Uncertain Climate in the Maghreb

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Resurgence of Terrorist Activities

The terrorist attacks occurring over the past few months in different Maghreb countries give the impression of a consolidation of radical Islamic violence in the region, whereas the phenomenon now pertains to the dominion of international Jihadism. In December 2006, confrontations pitted the forces of order against a group of Jihadists in the suburbs of Tunis. This caused great surprise, as Tunisia was considered free from such violence. Nonetheless, though structured Islamism is not apparent in this country, Tunisia can hardly escape the regional or international dynamics of Jihadism. According to the little information that can be gleaned on this event, the terrorist cell that was broken up apparently consisted of at least one gendarme and six Salafists who had been trained at camps run by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) near Tebessa, in Eastern Algeria. It seems likewise probable that the cell had a relatively significant cache of weapons.

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This sparse information reveals the porosity of borders and the links existing among Algerian and Tunisian Islamists. It also reveals that radical Islamism has gained support among certain sectors of the middle class and the intelligentsia. Finally, it also raises the issue of the existence of weapons that had not been detected by a surveillance system reputed for its effectiveness. Moreover, the link among Jihadists on either side of the Algerian-Tunisian border leads to the belief that it could be a one-off command from the "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", the GSPC's new denomination. In any case, the capacity of the Algerian Salafist group to unify forces in the region is not a recognised fact and any links existing among the different terrorist acts seem more ideological than operational.

The fact that the former GSPC has gone over to al-Qaeda has given rise to a great deal of speculation on the presence of Bin Laden's movement in the region. Actually, the GSPC, which arose in 1998 from a scission in the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), allegedly suffered great setbacks due to the Algerian government's policy of national reconciliation, consisting of amnestying militant Islamists who complied with certain conditions and reintegrating them into society. This policy allegedly made them lose a large part of their members, producing massive desertions among its rank and file and reducing the movement to some one thousand people in the country. This development may have led its current leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, an explosives specialist trained in Afghanistan, to implement a new strategy.

The organisation rallied around the nebulous al-Qaeda in January of 2007 and organised attacks whose operational mode was absolutely new to the Maghreb: an attack on a bus transporting employees of an Algerian-American company in Bouchaoui and simultaneous attacks perpetrated against Algerian security force buildings on the outskirts of Tizi Ouzou and Boumerdès. On 11th April 2007, it organised two nearly simultaneous attacks in Algiers, first against the seat of the Algerian Government and then a police station in Bab Ezzouar, resulting in 30 dead and 240

wounded. The organisation thus seems to be giving precedence to spectacular actions targeting the symbols of Algerian power. In doing so, it is refuting all government assertions stating that radical Islamism is but a residual force.

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In contrast to the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and to GIA, which intended to establish an Islamic State within Algerian borders, the new Jihadists have set themselves a more global objective consisting of declaring war on the ruling class of the Maghreb, which they deem corrupt and subject to the will of the United States and Westerners in general, whom they refer to as "crusaders and Jews" in their official communiqués.

In Morocco, though the goals pursued by the authors of suicide bombings are not clearly known, their methods nonetheless resemble those of al-Qaeda, even if their leadership is independent. The regular dismantling of cells preparing terrorist attacks by security forces – as occurred in November 2003 when a cell of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) attempted to bomb the premises of 2M, the local television station – demonstrates the persistence of the threat and the capacity of different Moroccan Salafist groups to regenerate their rings. In this country, 'marginal radical Islam" is associated with the return of certain 'Afghans,' that is, people having fought in Afghanistan and having brought back with them a new culture focusing on the jihad. Today, there is a series of small, violent groups with no ties among them, all of them basing themselves on international Salafism. They have no precise political agenda.

Though violence relating to radical Islamism is present in all the Maghreb countries, it is deployed in different manners in direct relation to the national context. The concordance in the timing of certain bombings such as those of the 11th April 2007 in Casablanca and Algiers and the fact that the GSPC claimed authorship for a terrorist attack occurring in Mauritania in 2005 are insufficient grounds for inferring the existence of a single, regional command, which would in turn receive orders from al-Qaeda.

