

AIES-COMMENT

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North Africa and the Sahel region

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Introduction

North Africa, the unstable southern neighbor of Europe, is of particular significance to the European Union, not only because it is a hub and a transit route for migration and in part a hot bed of terrorism, but also because of its vast amount of natural resources. Since after the Russian invasion of Ukraine this importance has even increased. Algeria and also Libya have some capacity to increase gas exports, albeit, there is no way that they could replace the 175 bn bcm Russia was exporting to Europe in 2020.

Algeria

A brief view into the history

Algeria is still strongly defined by a terrible Civil War with 150,000+ killed, which raged from 1991-2002. During this war several jihadi groups were established by former Afghanistan fighters, including the forerunners of nowadays infamous groups like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Also its long-term leader Abdelmalek Droukdel fought in Afghanistan, together with many Libyans.

During the last phase of the war, in 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected President. After defeating the jihadists, he facilitated reconciliation quite successfully, benefiting from the fact that after the very bloody experience of the civil war, Algerians had no appetite to resume hostilities. Nevertheless, a rather low-level Islamism insurgency has been continuing ever since.

In April 2019, Bouteflika was finally removed from power by street protest, the so-called Hirak Movement. In December 2019 Abdelmadjid Tebboune was elected new President by 58% of the voters, albeit with a voter turnout of less than 50%. Tebboune belongs to the old political-military class of Algeria, which continues to rule the county to the dismay of many.

Unsurprisingly, the Hirak Movement street protests continue, while the government tries to suppress it, fearing the establishment of an organized political movement, which could become eventually a threat for the ruling class.

Economy - Oil & Energy

The hydrocarbon industry is the backbone of Algeria's economy, accounting for roughly 30% of GDP, 60% of budget revenues and 95% of export earnings (2021 about 35 bn USD). The country has the world's 10th-largest reserves of natural gas and is the 6th-largest gas exporter. The current annual production is about 130 bcm, of which 55 bcm were exported in 2021 to Europe, satisfying roughly 12% of the European gas market.

The giant Hassi R'Mel gas field produces currently 60bn cbm per year, but this can be sustained only until 2028, falling thereafter rapidly. Other fields currently under development will not be able to make up for Hassi R'Mel. Several of the currently most important fields will become insignificant by 2040.

Algeria has the world's 3rd largest gas reserves in shale basins, which remain untouched for the time being. Fears are widespread in Algeria that developing these reserves could endanger the deep Saharan aquifers.

Surprisingly, there is energy shortage in Algeria, which is the consequence of a low efficiency of the outdated power plants, high grid losses and no incentives for producers or consumers to seek savings. The price of gas for domestic needs does not even cover the production costs.

It seems to be, after numerous changes at key positions over the last years following the political turmoil, there is no longer a strategic plan behind the Algerian economy. With the exception of the hydrocarbon sector, most of the country's economy is in decline. But even the national state-owned oil company Sonatrach has been shaken by numerous scandals and corruption cases since the end of the civil war. The government appears to be incapable of deep economic reforms, while a very complicated regulatory policy discourages western foreign investors. The increasing role of Turkey, China, and Qatar is not met by the EU. Much more investments, especially in the gas sector would be required to stabilize Algeria's economy. The problem will increase over time, as Algeria's demographic development is of concern. 44 % of the 43,6 mio population is below 24 years old.

Foreign Policy

Relations with Morocco are still tense over the Western Sahara and Berber minorities in Algeria. In November 2020 Algerian-supported Polisario Front resumed its armed campaign after 30 years against what they consider as Morocco's occupation of the Western Sahara.

Algeria severed diplomatic ties with Morocco in August 2021, opposing the normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel in December 2020, a spying affair targeting more than 6,000 Algerian phones and Morocco's support to the Berber-ethnic Movement for the self-determination of Kabylie, classified by Algeria a terrorist movement.

The 1600 km Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (MGE, 12 bcm/yr) from Algeria under the street of Gibraltar to the Iberia peninsula linking Algeria, Morocco, Spain and Portugal since 1996 was closed at the end of October 2021 after the 25 year contract elapsed. Morocco loses 7% transit fees and at the average 1.07 bcm annually used for electricity generation and will turn increasingly to solar power and LNG. The supply of Spain & Portugal runs now only through the Medgaz pipeline, which does not have the capacity to fully make up the loss of MGE. This will cost Spain and Portugal several billion a year.

The cold War between Algeria and Morocco and the low intensity conflict in the Western Sahara will continue for the foreseeable future.

Tunisia

Eleven years after the Revolution for many Tunisians the situation is more difficult than before. An already troubled economic situation got worse. The social situation is more challenging than before. Tourism – a key source of foreign currency – faced a sharp drop over Covid-19. Endemic corruption strangles the economy and daily life.

Ennahda, Tunisia's Muslim Brotherhood party has set out to change all that, but is now also deeply entangled in corruption. With 52 seats out of 217 it is the largest party in the parliament and its head, Rachid Ghannouchi, is the speaker. Ennahda took control over key institutions and established something like a deep state.

