

# TO TACKLE THE SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE MAGHREB: FOCUS ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT!

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS BY CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS FROM  
TUNISIA, LIBYA, MOROCCO AND ALGERIA




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Today, the Greater Maghreb is a geographical, social and ethnic reality. But, at the same time, it is also a denial of a political and economic reality. Composed of five states - Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania - the region is a bridge between Northwest Africa and Europe and therefore is perceived as a transit zone for illegal migration, drug trafficking and terrorism to enter the European Union (EU). Thus, EU members often regard the Greater Maghreb as a threat, which has severe consequences in regard to support mechanisms for the region.

With this in mind, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's (FES) Tunisia Office and the FES MENA Regional Peace and Security Project organized a workshop for 25 civil society actors from the Greater Maghreb region from 15 to 16 January, 2020, to discuss the challenges of the region, particularly in the border areas, and to propose solutions. The objective was to leave the well-trodden path of 'Security First' in favor of a more sustainable approach towards human security and regional development.

## **ECONOMIC AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE MAGHREB**

Currently, migration, smuggling and terrorist activities are challenges facing the Greater Maghreb, especially in the often already marginalized border regions. These problems are exacerbated by the lack of communication and cooperation, the closure of several borders and the weak economic development of the respective countries. The political order within most Greater Maghreb countries represents one source of insecurity. This intrinsic insecurity of the political system is mostly countered by a 'Security First' approach and the centralization of power and resources. This isolates the marginalized population and increases divisions between the authorities and populations, especially in border regions.

Populations in the border regions are considered to be major actors in trafficking and as such pose a danger to the rest of the region. This perception has led to disassociation of these populations and general stigmatization and, as a result, these populations have limited access to education, healthcare and job opportunities. Their fundamental rights are often denied and the border regions have become a nurturing ground for extremist ideologies.

The ongoing war in Libya and the insecurity of the Sahel region are other causes of instability in the Greater Maghreb which have intensified the migration crisis and border trafficking. The lack of state-control has created economic opportunities for around two million people in Tunisia and Libya who live off the income from illicit trade between the two countries.

The socio-economic situation in the borderlands of the Greater Maghreb is also influenced by the economic disparities between the States induced by contradicting policies, as well as an unjust distribution of state services within the countries. The results have been economic and political tensions.

A crucial part of the borderland economy is the trafficking of migrants, especially across Libyan borders where human trafficking networks are well established. The conflict situation in Libya and the lack of legal migration opportunities encourage the transit of illegal migrants and the exposure to abuse by local militias and security forces. Supporting the local militias and security forces with equipment and training to prevent migrants from reaching European borders could support short-term political goals; but this means tolerating abusive practices and as such has a negative impact on long term local conflict dynamics.

## SUMMARY

The situation in the borderlands of the Greater Maghreb is dire as many of the persisting economic and security challenges of the region - for example, unequal development of the regions and a highly centralized state authority - have particular consequences for border populations. Over time, borderlands become a state within a state with parallel economies and parallel security systems and this has intensified the neglect in terms of social coverage, investment and infrastructure of these regions. In addition, latent conflicts between Algeria and Morocco, as well as the war in Libya and weak economic developments of the countries, have deepened and fueled the ongoing crises.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

After discussing the above-mentioned challenges, the **25 civil society** actors with backgrounds in academia, advocacy and activism, developed the following **recommendations** which can contribute to **improved regional development** of the border areas in the Greater Maghreb and ultimately to an enhanced integration of the region. The persisting security and economic challenges of the region are addressed by adopting a **human development approach** instead of a 'Security First' approach. A **sustainable solution** to the persisting challenges can be achieved by adopting the following recommendations:

