he North African Maghreb is an important but often unrecognized arena in the United States’ counterterrorism strategy. While security dynamics in the region make it critical for U.S. policy, the Maghreb is unlikely to become a high priority or receive large amounts of U.S. resources compared with other challenges, such as global competition with China and Russia. As the terrorism threat in North Africa evolves following the collapse of the Islamic State group (ISG)’s “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, the region will be an important test case for how the United States and its partners pursue counterterrorism and security goals with relatively scarce resources.

The U.S. approach to counterterrorism in the Maghreb will require intimate cooperation with governments in the region, each of which pursues counterterrorism based on different historical experiences, strategies, and goals. Aligning these different approaches with U.S. goals and strategy will be a major challenge in the months and years ahead. Looking forward, the United States must clarify its goals to match the resources it is able to apply and the outcomes it wants to achieve. To be successful, the United States and its partners will have to develop more effective non-military tools and find ways to improve the underlying conditions that drive radicalization. Doing so will be a much more complex task than simply killing terrorists. Without addressing the root causes of terrorism, the next cycle of violence is just a matter of time.

On December 4, 2017, the CSIS Middle East Program convened a daylong conference to analyze how security threats are evolving in the Maghreb; highlight how government strategies seek to counter those threats; and think through how to set practical goals and define success in fighting terrorism in the Maghreb. Speakers included senior security officials from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia as well as current and former senior U.S. government officials, and experts from the region. While much of the conversation centered on specific trends in the Maghreb, the themes that emerged from the discussions carry broader applications for the fight against terrorism.

**NORTH AFRICA IN PERSPECTIVE**

Security in the Maghreb is important to U.S. interests for several reasons. First, the region is a strategic crossroads between the Middle East, Africa, and Europe; what happens
in the Maghreb affects U.S. interests in all of those adjoining regions. Second, the Maghreb is home to U.S. allies whose stability serves U.S. interests. Third, North Africa has been at the forefront of both al Qaeda and ISG recruitment.

North Africa has become a “more fertile environment for terrorist development, plotting, and activity than most parts of the world.”

- The Hon. John McLaughlin

For a number of reasons, North Africa has become a “more fertile environment for terrorist development, plotting, and activity than most parts of the world,” argued former deputy and acting CIA director John McLaughlin. In part, growing cooperation between extremist groups is making it difficult to dismantle terrorist recruitment and financing. In addition, long and porous borders in the region are difficult to defend, and a large number of loosely governed or ungoverned spaces provide sanctuary for terrorist groups, primarily in conflict-torn Libya but also in peripheral bordering areas such as Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula and the Sahel. Finally, complex and deep-seated socioeconomic grievances and pervasive perceptions of injustice create vulnerabilities for terrorist groups to exploit. Many youth who were hopeful of change following the 2011 uprisings have faced disappointment and frustration with the pace of change, which has further deepened youth resentment and anger. The intersection of these factors creates a unique security landscape in North Africa that warrants “highest priority” U.S. government attention, McLaughlin said.

Evolving threat environment

While jihadi-salafi violence in North Africa has evolved over decades, a combination of internal and external factors is reshaping the security landscape. First, North Africa faces the risk of returning fighters who joined the ranks of the ISG and al Qaeda in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Accurate assessments of North African foreign fighters are difficult to confirm. Figures based on Maghreb government sources estimate that approximately 7,500 Tunisian, Moroccan, Libyan, Egyptian, and Algerian nationals have joined jihadi-salafi groups abroad. North Africans therefore comprise a significant part of the approximately 40,000 foreign fighters estimated by the U.S. government to have joined armed groups in Syria and Iraq since 2011. According to National Defense University senior research fellow Kim Cragin, fewer than a quarter of those individuals have returned to their home countries in North Africa (during previous historical waves of foreign fighters, the rate of return was 70 to 80 percent). Even in small numbers, however, motivated and trained returning fighters pose a security threat, and effectively monitoring them requires significant resources for surveillance and incarceration. Many jihadists have been imprisoned, although participants noted that most are serving sentences of three to eight years. Their release, and more broadly determining which of them remain ongoing risks, poses formidable challenges for regional governments.

Second, some North African fighters who had joined groups in Syria and Iraq are now entering Libya or Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula—where an ISG branch is fighting the Egyptian government—rather than returning to their home countries. According to Cragin, about 900 jihadists who fought in Syria have relocated to Libya. Half are originally from Maghreb countries and half from elsewhere—including Saudi Arabia. Jihadi-salafists operating in the mountainous border area between Algeria and Tunisia also remain active. The flow of a significant pool of combat veterans into under-governed or ungoverned areas of the Maghreb will result in heightened risk.

