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ALGERIA–MOROCCO RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE MAGHREBI REGIONAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the dynamics of relations between the two regional powers in the Maghrebi sub-regional system: Algeria and Morocco. More specifically, it examines the trajectory of the long and complex interactions between those two states as well as the key issues at stake, especially the Saharan problem. Based on extensive interviews conducted in both Algeria and Morocco, the paper compares the two country's divergent perspectives on those issues and discusses how those differences impact on regional stability. It argues that in spite of their long history of difficult relations, Algeria and Morocco have made continuous efforts to avoid major escalations that would lead to direct military confrontation. Moreover, recent developments in the region, including Morocco joining the African Union as well as common challenges such as the fight against terrorism, have provided opportunities for the two states to cooperate.

INTRODUCTION

In February 1989, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania signed the constitutive treaty of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in Marrakech, aimed at creating a common economic market with free circulation of people and goods as well as a customs union (Belkaïd and Stora 1999: 216). Its formation was strongly influenced by that of the European Union. John Entelis explains that the organization's goals were to achieve economic integration among the member countries and to strengthen the position of the Maghreb vis-à-vis the international system (Zartman et al. 2007: 17–8). The political union was to be a corollary of this process of economic integration, very much like in the EU system. A former Algerian minister of foreign affairs explained that

during the negotiations that led to the creation of the AMU, Libya of Gaddafi wanted immediate political unification whereas Algeria and Morocco, most likely influenced by the EU formation and feeling more pragmatic, insisted on economic union first with the idea of the political union coming later [...] we believed it was more pragmatic. (Interviewee 1)

Luis Martinez (2006: 4) argues that the union aimed at alleviating the poverty, bad management and social violence that the countries of the region were experiencing at the time.

Sharing similar languages and dialects, the same religion (Sunni Islam), recent experiences of colonial oppression – whether French colonialism in the case of Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania, or Italian in the case of Libya – and a similar culture with seemingly complementary economies, this goal of creating a union seemed achievable. More promising still, the single most

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intractable regional issue that had prevented the process from moving forward previously – the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, especially over the Saharan issue – seemed to be nearing resolution. As a former Algerian diplomat explained,

at the time, the Algerian President Chadli and the King Hassan II of Morocco had decided to ignore the Sahrawi question in the bilateral relation between Algiers and Rabat and to leave it to the UN. Better, Hassan II strongly believed that the creation of the AMU would facilitate a solution in the Sahara. (Interviewee 2)

However, thirty years later, it is clear that the AMU has been a total failure as a result of the continuing dispute between Algeria and Morocco.

This, in turn, has severely constrained the region's economic development and damaged its position in the international system. According to a study coordinated by Dr Azzam Mahjoub (2017) for the European Union, while all the Maghreb countries are open to the international economy and world markets, there is no coordination among them. As a result, their economic development has been restricted given the asymmetry between them and their primary economic partners – the EU, the United States and China. Moreover, the Maghreb countries have signed a series of agreements with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other major actors that have led to vertical rather than horizontal integration, thus benefiting their partners rather than being mutually beneficial. At the same time, trade among the Maghreb countries represents less than 3,6 per cent of their overall economic exchanges and contributes only 2 per cent of the total GDP of the Maghreb region in 2015. This is the result of the high tariffs imposed by the Maghreb countries on one another's products, severely limiting the potential for economic integration at the regional level (Mahjoub 2017: 14).

This lack of economic integration is worsened by divergent foreign policy interests and goals, especially between the two regional powers – Algeria and Morocco – which undermines the stability of the entire Maghrebi–Sahelian sub-regional system. As Yahia Zoubir (2000) argues, the Maghreb must be understood as a regional system in which the interacting units affect each other. Furthermore, Zoubir (2000: 44) explains that

Due to the structure of the system and state capacities (power reach) in the Third World in general, the primary area of involvement of the units lies primarily in the region in which they are embedded. Consequently, the activities of any member of the region directly influence the foreign policies of the other units of the system.

In the case of Algeria and Morocco, the primary source of contention is the Saharan issue, that is, Algeria's support for the POLISARIO, the national liberation movement in a region over which Morocco has declared sovereignty based on its historical status prior to Spanish colonization. A major point of contention between Algiers and Rabat, this issue has shaped the relations and foreign policy alignments of the two countries for the past four decades. The border between the two was closed in 1976, reopened in 1988 and closed again in 1994, and since then there have been recurrent political tensions between them, particularly in the past five years. The conflict culminated in October 2017 when Morocco recalled its ambassador to Algeria for several weeks

due to what it considered insulting comments directed at Morocco by Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelkader Messahel. A few months later, in January 2018, relations between Algeria and Morocco again became strained as the result of a stand-off between the POLISARIO and Rabat in Guerguerat, a demilitarized area in the Sahara. It took several weeks for the tensions to recede, only to surge again in April 2018, as reports surfaced claiming that Morocco had threatened to intervene militarily against the POLISARIO if it did not evacuate the demilitarized area of Guerguerat, a move that, if implemented, had the potential to escalate to a possible confrontation with Algeria (Khider 2018). Both sides eventually decided not to escalate and the POLISARIO withdrew. However, soon thereafter a new dispute erupted between Algeria and Morocco, this one related to the Middle East: as the enmity between Saudi and Arabia increased, Algeria's proximity to Tehran and Morocco's to Riyadh became another source of friction. For example, Morocco agreed to participate in the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) created by Saudi Arabia, while Algeria openly refused. In this context, in May 2018 Rabat accused Iran and Hezbollah of providing missiles to the POLISARIO with the support of Algeria, which Algeria denied (Lamlili 2018). Algeria responded by organizing massive military drills during the first half of 2018, including the Toufane 2018 (or *Déluge* 2018) military manoeuvres held in May in Oran, in western Algeria, the largest military drill ever organized in the history of independent Algeria, in which it showcased its latest military acquisitions. However, the two countries did not break off relations and they have continued to cooperate on several fronts, including the fight against terrorism.

In this context, the chances for regional integration or cooperation between the two countries appear to be non-existent. This in turn has had a negative impact on regional security and stability. As an EU diplomat explained, "the North African–Sahelian context is very fluid; a regional integration and cooperation among the local actors in North Africa would facilitate the stabilization of the situation, however the Algerian–Moroccan relations create uncertainties and limit the perspective of such cooperation" (Interviewee 3). In 2015, another EU diplomat criticized both Morocco and Algeria for their tendency to block each other's initiatives in the region, especially in the Sahel, thus preventing it from becoming stable (Interviewee 4).

