

The Maghrib: Bridge or Barrier?  
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Iberia is a head looking across the Atlantic, and the Canaries are the Spanish beard hanging down over the northwest coast of Africa, sparkling with ocean foam. When the Atlas mountains started marching from Sicily across North Africa, preceding the Phoenicians and the Romans, they just kept on going out into the Ocean, unaware that Africa had ended, only their tallest heads remaining above the surface of the waters until finally the Ocean got too deep and submerged them all. Okba ibn Nafi', the desert warrior, was more alert: "If it weren't for this [pesky] ocean," he proclaimed in 681, "I would keep on going!" North of the Atlas, Tariq ibn Ziyad was not stopped by a smaller body of water. Africa stops at the Pyrenees, Europe stops at the Atlas, it is variously claimed. All this is very relevant today.

This multi-crossroads of the world is a congeries of geographic forces and images that fall into the perspective of one's observation point. From Europe's point of view, North Africa is the Other Shore, across the river, but West Africa is Around the Bend. From West Africa's point of view, the Maghrib is also the other shore, the other side's Sahel from whose incursions the Sahara affords some protection; caught between two slave-traders, first the Maghribi Arabs from the North, then the Europeans from the coast, the West Africans developed their own uneasy relations with both, both before and after (regained) independence. So in the middle is the Maghrib, as much an island as Algeria's name indicates, separated by two seas—water and sand—but in both directions: Longitudinally it is a transitional zone where Africa faces Europe, a Grey Area in borderland terms (Zartman 2006), but latitudinally it is also between salt and sand, a piece of the Arabo-Muslim world set adrift west of Lepanto, partially Ottomanized to be sure but as distinct from the core as the Sun's Rise is from its Setting (or indeed in colonial terms, as the East is from the West).

When one adds a completely foreign perspective, the one that looks back at the face of Iberia, all this does not disappear but takes its own shape. To the US, hiding behind its Monroe Doctrine, Europe bears a complex special relation, as all countries do with their former colonizers. West Africa bears no relation at all, since it colonized America, albeit involuntarily, not the reverse. In between, North Africa is seen as a mildly important part of a continent of no importance. It is seen as a region of borrowed interest, more for its latitudinal relation than its longitudinal one. Since seeing is believing, is it a Bridge or a Barrier, and to where?

### **The Latitudinal View**

Seen from the US, North Africa is above all the western-most extension of the Arabo-Muslim world. It has been many other things too—the southern shore of the Mediterranean, the northern cap on Africa, a historic partner—but its East-West relation (on the same latitude as the US East Coast from Washington to Florida) gives it its greatest importance. These relationships take on different colors within the global context of the moment—World War II, the Cold War, the "war" against terrorism—but the pattern of importance is generally the same.

In the current context, the Maghrib is the most accessible part of the Middle East, and the various aspects of its relations with the US need to be strengthened to serve this interest. The first is the application of (current) US trade policy in the form of regional free trade agreements (FTA). Morocco, along with Jordan, are the initial steps in the application of that policy by which the US hopes to open markets, encourage trade liberalization and economic *infitah* in general, promote US direct investment (FDI), and develop closer economic ties. Tunisia is the next target, perhaps Libya thereafter, and with these stepping stones the whole south shore of the Mediterranean would gradually be brought into a regional free trade area with the US, for the greater modernization (*mise à niveau*) of the region and the expansion of US trade.

The US would be happy to see the free trade area idea be extended to intra-regional trade rather than having to deal with a bundle of bilateral agreements. It is unlikely that it would take major risks to make such horizontal free trade a condition for its own vertical FTAs, but it is likely to do its best to encourage such opening. The Maghrib Arab Union and the European

Union's trade agreements with the states of the region have failed consistently to achieve any intra-regional trade liberalization; intra-Maghribi trade is negligible (average 5%), which is the problem, whereas trade between individual North African countries and the EU occupies the majority of the region's total trade, which is the other side of the problem. Trade with the US varies widely by country and direction, leaving the US without enough clout to enforce a true regional free trade area. In any case, it will be a while before the US can fill in all the holes between Morocco and Jordan, not to speak of the holes being busily bored in the bottom of the boat by the congressional Democrats.