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A third and related threat lies in the lack of a political horizon in Libya. The difficulty of finding a solution to Libya’s crisis suggests that the country will continue to be a destabilizing factor in the region in the years ahead. While the ISG was driven out of its stronghold in the Libyan city of Sirte, it is regenerating in central Libya and on the western borders with Algeria and Tunisia, where it remains a threat to both neighboring countries. Groups
linked to al Qaeda also operate in Libya. A growing nexus between jihadi-salafi groups and criminal networks, including human traffickers, creates additional sources of funding for extremist groups. Loosely governed spaces in the Sahel region bordering the Maghreb to the south also create safe havens in which terrorist groups can operate.

There is a mismatch “between the scale of the threat and the challenge that we’re facing, and the resources that we’re able to put against it.”
-The Hon. Christine Wormuth

Fourth, radicalization is happening faster than at any time in the past. Brandeis University scholar Mohammed Masbah described the growing phenomenon of “fast food jihadis” who begin with little religious education or knowledge of jihadi-salafi doctrine and are radicalized in as little as two months. Jihadi-salafi groups are honing their abilities to exploit psychological vulnerabilities among youth, seeming to provide answers to questions of identity and purpose. Masbah reflected that governments in the Middle East repeatedly promise to empower youth, but “in reality, it was jihadi groups who provided that [empowerment].” Diffused groups of rapidly radicalized individuals allow for low-tech attacks by individuals who may have little to no formal connection to a terrorist organizational structure.

As is true everywhere in the world, cyberspace is a domain of increasing concern. Regional governments are seeking to combat radical ideology online, and they are seeking to disrupt violent groups that use online platforms to recruit and network. Any effective counterterrorism strategy must include a cyber component, yet few governments in the region are highly capable in this realm.

All of these threats will continue to evolve. Jihadi-salafists are waiting to exploit a regional crisis that could boost recruitment and refocus their actions. Understanding the trajectory and drivers of these trends will be critical to developing more effective counterterrorism policies.

U.S. priorities
While the Maghreb remains particularly vulnerable to extremist violence and is important to U.S. interests, it is unlikely to become a priority for the U.S. government at a time when global security challenges such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran compete for attention. Nor will the Maghreb see the type of robustly-resourced military deployments that the United States has pursued in other parts of the Middle East and Southwest Asia in the last decade. Instead, there is a mismatch “between the scale of the threat and the challenge that we’re facing, and the resources that we’re able to put against it,” stated former undersecretary of defense for policy Christine Wormuth. That mismatch presents the United States with critical choices about how it fights terrorism in the Maghreb, including how it interacts with regional partner governments. The Maghreb’s strategic value requires success despite highly constrained resources.

For Lt. Gen. Michael Nagata, who runs the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning at the National Counterterrorism Center, the Maghreb should be viewed “as a test case of whether or not the international community—not just the United States—can demonstrate effectiveness against terrorism and violent extremism without large-scale military campaigns.”

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REGIONAL GOVERNMENT APPROACHES
U.S. resource constraints make U.S. government cooperation with regional partners all the more critical. Governments in the Maghreb are devoting considerable
effort and resources to improving their security capabilities and border defenses with a focus on dismantling terrorist cells as well as breaking recruitment and financing networks, although progress on more complex socioeconomic and governance concerns has been lacking. While states in the region share overlapping threats, each government approaches security differently based on unique threat perceptions, historical experiences, and challenges.

Tunisia has spent the last several years attempting to rebuild its security capabilities and restructure its institutions to meet both a new counterterrorism mission and a post-dictatorship structure. While Tunisia has made significant progress in its ability to manage and respond to threats, duplications of capabilities and responsibilities within various security branches “create the risk of dysfunction,” assessed Tunisian scholar Ahmed Driss. Tunisia’s legal framework is still evolving to the post-Ben Ali era and citizen demands for greater transparency and accountability. In 2015, Tunisia’s government revised a 2003 counterterrorism law that was widely condemned by human rights groups. It also adopted a national counterextremism strategy in November 2016 and a national strategy on border security in November 2017, Tunisian national security adviser Rear Adm. (Ret.) Kamel Akrout noted.