Algeria: Low Turnout at Legislative Elections

Slightly over a month after the double suicide bombing of 11th April 2007, the Algerian authorities wanted to use the legislative elections as a sort of 'referendum against terrorism.' The Minister of Home Affairs, Yazid Zerhouni, urged the Algerians to vote in order to "reject terrorism and confirm the democratic option." In fact, the Algerian legislative elections in April 2007 registered an abstention rate of nearly 65%, thus revealing a crisis of confidence in the representatives of the people and more generally, in the ruling class as a whole.

In reality, the low turnout rate can be adduced to several different reasons. In the first place, the Algerians are convinced that parliament is not really a place of political power, President Bouteflika having concentrated all power in his hands, leading to greater weight being placed on the executive branch in the Algerian political system. By the same token, they have a negative image of an Assembly composed of some twenty parties that are maintained artificially in order to give the illusion of a democracy and pluralism that does not actually exist. As they do not have a real constituency, the majority of parties do not have political programmes. During the electoral campaign, their leaders called on the population to vote as if "placing a ballot in the ballot box" really had a programmatic value. Moreover, the three major parties in competition – i.e. the National Liberation Front (FLN), formerly the only party, the National Rally for Democracy (RND), a party of important people under the former head of state, Ahmed Ouyahia, and the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), an Islamist party under the sphere of influence of the Muslim Brotherhood – have generally upheld the policies of the Head of State. This convergence of viewpoints was particularly perceptible with regard to the policy of national reconciliation. Nevertheless, after the 11th April attack claimed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, pursuing this policy has become highly controversial. The capacity of the former GSPC to strike at the very heart of Algiers has demonstrated the limits of the initiative to reintegrate the former insurgents and end the violence.

It is in this context, marked by the resurgence of terrorist attacks and uncertainty on the Head of State's health

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accompanying the numerous inquiries into the matter of his succession that the past legislative elections were held. They were elections with no real issues because the Algerians knew perfectly well that, no matter what the composition of the Assembly ended up being, the representatives would not be able to act on the real problems of society, namely: unemployment, pauperisation, insecurity and the housing shortage.

Proposal for Western Sahara as an Autonomous Region

On 11th April 2007, Morocco submitted a proposal for Western Saharan autonomy to the UN in an attempt to 'end the stalemate.' The proposal was backed by the United States, France and the Spanish government, whereas it was immediately rejected by the Polisario Front, which submitted its own proposal to the UN regarding self-determination. The Secretary General of the United Nations responded to these two documents with a resolution (Number 1754) calling upon both parties *"to enter into negotiations without preconditions and in good faith, with a view to achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara."*

These negotiations, which took place in New York in June and will resume in August, may end in failure like all preceding negotiations, which faltered because the parties held positions that seemed irreconcilable. Nevertheless, today, two major factors could incite the leaders of the Maghreb, the US, France and Spain to wish to put an end to this conflict: the multiplication of traffic of all sorts in the desert areas of the Maghreb, which could constitute a safe haven for al-Qaeda, and the recurrent protests occurring in the cities of Western Sahara, in particular in El Aaiún.

The establishment of an autonomous region in Western Sahara seems to constitute the most probable solution to this conflict. In any case, it undeniably poses a series of questions to the Moroccan government in the first place, but also to other countries in the region. With regard to Morocco, it would imply a new institutional architecture requiring a revision of the Constitution. It would also involve establishing a new pact with the Sahrawis, who would have regional prerogatives as they would be represented by an assembly. The question then arises of the composition of this assembly, in other words, what Sahrawis would be involved in local governance in this autonomous region? Should the displaced people from Tarfaya or Goulimine be involved? Moreover, will the Moroccans living for two decades in the Western Sahara be associated with life in the region? How will the latter so-called Saharan populations be able to coexist with the members of the Polisario Front, a movement they have been fighting for thirty years now? For them, it is their 'resistance' and their exile in Tindouf that has led to the conditions for the establishment of an autonomy based on the recognition of the Sahrawi identity. Whereas for the Sahrawi ethnic group in Western Sahara, this option is what they have been demanding for a good many years now. The question of legitimacy then crops up, closely linked to the possibility of negotiating the limits of local power with Rabat.