The second aspect of US-Maghribi relations involves security. While the core of common security concerns involves anti-terrorist cooperation, security has some very different implications for each North African country that cast shadows on that cooperation. All five Maghribi countries are deeply concerned by the destabilizing effects of salafist or jihadist groups, the most important of which is the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), roving around the Sahara, which has just proclaimed its adherence to al-Qaeda (for what that is worth). The countries cooperate in EUCOM's Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) expanded from the Pan-Sahel Initiative and focused on equipment and counterterrorism training for Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, and possibly Libya, in addition to Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, Niger and Chad. Despite stories, there do not appear to be any US bases in Morocco or Algeria, only supplies, advisor and trainers to local bases. However, as with the trade issue, security cooperation with the US does not extend to military cooperation among the enemy brothers of the region or the establishment of a security community, where military exchanges are undertaken and war is no longer a policy option between members.

Economic openness and security meet in the crossroads of development, for increase in economic satisfaction and opportunity reduces the available dissatisfied youth that foster Islamic terrorism. Fundamentalism is an economic phenomenon, that ideological entrepreneurs are eager to take to their account. The best way to reduce the threat of terror is not through theological debates or even political mediation (in the Mideast, not in the Maghrib) but through the increase of economic opportunity and social promotion at home. North African and American governments alike are aware of the relationship, although the urgency is most sharply felt at home. Unfortunately, development, promotion and opportunity do not come overnight, whereas disillusion, despair, and anger often do burst forth impetuously, after long seething.

All North Africa states also share concerns, along with the US, about internal Islamist subversion. Such concerns were the undersurface basis of cooperation as early as 1989 in the creation of the UMA, and they have provided reasons of common interest among otherwise uncooperative Maghribi states, and with the US. Morocco, and perhaps others, cooperates with the US security services in tracking and interrogating suspects, as in Guantanamo, and in sharing intelligence, and has worked with US intelligence organizations to monitor the international activities of terrorist groups, leading to the prevention of alleged attempts to sabotage shipping in the Straits of Gibraltar. Other types of security cooperation involve the US with the other Maghribi states.

Such cooperation has its cost. On one hand, it obliges the US to chide less forcefully about repressive regime behavior, as in Tunisia, or to tiptoe around contentious issues where it might otherwise weigh in more strongly, such as the Sahara. On the other hand, military cooperation causes concern among neighbors, as military cooperation with Algeria worries Morocco (particularly after Algeria's major arms purchases from Russia). As a result, US initiatives in conflict management in the area are—perhaps counterintuitively—muted. While one might think that security cooperation with two conflicting North African countries would give the US a position from which to bring them together, the fact that the US is as interested as they in the “war” against terrorism means that the lever is in the other hand. While the US would certainly like to play the peace broker between Morocco and Algeria on the Saharan issue, and did so under the cover of the UN designation of James Baker III as Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and erstwhile special friend of President George W Bush, Baker's frustrating and ultimately compromising experience in the job showed the impossibility of mediating a solution. In the end, the US—and the UN—has had to accept

the fact that agreement on a voters' list to fulfill the criteria for a referendum is impossible and that the best course is to work with the only step toward the middle offered by either party, the Moroccan autonomy proposal.

The third area of interest for the US in North Africa is democracy, or more properly democratization. The Maghrib is somewhere in the midst of the process, and the US has wisely stayed out, limiting itself to supporting NGOs that teach better governance. Morocco is a historic multiparty system with a hereditary and all-responsible (if not all-powerful) head of state; Algeria has had the only competitive elections for a head of state, operating under control of the military junta since independence; Tunisia had made several admirable moves to the edge of democracy, only to pull back into worse repression thereafter. Pressing for more progress has not been a priority of US policy and interest in the region; after all, the Maghrib is generally doing better on this count than the rest of the Arab world..

Of greater interest is the fourth area, oil and gas. In this too the Maghrib is an extension of the Arabo-Muslim(-petroleum) world. Only Algeria and Libya are involved, both OPEC members who provide only limited alternatives to the US Mideast energy dependency.

Finally, seen from the US, North Africa is an area of historic engagement, sometime of ambiguous direction. Military engagement on the shores of Tripoli and Algiers led to a historic relationship with Morocco, the first country to recognize the US in 1787 and then to America's oldest friendship treaty, still in effect. Allied landings in North Africa in World War II and then bases in Morocco and Libya until 1964 and 1969, respectively, created ties of memory. Overseas Research Centers of the American Institute of Maghrib Studies (AIMS) in Tunis (Centre d'études maghrébines à Tunis—CEMAT), Tangier (Tangier American Legation Museum) and Algeria (Centre d'études maghrébines en Algérie—CEMAA) facilitate research ties with the region. AIMS is affiliated with the professional association of Middle East Studies (MESA), not of African Studies (ASA). Important as these elements are, they complement but do not orient US policy toward the region or even the US perception of it. The US does not have a significant or active emigrant population from North Africa to exert political pressure in favor of its country of origin.