Morocco’s current security framework has been shaped in large part by the fallout from the 2003 Casablanca bombings and has continued to evolve since 2011. From 2002 to 2016, Moroccan authorities reported thwarting nearly 350 attack plots and dismantling some 170 terror cells. Morocco’s current counterterrorism efforts have been heavily concentrated in a centralized FBI-like agency, the Bureau Central d’Investigation Judiciaire, since the institution’s establishment in 2015. The Bureau works closely with national police and other security branches to investigate and interdict networks and suspects, as well as to closely monitor nationals who joined jihadi groups abroad. Morocco has also made updates to its penal system—for example, by criminalizing travel to participate in a foreign conflict.

Algeria’s security and legal approaches are shaped both by its largely solitary fight against terrorism in the 1990s, and by its vast territory. Algeria is the largest country in Africa, with more than 4,000 miles of land borders to patrol; moreover, these borders abut some of the most unstable and impoverished countries in the world—Libya, Mali, Chad, and Niger. Partly as a result of its size and border vulnerabilities, Algerian security efforts draw on an array of actors reporting alternatively to the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, according to veteran North Africa analyst Arezki Daoud. In addition, Algeria’s legal framework bears the legacy of its post-civil war reconciliation process. As the Algerian ambassador-counselor for international security issues El Haouès Riache noted, accused jihadists enjoy certain protections as part of the national reconciliation following Algeria’s civil war in the 1990s. For example, there is a moratorium on the death penalty, and certain ex-fighters are granted clemency. Algeria’s improved border defenses have so far prevented terrorists from infiltrating Algeria to launch a repeat of the 2013 In Amenas attack that killed 39 civilians.

Incarceration and deradicalization

While governments in the Maghreb rely heavily on securitized counterterrorism approaches, they are also experimenting with non-military tools to fight extremism. Algeria’s Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation is an important example. Morocco is also promoting a range of deradicalization programs aimed at splitting violent jihadi-salafists from non-violent salafists and strengthening the role of the Maliki school of Islam. Prison reform is another critical component. The fact that some formerly imprisoned citizens of North African countries went on to commit terrorist attacks highlights the failure of prisons to rehabilitate. In fact, in some cases they are incubators of jihadi-salafism.

While governments in the Maghreb rely heavily on securitized counterterrorism approaches, they are also experimenting with non-military tools to fight extremism.

In the last several years, Morocco has initiated widespread prison reform, including the separation of jihadi-salafi prisoners from the general prison population in order to prevent petty criminals from being indoctrinated by jihadists. Morocco has also introduced a number of pilot programs aimed at promoting dialogue and “musalaha,”
or reconciliation. Morocco’s approach is based on three components: psychological rehabilitation; reintegration with the community; and reconciliation with a different, non-violent, interpretation of religious texts. The prison authority has overseen a pilot project that included 25 people, including 19 jihadi-salafists who were imprisoned before 2011, as well as six ISG fighters. According to Mohamed Salah Tamek, the senior Moroccan official who has spearheaded Morocco’s prison reforms, 13 of these former jihadists have received amnesty and have been released from prison.

While the dialogue programs show promise, it is too early to assess their efficacy and scalability. Reconciliation efforts will be limited if they engage only those conciliatory enough to volunteer to participate. Finding ways to engage more committed hardline jihadists constructively will be a formidable undertaking, but ultimately necessary to undercut the ideological driver of radicalization.

### Ideology is an important element of radicalization, but it should not be understood as the phenomenon’s principal driver.

#### Regulating religious spaces

Morocco and Algeria’s dialogue and reconciliation efforts aim both at splitting violent salafists from non-violent ones and at using former jihadi-salafi ideologues to preach against violence. These approaches are part of these states’ broader efforts to regulate religious space and shape religious identity, an area in which these governments are investing growing resources. Morocco and Algeria see strengthening their national or “traditional” schools of Islam as an antidote to jihadi-salafism, and they are attempting to do so through the training of imams and the creation of new religious scholarly and monitoring bodies. Tunisia, which underwent decades of state secularization policies, has lagged far behind in reforming its religious and educational institutions. Some argue that the weakness of Tunisia’s state religious institutions makes the country more susceptible to extremist recruitment and violence.

While fighting radical interpretations of religion is a critical component of broader counterterrorism strategy, state promotion of specific religious traditions as a bulwark against extremism has a checkered track record. For one, as International Crisis Group senior analyst Michaël Ayari pointed out, successful outreach requires messengers with credibility—something that can be undermined by an overly close relationship to the state.

