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## Trump in North Africa

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The election of US President Donald Trump in 2017 meant a critical realignment in Washington's global priorities. The Middle East and North Africa is no exception to this trend as new geopolitical realities emerged that prevalently breaks with traditional arrangements. The Trump administration's policy towards North Africa in particular was characterized by a degree of apathy and an overall prioritization of US national interest. But the gradual demise of the White House and the State Department in North Africa is being replaced by an active Pentagon and a reinvigorated Congress. The following presents an evaluation of the US policy towards North Africa in the Trump era.

### **Introduction**

US foreign policy under President Donald Trump is characterized by isolationism and US engagement across the world is decreasing as a result. Africa is not an exception and in November 2018, for instance, the Pentagon announced a cut of 10% of its troop presence on the continent. North Africa, on the other hand, has never been a priority for Washington's policymakers. Actually, its relevance for Washington is primarily due to its closeness to Europe and its vicinity to the Sahel, where American military presence is on the rise. Furthermore, the current administration has rather been preoccupied with China, Russia and Iran, which makes Africa, and especially North Africa, arguably less urgent to address.

It also seems that Trump's administration is sidelining those regimes considered close to previous administrations. Hence, Tunisia, the success story of Obama's democracy promotion, is rarely mentioned by the Trump administration. Morocco, whose monarchy had close ties with the Clintons, has also been ignored by Trump. Al-Sisi's Egypt by contrast, whose relations with Washington were coarse under President Obama, became the jewel of President Trump's regional policy.

Besides, the Trump camp is skeptical about political Islam. This current, influential in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and to a certain extent Algeria, is equated to extremist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS by influential personnel inside Trump's White House. The same people are, on the other hand, almost in adoration of Egypt's al-Sisi; they prefer his authoritarian and anti-Islamist model to the more emancipated systems that are in place in North Africa since 2011. In many aspects, President Trump has adopted a realist vision confronting Obama's liberal tone. The Congress, however, which is under the Democrats' control since November 2018, will continue to oppose the administration on the foreign policy level.

## The Africa Strategy

On December 13, 2018, National Security Advisor John Bolton unveiled the Trump administration's new "Africa Strategy". It follows a predominantly realist agenda focusing on US national security and economic interest, while targeting the larger objective of countering terrorism as well as limiting Russian and Chinese influence on the continent. Hence, the new strategy opposes Obama's policies that mainly pursued a liberal agenda of democratization, youth empowerment and equal business opportunities *along with* security. With President Trump, it seems as if Africa is left to the Pentagon, American security agencies, and US business circles.

Bolton further emphasized his country's commitment to efficient and tailored development projects that also address Russian and Chinese standing on the continent. Another emphasis was laid on counter-terrorism efforts with a particular focus on North Africa. Thus, evoking Libya and the threat of Islamic extremism, Western Sahara where the US is a strong supporter of the UN efforts, as well as countries located in North Africa's southern neighborhood, such as Mali, South Sudan, and Djibouti. America's presence, according to this strategy, will thus be more targeted, condensed and security as well as business oriented.

## North Africa under Trump

Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco are the only three "Major Non-NATO Allies" of the US in Africa. Along with Algeria, they are frequently visited by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) leadership. As for Morocco and Tunisia, where democracy has made some progress, they are a prized destination for Congressmen and Senators.

Because of **Egypt's** central role in the Middle East and North Africa, several high level meetings between American and Egyptian officials took place (the US First Lady, Vice President, the successive Secretaries of State and Defense, among others, all visited Cairo,

while the Egyptian president was one of a few North African heads of state to be invited to the White House). On January 10, 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered his realist, pro-authoritarian, status-quo seeking "Cairo Speech", meant to counter the liberal "pro-democracy, pro-reform" 2009 speech of President Obama. The Trump administration counts on Egypt to achieve peace in the Middle East and perhaps as well to stabilize Libya in the future. However, due to disagreements between Democrats and Republicans in the Senate, the administration's nominee for the role of ambassador to Egypt remains blocked.

