



Clingendael

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Europe's Volatile Southern Neighbourhood

Policy Options for North Africa

This policy brief examines regional political developments in North Africa since the onset of the Arab Spring, and the impact they will have on Europe. It provides a menu of policy options that European decision-makers can pursue to address the crisis in the region. Its aim is not to advocate a particular strategy, but to provide a policy menu that analyses various options, weighing the costs and benefits of each approach.

Introduction

The “Arab Spring” protests of 2011 upended the political status quo in North Africa, ushering in an era of turmoil and political uncertainty. Regimes that had maintained a firm grip on power for decades crumbled in months or weeks, though the process of deposing these autocratic regimes was sometimes protracted and violent. From the ashes of the old regimes, a new political order emerged – one that was volatile, unpredictable, and more prone to conflict than the system it had displaced.

This policy brief is adapted from our new Clingendael Report, [The Crisis in North Africa: Implications and Options for EU Policymakers](#), co-authored with George Willcoxon and Norhan Basuni. The brief begins by examining regional political developments since the onset of the Arab Spring, and the impact they will have on Europe. It concludes by providing a menu of policy options that European decision-makers can pursue to address the crisis in

the region. Neither that study nor this policy brief are designed to advocate a particular strategy. Rather, our intention is to provide a policy menu that analyses various options, weighing the costs and benefits of each approach.

Developments in North Africa and their impact on Europe

The instability initiated by the revolutionary events of 2011 has been felt in different ways across the countries of North Africa. The two westernmost states, Morocco and Algeria, experienced only minor protests, and largely avoided the turmoil that beset the rest of the region. Both governments quickly implemented packages of government expenditures and political reforms (often largely symbolic) that ameliorated the grievances of their protest movements. In contrast, the three easternmost states – Libya, Egypt and Tunisia – have been plagued by varying degrees of instability.

Libya has been the hardest hit, with the central government unable to re-establish its writ following dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi's fall. Though Libya's transition beyond Qaddafi's misrule initially looked promising, with transitional authorities holding successful elections in mid-2012, this progress was unable to overcome the deep regional divisions that the civil war had accentuated. The government's inability to disband various revolutionary militias and armed groups left the central government weak and largely dependent on these same militias for internal security, fostering an [untenable](#) hybrid security structure.

After an uneasy period in which a variety of militias carved out their own spheres of influence, a match finally ignited the tinder of post-Qaddafi Libya in May 2014. That month Khalifa Hifter, a former officer in Qaddafi's military who defected during Libya's ill-fated war in Chad, [launched](#) "Operation Dignity" to combat the country's Islamist factions. Hifter found many supporters, but also made an extraordinarily large number of opponents, as he refused to distinguish between jihadist groups and more moderate Islamists who might participate in the political system. Islamists and revolutionary militias from the western coast of Misrata mounted a [counteroffensive](#) known as "Operation Dawn." The conflict between the Dignity and Dawn coalitions has escalated ever since, and extremist groups – including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State – have been able to carve out a powerful foothold in this chaos.

Extremist groups have also been able to find a foothold in Egypt, whose post-revolutionary trajectory has disappointed many of those who marched in Tahrir Square in early 2011. Though the election of Mohamed Morsi in June 2012 seemed to indicate a new, permanent role for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian national politics, Brotherhood leaders remained deeply suspicious not only of the state institutions that had carried over from the Hosni Mubarak era, but also of their more secular political opponents. Morsi's strategy seemed to be commanding the state through fiat and plebiscites, and after his government faltered across 2012 and 2013, a new protest movement turned out to oppose him. The military again stepped in,

just as it had done to remove Mubarak, this time deposing Morsi. The Brotherhood was subsequently declared illegal, and a jihadist insurgency in the Sinai grew stronger and increasingly brutal after Morsi's fall.