Altogether, the system is completely dysfunctional, infighting and corruption is all over. The 2014 Constitution is certainly a great achievement, but includes some problematic articles, e.g. hampering foreign investments. Article 13 demands that every investment contracts related to Tunisia's natural resources (oil!) has to be presented to the National Assembly for approval (i.e. made public) which led to an exodus of foreign companies from Tunisia.

Islamic extremism is still a problem. More than 6.000 Tunisians joined ISIS in Syria in 2012-15. Most of the survivors went to Libya or returned back home. There is an ongoing insurgency in the mountainous western part of Tunisia, especially around Mount Chambi - Kasserine Pass, but there are also occasional terrorist activities in the greater capital region. The porous border with Libya, allowing for infiltration and arms smuggling to Tunisia, is a huge challenge.

In light of violent demonstrations against the government, demanding the improvement of basic services and amid a growing COVID-19 outbreak, on July 25, 2021 President Kais Saied, a former professor in constitutional law, pulled the emergency brake. He suspended the parliament and dismissed PM Hichem Mechichi, waived the immunity of the parliament members and ordered the military to close the parliament house. At first, Ennahda tried to encourage street protests against the Saied, but failed. Several of their party offices were ransacked by the crowd. No. 2 of Ennahda was set under house arrest, several other party members arrested.

While Saied started to rule by decree and appointed in September Tunisia's first female prime minister, the population was hopeful initially. But as the President was not able to deliver on his promises, many were getting more and more sceptic. On December 13. Saied extended the suspension of the parliament until new election take place. On the occasion of the 11th anniversary of the Revolution in January police cracked-down on protesters.

Ennahda is pushing for reinstating the current parliament, which would turn the wheel entirely back and is strongly lobbying for international pressure, especially in the US. It tries again to encourage mass protests against Saied – and is more and more successful.

Kais Saied plans for a constitutional reform, a referendum about the new constitution in July, and general elections on December 17. The next months will show if Tunisia is slowly moving to real democracy, is heading back in history – or if it will get a new dictatorship.

Libya

Unfortunately, Libya is a good example for failed International crisis management. After the successful international intervention 2011, there was neither efficient international support for state building nor for the disarmament of the many militias. On one side, after the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq, there was no real appetite to engage in another “adventure” in a Muslim country and on the other side, the Libyans did not want to have something like an international oversight.

The first free elections on July 7, 2012, were euphorically celebrated by the international community. Albeit, just some 1.8 million Libyans (out of about 6 million) went to the polls, about 62% of the 2.87 million registered voters, but only about 44% of those eligible to vote per se. In June 2014 only 630,000 (14.6%) participated in the second general elections. The international euphoria somehow cooled down.

In the following month, fighting broke out, when Islamists chased the newly elected House of Representatives (HoR) and its internationally recognized Interim Government out of the capital Tripoli. The country, effectively split into two parts, was in the midst of a civil war.

The UN initiated a long series of meetings – ignoring by and large that an internationally recognized government of Libya existed – which finally led to the signing of the “Libya Political (Skhirat) Agreement” on December 17, 2015. A "Government of National Accord" (GNA) was established and endorsed by the UN Security Council already six days later, even before Libya's still legitimate parliament, the HoR, had a chance to vote on it, which is probably a quite unique approach in the history of UN. Eventually, the HoR refused to confirm the GNA, and only the international recognition remained to provide it with some kind of legitimacy.

While the international media and diplomats cheered the agreement and the subsequent move of the GNA under prime minister (PM) Fayez Al Serraj to Tripoli on March 30, 2016, as a major step toward stabilizing Libya, it actually paved the road to disaster. The participants to the negotiations in Skhirat were no appropriate representation of those who had actually the real power in the cities and regions of Libya. Therefore, the outcome was contested almost immediately.

This phase ended with the beginning of LNA Commander Khalifa Haftar's military offensive to take Tripoli by force in April 2019, which failed after the Turkish intervention in mid-2020.

Acting UN Special Envoy Stephanie Williams established in fall 2020 the so called Libya Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). She handpicked 75 LPDF delegates, who developed a roadmap for presidential and parliamentary elections on 24Dec21. After some vote buying in the LPDF, Abdul Hamid Dbeibha was selected to head a Government of National Unity (GNU) and confirmed later on by the HoR.

Unfortunately, Dbeibha used his role as a PM to enrich his own clan and for campaigning with public money - some called it a kleptocracy – while doing next to nothing to fulfil his main role, to facilitate the election process.

In total about 2.8 Million Libyans registered to vote. In September, the HoR issued – albeit quite controversial – electoral laws, foreseeing presidential election on December 24 and parliamentary elections one month later. In mid-December 2021, Libya was as close to elections as it was never ever since 2014.

But the final list of candidates for the Presidential Elections was not published and the elections were postponed without a new date. The main reason for this was that the courts of appeal made several - obviously wrong - decisions about the right of candidates to run. For example, PM Dbeibha was approved to candidate, although he pledged not to do so before running for PM at the LPDF and although he was not eligible to run as a serving PM according to the electoral law.

