libyausqaedamilitary, accessed 13 Aug. 2009.

⁶³ ICG, *Islamist terrorism in the Sahel: fact or fiction?*, report 92, 31 March 2005, available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=3347>, accessed 5 April 2005.

⁶⁴ Donna Miles, 'New counter-terrorism initiative to focus on Saharan Africa war on terror', *American Forces Press Service*, 1 June 2005.

⁶⁵ Cited in Djamel Bouatta, 'Plusieurs fois reporté, le sommet de la sécurité au Sahel maintenu', *Liberté* (Algiers), 2 June 2009.

before he took office is the correct one, not simply a way of demonstrating to Republicans that he is not soft on terrorism. In concrete terms, the Obama administration's proposed fiscal year 2010 budget for the Department of Defense requests some \$300 million in operation and maintenance funds to cover the cost of AFRICOM operations and Operation Enduring Freedom–TSCTP operations at the AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart. The administration is also requesting US\$263 million to provide added personnel, airlift and communications support to AFRICOM, and a total of \$451 million to replace or upgrade facilities at enduring CENTCOM and AFRICOM locations; however, it does not provide a separate figure for AFRICOM.⁶⁶

Conclusion

For the US, the events of 9/11 changed the Maghreb's geopolitical importance. Not only did it encourage closer relations between the Maghreb states and the US, it also sharpened US interest in the area, which from a security point of view now extends to the Sahel region. It should be emphasized, however, that whereas the Maghreb governments quickly sought integration in an international coalition to fight terrorism, thus enabling them to justify their domestic repression and violations of human rights in the name of this same fight, these actions in fact increased the latent anti-Americanism in the area, at least under the Bush administration. One should be aware of the division that exists between rulers and ruled in the region with regard to perceptions of the United States. American support of governments that do not act from democratic principles does nothing but increase the frustration of the Maghrebi populations, who perceive that the area suffers from a lack of justice, social development and education, all necessary conditions for the legitimacy of governments. The regimes have certainly drawn dividends from the new situation, but their resistance to domestic change will serve neither their own longer-term interests nor those of the US. The latter should not 'militarize' its foreign policy but should instead support genuine development, which is one of the main instruments available to stem the rise of radicalism in the region. While he has continued Bush's security policy in the Maghreb–Sahel, Obama has yet to indicate that US policy *vis-à-vis* the authoritarian regimes will undergo any change. If his Cairo speech on 4 June 2009 is any indication, any change in US policy towards these regimes is likely to be rather slow.

⁶⁶ Daniel Volman, 'Africa: Africom to continue under Obama', 11 June 2009, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200906110882.html>, accessed 30 June 2009.

