


The Maghreb: regional disintegration and the risks of the zero-sum logic

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Theme¹

In recent years, the Maghreb has been showing signs of an accelerated regional disintegration in the midst of heightened intra-regional conflict. It remains to be seen whether this is a temporary period of tension or if the region has become immersed in a 'cold war' that could heat up.

Summary

The regional environment in the Maghreb has seen a deterioration over the past few years. The tendency was exacerbated following the unilateral US recognition in December 2020 of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory of the Western Sahara, in exchange for Rabat normalising relations with Israel. This dynamic is viewed in Algeria as a threat to its national security. An arms race is underway in North Africa, feeding into a 'security dilemma' that could lead to an outcome that no party truly desires.

Analysis

In the Maghreb long gone are the days when the leaders of the five states² that [established](#) the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989 declared their intent to 'reinforce the bonds of fraternity binding the member states and their peoples [and] contribute to the maintenance of peace based on justice and equity'. Among [the guiding objectives](#) set in the AMU's founding Treaty was 'to achieve concord between the member states and promote close diplomatic cooperation based on dialogue'. Thirty-four years later, intra-regional relations are at one of their lowest points ever. Today, almost everything that could be cut off, severed or shut down between the two most populated Maghrebi countries (Algeria and Morocco) has already been cut off, severed and shut down, with negative ramifications throughout the region.

Over the past four years, the Maghreb has been facing heightened tensions due to various factors; some of them have strained regional relations for decades, while the more recent ones have aggravated already existing tensions. Longstanding rivalries between Algeria and Morocco have shaped the region's cooperation and conflict

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² The five founding members of the AMU are Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

dynamics. The two main causes of such rivalries are the deeply rooted distrust between policymakers in the two countries and their geopolitical competition for hegemony in north-western Africa and influence in the neighbouring Sahel region, at the continental level and beyond. The three main sources of regional tensions are: (1) the Western Sahara conflict; (2) Israel's abrupt entry in the Maghreb through its relationship with Morocco; and (3) the zero-sum mentality guiding each country's decision-making processes and diplomatic activism, whereby the neighbour's weakness or perceived vulnerability are always viewed as being in one's own interest.

When the Arab uprisings started in 2011, both Morocco and Algeria initially shared a similar threat perception of the challenges facing the regional status quo, prompting a short-lived 'defensive détente'. That rapprochement soon yielded to a new and more intense period of rivalry.

A case of regional disintegration

Historically, the Maghreb region has faced multiple challenges and obstacles to achieving effective regional integration and cooperation. Hopes for substantial political and economic integration were short-lived after the establishment of the AMU, as distrust and inter-state political tensions –especially between Morocco and Algeria over the status of Western Sahara– complicated the consolidation of the regional integration project. Two examples illustrate the regional state of affairs: (1) the last summit between the AMU heads of state took place in 1994; and (2) intra-regional trade between the five member states in 2021 stood at a mere 2.4% of the group's total trade, which is one of the world's lowest percentages of intra-regional trade.

Worse than that, the share of intra-regional trade is even set to shrink after the closure of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (MEG) –which transported Algerian natural gas to Morocco, Spain and Portugal– in November 2021 due to the escalating rivalry between the two North-African neighbours. The MEG is a good reflection of how much the regional environment has deteriorated. It was inaugurated in 1996 as a strategic infrastructure that would help consolidate the western Mediterranean through shared interests, generating trust among neighbours, especially between Algeria and Morocco. Saving the distances, if that was the Maghreb's equivalent of the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (given the importance of that organisation to the formation of the EU), the closure of the MEG after a 25-year transit deal between the two neighbours expired without renewal represented, in a way, the death certificate of that attempt of region-building through shared prosperity.

As of July 2023, the gas pipeline between Algeria and Morocco is shut down, the land borders are sealed, airspace is closed and diplomatic relations are broken. Tensions abound between the two countries and any pretext is used to accuse the neighbour of harbouring ill will. In February 2022 Morocco established a new military zone bordering Algeria, while the latter has been conducting several live-ammunition military exercises near the Moroccan border. The Algerian President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, went even further in March 2023 when he said in an interview that his country's relations with Morocco had 'practically reached the point of no return'. For the past three years, the two countries have been trading accusations over who is to blame for the deterioration

of bilateral relations, with Algiers claiming that Morocco used the Pegasus spyware made by the Israeli NSO Group to hack the phones of several Algerian political and military officials,³ and Rabat denying such accusations and [claiming](#) that the government of the Kingdom of Morocco has never acquired computer software to infiltrate communication devices, nor have the Moroccan authorities ever resorted to such acts.

