



PolicyWatch 2205

No Time to Hit Snooze in North Africa and the Sahel

[*Joshua C. Burgess*](#)

Also available in [العربية](#)

February 10, 2014

The Obama administration should demonstrate renewed resolve to counter growing extremism in the region and build lasting stability, starting with a joint U.S.-French statement during President Francois Hollande's visit to Washington this week.

Chronic instability has become a defining characteristic across the Trans-Sahara region, affecting everything from security to socioeconomics and human rights. At a time when many locals believe the United States is disengaging from the region, jihadists and foreign fighters operating in and returning home from Libya and Syria are fanning the fires of violent extremism. If those fires are to be controlled, Washington needs to join with international and regional partners to define and apply a comprehensive regional strategy.

SHAKY GROUND

The volatility in North Africa and the Sahel presents significant threats to vital French and European interests, and the region's location will increasingly tie it to broader global interests. Foremost among these long-term interests is stability, both national and regional. For these and other reasons, the area is of growing concern to the United States.

Over the past two years, hopes that the "Arab Spring" uprisings would produce stable young democracies have largely gone unrealized. In their place, fragility and discord have caused ungoverned spaces to spread like ink spots within postauthoritarian states. Absent a heavy hand to smother dissent or fair rule of law and distribution of resources, these spaces provide perfect breeding grounds for an Islamist backlash.

Unfortunately, violent extremists are gaining invaluable training and combat experience in Libya and Syria, where foreign Sunni fighters reportedly number as many as 10,000 (foreign Shiites fighting for the Assad regime, including Hezbollah, may total an additional 10,000). As these battle-hardened jihadists return to their home countries, they will find

increasingly disenfranchised and disaffected populations who are more susceptible to extremist ideology, setting the table for an extremist awakening with ominous long-term implications.

THE ARC OF ENTROPY

Currently, most of North Africa and the Sahel is in varying states of crisis. Fed by extremist violence, poor governance, coups, and social tumult, the situation hints at a deepening geopolitical entropy that will only embolden violent factions.

Postrevolution Tunisia, suddenly optimistic after the recent approval of a new constitution, is still struggling to coalesce around a central identity. Political tension and uncertainty have led to a sharp economic downturn, and major criminal trafficking routes thrive in the south. Furthermore, extremist group Ansar al-Sharia continues to flourish and gain traction despite being designated a terrorist organization and placed under wider surveillance. At least seven purported terrorists were killed in government raids outside Tunis last week, but the overall threat persists.

In Algeria, a fourth term for divisive (and ailing) president Abdelaziz Bouteflika appears inevitable, raising the prospect of significant unrest after the April election. The dispute over Western Sahara also continues to simmer, hindering all cooperation between Algiers and Morocco.

For its part, Morocco has deftly checked Islamist power and mostly curbed domestic terrorism. Yet its geographic isolation and exclusion from significant regional coalitions may limit its influence and ability to work multilaterally.

Meanwhile, Mali -- only a year removed from a devastating insurgency -- is still saddled with numerous social, political, and security shortcomings and must play host to international peacekeepers for the foreseeable future. In the restive north, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb survived the French and African Union intervention and will likely look to reassert its influence soon.

Finally, Libya is splintered by tribal and ethnic divisions and suffering from a shortage of capable technocrats. If not for international stabilization efforts after Muammar Qadhafi's fall, Benghazi and Tripoli might be even further on their way to becoming Mogadishu on the Mediterranean. The country's uncontrolled borders are essentially free-trade zones for the trafficking of experienced fighters and weapons into neighboring areas ill-prepared to deal with such proliferation. Left unchecked, extremist movements will prosper and inevitably broaden their targets.

WHY INCREASE ENGAGEMENT?

The United States will always have an interest in promoting human security, and more than a quarter of U.S. bilateral foreign assistance already goes to Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet massive gaps in healthcare, governance, education, and job training persist, and investments in these areas will stop in their tracks if security and stability are not addressed.

At present, security threats to U.S. and partner interests are on the rise with no

indications of ebbing. Although intelligence assessments indicate that regional terrorist groups have not targeted the U.S. homeland, the numerous deadly attacks on American diplomatic targets in Africa foreshadow greater threats in the future. If Benghazi is not a sufficient cautionary tale, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar al-Sharia, Boko Haram, and various other violent Islamist groups have staged numerous attacks against foreign embassies, NGOs, and business interests in recent years, and all have stated their intent to continue.