Tunisia has had the most hopeful path of the three post-revolution states. Despite deep mutual suspicions, liberal, secularist, nationalist, and Islamist actors have been able to come to terms with each other, negotiate a liberal constitution, hold elections, and form coalition governments. The current coalition government, which includes both liberal and Islamist parties, is a positive sign that Tunisia's democratic model may be sustainable. However, Tunisia has seen the growth of salafi jihadist violence, which was most brutally manifested in a March 2015 terrorist [attack](#) on Tunis's Bardo museum that claimed 22 lives. The threat from salafi jihadist militants remains Tunisia's biggest security challenge, and is [magnified](#) by the deterioration of security in neighbouring Libya. Further, the Tunisian economy has struggled to overcome the structural weaknesses inherited from Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime.

The unstable environment in North Africa has created an array of challenges for Europe. Most prominent challenge is the jihadist groups that have flourished in post-revolutionary North Africa, capitalizing on state weakness. The proliferation of jihadist actors poses the risk of terrorist attacks in Europe, as well as the possibility of strikes against European interests in North Africa. Further, the instability that has beset North Africa challenges European interests in other ways. Violent conflict and political disorder have undermined North Africa's economic potential, in turn harming European trade with its southern neighbours. Parts of North Africa have become strongholds for criminal networks, including drug traffickers, that have used North Africa as a base from which to gain entry into Europe. The influx of irregular migration from North Africa also challenges Europe's ability to control its borders. The Libyan government's collapse has turned the country into a [refuge](#) for human smugglers, and in the past two years, thousands of migrants have travelled from ports in Libya to Europe, overwhelming

European border security capabilities and straining European states' welfare systems.

Though the problems besetting North Africa are deep-seated, European policymakers have options for addressing these challenges and protecting European interests.

Policy options for European states

The European Union and EU member states have a spectrum of policy options available, ranging from resource-intensive hard-power strategies – including military support to regional allies and even direct military action against militant groups – to soft-power approaches addressing economic and political issues that may contribute to instability. The potential effectiveness of these policies depends on a variety of factors, including the willingness and ability of the EU and member countries to invest resources in them, the extent of cooperation between North African countries and the EU, and evolving political and security conditions in North Africa. As previously noted, this policy brief does not advocate a particular strategy toward the region, but instead is designed to analyse a variety of possible options.

Approaches toward Libya. Of all the North African states, Libya's political environment poses the greatest challenges to European interests and internal security. The escalation of civil conflict has left the country deeply divided politically and geographically, and has facilitated the emergence of an array of violent non-state actors. States such as [Qatar](#) and [Egypt](#) have fuelled this conflict, providing military aid and financial support to their preferred proxies. EU policymakers have rightfully prioritized political negotiations between warring factions as their preferred option for addressing the civil conflict. But policymakers should be prepared for the possibility that negotiations will fail; and even if they do succeed, it is inevitable that some "irreconcilable" groups will reject the negotiations altogether.

One approach that Europe could adopt to facilitate political negotiations is financially sanctioning Libyan factions that obstruct negotiations, and incentivizing factions to engage politically. Targeted sanctions against individuals and groups could allow the EU to increase the costs of non-engagement, and coerce intransigent factions to come to the bargaining table. Sanctions would be particularly effective against factions with significant assets abroad. Under this policy option, EU practitioners would push for sanctions against both Dawn and Dignity factions. The logic behind such a broad application – while some EU states have argued that only Dawn should be sanctioned, and not Dignity – is that restricting sanctions to Dawn leaders and members of the GNC fails to encourage negotiations, instead creating the perception of bias and discrediting the EU as an arbiter.

Sanctions could also be employed if negotiations collapse. In that case, the primary purpose would be to punish jihadists and actors who support them. The sanctions would specifically target Libya Dawn actors who provide material support, political or military, to jihadists in Benghazi and elsewhere in the country.

In the event that negotiations collapse, European policymakers may also look to support Operation Dignity and its allies politically and militarily. The rationale behind this policy is that, although the Dignity coalition is a flawed partner, it nonetheless remains the most promising ally for the West. As U.S. ambassador to Libya Deborah Jones [put it](#), Dignity has been "attacking groups that, frankly, are on our list of terrorists." Support for Dignity would look even more attractive if polarizing players within the Dignity campaign, including Khalifa Hifter, could be side-lined in favour of leadership that is more inclined to distinguish between moderate Islamists and hardliners. There are, however, risks that military support to Dignity forces could fall into the hands of malevolent actors if jihadist groups overrun Dignity military installations. Similar scenarios have already played out in Iraq and Syria, where the Islamic State has taken control of a number of military bases and [seized](#) weaponry and equipment.