- Overall, a **holistic approach** to improve the situation of the borderland population should be taken. Measures on the national, interstate, regional and international level are necessary.
- On a **national level**, the states should first and foremost focus on the development of their border regions. This should include the creation of border economic zones, decentralization efforts and investment in infrastructure. Numerous reforms will have to accompany the process. The reduction of social inequalities within the countries should be a key objective.
- On an **interstate level**, steps towards conflict resolution must be taken. In particular, the protracted conflict between Morocco and Algeria is hindering further development of the region. Resolving border issues and other latent conflicts between the Maghreb countries should be the first step towards improving the relationship between the countries as is reopening the borders that are currently closed between Algeria and Morocco as well as Algeria and Libya.
- On a **regional level**, the revitalization of the Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA) is paramount. This institution should facilitate necessary reforms to deepen the Greater Maghreb integration.
- The governments of the region need to improve economic integration to combat smuggling and trafficking to create a free trade zone allowing the unrestricted movement of people and goods. The **harmonization of taxes and customs tariffs** will have a positive impact on the movement of goods and will make the need for illicit cross-border traffic obsolete. Also, common approaches towards **social transfer services** could reduce disparities in prices, wages and social conditions; currently, the countries' approaches diverge. The Algerian and Libyan states heavily subsidize food, water and energy, which is less the case in Tunisia and Morocco. As part of the fight against smuggling and an illicit economy, subsidy schemes should be unified.
- The Maghreb States and the UMA should stimulate the **education sector**. The standardization of academic programs and diplomas, as well as the creation of an inter-Maghreb exchange program for students and teachers, could be an ambitious but fruitful undertaking. Establishing **knowledge exchange zones** by founding universities on the borders of the countries, which focus on cooperation and local development, could strengthen the development of those areas.
- A substantial **investment in infrastructure** is needed to encourage deeper integration of the Greater Maghreb states, including the extension of the inter-Maghreb motorway to integrate all the member states and the construction of an inter-Maghreb rail

way. Border areas should be prioritized.

- A common **migration and asylum policy** should be **established**, one that is acceptable under international humanitarian norms. Cross-border cooperation between Maghreb countries and shared standards in migration policies would have a huge impact on the dire situation of migrant communities trapped in camps between the borders of the region. How to achieve this policy should be the target of a separate discussion.
- Various bodies, including a **monitoring and conflict resolution committee**, should be established with possible neutral international observers to provide technical support, a forum representing Maghreb citizens and civil society actors to promote participatory democracy. In addition, a committee should be established that would be charged with drafting a new charter for the UMA. Tunisia could be a suitable host country for such a forum.
- Besides establishing new institutions and bodies, it will be necessary to **revive and revise** the currently

inactive institutions, that already exist within the region.

- The deeper integration will also have to include a **joint foreign and security policy**. In light of the conflicts in Libya and the Sahel region, a common approach would be instrumental to counterbalance the attempts of interference by other regional and international actors.
- On an **international level**, support is needed in terms of arbitration and mediation. This support would make it possible to initiate a dynamic of de-escalation in the region. As the Maghreb region is a natural border between the southern flank of Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, the European Union and the African Union should take part in the integration process in the Greater Maghreb. International actors, such as the EU, could contribute to the development of a more integrated, sustainable and prosperous Greater Maghreb region. Ultimately, this could have a positive effect on the security challenges that the region is facing, making security assistance negligible in the long run.

## CONCLUSION

In theory, the Greater Maghreb countries have everything they need to achieve a radical transformation and development of their borderlands. The main challenges are homegrown. One common pattern is the fear and mistrust towards neighboring countries. This mutual mistrust has led countries to severely curtail regional cooperation, which is much needed for regional development.

Overcoming conflicts between and within the Maghreb states would be a historic opportunity for the development and integration of border areas where the consequences of the persisting security and economic challenges of the wider Maghreb region are particularly felt. This could lay the cornerstone towards wider regional integration and, ultimately, a union of the states and populations. Finally, as per the recommendations of civil society actors, the wider regional and international debate on the Greater Maghreb should focus on developing regions rather than securing borders.



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