This paper aims at answering several questions: how did relations between Algeria and Morocco reach such a low point? How should the recent dangerous developments between the two countries be assessed? What are the possible scenarios for the future of relations between the two countries? Can multilateralism be a platform for cooperation between Algiers and Rabat?

The first section of the paper provides a historical overview of relations between Algeria and Morocco, especially the antagonism between the two since Algeria gained independence in 1962. One of the central issues is the complex history of relations between the two countries since independence, which has shaped in part the way the leaders approach one another. The second section then provides an analysis of the Algerian perspective on its relations with Morocco. The third section conversely provides a Moroccan perspective on the core issues at stake between Algiers and Rabat. The final section of the paper explores possible routes to cooperation between Algeria and Morocco.

1. A COMPLEX HISTORY OF COMPETITION AND RECONCILIATION

In May 2000, in an effort to “reset” its relations with Rabat, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had been elected the previous year, sent Bachir Boumaza, then President of the Council of the Nation (the Algerian senate) and therefore his second in command, on a mission to Morocco. Prior to his visit, Boumaza declared that “the history and common fight for independence of the two countries constitute an essential reference for the current generations to look up to, in both Algeria and Morocco, to inspire them to build a union” (cited in Stora 2002: 10).

The idea of a common fight and unity between the peoples and the states in the Maghreb goes back to the colonial era, when the elites of those countries, confronted with colonialism and repression, attempted to unite their ranks to fight French colonialism. Similar to the “Young Turks” movement under the Ottoman Empire, North Africa saw the creation of the “Young Tunisians” (1907), the “Young Algerians” (1914) and the “Young Moroccans” (1919) (see Balta 1990: 19). The three organizations even created a joint committee that met in Geneva and called for the independence of all three countries and the creation of a North African Republic (Balta 1990: 20). Subsequently in 1947, the Tunisian Neo-Destour Party, the Algerian People’s Party (*Parti du Peuple Algerien*, PPA) and the Moroccan Istiqlal Party created the Bureau of the Arab Maghreb with the aim of coordinating their actions against colonialism (Balta 1990: 20).

Thus the political elites of the national movements, especially those of Algeria and Morocco, coordinated their actions to achieve independence. This continued to be the case during the armed struggles of both countries, when the Algerian National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération Nationale*, FLN) and the National Liberation Army (*Armée de Libération Nationale*, ALN) collaborated in 1954–5 with the Moroccan Army of Liberation. Moreover, after Morocco became independent in 1956, it provided full support to the ALN, becoming along with Tunisia a rear base for its military facilities. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of Algerian refugees fleeing the war in Algeria took refuge in Morocco. In a show of solidarity, Rabat even rejected a proposition by France to dismantle the FLN base in Morocco in exchange for the return of two border cities, Tindouf and Bechar, over which Morocco claimed sovereignty but which were under the French administration of Algeria. Instead, the King of Morocco, Hassan II, signed an agreement in 1961 with the Algerian provisional government in exile by which both sides recognized the existence of a border dispute but agreed to delay its resolution until after Algeria gained independence (Stora 2002: 25). However, the borders would be the first of many issues over which independent Algeria and Morocco would disagree.

1.2 THE ISSUE OF THE BORDERS

The conflict over the borders, which can be regarded as the foundation of the relationship between Algeria and Morocco, has continued to be a source of strain in their relationship. As Zoubir underlines, the French established clear borders between the different units that constituted its colonial empire, including in the Maghreb. However, the French administration did this without taking into consideration the concerns of those units (Zoubir 2000: 45). Consequently, once independence was achieved, the borders became a contentious issue between the newly established governments.

Shortly after Algeria gained independence, Morocco's King Hassan II asked the newly established Algerian authorities to resolve the question of the border towns of Bechar and Tindouf, over which Rabat claimed sovereignty. Ahmed Ben Bella, the president of Algeria, initially asked the King for time, arguing that he needed the agreement of the political bureau of the FLN to make any concessions on the issue. In autumn 1963, the Algerian leadership, especially then Vice President and Minister of Defence Colonel Houari Boumediene, argued that it was "inconceivable to concede any parcel of territory given the suffering of the population to acquire its independence" (Stora 2002: 26), contrasting "the price of blood of the martyrs" (*le prix du sang*) with the Moroccan claims based on historical grounds. For his part, Ahmed Ben Bella declared that Algeria was "one and indivisible from borne 230 (the Tunisian borders) to Tindouf" (Balta 1990: 202).

Instead, Algiers endorsed the charter of the African Union (AU), which stipulated that the borders established during the colonial era could not be altered unless both parties agreed to the change. For his part, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria, argued with regard to the 1961 agreement that "it was a political compromise of circumstances and not a legal one per se, it had been dictated by the imperatives of the War of Independence and therefore could not commit the future of a sovereign Algeria" (Yousfi 1989: 121). By mid-1963 Morocco, feeling that it had been betrayed, had deployed troops on the border, and by the end of September the first military clashes had erupted between the two countries. On 8 October, King Hassan II sent an emissary to Algiers to find a compromise and to avoid any further escalation, but to no avail. The clashes between the Algerian and Moroccan armies escalated to a full-scale confrontation in what became known as the Sands War of October 1963. The conflict ended with a ceasefire negotiated by the AU with the mediation of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and Malian President Modibo Keita on 2 November. Morocco had the upper hand in the conflict as Hassi Beida, Tinzouba and the areas around Tindouf were under the control of the Moroccan army, while Algeria benefited from the diplomatic sympathy of the international community. The ceasefire itself resulted in a return to the status quo antebellum in with each party withdrew its troops to their pre-conflict positions while all prisoners of war were released by both sides.

The Sands War as such was a conflict of low intensity lasting one month, geographically concentrated in the disputed areas between the two countries, with a few hundred casualties on both sides. However, the significance of the conflict is evident in its long-term political impact, as it generated an enduring sense of mistrust and rivalry between the two parties that only deepened over the years. The issue of the border itself was officially settled in 1969 during the Ifrane summit between Hassan II and Houari Boumediene, resulting in the treaty of 1972 by which Morocco officially renounced any claim to Tindouf and Bechar. In exchange, Morocco asked Algeria to support Rabat's territorial claims over the Sahara, then occupied by Spain, common exploitation of the Gara Djebilet iron mine located on the Algerian side of the Algerian–Moroccan border and the sale of Algerian natural gas at a favourable price to Morocco (Balta 1990). President Boumediene, who had ousted Ahmed Ben Bella in a coup in 1965, seemed to agree to those demands, and the treaty was signed.