Moreover, ideology is an important element of radicalization, but it should not be understood as the phenomenon’s principal driver. Instead, North Africans who join jihadi-salafi groups are motivated by complex combinations of environmental, ideological, and individual factors. And these patterns of radicalization are also shifting, which affects efforts to deradicalize jihadi-salafists. A generational split among jihadi-salafiists is one factor. As older jihadists were pardoned or underwent government reconciliation programs, their influence waned, creating a vacuum in the jihadi-salafi landscape. Moreover, unlike previous generations of jihadists—many of whom studied jihadi-salafi texts at length as part of their radicalization process—members of the younger generation more often have only a shallow understanding of ideology, much of it gleaned through the Internet and social media. As Cragin noted, however, the speed of radicalization should not be equated with a shallowness of conviction.

### North Africans who join jihadi-salafi groups are motivated by complex combinations of environmental, ideological, and individual factors.

Understanding the drivers of radicalization is critical, and governments and the academic community have made progress in understanding what motivates would-be terrorists. However, policymakers would also do well to better understand what causes many North African youth to resist radicalization. The vast majority of young people in the Maghreb exposed to similar environmental and structural drivers do not join jihadi-salafi groups. Policymakers need to better understand what Cragin termed the “control group” for radicalization in North Africa.

#### The regional cooperation imperative

One of the most important keys to effective
counterterrorism is greater regional cooperation, yet progress has been uneven. The transnational nature of threats means that no country can fully defend itself alone. Maghreb governments differ in their approaches to cooperation with external actors, with Algeria remaining more skeptical than Tunisia and Morocco. Still, cooperation between the United States and governments in the region is unprecedented. Regional governments are also deepening intelligence sharing and cooperation with European governments who face overlapping threats. Yet, cooperation between governments in the Maghreb remains underdeveloped, and the lack of coherent regional security mechanisms exposes every country to greater risk. Tunisia and Algeria cooperate closely on border security, but tense relations between Morocco and Algeria present a persistent obstacle to close cooperation. Distrust and local disagreements impede information sharing, coordination, and effective security cooperation needed to manage cross-border threats that affect every country.

Building trust between state and society

Looking forward, confronting radicalization will be a generational and society-wide challenge. Pursued narrowly, security-led strategies against terrorism could risk reinforcing some of the phenomenon’s drivers. As Akrout noted, one of the factors driving radicalization is the perception by some youth that injustice continues to go unaddressed and that “society is working against them.” Mistrust and suspicion of security forces is another issue that must be addressed in the region broadly.

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-Rear Adm. (Ret.) Kamel Akrout

Protests driven by socioeconomic or governance demands have become a regular feature across the Maghreb, and how governments position themselves towards these expressions will have a bearing on jihadi-salafists’ ability to exploit various grievances. The counterterrorism strategies of every country would be strengthened by addressing economic justice and corruption concerns, which have been priorities for citizens demanding more accountable governance. While some macroeconomic indicators have been improving, governments may not be able to produce the kind of rapid gains demanded by the population. In some cases, governments are responding to socioeconomic demands with force, which deepens the confrontation between state and citizens. How governments in the region respond to these challenges also affects U.S. interests.

Only after the United States sets clear goals can it identify benchmarks for success and measure progress against them.

U.S. POLICY GOALS AND DILEMMAS

Against this strategic backdrop, the disparity between the Maghreb’s importance and the limited U.S. resources that it receives compared to other regions requires making choices about priorities and goals. Only after the United States sets clear goals can it identify benchmarks for success and measure progress against them, Nagata argued.

The overarching goal of U.S. counterterrorism strategy since 2001 has been to prevent another massive attack on the U.S. homeland. An ancillary goal has been to define the capabilities that the United States and partner governments need to possess in order to identify a threat, track it, and ultimately take action against it. This has made U.S. efforts to fight terrorism and extremism dependent on military tools and largely focused on the elimination of terrorists. The problem with both of these goals is that they create an endless cycle of violence, consume limitless resources and effort, and set unrealistic expectations. The deep factors that drive radicalization mean that terrorist groups will have a steady supply of angry and frustrated youth to join their ranks for the foreseeable future.