In sum, policy American looks at the Maghrib as a western extension of the Middle East, an accessible entry point or Bridge to the Mashriq and the Khalij (Gulf), attractive in the same terms of interest as the Arabo-Muslim(-petroleum) core but containing greater degrees of shared interest. Does this situation presage heightened US interest and influence, in terms of the region itself rather than just as a Bridge to further core areas of interest? Unlikely, although much depends on the scenario; the Maghrib is likely to remain of interest as the handle to the Mideast casserole rather than an area of primary interest in and of itself.

Perhaps 3 quick scenarios will help focus perspectives. One would be the Islamist Dream, the exorcism of the West, America, and their culturo-economic-political expression—globalization. Bases all gone, oil all nationalized, fundamentalist governments in, in the Mashriq. The Maghrib will be beleaguered from within and without, but all the more important to the US (and the West) for that very reason. Meanwhile, in the Mashriq, European government will stumble over each other to development special, privileged, understanding relations with the various fundamentalist regimes, who will soon fall out among themselves: Nothing is as divisive as religious unity!

Another scenario would be the great retreat of fundamentalism, the continuing tsunami of globalization, the strengthening of pre-Western governments, the diminution of terrorism. While this is unlikely in its "pure" state, it contains many probable elements. The Maghrib would be part of the trend, not riding against it, and so would share in but not overshadow the importance of the Mashriq for the US.

The third scenario is always something in between, more of the same, no clear victories anywhere. Without arguing all the details of this projection, suffice it to say here that in it the Maghrib retains its importance to the US, secondary in relation to the Middle East but deriving its interest from the core region, a latitudinal Bridge.

## The Longitudinal View

Earlier inquiries into the seas of sand and salt that surround the Maghrib found that they too were bridges across themselves, tying the north and south shores of the Mediterranean and the Sahara together in human commerce of all types (Zartman 1962, 1964). Does the Maghrib form that same function in relation to Europe and to West Africa, in US eyes?

Little will be said here about Maghribi-European relations, because too much would have to be said. North Africa, along with West Africa, is currently reversing the colonial flow across the Sea, from southward to northward, to Europe's discomfort. If North Africa is in any way a bridge to Europe, the traffic needs badly to be regulated. The US looks on, sympathetic but impotent to act on the issue; after all, the Maghrib is Europe's Mexico, and the US has not solved its own. At the same time, to the US, the Maghrib has a post-colonial relation with Europe that needs to be enlarged, not replaced, but by alternatives offered by the US. Free trade policies, energy policies, security policies need all to be understood in part in that light.

The view to the south is similar for all the differences. North Africa is indeed a bridge, not for interchange but for further flows of postcolonial reversal, a pausing place for West Africans preparing for the final plunge to Spain or Italy, quite to both Europe's and the Maghrib's discomfort. North African states play politics and economics in West Africa, and they export their rivalries onto the power vacuum of the Sudan-Sahel since (in a mini-Marxist transposition) they are restrained from direct confrontation across borders among themselves (Zartman ). None of these characteristics gives the Maghrib a bridging role into West Africa.

So, as seen from the US, West Africa has to be viewed by itself, and it does not look very big. Although as the superpower, the US has global interests, Africa ranks at the bottom of its continents of concern, and West Africa is only a higher part of the lower rank because of its propinquity and because of the regional importance of Nigeria. (West Africa will be the topic of the following discussion, because it is the assigned topic and because it fits into the logic of the discussion, although some of the discussion can also apply to the other parts of the continent). West Africa is seen from the US in terms of most general interest, in stability and access, preemptive concerns rather than specific commodities or commonalities. These two dimensions bear examination.

Stability and access are the basic elements in foreign policy interest, applied selectively by smaller states and broadly by global powers (Zartman 2005). A country wants to see stability in the target area of concern, negatively because it does not want to be drawn into conflicts against its interest and positively because it wants to enjoy access, whether commercial or diplomatic. Instability of course is not the only inhibition to access; denied access may result from privileged access by another state, as occurred in the Cold War but also in some post-colonial areas. But where it is endemic and where it requires involvement anyhow, instability is a primary barrier to be overcome.