While on the surface the situation seemed to have stabilized, the reality was more complex. Algeria and Morocco were completely at odds in terms of political system, ideological orientation and foreign policy alignment. Algeria was then a revolutionary republic with a socialist economic

system. It was strongly influenced by the ideas of Pan-Arabism in the 1960s and 1970s and therefore closely allied with radical Arab countries such as Nasser's Egypt and the Ba'athist regimes in Syria and Iraq. Algeria was a strong advocate of the Arab cause and endorsed the most radical stances on the Arab–Israeli conflict. Furthermore, in terms of foreign policy orientation, although Algeria claimed to be a non-aligned country, diplomatically and militarily it was very close to the Eastern Bloc and thus to the Soviet Union. Conversely, Morocco was a conservative monarchy with a liberal economic orientation. Ideologically it was close to the Arab monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, and rejected Ba'athism. On the Palestinian issue, while it fully supported the Palestinian cause, Rabat always advocated for a just and fair compromise with Israel, putting itself in what was deemed to be the moderate camp. Finally, in terms of foreign policy orientation, Rabat was also officially a non-aligned country but in practice was a close ally of the Western Bloc and thus of the United States. Therefore, if it is true that in 1972 the main issue – the border question – had been settled, the two countries were nonetheless still positioned in opposition to one another. In addition, the mistrust that had arisen during the 1963 war was still present and became manifest in the crisis in the Sahara.

1.2 THE SAHARAN CONFLICT

The Saharan conflict has been the longest-running and most enduring conflict in the North African–Sahel region and has had tremendous long-term consequences for Algerian–Moroccan relations since its onset in 1975, representing the core issue of contention between the two countries. As discussed previously, King Hassan II had formally renounced any territorial claims over Tindouf and Bechar in 1969 at the Ifrane summit, reaffirming this commitment in 1970 and again in 1972. Moreover, in 1969 Hassan II also formally recognized the independence of Mauritania, a country over which Morocco previously had claimed sovereignty. Thus for the King and for Morocco, the problem of the borders in North Africa was resolved with the exception of what was then called the “Spanish Sahara”, which was occupied by Spain. From Rabat's perspective, Algeria and Mauritania could be expected to support its claim to regain the Spanish Sahara in exchange for its territorial renunciations. However, this was not the case.

Algeria and President Boumediene could deal with the impasse in one of two ways. The first option, advocated by then Minister of Foreign Affairs Bouteflika, was to support Rabat in the takeover of the Sahara in exchange for which Morocco would ratify the Ifrane treaty (Yousfi 1989: 124). The second option was to support a referendum on self-determination of the Sahrawi and the POLISARIO movement, which wanted to create an independent Sahrawi state. The supporters of the second option perceived Morocco as an expansionist state and feared that the takeover of the Sahara would be the first of many steps and therefore aimed at containing the influence of Morocco in Africa (Zoubir 2007: 160–1). William Zartman (2007: 181) argues as well that those who supported the second option considered that the outcome would be the creation of a sort of satellite state which would give Algeria access to the Atlantic Ocean. In any case, the issue of the balance of power seems to have played a major role in the Algerian leadership's thinking: according to a former Algerian official, “there was the consideration in Algiers then that the takeover of the Sahara would make Morocco stronger and offset the balance between the two” (Interviewee 5). Despite an understanding signed by Hassan II and Abdelaziz Bouteflika in July 1975 in Rabat, Boumediene decided to support the second option. However, in November 1975 King Hassan II organized what

became known as “Green March” that is a massive popular mobilization followed by a peaceful march on the Sahara with the aims of taking it back. The success of this initiative caught Algiers completely unawares given that Spain had secretly promised Boumediene that a referendum on self-determination would be organized prior to any withdrawal (see Balta 1989: 219–21). Algeria responded by providing public support to the POLISARIO, while the Algerian and Moroccan armies came into direct conflict twice, in January and February 1976, during the two battles of Amgala. In March 1976, the two countries broke off diplomatic relations and expelled thousands of one another’s citizens (Stora 2002: 29). However, starting in 1977, Algeria and Morocco entered into secret negotiations to find a peaceful solution to the ongoing war. In the summer of 1978, the two parties agreed to a meeting between Boumediene and Hassan II, but the meeting never occurred because Boumediene fell ill and passed away in December 1978.

What followed was a protracted war in the Sahara between the troops of the POLISARIO, supported by Algeria, and the Moroccan army. The POLISARIO pursued a guerrilla strategy of hit-and-run attacks against Moroccan troops. Morocco, for its part, countered with a strategy beginning in 1980 of building “defensive walls” that covered 80 per cent of the disputed territory. The conflict had reached a stalemate by the end of the 1980s, as the POLISARIO became less and less able to mount successful attacks, and Morocco was able to reverse the tide of the conflict. The war ended in 1991 with a UN-brokered ceasefire which included the creation of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to monitor the ceasefire and the designation of a no-man’s land between the POLISARIO and the Moroccan troops. The principle of organizing a referendum of self-determination was also agreed upon, and negotiations were supposed to begin between the two parties for a final agreement under the mediation of the UN. This process was facilitated by Libya withdrawing its support from the POLISARIO in 1985 and by Algiers’ determination in the 1980s, under the presidency of Boumediene’s successor, Chadli Bendjedid, to improve relations with Morocco (Zoubir 2007). However, twenty-eight years after the ceasefire was signed, the problem remains unsolved. Since 2007 Morocco’s position has been to refuse the option of a UN-brokered referendum, favouring instead a plan for extended autonomy, an option so far rejected by the POLISARIO and Algeria.