These drawbacks raise the question of whether a more practical and effective goal in North Africa should emphasize redressing the conditions that drive radicalization and jihadi-salafi recruitment rather than
trying to eliminate all terrorists. Pursuing such a path to address terrorism’s root causes is infinitely more complex and difficult to measure than military efforts against terrorist leadership and operatives. The drivers of radicalization tend to center around deep-seated emotional, psychological, cultural, and societal factors that governments are sometimes ill-positioned to address effectively, according to Nagata. Moreover, while the United States succeeded in transforming post-WWII Europe and Japan, its track record of trying to impose Western norms in the Middle East and Southwest Asia has largely been one of failure, often at great cost.

Another way to think about successful outcomes is to aim to reach a point where the threat of terrorism could be downgraded from the level of a top-grade national security concern to that of a “nuisance.” As McLaughlin suggested, terrorism has existed in some form for millennia, and will never be completely eliminated. Instead, the United States should seek to devitalize terrorism to the point that it no longer “grabs our attention and mobilizes all of our resources” to the degree it currently does.

**The dilemma before U.S. policymakers is to remain attuned to the risk that “what you are doing tactically may work against what you are doing strategically.”**

*The Hon. John McLaughlin*

Navigating the competing demands of counterterrorism partnerships will be a continual challenge. Finding a balance between messaging partners on the importance of respecting human rights in the fight against terrorism and projecting American values, while being pragmatic about not alienating partners on whom the United States is dependent for cooperation, will be critical. As Wormuth noted, “if you are completely rigid about that conditionality, you may fundamentally alienate your host country partner.”

**ALIGNING MEANS AND TOOLS**

In the months and years ahead, the United States will have to “rely on instruments that traditionally enjoy far less resources and policy support,” in fighting terrorism in the Maghreb, Nagata said. Policymakers should think about ways to make U.S. tools more effective in several ways.

**More effective cooperation within governments, between governments in North Africa, and between the United States and its partners in the region is imperative to effective counterterrorism efforts.**

First, more effective cooperation within governments, between governments in North Africa, and between the United States and its partners in the region is imperative to effective counterterrorism efforts. This requires trust at all levels. Data fusion between local agencies is a particularly crucial area where efforts remain underdeveloped. More robust data fusion will require building trust as well as technical multilateral capacity. Deeper coordination both across states and within states, including between law enforcement and other security services, will also improve efforts to manage a range of threats, including returning fighters.

Policymakers should think about ways to make U.S. tools more effective in several ways.
Without a long-term strategy to change the conditions that drive radicalization, success will be limited to short-term gains assessed by the number of terrorists killed, terrorist cells dismantled, and casualty figures.

Second, military instruments should be selected and used in ways that support rather than undermine political goals of countering extremism. Military tools will continue to be critical to countering extremist groups’ leadership and denying groups safe haven to operate. However, relying too heavily on military tools without sufficient attention to the drivers of radicalization will be counterproductive. Despite the challenges, without a long-term strategy to change the conditions that drive radicalization, success will be limited to short-term gains assessed by the number of terrorists killed, terrorist cells dismantled, and casualty figures.

The United States should draw more expansively and creatively on its non-military tools including diplomatic, economic, development, and trade tools.

Third, the United States should draw more expansively and creatively on its non-military tools including diplomatic, economic, development, and trade tools. Diplomacy in particular will play a critical role in the trajectory of U.S. efforts towards Maghreb security. The State Department and ambassadors typically play an important role in maintaining U.S. government attention on a given region. Diplomacy will also be central to managing differences between U.S. priorities and those of its partners, particularly concerning efforts to counter the root causes of radicalization. Moving forward, it is through the difficult diplomatic work of building partnerships that much of the tension between tactical and strategic aims in the Maghreb will need to be resolved.

ENDNOTES
1. Academic estimates put the numbers of North African foreign fighters much higher—between 10,000 and 13,000.
2. Tunisians made up the largest national reported component of the group, while Algerians played a relatively minor role compared to their prominent profile in the jihadi campaign against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980s.
3. Tunisia’s defense minister claimed in November 2017 that around 100 fighters remain active in the area, while independent analysts place the number closer to 250.
4. Reforms have focused on a new legal framework designed to be compatible with Tunisia’s new constitution. Restructuring has produced a new defense intelligence agency within the Ministry of Defense and a national intelligence center mandated with an intergovernmental coordination function. Tunisia has also launched a national intelligence plan that seeks to create a new overarching vision for security.
5. Tunisia in particular has sought deeper ties with the United States and European governments in training, border control, and security sector reform. Morocco and the United States have a long history of military and security cooperation stretching back decades. The Algerian government, on the other hand, views foreign military intervention in the Maghreb with skepticism.