According to the LPDF roadmap endorsed by UN resolutions and the decisions of the HoR, the GNU's mandate expired on December 24, 2021. In February, the HoR appointed former GNA Minister of the Interior Fathi Bashagha to prime minister, but Dbeibha refuses to hand over.

Bashagha has the advantage that he is able to work with the west of the country as well as with the east and the south. He could therefore be someone who is accepted throughout the country despite the postponed elections. If Dbeibha remains in power, it can be assumed that the situation will deteriorate sharply in the medium term, possibly to the point of a declaration of autonomy for the east, which could lead to another war.

Jihadists in the Sahel region

Jihadism in the Sahara is frequently connected with the Touareg, who belong to the indigenous people of the Sahara. About 4 mio Touareg nomads live in the western central part of the great desert. Sahara trade has been their economic backbone since 1000s of years – we call it today smuggling and human trafficking. Many Touareg have been seeking an own state or at least some kind of autonomy since the end of colonialism. Rebellions took place in 1962-1964, 1990-95, 2007-09, and from 2012.

In the 1980s, Libyan dictator Gaddafi recruited many now senior Touareg and terrorist leaders into his Islamic Legion, which he used for his many wars in the neighborhood. After the end of the Libyan Revolution numerous well-trained fighters and weapons from Libya destabilized neighboring countries, especially Mali, while the southwest of Libya itself has been used as a Safe Haven and a logistic zone for many rebel groups and terrorist organizations.

The current situation is especially in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger characterized by terrorist attacks versus the poor performance of many government forces. Military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso have undermined the narrative of western forces supporting nascent democracies. After gaining a foothold in the Central African Republic (CAR), Russian mercenaries are increasing their influence now also in Mali.

European and especially French strategic interests on the Sahel region focus on economic interests, especially commodities (e.g. uranium, diamonds, gold, copper, Manganese), containing migration and fighting terrorism. International stabilization efforts include a combination of UN efforts, the French Operation Barkhane, and EU missions.

The 15,000 troops strong UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA in Mali is the bloodiest UN-mission since the Korean War. For the time being, 220 soldiers were killed. Operation Barkhane is a tool to ensure French strategic interests in the region and operates in the whole Sahel, directly combatting terrorists and providing training. The EU Training missions in the CAR and in Mali are in direct competition with Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group. Actually, in the eyes of the host nations, Wagner covers the needs of the military – training,

equipment and mentoring in combat – more efficient than the EU, without asking for democracy & human rights.

Since after the delay of the return to democracy after the military coup in Mali, the future of the French and EU involvement in this country is in doubt. After some polemic between French politicians and members of the junta, the government of Mali demanded the French to withdraw their troops immediately. Recently even the suspension of FRANCE 24 television and RFI radio in the country were ordered. The French withdrawal is in progress and should be concluded by early summer.

The EU will decide soon about the future of its training mission. On one side it is difficult to sustain the mission without the French presence, on the other side, a termination of the mission would mean to leave Mali to the influence of the Russian mercenaries, which is in the light of the Ukraine war also not an attractive option.

A negative example: Burkina Faso

The country achieved independence from France in 1960. Repeated military coups during the 1970s and 1980s were followed by multiparty elections in the early 1990s. Long-time President Compaoré resigned on October 31, 2014 following popular protests. An interim administration organized presidential and legislative elections on November 29, 2015, which were considered widely free and fair. Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected president with 53.49% of the votes. Burkina Faso became a reasonably stable country. The main risks were a spill-over of the conflict in Mali and tribal conflicts between cattle herders and farmers over land ownership.

While the economic data for Burkina Faso did not look too bad, a neglect of security forces in combination with terrorist intrusions from Mali led to an increasingly difficult situation. Furthermore, environmental degradation triggered increasing tensions between cattle herders and farmers. The security situation deteriorated. The number of attacks by Nusrat al-Islam (an off-shoot of al Qaeda) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara increased. Since 2015 about 1,800 persons were killed, 1.5 mio people are internally displaced.

Kaboré was re-elected in 2020 with 58%, promising to tackle the deteriorating security situation, but failed to do so. A rebellion was brewing in the army and among many civilians. Finally, on January 23, 2022, a military coup took place. As usual under these circumstances, ECOWAS and the African Union suspended Burkina Faso. The country is on the brink of total chaos, which will be certainly exploited by the Jihadists.

Conclusion

In several of the Sahel states, the situation is getting from bad to worse. One might ask, if weak and corrupt “democracies” are really the best suited tool to stabilize fragile countries and to fight terrorism, especially in the light of the renewed conflict between Russia and the west.

States like Tunisia and Burkina Faso need to be supported before the situation spills out of control. While Tunisia could still become a role model for a democracy in the Arab world, Burkina Faso must be prevented from following the path of Mali.

Altogether, the region needs much more attention from Europe. Very worrying, as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, there is a significant increase in costs of basic foodstuff. If this is not addressed properly, this could lead to another wave of social unrest like during the “Arab Spring.”