



**Statement before the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

“U.S. POLICY IN NORTH AFRICA”

A Testimony by:

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee,

It is an honor to talk with you about U.S. policy in North Africa. In a time of great historic change and uncertainty, North Africa poses both perils and opportunities for the United States. Future trends in this region will not only affect the people living there, but will also deeply affect global U.S. interests.

The Maghreb states of North Africa have been marginal to U.S. strategy for decades, yet changes in the region since early 2011 make it increasingly central to a wide range of U.S. interests. These include: security and the fight against violent extremism, political reform in the Arab world, and U.S. security and economic interests in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The U.S. government has acknowledged these shifts in North Africa through modest increases in foreign assistance, most importantly to Tunisia. The Tunisian people inspired millions after deposing a longtime dictator, and set in motion tectonic shifts across the Arab world. In my judgment, however, U.S. engagement has not yet matched the importance of the Maghreb. We ignore the region at our own risk.

Three core factors explain U.S. interests in North Africa:

- 1) **Geography.** North Africa borders three regions that are vital to the United States: Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Trends in the region affect everything from Europe's migration crisis to U.S. forces in the Mediterranean to the safe passage of shipping through the Suez Canal.

The sheer volume of illegal migrants transiting through North Africa on their way to Europe is not only a humanitarian disaster, but it is straining infrastructure, budgets, and security in Europe. This trend could also strengthen extreme nationalist political forces in Europe. It challenges political stability in Europe and NATO's credibility as an effective collective security institution.

North Africa is also deeply intertwined with Sub-Saharan Africa through diplomatic, trade, military, and religious ties. Moreover, vast smuggling networks which traffic in goods and people connect North Africa with Europe, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. When Malian mercenaries on Muammar el-Qaddafi's payroll fled Libya in 2011, they filled the ranks of militant groups in Mali. The political infighting that ensued led to al Qaeda's takeover of northern Mali in mid-2012. Moreover, insecurity in North Africa directly affects developments in Sahelian countries where the United States has identified key security threats—for example in Niger and Chad, where U.S. forces are helping to build more effective counterterrorism forces to battle Boko Haram and other militant groups.

Turning to the Middle East, while many see North Africa as marginal to the region, it is clear that what happens in the region is increasingly important to the Middle East's core. The Arab uprisings that swept across the region began in North Africa, and the governmental responses—both cracking down in the case of Egypt, and exploring more democratic openness in the case of Tunisia—have their locus in North Africa.

North Africans from Tunisia and Morocco especially are globally networked, primarily through expatriate communities in Europe, but also throughout the rest of North Africa and the Middle East. These networks transmit what happens in those countries far beyond their borders. The most worrying negative example of this is the large numbers of young Tunisians and Moroccans fighting with the Islamic State group (ISG) and jihadi-salafi militias in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

Since 2011, Arab governments and Turkey have noticed these connections, and they have played a more active role in the region. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have been the most assertive outside actors in the region. They seek to harness regional alliances to protect their core national interests and expand their spheres of influence at a time of greater regional polarization and conflict. Morocco for example, is now participating in the anti-ISG coalition in Syria and the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen. External actors are also more willing than ever to act independently and expend significant political and financial capital to influence political outcomes in North Africa. Some, like the UAE, have even launched independent military air strikes in Libya. That Arab governments in the Gulf see the region as central to the future of the Middle East should further alert us to its importance.

- 2) **Terrorism.** Libya is the ISG's most important base outside of Syria and Iraq, and it is emerging as a hub for jihad. Thousands of extremist fighters have come to Libya, where they train and network. Some trained fighters then return home, where they pose a security risk and launch terrorist attacks. An Islamic State outpost in the southern Mediterranean—only 100 miles from European shores—threatens American security and economic interests, puts neighboring states at risk, and makes it unlikely that a stable political order and economic development will emerge in Libya in the near future.

According to a UN Working Group, the Islamic State commands approximately 3,000 fighters in Libya, mostly in its base in Sirte. Almost half of those are believed to be Tunisian, but there are Moroccans, Sudanese, Nigerians, and other nationalities joining as well. Since revolutionaries overthrew the Qaddafi regime in August 2011, Libya has served as a training ground and transit point for Tunisians and other North African jihadists on their way to Syria and Iraq. While Syria remains the main destination for jihadi fighters, in time, Libya could eclipse Syria as the primary destination for jihadists from North Africa, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Evidence on social media suggests jihadists are debating the merits of joining the Islamic State in Libya versus Syria and Iraq. For North Africans and for many Europeans, Libya is closer and easier to reach than Syria. Libya shares 2,700 miles of land borders with six neighboring states. (By comparison, the U.S.-Mexico border is 2,000 miles long.) Crossing porous borders, especially from Tunisia and through the Sahara Desert, can be perilous, but is relatively straightforward.