Approaches toward Egypt. European policymakers can take steps to strengthen the democratic process and improve security in Egypt, another post-revolutionary country struggling with instability and threats from jihadist organizations. For one, the EU could help to foster greater political engagement between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been the target of a crackdown following the unseating of Morsi's regime in 2013. Many analysts have [argued](#) that the Brotherhood's continuing subjugation could drive its supporters to join hardline groups that engage in terrorism and other forms of political violence. Thus, Europe may consider facilitating dialogue between Sisi's government and the Brotherhood. For example, European officials could host political forums and conferences that include regime officials and Brotherhood members as a means of fostering a culture of engagement, and opening the door to possible reconciliation.

Similarly, the EU could try to facilitate political reconciliation between the Egyptian government and tribes in the Sinai region. The Bedouin tribes of the Sinai have long suffered from political marginalization and economic disenfranchisement, prompting some Sinai residents to [join](#), or at least provide tacit support to, jihadist organizations. Partially because of this dynamic, the Sinai has become the primary safe haven for jihadist organizations in Egypt. The EU can help address the underlying grievances by orchestrating formal political dialogue between Bedouin tribes and the government, providing targeted economic assistance to Bedouin communities, focusing development efforts on the Sinai Peninsula, and encouraging the Egyptian government to exercise more discretion when conducting counterterrorism operations there.

Regional approaches. In addition to country-specific policies, EU practitioners may implement policies on a regional basis that address issues common to many, if not all, North African states. From a security perspective, every North African state confronts either a serious or potential problem with the jihadist groups that have benefited from the post-Arab Spring turmoil. European policymakers can

attempt to strengthen North Africa's security capabilities in several ways.

One of the most critical steps the EU could take is improving North African states' intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and counter-IED (improvised explosive device) capabilities. ISR is a "[critical](#) enabler in understanding, tracking and targeting terrorist networks." Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia all need to modernize their ISR equipment and expand ISR capabilities in order to monitor militant groups operating within, and across, their borders. European states can bolster North African countries' ISR through one of two approaches:

- 1) conducting direct ISR operations (e.g., drone overflights) in North Africa, and sharing intelligence with local partners, or
- 2) conducting capacity-building initiatives and training aimed at strengthening North African states' indigenous ISR capabilities.

Expanding North African states' counter-IED capabilities is similarly a priority, as IEDs have become an increasingly popular weapon for North African jihadist groups. Jihadists in the northwestern mountains of Tunisia have relied heavily on IEDs to disrupt Tunisian military operations. Sinai-based militant groups have also employed IEDs against Egyptian security forces, and an increasing number of IED attacks are occurring in Egypt outside the Sinai. The [proliferation](#) of IEDs in heavily populated areas, including Cairo and Alexandria, presents a particular challenge, as IED detection in urban areas is more difficult.

A variety of instruments are available to EU states to bolster North African counter-IED capabilities. First, EU states may provide local security forces with Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, which are [designed](#) with a V-shaped hull that allows the vehicle to better withstand an IED strike. Second, EU states can provide North African security forces with counter-IED equipment, including systems that will allow these forces to detect and neutralize IEDs. Third, the EU can help build intelligence-gathering capabilities related to the IED threat, which would allow North African states to more effectively target IED procurement and bomb-making cells.

One political risk to providing security assistance is that regional governments, including the Sisi [regime](#) in Egypt and the Bouteflika [regime](#) in Algeria, often disregard internationally recognized human rights standards in their efforts to crack down on domestic security threats and political dissent. By providing security assistance, the EU may be perceived as condoning the behaviour of these regimes, opening itself up to criticism from human rights advocates and perhaps even violent retaliation. To avoid this dilemma, the EU may consider placing conditions on the provision of security assistance, including stipulations that these regimes must adopt democratic reforms and employ greater discretion when conducting domestic counterterrorism operations. In addition, the EU can take a proactive approach to addressing human rights abuses by leading trainings for, and providing guidance on human rights to, North African security forces.