With regard to education, for instance, can one imagine school curricula different from those in other regions? If these curricula were similar, what would remain of the Sahrawi identity and the history of Western Sahara, which is a history that will certainly have to be written? How should they recast a national pact, and how will they write an official history that takes into account plural identities?

Beyond these difficulties relative to the formation of a nation, the principle of regionalisation based on the recognition of specificity can give rise to an 'ethnic nation,' with all of the dangers this can entail. Because eventually, groups whose identities are recognised as forming part of a region could considerably weaken central power.

Despite the exceptional nature granted by Rabat to this region, the proposal for granting autonomy to the Western Sahara entails a transformation of Morocco's territorial framework and internal regime that could affect its political identity. Moreover, this autonomy could set an example and give rise to other claims from other Moroccan regions whose populations could be tempted to put forth their identity or simply their specificities. If this occurred, would the outcome be a happy federalism that certain observers already associate with the natural configuration of the kingdom

or a fragmentation of central power to the benefit of local identities and liberties?

The Moroccan regionalisation scheme could likewise appear attractive to groups from neighbouring countries. The Kabyle, tired of submitting to a Jacobin central power, could wish to be autonomous from Algiers. The establishment of autonomy in Western Sahara could thus be a prelude to a Maghreb of regions that would substitute a Maghreb of Nation-States, a Jacobin political model inherited from their former colonisers. In any case, should such changes, which could occur subsequent to the establishment of autonomy for the Western Sahara, be considered potential risks or dangers? Aren't the demands of different populations in certain regions or of certain ethnicities already moving in this direction?

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Despite the difficulties associated with the implementation of autonomy, carrying out the plan proposed by Rabat has the advantage of putting an end to this conflict if accepted by the Polisario Front and Algeria. Indeed, though after 1991, date on which a cease-fire was declared, Western Sahara was a controlled area characterised by a low-intensity conflict, today new elements are causing concern among the ruling classes in the region. On the one hand, the existence of training camps of the former GSPC in the vast area of the Sahel could attract members of the Polisario Front established in Tindouf. And on the other hand, some idle Sahrawis, searching for bearings and ideology, could join the several traffickers operating in the region.

Over the past few months, inquiries and police raids have demonstrated that there could be a link between these two categories. The study conducted by Altadis on tobacco contraband in the Maghreb shows that Sahrawis have been involved in a vast contraband ring, receiving the merchandise in Casablanca before distributing it. This traffic, which uses diverse routes, also passes through Western Sahara, in particular the city of El Aaiún, and enters Algeria via Tifariti and Bir Lahlou, water points controlled by the Polisario Front[1]. Moreover, on 1st and 2nd May, Mauritanian police forces having been alerted to the presence of a drug trafficking operation took control of the Nouadhibou airport in order to seize a small aeroplane. The crew, which managed to escape, left behind over 600 kg of cocaine. The investigation revealed that the crew apparently found shelter with the Sahrawis in the areas controlled by the Polisario Front[2].

These few examples reveal the porosity of borders and the possible connections between traffickers, Jihadists and Sahrawis in an area little controlled by the States of the region. This absence of control is causing concern among Americans and Europeans alike, who fear the region could become a safe haven for al-Qaeda. Similar concerns are shared by the States of the region, who fear their opposition could also find a safe haven there. All the more reason to put an end to the conflict in Western Sahara, the first stage in pacifying the region.

[1]Ignacio Cembrero, La contrebande du tabac malmenée par Altadis, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* 2nd-8th June 2007.
[2]En Mauritanie, un trafic de cocaïne éclabousse des notables, *Libération*, 17th June 2007.