NORTH AFRICA: COMPARATIVE COUNTERTERRORISM

Trauthig I.K. Counterterrorism in North Africa: From Police State to Militia Rule and the Quagmire of "CVE". – London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2021. 55 p.

In *"Counterterrorism in North Africa: From Police State to Militia Rule and the Quagmire of 'CVE'"*, Inga Kristina Trauthig analyzes counterterrorist (CT) policies in five politically diverse, Arab-speaking states of North Africa: Egypt (republican rule with strong role of the military), Libya (civil institutions alongside militia rule), Tunisia (challenged democracy), Algeria (ailing army rule), and Morocco (constitutional monarchy). All of these countries experienced terrorism, including that of Jihadist bent, and embarked upon counterterrorism policies. One of the common features in the North African CT efforts is that the most prominent model is the military (war) model: most countries rely on military/enforcement means to fight terrorism, even though the extent of such reliance varies from country to country; the Criminal justice model is found to be scarcely represented in this region.

There is one measurement by which CT policies can be evaluated: whether or not there have been lower levels of radicalization and fewer terrorist incidents in the years that followed since its implementation, and by no means immediately. This research report offers an overview of these contemporary policies, explores the extent to which they have been effective, and suggest some recommendations that could upgrade the struggle against terrorism in the respective North Africa states. The author also touches upon the historical background and institutional setup in which the CT policies are enacted, such as the respective legislative, executive, and judiciary frameworks, the military and intelligence dimensions, the "countering violent extremism" (CVE) and deradicalization programs, the state of emergency, death penalty and issues, and .

Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi, president of *Egypt*, has been stepping up counterterrorism operations, especially in North Sinai. CT policies are fully embedded in state policies and regularly referred to in Egyptian politics, due to al-Sissi's pledge to "eradicate terrorism and extremism." From the legislative perspective, the 2015 Antiterrorism Law no. 94 has played a major role in institutionalizing CT in Egypt. However, this law has been regularly criticized by human rights organizations for its infringement on basic human rights and freedoms. More generally, CT policies in Egypt have long been under critique for being instrumentalized as grounds for human rights abuses and for silencing the regime critics and civil society. Northern Sinai in particular suffered multiple rounds of brutal military campaigns that did target terrorists, but also targeted the social structures of the peninsula. Egypt has also engaged in some deradicalization efforts by launching platforms to "refute terrorist messages and counter the radical religious interpretation of Islam". In addition, the government has launched "*Thawra Deneya"* (religious revolution) that involves closing small mosques, unifying Friday Sermons, cracking down on unlicensed preachers, and countering extremist ideas. Egyptian authorities also try to completely eradicate "The Muslim Brotherhood". On the international and regional level, Egypt has nurtured international and regional security cooperation for decades, portraying itself as an experienced anti-terrorism actor in the Middle East and actively engaging in regional security, prioritizing CT issues. The United States tends to

increasingly support a strong state in Egypt and has resumed bilateral military relations, while European policymakers recognize the importance of Egypt in their security rhetoric, too. Al-Sissi's regime is well aware of European and American security interests in the region and is able to exploit these to its own advantage. Even though the terrorist threat to Egypt is real, president al-Sissi has been exaggerating this threat in order to gain support for severe CT policies and enforcement, at the same time making sure that Egypt's struggle is aligned with a regional and international front against Salafi-Jihadist terrorism.

Libya is a divided country and has internal difficulties of its own. During the civil war of the 2010s, following the demise of Muammar Gaddafi's "*jamahiriya*" regime, the country has been torn by two main rival forces and administrations: the Libyan National Army in the east backed by House of Representatives based in Tobruk and the Tripoli-based and UN-backed Government of National Unity in the west. For this reason, resources that could have been used to counter terrorism are spent on recurring intrastate fighting. Also, there is no clear definition of, nor agreement on, non-state actors who pose a threat to the state. As a result, not only is there an absence of a shared CT rationale, with two camps conducting CT operations of their own, but various armed actors enforce CT measures within the margins of their own interpretations, largely weaponizing and instrumentalizing the term "terrorism" to denote their political-military opponents. Both state segments and non-state actors and institutions claim CT responsibilities in Libya. Thus any national counterterrorism strategy or coordination with nominal central authorities is absent even though CT rationales are employed by almost all security actors in Libya. No centrally organized deradicalization programs exist, and Libya's prisons in both camps have been filling up with Jihadists of various degree of radicalism. There is little to no independent or public access to evaluation of Libya's detention centers, prisons and programs of ideological rehabilitation. Libyan prisons widely practice torture, among other human rights abuses, inciting further radicalization. Overall, the CT agenda in Libya has been employed for the purpose of bolstering individual domestic and international legitimacy in a struggle between multiple actors and their institutional political apparatus. One of the author's most important recommendations is that some unified and clear CT legislation with proper guidelines is adopted by the new provisional Government of National Unity formed in 2021. This should be one of several tools to end the weaponization of CT in Libya that must be terminated by domestic actors. Libya also needs Western policymakers to coordinate their CT policies and support and not downplay the significance of, and demand for, CT efforts in this region.