On **Libya**, and although Prime Minister Fayed al-Sarraj is the only other North African head of state after al-Sisi to be invited to the White House, the US administration continues to adopt a pure security strategy. It is not surprising therefore that Trump has not nominated an ambassador since the end of Peter Bodde's term in 2017. For Washington, three problems are ingrained in the Libyan quagmire: terrorism, migration and Russian influence. Furthermore, Libya is central for the stability of Europe and the Sahel. This explains the constant activity by the US army in and around Libya through surveillance, attacks, semi-secret bases, established military bases, or participation in the French led operations in Mali.

In **Tunisia**, the issue of ambassadorship does not exist. A new ambassador arrived in January 2019, the same month the former ambassador left; there was almost no vacuum. However, high level summits, including the Economic Dialogue and the Strategic Dialogue, have stopped. Only a handful senior officials (and not at the level of Secretary of State) visited Tunis recently. Prime Minister Youssef Chahed visited Washington twice between 2016 and 2017 and he met with some important people from the Trump administration, but not with President Trump himself. President Beji Caid Essebsi has not had any one-to-one meeting with President Trump either. A striking contrast with the Obama era when Tunisian heads of state were regular guests of the White House, when Tunisia was often praised by US officials, and when US secretaries flew to Tunisia on a quasi-annual basis. Conversely, it is in Congress and in Senate that Tunisia keeps its prevalence. Congressional and senatorial visits as well as support therefore continue as usual. Hence, when President Trump wanted to decrease aid to Tunisia by two-thirds for 2018, Congress refused and allocated even more funds to the country. The Congress seems to be taking the Tunisia file away from the administration.

In **Algeria** as well, an ambassador was appointed and confirmed since Trump's early days. Washington and Algiers held three Strategic Dialogue sessions since 2017, and the Algerian foreign minister is frequently hosted in Washington. But Algeria remains a close partner of Iran, an important economic partner of China and the largest buyer of Russian weapons in Africa. Its foreign policy is thus generally opposed to the US. The explanation of the recurrence of these Strategic Dialogues, unique in their regularity in North Africa, lays possibly in the Pentagon's efforts to include Algeria in its military programs for Africa, through which the US aims to counter terrorism and migration.

Trump's nominee as ambassador to **Morocco** is, two years after Dwight Bush's resignation, waiting for confirmation. Moreover, Trump has yet to meet with the King of Morocco Mohamed VI. High level meetings are limited, but Rabat keeps paying lobbyists in Washington to improve its image. Moreover, after Rabat severed ties with Teheran in May 2018, the Kingdom started to recover its place in Washington. By showing hostility to Teheran, Rabat signaled its alignment with Trump's Middle East policy. Moroccan foreign

minister Naceur Bourita was thereafter invited to Washington by Secretary of State Pompeo in September 2018, and a Strategic Dialogue session is planned to take place this year. Morocco is also the largest buyer of US weapons in Africa and it can serve as an American outpost to surveil Russian-, Chinese-, or Iranian activism in Algeria, which certainly is of interest to the Pentagon. Rabat can also be a partner for Washington to oppose China, Russia and Iran at once through its almost perpetual conflict with Algeria, which maintains strong ties with all three countries. Additionally, thanks to its lobbying efforts and political reforms, although they are arguably limited, Morocco fares well among Washington lawmakers. Hence, Morocco fits well with President Trump's Africa strategy that is looking for profitable markets. Apart from Egypt, it is Morocco that has the highest capacity to become a North African anchor for Trump's Washington.

## Conclusion

President Trump has made it clear that he wants to move away from the Obama administration's liberal inclinations, stressing on security and economic interests first. President Trump's focus on Egypt, and total disregard of Tunisia, summarizes this orientation. The region's securocrats, who are still influential, find his orientation appealing. Moreover, because of the isolationism of this administration, it is the Pentagon that is taking precedence in a number of foreign policy files. But the Congress and the Senate have a say on foreign policy and do a lot of oversight on expenditure (be it for diplomacy, intelligence, war, etc.). The Congress especially, whose majority is firmly opposed to Trump since the recent midterms elections, will ask for more check powers. The democracy and human rights components are consequently unlikely to disappear from US foreign policy, even if some in Washington would like that to happen. In short, while the White House looks away from North Africa, the Pentagon still considers it a strategic region, and the Congress and the Senate continue to rely on liberal lenses when addressing it.

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