1.3 THE 1994 ATTACK AND THE CLOSING OF THE BORDERS

Bendjedid succeeded Boumediene as President of Algeria in 1979 and began a process of reconciliation with Morocco that culminated in the two countries re-establishing diplomatic relations in May 1988 (see Balta 1989: 227–35), followed by the first Maghrebi summit involving all heads of state from North Africa, held in Zeralda, near Algiers, in June. This in turn led to the Marrakech Treaty of February 1989, which formally created the Arab Maghreb Union, headquartered in Rabat. The AMU was supposed to lead very quickly to the free circulation of goods and people, a tariff union, and the creation of a single currency and a common market. However, none of this ever materialized. According to an Algerian diplomat who participated in the negotiations, several mistakes were made:

the premise of this union was based on the fact that Algeria and Morocco would ignore the POLISARIO problem and leave it to the UN. That meant that provided the UN would be able to solve the problem, the AMU would be successful. However, the UN was not able

and have not been to do so. The second mistake was to establish the headquarters in Rabat. The headquarters should have been in Tunisia, a country which had no diplomatic problems with neither Algeria nor Morocco. Furthermore, Tunisia was a country with a history of international organizations having their headquarters there (i.e. the Arab League from 1979 to 1989). Given that the problem remained unsolved between the POLISARIO and Morocco, neither Algiers nor Rabat should have hosted the headquarters of the AMU. Finally the third mistake was the word Arab in the name, it should have been Maghreb Union or something like that, North Africa is composed of Arabs and Berbers [...] the word Arab negated the Berber heritage in all North Africa. (Interviewee 2)

In fact, the AMU's foundation rested solely on the goodwill of the actors involved and their favourable disposition towards one another. The central issue, that of the Sahara, remained unresolved. It had simply been ignored.

By 1994, the negotiations between Rabat and the POLISARIO had stalled, while the political situation in Algeria had taken a dramatically tragic turn. Indeed, further to the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS) in the legislative elections of December 1991, the electoral process was interrupted by the Algerian army in early January 1992 and President Bendjedid resigned from his office of president. Those events plunged Algeria into an extremely violent civil strife called the "black decade" which claimed the life of tens of thousands of people. By 1994, the jihadi groups Islamic Salvation Army (*Armée islamique du salut*, AIS) and above all the extremist Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA) were at the peak of their power, and there were risks at the time of a government collapse. Moreover, the GIA had entered into a campaign of attacks against foreigners from countries suspected of supporting the Algerian government, especially France, as well as direct attacks on other countries. In July 1994, for example, the GIA launched a bombing campaign in Paris, killing eight people and injuring several hundred others. Tunisia was targeted as well in January 1995, when several Tunisian border guards were killed in an attack by the GIA. Morocco for its part was targeted in August 1994, when two French citizens of Algerian descent belonging to the GIA shot a group of Western tourists in Marrakech, killing two Spanish citizens and injuring one. The two perpetrators and several of their accomplices were arrested in the following days by the Moroccan police. However, in the hours following the attack the Moroccan Ministry of Interior accused the Algerian intelligence services of being behind the attacks (Millet 1995). The Moroccan government immediately imposed visa requirements on Algerian tourists who were spending their summer break there. A former Algerian minister of foreign affairs explained:

what needs to be understood is that there were thousands of Algerians in Morocco then. With Tunisia, Morocco was the only country that was accessible to the Algerians without visas and it was the period of terrorism. Thousands of people were trying to 'breathe a bit' and stay away from the ongoing violence. Imposing a visa meant those tens of thousands of Algerian tourists had to leave Morocco in the next 48 hours or so, we had to evacuate them in catastrophe. (Interviewee 1)

He added, furthermore, that

those who perpetrated those attacks, they were French citizens, they entered Morocco with French passports, they were not Algerians. I told our Moroccan counterparts that we had nothing to do with that and that if they implemented this procedure (imposing visas) we would react. The Moroccan authorities proceeded however and we reacted. (Interviewee 1)

The Algerian government responded by imposing visa requirements for Moroccan citizens and closing the borders with Morocco, severely damaging the significant border economy that had developed there since 1989. This crisis effectively ended the rapprochement between the two countries and resulted in the freezing of the AMU. As the analyst Ali El Kenz (1996a) puts it, “the AMU obeyed more to tactical interests rather a deep reconversion of the North African leaderships towards a regional approach [...] each one of them gave to the AMU, the meaning which suited most his needs of the moment”.

With Algeria mired in civil strife and the Saharan issue still unresolved despite the efforts of the UN, the borders remained closed. The election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika to the presidency in 1999 raised hopes of another rapprochement between the two countries, as he and King Mohammed VI both signalled a willingness to negotiate. During the early 2000s visa restrictions between the two countries were suspended. A number of high-ranking officials from both countries made reciprocal visits, and in 2005 Mohammed VI visited Algeria during a summit of the Arab League. Rumours circulated about the possible reopening of the borders, but no progress was made and in 2012 Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia declared that the opening of the borders was not a priority. Worse still, tensions between the two countries have continued to rise since 2013.

2. THE ALGERIAN NARRATIVE

According to the former Algerian minister of foreign affairs interviewed for this research, from the Algerian perspective, when it comes to Morocco, there is a clear distinction between what he calls “the Algerian–Moroccan track” and “the Saharan track” (Interviewee 1), a perception shared by most Algerian analysts.

2.1 THE ALGERIAN-MOROCCAN TRACK

According to several of the Algerian diplomats and analysts who were interviewed, the Algerian–Moroccan track refers to the long and complex history of tensions between the two countries. Diplomats and analysts agree that while the tensions have generated suspicion and mistrust between the two, it is possible to solve “this track” provided that political goodwill is present. As such, this track comprises several elements.

The first component of this track is directly related to the 1994 shooting in Morocco and Rabat’s accusation that the Algerian security services were responsible for the attack. For the former Algerian minister of foreign affairs, “our denials and above all, the subsequent both French and Moroccan investigations as well as the trial in Morocco of the perpetrators demonstrated that it

was the GIA who was behind this” (Interviewee 1). He and several other analysts felt that Morocco should express regret in some form; while he did not expect there to be a formal apology, he added that “good experienced diplomats have the experience of such situation and should be able to find a correct formula that would suit both sides and close once and for all this regrettable incident” (Interviewee 1).

The second element of this track is the issue of the people expelled by both countries in the 1970s. For him, and for many others, a fair and final solution where both parties would recognize their responsibilities and try to find acceptable solutions, including possible compensation for the victims on both sides, is needed to resolve this issue once and for all.

The third element is economic relations. While the two economies are complementary, the Algerian economy, especially the agricultural sector, might not be able to compete with that of Morocco. For him, the opening of the borders, while necessary, should take the economic reality into account. Therefore, he argued, trained economists should negotiate the free circulation of goods, which should probably be introduced gradually and with the goal of building a common market.