Terrorists in Libya often do not stay in Libya. ISG operatives in Libya have already struck Western tourists in neighboring Tunisia, undermining its security and economy.

Not only are jihadists from across North and Sub-Saharan Africa joining the ISG in Libya, but weapons from the conflict have reached insurgents in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula as well as in the Gaza Strip. Putting this into perspective it's important to note that al Qaeda was able to wreak havoc from its isolated base in the Afghan mountains. A jihadi stronghold off the shores of Europe poses direct long-term threats to U.S. interests.

Libya's role in regional and global jihad is not new. Libyans formed jihadi-salafi groups in the 1990s and 2000s, which fought alongside al Qaeda in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. Following the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in August 2011, many former jihadists returned to Libya and took advantage of the security vacuum, lack of government consensus, plentiful arms, and pools of young idle men. Libya quickly became a transit point for North African jihadists to train before reaching Syria, and an important hub for weapons, training, and sanctuary.

Algerian terrorist mastermind Mokhtar Belmokhtar's group transited through Libya on its way to attack Algeria's In Amenas gas facility in January 2013, where it killed 40 people. As fighting and diplomacy in Syria begin to shift, more North African, Sub-Saharan African, and European jihadists could seek to join the ISG in Libya. Their presence poses a long-term threat to Mediterranean shipping, border security in North Africa and the Mediterranean, tourism, economic growth, and political stability.

Terrorism is not only a central problem for Libya. The rise of terrorist violence in neighboring Tunisia, which shares a 275-mile border with Libya, has been a persistent threat. Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia leadership fled to Libya and regrouped there after it was banned in the summer of 2013. Tunisian ISG members who were trained in Libya carried out attacks against Westerners at the Bardo Museum in Tunis in March 2015 and at a beach resort in Sousse in June 2015, killing more than 50 people combined. The attacks undermined Tunisia's security and weakened its economy, which relies on tourism for approximately 7 percent of its GDP.

Tunisia has its own domestic terrorism problem, even without spillover from Libya. By most accounts Tunisians make up the single largest foreign group of fighters in Syria and probably also in Libya. More than 4,000 Tunisians have joined jihadi groups in Syria since 2011 out of an estimated 30,000 foreign fighters. That's roughly 13 percent of foreign fighters in Syria from a relatively small country of only 11 million people. There is no single driver of radicalization. Young men are attracted to radical groups for a range of ideological, social, financial, and criminal reasons. As long as the deeper socioeconomic issues driving radicalization persist including youth marginalization, unemployment, and a broader sense of humiliation and despair, Tunisians will continue to join radical groups and pose a long-term challenge to the country's development.

- 3) **Political change in the Middle East.** Tunisia is an important example of how an Arab country can transition from autocracy to more representative and accountable government. Success stories are few, but Tunisia is a strong candidate to be one of them. Politics seem to be bringing people together out of necessity, and the population seems overwhelmingly committed to change through politics rather than through violence.

For more than a half-century, the United States has promoted good governance and reform globally, and in the Middle East and North Africa in particular. While the emphasis has shifted from administration to administration, promoting accountable and representative government remains a core objective of U.S. foreign policy. Congress has approved tens of billions of dollars in aid to meet that objective. Tunisia, despite its numerous challenges, remains the best opportunity for building a new kind of compact between an Arab government and its citizens. In many ways, it has become a test case for U.S. commitment to the idea of reform, and other governments are watching.

Moreover, the United States has a unique opportunity to build a new kind of partnership with an Arab country. Over time Tunisia could become an important asset and partner in the region in counterterrorism cooperation, naval security, peacekeeping, and trade.

But it is much too early to celebrate. While Tunisia has made important strides forward, as recognized by the Nobel Prize Committee, it remains vulnerable to a host of threats and challenges including: political polarization; radicalized youth; deep socioeconomic problems; economic stagnation and corruption; and a wide gap between the country's coast and underdeveloped interior, any of which could precipitate crises that would make democratic consolidation more difficult.

With all this at stake, it is worth identifying the most important trends affecting North Africa right now. I'd like to draw your attention to three key points concerning the situation in the area.

1) **Libya's political conflict creates a security vacuum exploited by the Islamic State group and other militants, which destabilizes every country in the region.**

Competition and rivalry between Libya's two governments is the biggest factor contributing to the ISG's expansion in Libya. These two competing governments--one based in Tripoli in the west and the other (recognized by the United States and Western governments) in the eastern town of Tobruk--are more interested in fighting each other than cooperating to defeat the ISG. Without a unified government Libya will be unable to begin the long process of building state institutions, renewing its oil exports, reviving its economy, and disarming hundreds of militias that undermine the idea of a unified state.

