# Challenges to Peace and Security in North Africa: Accounting for the Lack of Regional Institutional Response

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**Since 2011, the security situation in North Africa has deteriorated rapidly, with armed conflict, terrorism, unconstitutional changes in power and transnational crime quelling the zeitgeist of hope that characterized the initial aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring. Yet, despite the existence of regional organizations that could potentially assist in managing security – the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) – little has effectively been done. This brief analyses the main challenges to peace and security in North Africa in the past five years and seeks to explain the current lack of regional institutional response.**

North Africa is home to some of the most economically and militarily powerful states in Africa, with Algeria, Egypt and Libya being three of the five countries that contributed 65% of the member state portion of the African Union (AU) operational budget in 2014. Although the last five years have seen positive developments, such as the fall of long-serving autocratic leaders in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011, regional security has since taken a serious turn for the worse. Not only has the region seen the outbreak of civil war in Libya, a military coup and emerging insurgency in Egypt, but the problem of terrorism has also worsened to unprecedented heights with the regional expansion of the Islamic State. In addition, declining oil prices have had an impact and are likely to continue to affect the major producers in the region: Algeria, Egypt and Libya. However, a recent massive natural gas finding may allow Egypt to emerge relatively unscathed from the current fuel crisis.
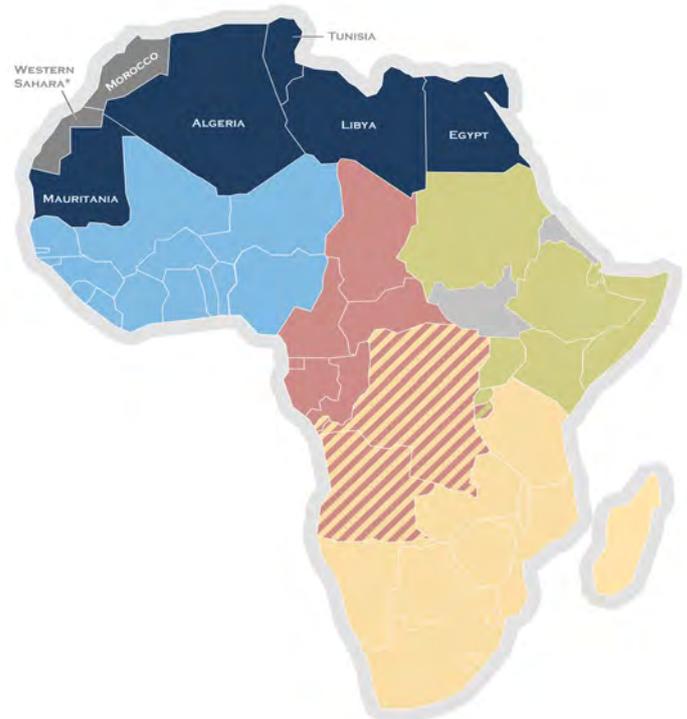


### Regional organizations

There are two key regional organizations in North Africa: the Arab Mahgreb Union[1] (AMU, founded 1989) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States[2] (CEN-SAD, founded 1998). AMU and CEN-SAD are AU-recognized Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and thus part of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). However, the AMU has never formalized its relationship with the AU by signing the *Protocol on Relations between the RECs and the AU*. In addition, there is the North African Regional Capability[3] (NARC, founded 2007), the regional

mechanism (RM) in charge of managing the North African brigade contribution to the AU's African Standby Force (ASF).

### Main challenges to peace and security in North Africa
- **Armed conflict**

The anarchy in **Libya** that emerged following the NATO bombing and fall of President Muammar Ghaddafi in 2011 has evolved into a full-scale civil war, with two main factions, both referring to themselves as the government, fighting for control of the country. The faction based in Misurata and with a provisional government in Tripoli comprises Islamists and local militias, whereas the faction based in the east and led by General Khalifa Hiftir comprises

1 Member states include Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia.
2 Member states include (North African in bold): Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, **Egypt**, Eritrea, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, **Libya,** Mali, **Morocco,** Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo and **Tunisia**.
3 Member states include Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, Egypt, and Western Sahara.

anti-Islamists. Since most of elected Parliament has fled Tripoli and sought Hiftir's protection, the eastern faction is commonly referred to as the internationally recognized Libyan government. United Nations peace talks have thus far failed to reach agreement on ending the fighting.

A third party has now emerged in the Libyan civil war, namely the *Islamic State* (IS), affiliates of which have expanded their territory in the country, targeting security forces and civilians. IS appears to be establishing branches across North Africa, with local groups throughout the region, but especially in Egypt and Libya, pledging fealty. Although it is difficult to assess the extent to which these branches take orders from IS, or are actually semi-autonomous and seek the group's affiliation for merely opportunistic reasons, there is nothing unclear about their willingness to employ deadly violence.

- **Democracy deficits**

Tunisia is the only country that has successfully managed to transition from autocracy following the Arab Spring, making it the region's only democracy. In contrast, Egypt's Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, the president elected in the country's first free parliamentary election since the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, was himself ousted in a military coup d'état backed by popular protests in 2013. The coup leader, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, was subsequently elected president following an election widely considered by international observers to be flawed. The new government's heavy-handed repression of political dissident suggests the country has, alas, returned to its autocratic ways. The violent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization considered a terrorist group by the government, has caused young leaders within this traditionally non-violent national branch of the Islamic movement to take up arms against the government.

**Accounting for the Lack of a Regional Institutional Response**

Despite the institutional infrastructure described above, neither AMU nor CEN-SAD has as yet done much to manage the various challenges to peace and security that have emerged in the region since 2011. The following section seeks to explain what accounts for this institutional stalemate.

The conflict between Algeria and Morocco over the status of Western Sahara has more or less deadlocked the AMU, which has been largely dormant for close to two decades. Despite there having been no fighting between the Polisario Front, the Western Sahara independence movement, and Morocco for the last 24 years, the conflict remains unresolved.[4] The AMU stalemate inspired Libya, under Ghaddafi, to create CEN-SAD. Since Morocco, but not Algeria, is a member of CEN-SAD, the organization does not face the same problems over Western Sahara as AMU. Another strength of CEN-SAD is that, in contrast to AMU, it includes the military powerhouse Egypt. Nevertheless, the fall of Ghaddafi has left CEN-SAD in disarray, resulting in institutional inertia as regards dealing with issues of regional security. Lately, however, there have been signs of attempts to revive both organizations, with Tunisia seeking to take the reins of the AMU and Morocco those of CEN-SAD. Yet, meetings by these organizations have produced little to date in terms of actual management of security in the region.

Finally, there is NARC, whose standby force is meant to be used for managing regional security. The main reason why NARC remains a moot cause is because its standby force has yet to reach initial operational capacity, making it the regional standby force whose development is furthest beyond schedule. NARC's development has been lagging since its creation, and up to 2011 primarily due to disagreements among states in the region on how to proceed. Following 2011, NARC has largely fallen by the way-side, largely due to the security situation in Libya, where the RM is based. The AU is currently looking into relocating NARC to another North African country.

Given the institutional stalemate in the region, the request by the recognized government of Libya in August 2015 that the League of Arab States (LAS) intervene militarily to fight IS is perhaps not surprising. Whereas LAS member states quickly agreed that IS in Libya needs to be fought, the organization has decided to delay indefinitely the decision of whether to form a regional force and engage militarily. Hence, an institutional response to the turmoil in Libya by an organization with regional member states appears distant, at best.

4 Morocco is the only African country that is not a member of AU, a direct reaction to Western Sahara having been admitted as a member by its precursor organization, the Organization of African Unity (OAU).