In addition to these three issues, the former minister along with another former diplomat noted that two other elements should be added to this track. They both argued that “the ending of mutual negative declarations and speeches that have fuelled the controversies between the two countries and which do not bring anything but bad things is absolutely necessary” (Interviewees 1, 2), referring to declarations made by both sides since 2014 which have played an important role in increasing the tensions. In addition, they both added that the “cross borders trafficking especially drug trafficking” needs to be addressed. For both of them, a reconciliation would necessarily entail creating mechanisms of cooperation between the two countries to fight drug trafficking.

From their point of view, all of these relatively common, technical issues, which never should have escalated to the levels they have, will be relatively easy to resolve provided there is political will on both sides to do so.

However, in addition to these problems, Akram Kharief adds that the rivalry and tension have spilled over to affect the strategic interests of Algeria in Africa, and therefore the foreign policy component of the Moroccan–Algerian track should not be ignored (Interview A). More specifically, he explains that Algeria is suspicious of Morocco’s policy in the Sahel. For him, Algeria has always considered the Sahel as its own area of influence: “Algiers sees the Moroccan actions such as the formation of the Malian imams, the mediation between the Tuareg factions in 2014, and other initiatives as an intervention in its reserved domain of influence” (Interview A). Indeed, the Sahel has gradually become a new forum for the expression of the rivalry and tensions between Algeria and Morocco. While Algeria was opposed to international military intervention in the region, favouring what it called a political solution, Rabat supported the French intervention (see Lounnas 2013). Mediation also became a topic of rivalry between the two, as traditionally Algeria saw this as its natural role, and considered the emergence of Morocco as a possible mediator in the Sahel as an attempt to limit or counter its own influence in the region. Furthermore, Algeria disapproved of Moroccan promises to deliver weapons to Niger and later to Mauritania (see Hernando de Larramendi 2018, Thieux 2018).

For its part, Algeria has repeatedly attempted to prevent Rabat from becoming involved in the Sahel, arguing that Morocco is “not a country from the area” (Interviewee 6), whereas Morocco conversely argues that it is indeed a Sahelian country. This reflects their divergent views on the Sahara, for as an Algerian official observed, “Morocco has access to the Sahel through the Sahara and Algeria does not recognize the sovereignty of Morocco over this area, therefore Algeria did not invite Rabat to be a member of the CEMOC” (Interviewee 6), a Sahelian regional military command set up by Algeria in 2010 which included Mali, Mauritania and Niger and was supposed to foster military cooperation between the Sahelian countries.

Nevertheless, several Algerian officials insisted that the future of both countries lies in mutual understanding and agreement. They could not envision a complete break between the two countries despite the tensions and crises. Moreover, they pointed to ongoing cooperation between the two, especially in fighting terrorism, although they noted that it was not currently “up to what it should [be]”. Furthermore, they all agreed that the real core of the problem was the Saharan issue.²

2.2 THE SAHARAN TRACK

The Saharan issue is at the very heart of the dispute between Algeria and Morocco. Algeria has been a staunch supporter of the POLISARIO since 1975, arguing that it supports “the right for self-determination of the people”, while for Rabat, the Moroccan nature of the Sahara is “not negotiable”, putting the two countries at odds with one another. At the same time, Algeria officially argues that given that the Saharan issue has been under the supervision of the UN since 1991, it is not part of the conflict between the two countries and should not be included as a topic in negotiations. Algeria holds that the solution should come from bilateral and direct negotiations between Rabat and the POLISARIO under UN mediation. This is in contrast to Rabat’s perception that Algeria and Mauritania are both parties to the conflict and therefore that Algeria should be directly involved in the negotiations, a demand that Algiers has repeatedly rejected. A former Algerian official and diplomat explained that when it comes to the Saharan question, there are in effect “two opposed schools of thought” between Algiers and Rabat on how to solve the problem (i.e. the organization of a referendum for self-determination vs autonomy/the Sahara is part of Morocco) (Interviewee 7). He further argued that this issue has been aggravated by the competition between Algeria and Morocco on the African scene, which itself has grown out of the dispute about the POLISARIO, rather than simply divergent views on the conflicts in Africa (Interviewee 7).

For another former official and current analyst, “the divergence over the Sahara issue reflects deeper and historical divergences and mutual suspicion, balance of power, strength and weakness of the both sides at different period of times” (Interviewee 5). For him, the Saharan conflict cannot be resolved without the direct involvement of Algeria, but such a move would require a clear vision of how to solve the problem and strong leadership from Algiers. However, he feels that the current domestic political situation in Algeria prevents any decisive move of any kind on this issue (Interviewee 5). It should be noted, however, that several former officials and diplomats made clear in the interviews that all solutions, including that of federation, should be considered. As long as the process is undertaken within the context of the UN and with the agreement of both sides (POLISARIO and Rabat) and includes a referendum, any solution is acceptable. One former

2 Series of informal discussions with Algerian officials between 2015 and 2018.

high-ranking official argued that

on this issue, Algiers should favour the long term over the short term and all the options for a peaceful outcome must be considered including [...] the three solutions proposed by a classical UN referendum. We must keep in mind that the future of North Africa lies in Morocco and Algeria reconciled. (Interviewee 8)

As a former diplomat stated,

at the end of the day, Morocco and Algeria should and must hasten this reconciliation, however from our point of view Morocco conditions any reconciliation by the solving of the Saharan file whereas we consider that we have no part in the conflict and therefore the two tracks should not be linked, it is like squaring the circle. (Interviewee 2)

Finally, the former minister of foreign affairs of Algeria stated explicitly that the current situation in the Maghreb–Sahel sub-regional system requires what he called “a cooperative security architecture” in which both regional powers – Algeria and Morocco – should be involved, and the differences over the Sahara set aside (Interviewee 1). Many observers argue, however, that several factors prevent any change on the part of Algiers regarding the Saharan issue and that the status quo is likely to remain in place, at least from Algeria’s perspective, unless the UN is able to broker an agreement between Morocco and the POLISARIO. However, all of the interviewees also pointed out that regardless of the tensions and crisis, a “rupture” between Algiers and Rabat is inconceivable and must be avoided at all costs. In that regard, Algiers has sent several positive signals, including supporting the readmission of Morocco to the African Union and more recently the idea of a common Algerian–Moroccan–Tunisian bid to host the 2030 FIFA World Cup. The need for reconciliation and appeasement between the two has been underlined by many political actors, including political parties and former diplomats in Algeria, who have called for the reopening of the borders. Among them, we can cite Mohcine Belabbas leader of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*, RCD), several leaders of the Socialist Forces Front (*Front des Forces socialistes*, FFS) as well as Abderrazzak Makri, leader of the Islamist party Hamas. We can also cite former Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi. While there is a consensus on the need to resolve this issue, there is no agreement on the proper means by which to do so. In March 2018, Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelkader Messahel went so far as to propose the creation of a “Maghreb Economic Community” as an alternative to the AMU, whose focus would be on the economy and would exclude political questions (Métaoui 2018).