The disintegration of the Libyan state is one of North Africa's biggest challenges. The conflict is largely a question of legitimacy. Those who fought Qaddafi claim revolutionary legitimacy. Some claim legitimacy from elections or recognition by Western governments. Hundreds of militias claim legitimacy and authority by force of arms and tribal affiliation. In the four years since Qaddafi's demise Libya has had three governing bodies: the National Transitional Council (NTC), which formed during the rebellion against Qaddafi; the General National Congress (GNC) which was elected in July 2012; and the Council of Deputies or House of Representatives (HOR) elected in June 2014. UN-led negotiations seek to create a national unity government, but that effort stalled in October when both Libyan governments objected. Both governments are equally responsible for the talks' failure.

It is tempting to reduce Libya's conflict to a battle between Islamist and nationalist forces. But the reality is more complicated. The country is divided along multiple fault lines which don't neatly fit into ideological categories but rather are based on intersecting tribal, ethnic, local, and regional dynamics. Moreover, neither government is unified. When the HOR Prime Minister Abdullah al Thinni tried to leave Libya to join UN-led talks in Malta regarding the national unity government, he was blocked from traveling by forces commanded by Khalifa Hifter, who is nominally the military chief of the HOR government. The government in Tripoli is also divided between political factions and militias representing different ideological, tribal, and local forces.

Libya's ongoing conflict threatens all of its neighbors. After decades of Qaddafi meddling in the region's affairs, Libya has become an arena for proxy wars by external actors. The quandary is that even if a unity agreement is formed it will not solve Libya's deep problems. But without a unity government there is little possibility for any group to secure enough legitimacy to begin rebuilding Libya.

- 2) **Tunisia remains vulnerable to political polarization, economic stagnation, terrorism, and deep socioeconomic challenges which help fuel radicalization.** The commitment of Tunisia's main political factions to compromise is an important achievement. Yet, this consensus is fragile and overshadowed by deep political divisions, which prevent the government from addressing controversial issues that could undermine the economic and political interests of nearly every key political actors. This includes the powerful labor unions and rival leading parties Ennahda, with Islamist ties, and Nidaa Tounes, which has ties to the former Ben Ali regime. The government's justifiable preoccupation with security has allowed it to sidestep a range of critical yet controversial debates. Rather than address a range of urgent economic issues such as investment, tax, and banking reform as well as job creation, corruption, and youth marginalization, the government has delayed any serious debate on these issues for fear of alienating powerful constituencies.

An economic reconciliation law intended to uncover past financial abuses and corruption that is under debate is an important example. The law is part of a broader transitional justice process aimed at uncovering past abuses under the old regime. Rather than prosecute past offenders, the law offers amnesty in exchange for admitting financial crimes in a secret tribunal and repaying any ill-gotten funds with a fine. Opponents of the law claim that it excuses crimes committed under Ben Ali and undermines the whole idea of breaking with Tunisia's authoritarian past. The government however, argues that the returned money will be used to create jobs and provides greater certainty for Tunisia's business community, which has been cautious of investing in the domestic economy for fear of prosecution. Every side in the debate has merit. The challenge for Tunisians is to decide the appropriate balance between investigating past abuses and avoiding new and potentially destabilizing political conflicts.

In all of this an unlikely coalition between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, which formed largely in opposition to Ennahda's rule, has allowed the government to pass legislation virtually unchallenged. So far the leaders of Ennahda have prioritized political consensus and compromise over a religious and conservative agenda.

The current government has largely focused on security, which is driven by three primary threats. First, since 2012 Tunisia has faced a low-level insurgency in the Chaambi Mountains on the eastern border with Algeria from the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigades, a loose group of militant cells largely affiliated with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Since the end of 2012 insurgents have killed dozens of Tunisian soldiers and security personnel near the Algerian border. According to some reports at least one Okba ibn Nafaa cell has pledged allegiance to the ISG.

The second threat is driven by the presence of the ISG in Libya and the growing role of Tunisians in Libyan jihadi groups. The ISG in Libya is aggressively recruiting Tunisians and is now marketing jihad in Libya to them as the gateway to Tunisia. For the ISG, Tunisia represents a low-cost opportunity to disrupt a neighboring state. This is important both to plant the flag of ISG operations in Tunisia in its competition with al Qaeda, but also to undermine the narrative of Tunisia's democratic transition. It is still unclear to what extent the Libyan branch of the ISG's outreach to Tunisians is driven by the ISG's leadership in the Levant or a local initiative to take advantage of Tunisia's close proximity and pools of radicalized youth. In either case, Tunisians are responding, which escalates the threat to Tunisia.