Perhaps more alarming, an estimated 1,000 North African extremists are now fighting or have fought in the Syrian conflict. As more of them return home with greater experience, credibility, and commitment, they may well turn their attention to regional partner governments, Europe, and even the United States -- a troubling prospect at a time when no Trans-Saharan nation has complete control over its borders or the extremist groups operating within and across them.

Economic considerations should not be overlooked either. Current U.S. trade with the region is limited, and America's shrinking reliance on foreign energy sources means less need for Algerian natural gas and Libyan oil. Yet new opportunities could emerge as markets mature; for example, Chinese trade across Africa reached nearly \$200 billion last year.

ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL

Late last year, France announced the reorganization of its military forces in the Sahara and Sahel to enable a more robust regional presence in response to growing extremist threats. Paris had already displayed its resolve in previous months through interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic. Yet despite providing logistical assistance to those campaigns, the United States is widely seen to be turning its strategic attention away from North Africa.

This is not to say that Washington has ignored the region's security. For example, the State Department directs the interagency Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, aimed at countering violent extremist ideology and building regional security capacity through a range of development, diplomatic, and security-related programs. The initiative has enjoyed some success, but it is frequently troubled by bureaucratic confusion and is undergoing a strategic review.

With the Atlantic Ocean as a safety barrier, America can afford to cede some responsibility to European partners, and France in particular maintains strong postcolonial ties with most of Francophone Africa. But that same history makes French intervention contentious. By expanding U.S. engagement, Washington could provide a foil to perceptions of French meddling while still collaborating closely with Paris.

In advance of President Hollande's upcoming visit, French defense minister Jean-Yves Le Drian met with U.S. defense secretary Chuck Hagel at the Pentagon last month. In their subsequent joint statement, Le Drian spoke of establishing a "high-level joint commission" to further discuss cooperation in Africa. That should be just the beginning of much broader coordinated efforts. For instance, tight synchronization of security force train-and-equip missions would greatly enhance regional capabilities, and complementary governance and development programs can help ameliorate conditions in which

extremism incubates. Perhaps most important, the United States should develop close intelligence sharing relationships in order to identify and track the waves of foreign fighters flowing out of Syria and Libya.

As defense spending inevitably shrinks and the importance of international alliances grows, Washington should also pursue a cohesive multilateral approach in which NATO plays a larger role. During a January forum at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Sen. Christopher Murphy (D-CT) noted, "If we ignore regional conflicts and increasingly ungovernable areas [in Africa], both we and the Europeans do so at our peril." At the same event, he and Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) called for greater NATO involvement and U.S. commitment in training and equipping African forces for counterterror missions and border control.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Washington can begin reassuring international partners of its commitment to stability and security in the Trans-Sahara by doing the following:

- Use the upcoming joint statement with President Hollande to pledge increased Franco-American "3D" support in the region (i.e., development, defense, and diplomacy). In a joint *Washington Post* op-ed on February 10, the two leaders touted ongoing efforts in Africa, including security and development assistance. Their postmeeting statement should draw from the op-ed to enumerate specifics of future cooperation.
- Commit to working more closely with regional and international organizations, including the African and European Unions.
- Call on NATO to increase its presence and assistance in Africa, and to place engagement in the region high on the agenda for September's NATO Summit.
- Embrace long-term, investment-focused development programs over traditional aid handouts.
- Appoint a Special Envoy to the Trans-Sahara with the authority to mediate interagency disagreements and oversee development of an updated and integrated strategy for countering violent extremism and fostering stability. This will reduce bureaucratic barriers to full-spectrum U.S. government efforts on these issues.

None of these actions will end violent extremism in the region overnight. But Washington should seize the present opportunity to think and act multilaterally and demonstrate forward-looking resolve to protect American and allied interests.

Lt. Col. Joshua Burgess, USAF, is a Visiting Military Fellow at The Washington Institute. The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author; they do not reflect the official position of the U.S. government, Department of Defense, U.S. Air Force, or Air University.