3. THE MOROCCAN PERSPECTIVE

Moroccan–Algerian relations since independence have been tense and fraught with conflict as the result of a series of misunderstandings between the leaders of the two countries. Each side considers that it is the victim of the other side’s exaggerated ambitions. Trust between the two has eroded over time, and it will be difficult, though not impossible, to restore it.

From the Moroccan perspective, the erosion of trust between independent Morocco and Algeria began with the Sands War in 1963, shortly after Algeria gained independence. According to

Morocco's identity-making narrative, Algeria's independence was a necessity: France, a major European power, would leave the region, and they believed that the Algerians would be far more accommodating to Morocco's demands. France's presence in North Africa was deemed a permanent threat. In the Moroccan collective political imaginary, the Moroccan defeat of France in the Battle of Isly in 1844 signalled the beginning of the end of Morocco's independence; thus, as long as Morocco shared a border with France, it would be under constant threat (Interviewee 9). Morocco's strong support for Algeria's fight for independence, as discussed previously in this paper, meant that the leaders of an independent Algeria would feel indebted to Morocco and be likely accommodate its territorial needs. When the new leaders of independent Algeria repeatedly delayed discussions with Morocco on the issue of the western territories of the Eastern Sahara (claimed by Morocco), Morocco regarded this as a treacherous betrayal of – at minimum – a moral commitment. A clarification is relevant here: although there was no clear formal agreement between Algeria's independence movement and Morocco about the western part of the Eastern Sahara claimed by Morocco, Moroccans considered that there was an Algerian moral commitment on the issue. From this point of view, Morocco's launch of the Sands War in 1963 was a natural consequence of Algeria's failure to deliver on a key Moroccan expectation (Berramdane 1987: 240).

The second critical moment in the evolution of Moroccan–Algerian relations, from Morocco's perspective, was the summit between King Hassan II and President Boumediene in 1969 in Ifrane, which led to the borders agreement of 1972 in which Morocco recognized the Eastern Sahara as part of Algeria while Algeria supported Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara (Hegoy 1970). Boumediene's relatively sudden change of heart regarding the Saharan issue and support for the pro-independence POLISARIO were perceived by Morocco as the second time that Algeria had turned its back on a major bilateral commitment. As a result, the Moroccan parliament did not ratify the borders treaty and Moroccan diplomats began to refer to having Algeria as a neighbour as a "curse" (Interviewee 10).

It might be useful at this juncture to underline the increasing relevance beginning in the late 1960s of the "Western" Sahara to Morocco. Allal Al-Fassi's "greater Morocco" map included not only Tarfaya, Sidi Ifni, Ceuta, Melilla, the western part of the Eastern Sahara and the Western Sahara, but also Mauritania and even parts of Mali, and established Morocco's borders at Saint-Louis in Senegal. This map, which is still on display at the Istiqlal Party headquarters in Rabat, remained the hoped-for objective of Allal Al-Fassi and some other leaders of the independence movement in Morocco long after 1956 (Hodges 1983: Ch. 8). However, by the end of the 1960s, it had become evident to Hassan II that fighting for Mauritania and parts of the Eastern Sahara was a lost cause, and that the only way to re-establish some semblance of Morocco's previous borders was to focus on the Sahara issue. For this reason Morocco – and more specifically Hassan II – indirectly recognized the sovereignty of Mauritania and signed the borders treaty with Algeria. Morocco's position over the Sahara issue justifies, in this sense, Morocco's African identity, roots and links, linking history to the present (Interviewee 10). Thus Algeria's strong diplomatic and military support to the POLISARIO comes as no surprise: Algeria, which, from a Moroccan perspective, considers itself the sub-regional hegemon, wants to isolate Morocco from the rest of the continent as much as it can. Establishing a "puppet" state in the Sahara – as Morocco calls it – would ensure the success of that Algerian objective.

Consequently, the third juncture at which relations between Morocco and Algeria further deteriorated was in the struggle over the Sahara. Hassan II stated clearly to the participants in the Green March of November 1975 that Spain was not the enemy, but that “others” – indirectly referring to Algerians – were the enemy. As much as the issue of the Sahara became an opportunity for Hassan II to build a national consensus and bring some of his key domestic political opponents to heel (El Houdaïgui 2003: 207–8), it was also a regional balance of power issue that would have, from his point of view, a major impact on Morocco’s future. As Morocco became engaged in a military confrontation with the POLISARIO to control the Sahara after the Madrid agreement of November 1975, which handed control of the territory of the then Spanish Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania, the strong military, logistic, diplomatic and financial support provided by Algeria – and for a long time by Gaddafi’s Libya – to the POLISARIO, which resulted in the rupture of diplomatic relations between the two states in March 1976, represented clear evidence of Algeria’s hegemonic intentions in the region and of the need for Morocco to push back against those intentions. Moroccan hopes for a potential change in Algerian policy in the region, based on the secret negotiations for a summit between Hassan II and Boumediene, quickly faded after the death of Boumediene in December 1978 as it became clear that his successor, Chadli Bendjedid, would maintain an antagonistic regional foreign policy, at least initially.

However, it was under President Bendjedid that relations between Morocco and Algeria saw their most significant improvement since the clash over the Sahara began. Diplomatic relations were re-established in May 1988, the borders were reopened and the region as a whole moved towards stronger internal links, which was symbolized by the creation of the Arab Maghreb Union in February 1989. The thaw in Moroccan–Algerian relations was all the more significant because it happened despite the fact that, at least officially, neither country changed its stance on the Saharan issue. From the Moroccan perspective, it seemed that both sides had decided to act as if the Saharan conflict was not an impediment to strengthening the links between them, with the assumption – commonly held at the time – that by establishing many venues of bilateral cooperation, trust would be established between the two and thus make it easier to find a mutually acceptable solution to the Saharan issue. Despite these positive developments, however, the thaw was short-lived, and relations reached their worst point yet following the terrorist attack in Marrakech in 1994.