Tunisia is a developing democracy that is at the early stages of the process of leaving its authoritarian past behind. In the context of this transition and related domestic challenges, Tunisia has become a major target for terrorists. On the one hand, the overall security situation has significantly improved over the past years, and the Tunisian government has taken a more holistic approach to fighting terrorism. On the other hand, violence persists and remains a serious challenge among others problems that plague the country. Continuous resentment among population against the Tunisian government persists since the Arab Spring, largely due to socioeconomic challenges. Tunisia has been known for "exporting" large numbers of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria (where they joined "Islamic State" (IS) and other jihadist groups) and accounts for a much larger contingent of such militants, compared to its North African counterparts. Consequently, a large number of foreign terrorist fighters have been coming back to Tunisia following the demise of IS in Syria and Iraq. These problems have been exacerbated by continuing instability in neighboring countries (Libya and Algeria). Indeed, sharing long borders with

Algeria and conflict-torn Libya places Tunisia in a vulnerable position, yet the border security measures undertaken by Tunisian authorities have created new problems. While stricter border control aimed at preventing transnational terrorism, in practice, it has negatively impacted local populations who have been severely restricted in their informal cross-border trade. Many people depend on this source of income and the government is unable to compensate for these losses. The author recommends that Tunisia reviews its heightened border security efforts and formulates parallel actions to smoothen the socio-economic impact of CT policies. She also points out that while Tunisia has taken the path of democratic development, human rights culture is not yet ingrained in all of its institutions, and some abusive and repressive tactics still provoke people's resentment towards the state in general and the security sector in particular. This distrust of the state can be heavily exploited by violent extremist groups, a trap that many states of the region fall into. One of the author's recommendations is that Tunisia should make its counterterrorism policies more transparent, in order to win public trust much of which was lost over the recent years, due to growing socio-economic hardships for many Tunisians. Western CT assistance has helped the Tunisian state to upgrade its counterterrorism capabilities, however, continued cooperation with other states and international CT programs is crucial and should be further pursued, especially in view of the fact that radicalization of Tunisians mostly happens abroad. The author also argues for higher importance to be attached to CT concerns in Western policies on Tunisia, before things in this field get out of control.

Institutionally, the *Algerian* political system is centered around the president (who plays the key role in CT policies). Besides a strong presidency, Algeria's political system is also dominated by a powerful security apparatus. Algeria had been through a long and bloody struggle for independence, which led to the formation of a military backed government. This military/security structures continue to heavily impact the country's policies, especially on counterterrorism. The parliament, on the other hand, has not been essential for Algeria's CT efforts, due to its weak position in the country's political system. In all cases when CT policies need parliament's approval, it is largely granted, in line with Algerian executive and/or security services' priorities. In short, counterterrorism in Algeria is militarily driven and state controlled. Since 1992, there have been numerous clashes between violent Islamists and state security forces. Currently, the Algerian government has developed a strong counterterrorism policy, and comparatively few foreign terrorist fighters generate from Algeria. However, even as terrorist attacks against Algerian civilians decreased significantly, jihadist groups shifted their focus to pressuring security forces, attacking government entities, and kidnapping international workers, and to heavier reliance on suicide operations. Overall, jihadism in Algeria seems to be on retreat, due to a lack of popular support for its organizations. Demonstrations and grass-root protests that do take place in Algeria have no explicit link to any Islamist agenda. The main factors leading to radicalization in Algeria remain social grievances and socio-economic problems. Like most other countries of the region, Algeria continues to experience widespread human rights violations and restrictions on freedom of expression, justified, to a large extent, as part of the authorities' CT policies. Some of the author's recommendations include increased focus on socio-economic reforms and scaling down military spending, reducing the role of the military in Algerian politics, and building up monitoring mechanisms against corruption.