Tunisia's future stability will be directly shaped by Libya, because the two countries are close neighbors that are deeply linked by family, historic, and economic ties. The two countries share a porous 275-mile border which is overrun by smugglers and criminal gangs which help facilitate the movement of goods and people. Many Libyans have family in Tunisia and before 2011, nearly a quarter-million Tunisians (out of a population of 11 million) lived and worked in Libya, where jobs were plentiful. After the Qaddafi regime fell between 750,000 and one million Libyans (out of a total population of approximately 6.5 million) fled to Tunisia.

More than 40,000 Tunisians currently live and work in Libya, which makes it difficult to distinguish between those who seek to fight jihad and those who seek legitimate jobs. Libya is also more accessible and easier to reach than Syria. It is relatively straightforward to cross the Libyan-Tunisian border and the ISG is deliberately reaching out to Tunisians and other would-be jihadists from the Maghreb to join the group in Libya. As long as the ISG remains active in Libya, Tunisia will be in the jihadi crosshairs.

Third, radical preachers urging violence have nurtured a homegrown jihadi-salafi movement in Tunisia. A legacy of state secularization dismantled Tunisia's religious institutions after independence in 1956, depriving religious scholars the intellectual tools to combat salafi and jihadi-salafi ideas that increasingly filtered into Tunisia over the past few decades. Following the overthrow of Ben Ali, radical preachers took control of nearly 20 percent of the country's mosques, though the government has reasserted control over most. Many young people are driven by the simplicity of the salafi message and the rebellion it poses to the limited Islamic teaching and practice that was tolerated under Ben Ali. Tunisia's government and religious institutions will need to develop a long-term

strategy to build more credible religious institutions that are relevant to the population, most importantly young people.

- 3) **Algeria and Morocco have been spared the political violence and tumult plaguing their neighbors, but they face many of the same chronic socioeconomic problems and a number of potentially destabilizing long-term challenges.** Compared to their neighbors in Tunisia and Libya, Morocco and Algeria have enjoyed relative stability. Yet, their ongoing political conflict over the Western Sahara prevents greater Algerian-Moroccan cooperation that is vital to addressing the region's broader security problems. Under the current circumstances it is unlikely that the Algerian-Moroccan rivalry can be mended in the immediate future.

Morocco remains politically stable compared to its neighbors largely due to cooperation between the monarchy and the Justice and Development Party (PJD), a political Islamist party integrated into politics for more than a decade that now heads the government. Each is dependent on the other, and each has an interest in cooperating to advance their interests. Meanwhile the economy has shown signs of improvement, and the instability in Tunisia and widespread violence in Libya remind many Moroccans that the alternative to the current predicament could be much worse. Still, Morocco faces many of the deep socioeconomic challenges and grievances that radicalize young people in other parts of the region. More than 1,500 Moroccans have joined jihadi groups in Syria, and local radicalized cells pose a persistent risk. Morocco's security forces have been vigilant against jihadi-salafists, but radicalization remains a long-term challenge. Moreover, a multifaceted grassroots opposition which called for widespread change in early 2011 has been divided and weakened, yet persistent calls for change could erupt again in the future.

Algeria is still enjoying more than a decade free of the widespread violence that gripped the country in the 1990s during its war on terrorism. That stability was largely fueled by high energy prices, which provided funds for massive public spending projects, subsidies, and government handouts used to address socioeconomic grievances and demands. But that stability may be only temporary. AQIM remains active in Algeria's mountains, and the attraction of the ISG could shift jihadi dynamics leading to a more aggressive jihadist campaign against the government. Lower oil prices have already depleted foreign reserves, and the government faced a \$50 billion shortfall in its 2015 budget. Politically, a long-lasting feud between the presidency and certain military factions appears largely resolved in favor of the presidency. Yet, President Bouteflika, who brought stability to Algeria after a decade of violence, is old and ailing. The lack of a clear succession plan creates uncertainty about Algeria's political stability in the next year. Instability in Algeria would negatively impact every country in the Maghreb and Sahel.