The attack on tourists in Marrakech tarnished Morocco’s reputation as a safe travel destination – tourism was and still is one of the largest sectors of the Moroccan economy. Morocco was quick to accuse Algeria of supporting the terrorists, three of whom were Algerian descent – accusations that Algerian authorities vehemently denied – and to impose visa restrictions on Algerians visiting Morocco. In retaliation, Algeria not only imposed visa restrictions on Moroccans visiting Algeria but also closed the land border between the countries, demonstrating the high level of mistrust between them. However, it is important to note here that this latest dip in bilateral relations between Morocco and Algeria was not as severe as the previous one. Indeed, diplomatic relations were sustained, and formal (both public and confidential) forums for cooperation were also maintained through the AMU and other channels. Two changes explain that evolution: on the one hand, the two countries – although Algeria especially – were confronted by a common enemy, the terrorist threat emanating from radical violent Islamist groups, which created incentives for collaboration in fighting that common menace. On the other hand, in the post-Cold War era, changing agendas and shifting global priorities – the Eisenstadt Initiative regarding the region’s relations with the

USA, the remaining superpower in a unipolar moment for world political history, and the Barcelona Process regarding Euro-Mediterranean relations – meant that both countries were incentivized to maintain some level of cooperation.³

The doctoral dissertation, published subsequently as a book, of Mohamed Ben El Hassan Alaoui (1994), which is the birth name of then Crown Prince Sidi Mohammed, who in July 1999 became Morocco's King Mohammed VI, received little attention at the time of writing but is revealing as an historical document in three ways. Firstly, the author, who knew he would become King sooner or later, did not hesitate in portraying the Sahara conflict as a fight for hegemony between two regional hegemon-to-be, that is, Morocco and Algeria. Secondly, he portrayed Moroccan – and Maghrebi – relations with the European Community and, subsequently, the European Union as frustrating and unfair to Morocco and the Maghreb. Thirdly, he reasoned that a more cohesive AMU would enable the region to take a stronger stand in relation to the Europeans. In other words, since Maghrebi states have no other choice but to work, trade and coexist with the European Union, they can only be successful if they unite and act cohesively as a Maghreb, and in order to do that, the two main leaders of the region, Morocco and Algeria, must get their acts together, end their fight for hegemony and work jointly to build a stronger Maghreb. This narrative clashes with the contemporary views of the Moroccan leadership. Indeed, in the King's speech in Addis Ababa in January 2017, when Morocco was admitted to the African Union, he expressed disappointment with the Maghreb, as well as hope that Africa will give Morocco what the Maghreb was unable to provide: an environment in which to prosper and collaborate.⁴

In retrospect, the first few years of Mohammed VI's reign, which coincided with the first few years of Bouteflika's presidency, held a great deal of promise for relations between the two states. Bouteflika, who had recently been elected, made a point of being present at the funeral of King Hassan II. His presence was symbolically important as it signalled the importance of the Maghrebi ideal for both states. That thaw in relations between Algeria and Morocco later resulted in the lifting of visa restrictions, first by Morocco in the summer of 2004, and a year later by Algeria. However, relations between the two quickly reverted to their previous tension as the goodwill expressed by both sides failed to produce any further overtures.

In the current political circumstances, Moroccan decision-makers seem to have two alternatives. The first is to maintain the status quo, that is, a closed border, continual tensions and accusations on both sides, but with no significant military escalation. As long as this option does not exclude current practices of close cooperation in fighting terrorism and violent extremism by both countries' security forces, the status quo seems to be an attractive option. The alternative option would be to revive the Maghrebi ideal, which would entail opening the borders and establishing new means of cooperation between the two states. For the time being, the former seems to be the stronger inclination, as mentioned earlier. By rejoining the African Union and applying for

3 The Eisenstadt Initiative refers to an initiative taken by the US under the Clinton administration to negotiate a trade agreement between the US and the Maghreb. Its relevance consisted in the fact that the US was not interested in negotiating separately with each Maghrebi state, but collectively with all three of them. The Barcelona process refers to an EU initiative towards the Mediterranean Basin which aimed at integrating politically, economically and socially – without reaching the level of a formal free trade agreement- the EU with its Mediterranean neighbourhood.

4 Full Speech of HM the King at 28th African Union Summit, Addis Ababa, 31 January 2017, <http://www.maroc.ma/en/royal-activities/full-speech-hm-king-28th-african-union-summit>.

membership of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Morocco seems to have given up, at least temporarily, on the Maghrebi ideal, and to be looking for alternatives on the African continent. In this sense, rejoining the African Union is not seen as a means to provide a venue for an approximation with Algeria, but rather as a zero-sum game in which Morocco was previously losing ground as it relied exclusively on its friends for help, and decided instead to make a proper stand and defend its own interests (Interviewee 11).⁵

The main challenge currently facing Moroccan–Algerian relations, from the Moroccan point of view, besides the Sahara issue, is that of the closed borders. Morocco frequently requests that the borders be reopened and Algeria refuses, insisting that a reopening of the borders should happen only within a broader context of improving relations. From Morocco’s perspective, reopening the borders would serve to address a key humanitarian issue, easing the suffering of families separated by the borders, who must endure a long and costly trip to visit each other, costs that for some families are prohibitive (Interviewee 11). Indirectly, the reopening of the borders would also ease tensions between the states. Over the last three years, both states have reinforced their borders by building separation walls to ensure the protection of their territories against trafficking of all types (of humans, drugs and goods). These walls have provoked strong popular reactions against the closed borders, and in June 2018, a social media campaign was launched to push for their reopening. By easing the human toll, the reopening of the borders would signal an improvement in relations between the states and help to ease the tensions between them.

If the closed borders represent one of the main challenges to improved Moroccan–Algerian relations, the fight against violent extremism is one area in which they cooperate closely and hence represents a concrete opportunity for improving relations. Moroccan and Algerian authorities in fact work efficiently together on this issue, although they avoid making such cooperation public.

Finally, two developments could change the status quo. The first is the consequence of US pressure on the United Nations to reduce its budget – i.e., the UN budget –, which will result in a reduction of the US financial contribution to the UN. One of the US targets for cost cutting are UN peacekeeping operations in general, and the one in the Sahara, MINURSO, in particular, as the US accuses it of inefficiency. If MINURSO is affected by important UN budget cuts, that could significantly affect the situation on the ground in the region. In other words, if the UN were to force a solution on the region without the necessary agreement of the parties, tensions might rise and keeping the status quo might no longer be an option. The second potential development, on a more positive note, would be a joint Maghrebi bid to host the 2030 FIFA World Cup. Although this is not the option favoured by Moroccan decision-makers, it might create a new dynamic of cooperation, enhance confidence among the decision-makers in the region and engender new opportunities for cooperation.

