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Turmoil in North Africa: Lessons for European Defense

by Tristan Abbey and Scott Palter

That the second decade of the 21st-century will end with neither Ben Ali in charge of Tunisia nor Hosni Mubarak ruling in Egypt should come as no surprise. After all, the former was born in 1936, the latter in 1928. The ancient Roman poet Horace reminds us: "Pale death, impartial, he walks his round; he knocks at cottage-gate and palace-portal." Whether by revolution, orderly succession, or a knock at the door, both men were bound to pass from the scene in the near future.

Amid all the analysis and projections--about the Muslim Brotherhood, the potential domino effect throughout the Muslim world, prospects for Israel and the United States, and so forth--recent events should also provide a warning to European defense planners. The scenes on the streets of Cairo could be repeated across the Maghreb in the coming years. Given global economic turbulence and volatile commodity prices, buying off the huddled masses in Morocco, Algeria, and Libya may prove beyond the power of those regimes. Political collapse in those countries--or in Tunisia and Egypt, down the road--could spark an exodus of refugees heading north, far worse than the present situation in places like Malta, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Imagine hundreds of thousands of desperate people setting sail in anything that floats and heading for the nearest European shore.

At the same time, in an age of dual citizenship, massive tourism, and economic globalization, there may be a considerable number of people requiring evacuation. In the 1960s, the Belgian and US military cooperated to evacuate over a thousand Westerners from the Congo. Several hundred paratroopers rescued hostages and secured an airfield. In 1997, French troops evacuated 6,000 foreign nationals from Brazzaville; in 2004, another 9,000 Westerners were evacuated from the Ivory Coast.¹ During the war in Lebanon in 2006, a diverse mix of nations (including the US, Europe, Australia, and even Chile) mustered buses, cruise ships, naval vessels, helicopters, and airplanes to evacuate hundreds of their citizens.² During the recent Tunisian unrest, over a thousand Westerners were spirited away by European tour operators and evacuations are underway in Egypt.³ We frequently underestimate the number of: a) people who claim first world protection; b) dual nationals; c) tourists; d) families of passport holders; e) people who have legitimately been promised protection; and f) citizens from other first world nations who simply expect the more powerful players to cover their people, too.

¹"French Plan a Last Brazzaville Evacuation Flight," New York Times (June 16, 1997).

<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/16/world/french-plan-a-last-brazzaville-evacuation-flight.html>; "French peacekeepers start to pull back from key sites in Abidjan," IRIN (November 23, 2004). <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=52171>.

²"Westerners flee Lebanon any way they can," CNN (July 18, 2006). http://articles.cnn.com/2006-07-18/world/lebanon.evacuation.int_1_cruise-ships-french-citizens-lebanon?_s=PM:WORLD

³Terence Roth, "Major European Tour Operators Evacuate Tourists from Tunisia," Fox Business (January 16, 2011). <http://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/2011/01/16/major-european-tour-operators-evacuate-tourists-tunisia/>

These two scenarios, a tide of refugees and hundreds in need of evacuation, provide some lessons for the kind of military the EU needs. First, an expanded coast guard and small-ship navy (littoral vessels, intercept boats, helicopter platforms, etc.) will be necessary to prevent border control from being overwhelmed and to provide humanitarian assistance to the incoming refugees. Second, an on-call brigade that can deploy across the Mediterranean and secure either an airfield or a port (or both) will be necessary to ensure the evacuation of EU nationals and the nationals of allied countries. Finally, and more controversially, a follow-up corps designed to bolster a friendly regime in distress (e.g., a Mubarak regime teetering on the brink of collapse) would also be extremely useful if the European continent has the desire and willpower to intervene in this manner. At some point, Europe will be faced with a choice: back a kleptocracy friendly to its interests or witness the rise of an unsavory government hostile to its interests.

Mubarak has claimed that a million tourists have already fled Egypt.⁴ This number may be high, but the actual number must surely be great nonetheless. So far, Egyptian security forces have been able to maintain enough order for a relatively secure evacuation, but a day may be coming when a European fleet and press-ganged airlines will be required. From Washington's perspective, European forces are essentially auxiliaries for our various wars. As the reluctance of NATO and other European countries to commit resources and troops to Afghanistan demonstrates, Europeans do not share the same view. They live in a rougher neighborhood than we do.

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⁴“Mubarak warns of chaos if he quits now,” MSNBC (February 3, 2011).
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41402303/ns/world_news-mideast/n_africa/.