The US public and officialdom sees West Africa as a region of instability, a problem to which attention has been drawn frequently by calls from policy and press. The West African Regional Rot, which began in the 1980s with the Doe regime in Liberia, has consumed a region previously known for its hopeful, even flamboyant experience in colonial liberation. The age born with Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in 1956, Sekou Toure in Guinea in 1958, and then Felix Houphouet Boigny in Ivory Coast, Leopold Sedar Senghor in Senegal, and Modibo Keita in Mali in 1960 and borne on the wings of a development ideology began to falter in the oil shocks of the 1970s and again the mid-1980s and the subsequent rise in indebtedness and corruption and the fall in terms of trade. Whether the rot began with the arrival to power of Sgt Doe in 1980 or his overthrow in 1989 is a matter of analysis but it introduced a conflict uncontained by state boundaries.

The US response to this situation has been restrained, despite calls for deeper involvement. Since the rot broke out at the end of the Cold war, any strategic interest in the region that the US had rapidly dissipated. Historic interest, narrowly focused on Liberia in any case, rested on a memory dissolved by the end of slavery and colonialism. Economic interest

paled as development faded. But the fear of being sucked into state collapse and genocides remained.

The US refused direct involvement in the replacement of Doe (Charles Taylor being a fugitive from justice in Massachusetts) in 1990, and gave only token support to Senegalese participation in the West African Monitoring Force (ECOMOG) in 1992. It supported UN peacekeeping involvement in Sierra Leone but left peacemaking to ECOWAS and Jesse Jackson at the end of the decade; successive coups in Guinea Bissau were also left to ECOWAS. ECOWAS treated Togo gingerly in 2005 because of the danger of instability it bore. The Casamance and Tuareg rebellions were left to the Senegalese and Malians themselves, respectively. When Ivory Coast fell apart, after 1999, the US resolutely backed France, then ECOWAS, and then the African Union, but did not engage directly.

But after the poor ECOMOG showing, politically as well as militarily, in Liberia, the US has developed military assistance projects for selected areas of the continent with particular attention to West Africa. This began with the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), originally involving non-lethal assistance and training to Benin, Senegal, Ghana, and Mali among its 9 members, with only the first two participating in the end. (It was accompanied by the French *Renforcement des capacités africaines pour le maintien de la paix* [RECAMP] and the British African Peacekeeping Training Support, and later Belgian, Canadian and Danish efforts, leading to a joint P3 initiative in 1997). The US effort continued in 2000 as the Operation Focus Relief, then the West African Stabilization Project the next year, then the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance the year after, and lately, in 2004) but certainly not finally the Global Peace Operations Intervention. The focus of much of this effort is on preparing African troops to participate in UN peacekeeping operations. On their northern shore on the Sahara, West African states such as Senegal, Mali, Chad and Nigeria are also involved in the Trans-Sahelian Initiative described in connection with North Africa.

These activities translate a perception of the region as an area of instability that needs encouragement to take steps toward its own stabilization lest it fail further. It is also mirrored by some efforts to reinforce the islands of emerging stability. Benin, Mali and Ghana qualify for Millennium Challenge Account; these 3 plus Senegal are in the favored G-11 identified by the World Bank as development prospects. Development is always a positive interest as the West regards Africa, but it is the spectre of instability that drives that concern in West Africa.

This conclusion probably goes far to explain why democratization has not been a generic item of US interest in the area. It is pretty well substantiated that the transitional phase for polities between authoritarianism and democracy is the most unstable, either pole being less conflicted, although authoritarianism tends to invite such pressures that its stability is only apparent and temporary. To make strong demands for democratization would only exacerbate the conditions of instability. However, the US has joined international (and domestic) pressure on insisting on a democratic transition as a means of dealing with egregious rulers who make instability a chronic inevitability: Kerekou in 1993 in Benin, Doe in 1990 and Taylor in 2005 in Liberia, Abatcha in 1999 in Nigeria, Gbagbo in 2006 in Ivory Coast, Gnassingbe in 2005 in Togo. Democratization took a giant step forward in West Africa in the Sovereign National Conferences (CNS) of the early 1990s and despite some recidivists still can claim Mali and Benin, among the CNS countries, and Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and hopefully Liberia and Sierra Leone as current cases of an operative democratization process. That progress is probably not well enough recognized in the US.

One additional specific element in interest has been left out, or left implicit in this discussion, and that is Nigeria. Nigeria is an interest in itself and mirrors the picture of its whole region. Hailed as the hope of Africa, the antidote and Nkrumah's Ghana, and the image of federal America at its birth in 1960, it hopped successively from hopes to disillusionments in the Biafran war, the Mohammed-Obasanjo restoration, the Abatcha depression, and the new Obasanjo restoration. Not only does it contain one out of every five Africans (one out of 4 Black Africans) but it also contains oil. Thus US interest in stability is increased even further for this corner of the West African region. Often viewed as one of the pivotal states of the whole continent, Nigeria is a key player in stabilizing the region. Particularly following the dynamic leadership of president Olusegun Obasanjo, who has revived ECOWAS, animated the African

Union as its first president, and paced it with the sister organization, NEPAD (the New Economic Partnership for African Development) with its peer-review mechanisms that prepared for the Millennium Challenge status, Nigeria has played a role commensurate with its size.