4. NEW VENUES FOR COOPERATION

In spite of the closing of the borders, human and economic relations have been maintained: each year, tens of thousands of Algerians travel to Morocco and vice versa, while in 2014, Algeria was

⁵ According to the interviewee, Morocco’s withdrawal from the Organization of African Unity had been a failure, and Morocco needed to stand for its issues on its own, and not rely on its allies.

the largest customer for Moroccan exports in Africa, while Algeria was the largest supplier of products for Morocco in Africa (Berahab 2016: 20). While the amount of trade between the two is modest, estimated at around 1 billion US dollars, it has nevertheless endured despite the rivalry, competition and tension and the closed borders.⁶

According to a European diplomat interviewed in 2012, whose analysis remains valid,

the region is fragmented more than ever, we have instability, terrorist organizations, all kind of radicals in the context of an attempt of Europe to disengage itself or at least to re-organize its commitments in Africa due to different constraints (financial ones especially) [...] the region is facing major challenges. [...] the difficult relations between Algeria and Morocco do not help and has repercussions. (Interviewee 12)

For him, the new realities created by the Arab uprisings and their aftermath (for example in the Sahel and Libya) meant that the regional powers had to find ways to bypass the Saharan issue, be pragmatic and realistic. In that regard, there was a short-lived rapprochement in 2011–13 between Rabat and Algiers, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, but to no avail. Tunisia attempted to revive the AMU during this period as well, but without success.

The two countries have continued to cooperate in several areas, especially security and the fight against terrorism, in the light of the sudden and major upsurge in jihadi threats in North Africa since 2013, particularly the emergence of ISIS. The Algerian former minister interviewed argued that “a regional cooperation security architecture, a sort of regional collective security institution could be set up, and could indeed provide the incentive or the venue for the two countries to settle their problems further as it is in their interest” (Interviewee 1). For European diplomats as well and while the AMU is unlikely to be revived anytime soon if ever, the return of Morocco to the African Union in 2017, could be a venue for the two countries to cooperate together in a formal multilateral framework and thus bypass the failures of the bilateral ones or of the AMU.⁷

CONCLUSION

Relations between Algeria and Morocco currently are tense and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, mainly due to their differences over the Saharan issue. Thus it is reasonable to expect the recurrent patterns of diplomatic strife and crisis to persist. However, we do not expect to see the militarization of the crisis any time soon. Both sides have systematically avoided any “rupture” in the relationship. We also observe patterns of cooperation, including in the area of security and especially the fight against terrorism, some very limited economic relations (the Algerian gas pipeline going through Morocco to Europe), and above all human relations are being preserved: close to 200,000 Algerian tourists visited or were expected to visit Morocco in 2018, while new air routes are planned between the two. Furthermore, music and theatre events, for example, provide important venues for cultural exchange. Algeria’s vote in favour of Morocco’s bid to host the 2026 FIFA World Cup was significant, and both Algerian and Moroccan officials have

6 See as well: *Algeria Exports By Country*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/algeria/exports-by-country>.

7 Interviews with European diplomats, Algiers, 2018.

discussed putting forward a North African bid to host the event in 2030. These examples reflect the will to preserve relations between the two countries in spite of the enduring tensions.

However, the rivalry remains very intense. The two states have been competing for dominance in Libya as well as in the Sahel, which Algeria considers its “*chasse gardée*” and where Morocco has been gradually raising its profile in recent years.

Of course, the POLISARIO issue is the focal point of grievances between the two due to Algeria’s continuing support for the movement. Indeed, for over a year, there have been recurrent tensions and crises, including the deployment of troops and mutual threats. This reflects the fact that the status quo that has been in place since the 1990 ceasefire is no longer tenable. The recent UN and EU resolutions on the issue have increased the pressure on all the parties to find a solution. The appointment of former German President Horst Köhler as UN mediator, who has made many visits to the countries of the region, has so far not produced any concrete results beyond the parties making statements reaffirming their respective positions while reiterating their commitment to a peaceful settlement. Given the rising tensions, there is the potential for “an accident” – that is, a localized confrontation between POLISARIO and Moroccan troops – to escalate, which could have tremendous consequences. The Guerguerat crisis in 2017 and 2018, in which the two sides came close to military confrontation, showed the dangers of such occurrences. The absence of any clearly established mechanism of control and regulation in such cases raises the prospect that an accident could result into a full conflagration.

The AMU, which was supposed to promote cooperation and to unite the North African states following a model similar to that of the EU, has been virtually inactive since 1994, mainly because of the tension between Algeria and Morocco, and is therefore considered by many as “a deceased organization”. The fact that Morocco joined the African Union in 2017 raised concerns that the AU would be transformed into a new “battleground” between Algiers and Rabat. However, many argue that the AU, given its multilateral nature, could be a venue where the two states could cooperate.

Finally, the competition between Algeria and Morocco disrupts the coherence of the sub-regional system and destabilizes it, or at least delays any possible stabilization, thus increasing the fragmentation of the region into a sort of “bipolarity”. For its part, the EU is seen by both Algeria and Morocco as a major partner both in economic and political terms. However, when it comes to the issue of the Sahara, while both sides believe the EU could play a role in its resolution, they have not succeeded in defining what that role could be, especially given the diversity of interests among EU members.

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ANNEX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Interviewee 1: former Algerian minister of foreign affairs, Algiers, 2014

Interviewee 2: Algerian former diplomat, Algiers, January 2018

Interviewee 3: European diplomat, Algiers, January 2018

Interviewee 4: European diplomat, 2015

Interviewee 5: former Algerian official and currently political analyst, Algiers, 2012

Interviewee 6: Algerian official, Algiers, 2012

Interviewee 7: former Algerian diplomat and official, Algiers, January 2018

Interviewee 8: former very high ranking Algerian official, Algiers, January 2008

Interviewee 9: former Moroccan influential political actor, Rabat, summer 2018

Interviewee 10: retired Moroccan diplomat, Rabat, Spring 2018

Interviewee 11: Moroccan specialist in international politics, Rabat, Spring 2018

Interviewee 12: European diplomat, Algiers, 2012

Interview A: Akram Khariief, journalist and security expert, Algiers, January 2018



Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

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