Morocco is a centuries-old monarchy where the king has high public legitimacy and is the highest authority in terms of both politics and religion. Compared to other states of the region, Morocco appears to be a model of political stability. Morocco has established itself as a capable security actor, including on counterterrorism, and has had no terrorist

attacks since 2011. Hence, it is hardly surprising that it does not welcome most suggestions for security reforms coming from abroad. However, the state's advanced security stands out in comparison to its economic deficiencies. This makes some Moroccans worry that the regime's security-centered approach towards CT may be leading to the creation of a police state, focused more on widespread surveillance of the population than on actually improving the lives of Moroccan citizens. Recommendations made by the report's author include the need to pay more attention to addressing socio-economic issues, as a lack of economic opportunities, inequality, and widespread corruption contribute to people joining terrorist groups.

Overall, this report is an up to date and highly policy relevant piece of work. It is also structured in a logical order, followed through the end of the study. Even though there are conclusions and recommendations made at the end of each section (and devoted to the respective state-based case study), there are no overall conclusion made at the end of the study that would try to identify general trends in all five countries and compare their CT policies. This makes the report a rather open-ended compilation of information, with any broader regional conclusions left for the reader to glean, as no implications to the wider regional and international antiterrorism are discussed.

There is one comparative table provided at the very end of the report. While it shows the main features of CT in each of these countries, it really fall short of a proper analytical conclusion regarding the effectiveness and comparative strengths and weaknesses of each of the national cases analyzed. No other tables, graphs, or diagrams are provided that could have systematized raw factual data, and the reader often has to rely on the author's judgment, with no backup proof. Nor are there any maps included in the text that could have demonstrated concentration and/or comparative intensity of terrorist activity across five North African countries or progress of CT operations in North African countries over a certain time span. Adding more data on terrorist threats and counterterrorism responses, especially in visualized form (tables, graphs, diagrams, and maps) could have helped to not only place each country case in the comparative regional context, but also to put North Africa in the broader global context. As of now, it may appear from the report that North Africa is overwhelmed with terrorism. However, in reality, as of 2020–2021, the situation in the region as a whole is far from what it used to be in the previous decade and has significantly improved. A data-based map or series of graphs would have made it obvious that North Africa is far from being the most terrorism-affected area in the African continent or globally. In fact, recent decline in terrorist threats in this region may imply that it is not just that some "advanced" external (namely, Western) actors that should "help" and "instruct" North African governments on how to do counterterrorism better, but also that others may actually learn something from select CT policies and approaches that are in place in such North African states, as, for instance, Morocco and even, in some respects, Egypt.

Also, very little information is provided on the types and scale of terrorist activity in each country, i. e. on the main terrorist actors, their background, goals, links, and how and why they resorted to terrorist means. While, in each chapter's section on the institutional CT setup, the fight against IS-linked and al-Qaeda-linked groups, as well as broader Salafi-Jihadist movement are mentioned, there is no explanation of the specifics of both transnational and homegrown terrorist challenges to each country. Some of the underlying factors driving terrorism are mentioned, mostly as part of multifactorial causes. However, this is not enough, considering that to carry out effective counterterrorism policies it is essential to understand what the objectives of terrorist groups in particular North African countries are. Such information would have helped formulate a clearer picture of the antiterrorism struggles in North Africa.

Another issue with the report is that the author somehow assumes that the readers are well acquainted with the political and historical background of each national case. Indeed, some background is provided at the start of each chapter covering the respective country, however, this does not suffice to understand all the implications. In the case of Libya, for example, barely any mention is made of the fragmentation of the country, where a large number of actors and communities and groups are all effectively competing against one another. Furthermore, little is said regarding the two rival administrations, GNA and LNA, whose roles, territorial control, and foreign backers are left unclear and open ended. Nothing is mentioned regarding the political affiliations of the GNA and LNA, which could provide explanations for the mismatched terrorist trends in divided Libya, where GNA is considered to be part of the Islamist camp and LNA is based on "militarist nationalism". This background information is crucial for understanding the terrorist situation in Libya, a country for years torn by civil war, with key political-military actors preoccupied with more important issues than (counter)terrorism. Likewise, little is said about the phenomenon of the Muslim Brotherhood movement across the North African region, even as it props up in the table at the end of the report. The author mentions that Egypt outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, but fails to mention that the Libyan GNA supports the Brotherhood, which may be the main reason why the Egyptian government supported the LNA against the GNA in the intra-Libyan conflict.

Overall, the report is well written, well structured, and heavily focused on both counterterrorist policies and their implementation. If there is room for improvement, it is in terms of ensuring better delivery of information and providing more back-up evidence and background on the respective country cases and terrorist threats. The report is up to date and can serve as a solid source of information for understanding the current struggles in North African counterterrorism policies.

Galina Yushvayeva
MGIMO-University, Moscow
ORCID: 0000-0002-9959-646X