One other difference may appear to distinguish this picture from the view of North Africa. Unlike the Maghrib, West Africa is the original home of a sizeable portion of Americans, even though it is impossible to separate those originating in West African from other parts of the continent. Their ties are distant, made of myth not memory, and in no way linked to specific countries, many of which did not exist at the time their populations left. Nonetheless, there is a concern for things African. But this diaspora group looks elsewhere for its issues and lacks the ingredients that make diaspora lobbies effective. On one hand, its foreign interests are far overshadowed by its domestic concerns for African Americans in the US, and while it will lobby for such issues as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) its clout is spent on issues of welfare for the Black population in the US. On the other hand, it has few African examples to cite in terms attractive to American values, and those that appeal are negative. The Rwandan genocide called for US attention in race-equal terms, but it also made atrocities in Sierra Leone, Liberia, or Ivory Coast look pale and typical. There are few examples of democracy, bootstrapping, pioneering, and other favored American traits to draw from West Africa. On their level, other organizations play their role: the West African Research Center/Association, the AORC in Dakar; the African Studies Association; and the National Summit on Africa and its branches.

In sum, policy American looks at West Africa as a place worthy of interest and sympathy, but needing above all help in preserving itself from the rot of instability. Because it was in the France sphere of influence and language, Ivory Coast was not a center of much US attention, but for those for whom it was, its collapse after 1999 was a devastating blow to the hopes of development and to the islands of stability argument. Does this situation presage heightened US interest and influence? Probably not, although much depends on the evolution of the region itself. The US is quite unlikely to be involved directly in conflict management in West Africa, but will remain deeply—perhaps more and more deeply, as the Pan-Sahel/TSCT Initiative suggests—involved in enhancing regional capabilities. This includes not only military support, but also capability enhancement for the active regional organization, ECOWAS (much more active and engaged than the UMA to the north), and also for economic and national institutional development, to strengthen the islands of stability. The evolution of Nigeria after the 2007 elections—as a pole of stability or instability—will be crucial, but the Abatche period showed that if Nigeria wants to revert to the latter direction, the US and the West can only watch—and continue to buy its oil.

## **Conclusion**

North Africa is seen from across the Atlantic as a bridge to the Middle East, rather than of direct interest in its own right, and as such attracts a good deal of US interest and concern. Its security and development prospects are good and the US has a common interest and concerned perspective in seeing them continue to improve. West Africa is of direct disinterest in its own right, having no region of greater interest to hang on to, despite the sympathetic concerns with which the area may be viewed. Were it to reverse its course and develop its own potential under the organization of responsible leaders, it would find an interested partner in the US, even more than it now finds in the various, small efforts to build capacity.

And the Canary Islands? All of these characteristics point to the one item, still unaddressed directly, that is of greatest importance to the Canary Islands and to the home country of which it is a part: North and West Africa emigration. North and West Africa's largest export, un-quantifiable in monetary terms, is manpower. Poor economic conditions and instability come together to create boat people, just as they create terrorists. A few boat people, in turn, become terrorists, when they discover that their attempts to seek material satisfaction are no more satisfactory abroad than at home and their search for compensating spiritual satisfaction, unsated at home, find fulfillment only in gestures of anger and salvation. Meanwhile, carpenters in Dakar have stopped making artistic furniture and turned to making boats; West Africans in Morocco use makeshift ladders to scale the walls of Spain in the

Moroccan enclaves. Attempts to stanch this flow are only stop-gaps, literally; but a real preventive policy is a huge and longterm effort. It is composed of all the elements discussed above. The problem itself is not a direct US concern, since the US has its own boat people, but the conditions that create it are a shared matter of interest. The US resolved a recent problem with boat people, Haitians in the 1990s, with a two-pronged policy: direct action to change the repressive government in Haiti and integration of the entire Haitian middle class into the American opportunity system. That is a caricature of an ideal response, even though its elements are worthy of note. A solution to the North and West African problem is more difficult to grasp.

Perhaps one should be grateful that the Atlas mountains continued to march into the ocean, breathing good sea air but far enough from the shore to be a bit apart. Perhaps they should thank Oqbi for being a realist, lest the spirit of Tariq take over.