Another security option for the EU is to support security sector reforms (SSR) in North Africa. Even before the Arab Spring placed extreme stress on these sectors, North African armed forces, intelligence agencies, and police were regarded as too large, under-trained, riven with politicization, top-heavy with personnel, equipped with obsolete weapons systems, and incapable of providing adequate levels of security. Many of these issues have been aggravated in the post-Arab Spring environment. SSR could help counterterrorism efforts while addressing continuing organizational and accountability deficits.

Complete security sector reforms would take patience and engineering. There is currently no broad push for reforms in the region despite pervasive issues in the states' security sectors. Each country presents a different set of challenges, but generally speaking they share similar systems of government that can be resistant to change. Donors must [prioritize](#) the needs of the people, ideally ensuring "the immediate protection of civilians," while in the longer term they can aim to "increase the strength of the relationship between the state and the society."

North African countries also face a number of economic challenges, many of which were inherited from the autocratic regimes that were recently toppled. As a recent World Bank report has [shown](#), these problems consist of a lack of competition in the economy, biased access to the economy, excessive government subsidies, and the inhibition of trade liberalization. This has resulted in a plethora of societal problems, especially high [youth unemployment](#). While some effort has been made to address these issues, more action is needed. European policymakers can leverage trade agreements and aid packages to encourage North African countries to adopt policies that would boost their economies, including removing barriers to market entry, lowering their spending on energy subsidies, and streamlining North African financial sectors, which are currently dominated by inefficient state-owned banks. Policymakers can also encourage European economic investment in North Africa.

Similarly, European countries can help strengthen North African political systems, and encourage the region's remaining autocratic regimes to gradually adopt democratic reforms. Corruption, weak rule of law, and bloated bureaucracies all impede good governance. EU policymakers can take several steps to improve transparency and governance, including facilitating, and providing guidance on, anti-corruption initiatives.

In addition, as part of a broader approach to democratic reform, EU policymakers can facilitate greater engagement between North African regimes and civil society actors. Though civil society actors in some North African states gained a modicum of freedom and autonomy following the Arab Spring uprisings, conditions generally remain suboptimal for these actors and the media. EU policymakers can address these issues through democracy assistance, and by encouraging North African states to adopt reforms that will allow civil society actors to operate more freely.

EU policymakers can take a number of steps to address the burgeoning migration crisis emanating from North Africa. For one, the EU

can adopt policies to address migration at its source by strengthening the border security capabilities of North African states. However, this approach will be only minimally effective, as the vast majority of migrants entering Europe from North Africa are departing from Libya, which lacks a cohesive and capable government that can partner with the EU to limit irregular migration. Alternatively, the EU can adopt unilateral measures to address irregular migration from North Africa, ranging from extreme steps – such as imposing a naval blockade and forcibly repatriating migrants to North Africa – to measures that will limit migrant fatalities on the high seas of the Mediterranean, including expanding search and rescue operations. In addition, the EU could change its migration policy to allow refugees to apply for asylum while still living in North Africa, a move that would hopefully reduce the number of migrants who attempt the dangerous sea crossing from North Africa to European shores.

Instability in North Africa will pose long-term challenges to Europe. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes economic, political, and security engagement with North African state and non-state partners. This approach must be both preventive (e.g., strengthening North African state institutions and helping states to rectify local grievances) and also reactive (e.g., mitigating existing threats and reducing European vulnerabilities).

About Clingendael

Clingendael is the Netherlands Institute of International Relations. We operate as a think-tank, as well as a diplomatic academy, and always maintain a strong international perspective. Our objective is to explore the continuously changing global environment in order to identify and analyse emerging political and social developments for the benefit of government and the general public.

www.clingendael.nl

About the authors

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and an adjunct assistant professor in Georgetown University's security studies program. He is the author or volume editor of eighteen books and monographs.

Nathaniel Barr is a threat analyst at Valens Global, a Washington D.C.-based consulting firm, where he focuses on violent non-state actors in Africa.