The U.S. approach:

The United States is more engaged in North Africa today than at any point in the last half-century. It has deep ties with Morocco stretching back to the Cold War, growing relations with Algeria, and receptivity in Tunisia to building a new partnership. Yet, its engagement and

commitment remains unfocused, underfunded, and not commensurate with the Maghreb's level of importance to vital U.S. interests. There is no blueprint for how to meet numerous challenges the region poses, in part because every country in North Africa is different, has its own historical experiences that influence society and politics, and is at a different stage of political development. Still there are a number of policy conclusions that can guide a more effective U.S. policy moving forward:

- 1) **Continue to invest in diplomacy.** The U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia played an important role urging Tunisia's main political factions to cooperate at crucial junctures in the country's transition. That direct engagement likely made a difference between political compromise and stability instead of violence and division. In Libya, pushing the two competing governments toward a unity government is also important. The United States can ratchet up pressure on warring Libyan factions through the use of more targeted sanctions against Libyans actively blocking a unity government. The European Union is debating additional sanctions and the U.S. Government should coordinate more closely with Europe on this point. Ultimately, Tunisians and other North Africans must make their own decisions based on their own interests. But the record shows that U.S. diplomats and political engagement can have a positive impact under certain conditions. When the United States stays on the sidelines or is ambiguous about its desired outcomes, however, other governments fill the void and often advocate narrowly driven policies, which undermine U.S. interests and often perpetuate political conflict. Support by different U.S. allies for Libya's competing governments for example, has helped perpetuate Libya's political crisis.
- 2) **Prioritize investment in and assistance to at-risk countries that show potential, most importantly Tunisia.** The United States has recognized Tunisia's progress, declaring it a major non-NATO ally, provided loan guarantees, and increased U.S. assistance since 2011. That aid has been an important sign of U.S. friendship. But the level of U.S. aid compared to other countries in the Middle East remains modest. The administration requested \$134 million in assistance for Tunisia in FY2016. The Senate's recent appropriation bill cut nearly one-third of the requested aid for Tunisia, while increasing aid for a number of other countries. Of course, there are finite resources available for foreign aid, and taxpayer dollars must be carefully scrutinized. But the importance of Tunisia's success at a time of historical challenges requires a more consistent and robust aid package, which Tunisians and Americans should formulate together. At the very least, fully funding the requested aid for FY2016 would send an important message of U.S. commitment.
- 3) **Speed up military assistance and sales that we have promised.** In July 2014 Tunisia's government requested to purchase 12 UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters to strengthen its border defenses and counterterrorism capabilities. The order was later changed to eight Black Hawks because Tunisia could not afford the full order, with an expected delivery date at the end of December 2016. (Four of the models were for modified versions with a number of weapons upgrades.) But in September 2015 Tunisia's government was notified that the four modified versions would not be delivered until mid-2019, nearly five years after the initial request. Moreover, they were informed that the cost would nearly double

from the original agreement. The Black Hawk sales were an important signal of U.S. commitment to Tunisia's fight against terrorism at a critical time. But the lengthy delay in delivery diminishes the value of U.S. support, because Tunisia faces an immediate threat. It not only limits Tunisia's military capabilities as the country is fighting an al Qaeda insurgency on the western border and the ISG in Libya on its eastern border, but it could also push Tunisia to seek aircraft and military supplies from alternative sources. This would undermine an important opportunity to build long-term defense and servicing contracts with a professional military force in the region, which has proven itself to be apolitical and committed to civilian government. At the same time, it is important not to over-secure our aid and partnership. Security is a crucial component, but it must be part of a more comprehensive strategy to help Tunisia.

- 4) **Have realistic expectations and a long-term investment approach.** Many of the challenges currently facing the region are chronic problems that don't have easy solutions, and in some cases will take more than a generation to improve. In the meantime the security environment will likely deteriorate before it improves, posing new challenges for U.S. interests and those of our partners. As the United States clarifies its policy objectives and priorities in the region, taking a long-term investment approach while having reasonable expectations of what is achievable in the short to medium term will guide a more effective policy. Most importantly, the United States should seek to build long-term partnerships across a range of institutions and constituencies in the region beyond governments. Investing in student exchange programs, joint research and development initiatives in specific fields, and more diverse trade can overtime foster deeper, more resilient, and more valuable partnerships.

It is in the United States' interest to invest in and forge deeper partnerships with the states of North Africa for the reasons argued above. There is great potential to create more stable societies, economies, and governments which are accountable to their people. Ultimately the people of the region must make their own decisions about the kind of future they want. The United States cannot force political decisions or set local agendas. But it can play a role in supporting these countries in the midst of historic changes.

Stability and progress in North Africa strengthens a wide range of global U.S. interests encompassing security, counterterrorism, and diplomacy. That requires a long-term investment approach that sees the opportunity, acknowledges the manageable risk, and has the willpower to ride out the inevitable fluctuations. If we stay that course, we position ourselves to ultimately strengthen America and to reap dividends long into the future.