The deteriorating climate between the two major Maghrebi countries is impacting other regional dynamics, as [the ongoing diplomatic crisis](#) between Morocco and Tunisia shows. Tunisia's traditional position for decades was to remain neutral on the Western Sahara dispute. In August 2022 Tunisia hosted the Japanese-African investment conference (TICAD 8). The Tunisian President Kais Saied welcomed at the airport the leader of the Polisario Front, Brahim Ghali, who is also President of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which provoked Rabat's ire. Tunis argued that the African Union (AU) had issued a direct invitation to the SADR, which is a full member of the AU, to join the conference alongside Morocco, as they had in previous such gatherings. The two countries recalled their Ambassadors and issued harsh statements against one another. [Observers interpreted](#) such a move as a sign of an increasingly visible Algerian influence on Tunisia, whose strategic interests are moving closer to Algiers than to Rabat, in the context of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and a prolonged political crisis.

The Western Sahara: cause and consequence of decades-long tensions

The final status of the Western Sahara has been a major source of contention between Morocco and Algeria for almost half a century. It is both a cause of the poor state of bilateral relations and a consequence of the antagonism and distrust that have afflicted those relations since the independence of the two countries in 1956 and 1962, respectively. The ideological differences between Morocco –a conservative monarchy– and Algeria –a socialist republic– have been at the heart of bilateral crises. However, tensions between the two countries are rooted in differences that [run deep and go beyond ideology](#). The Algerian leadership has been marked by Morocco's attempt to seize part of its territory in 1963, one year after it gained independence from France, a military confrontation known as the Sand War. Those memories, combined with occasional calls by some Moroccan officials and their related media outlets that parts of Algeria allegedly belong to Morocco (like the '[Eastern Sahara](#)'), are a [source of distrust and suspicion](#) among Algerians of Rabat's expansionist projects. For decades, Morocco's ambitions to gain more political and economic influence have alarmed the Algerian leadership.

Since Spain's withdrawal from its former colony in 1975, the Western Sahara has been a contested territory. Morocco considers it an integral part of the kingdom and effectively controls 80% of the land with a heavy military presence. The Polisario Front is the nationalist movement that fights for the right to self-determination of the native Sahrawi

³ According to Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International, some 6,000 Algerian phones were identified as targets of the Pegasus spyware. Some of the targets were senior officials, high ranking military officers, political activists, academics and journalists, as well as members of the intelligence services. See A. Cheref, 'Is Morocco's cyber espionage the last straw for Algeria?', *The New Arab*, 29/VII/2021, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/moroccos-cyber-espionage-last-straw-algeria>.

people. The UN considers the disputed former Spanish colony a ‘non-self-governing’ territory pending a self-determination process.⁴ Of a similar opinion are the [Court of Justice of the European Union](#) (CJEU) and the [African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights](#).

The dispute over the final status of the Western Sahara had been a frozen conflict for decades, following the UN-brokered settlement plan reached between the parties in 1991. That situation came to an end in November 2020 when the Polisario Front [broke the ceasefire](#) after Morocco used force to clear a roadblock by Sahrawi protesters at the Guerguerat crossing, a buffer zone between the territory and Mauritania. The Polisario Front considered this a violation of the 1991 ceasefire agreement and declared a resumption of its armed struggle for the self-determination of the Western Sahara. The pro-independence group was also [frustrated by](#) the lack of progress in the UN-led peace process and the stalemate over the promised referendum on self-determination.

The single factor that contributed the most to raising the temperature of the formerly-frozen conflict over the Western Sahara in recent decades was the [succession of three tweets](#) by the then US President Donald Trump on 10 December 2020, in which the US unilaterally recognised Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara, in exchange for Rabat establishing full diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. Trump’s presidential [proclamation](#) –one of the last decisions he took before leaving the White House, which was a result of a [fallout](#) between him and US Senator Jim Inhofe, a strong supporter of the Polisario Front– has not helped advance a solution to the Western Sahara conflict. On the contrary, it has hardened the positions of all the parties involved.

The transaction resulted in two major outcomes: (1) it led Rabat to believe that the US announcement settled the conflict in its favour, which translated first into a more vehement foreign policy, unleashing crises with Germany and Spain in spring 2021, and then into frustration when it became apparent that no other major country or international organisation –the UN, the EU, the AU or the Arab League– followed in Trump’s footsteps; and (2) it disrupted the unstable equilibrium between the two competitors for regional hegemony in the Maghreb, culminating in the severing of diplomatic relations between the two in August 2021, in the midst of an escalating barrage of mutual accusations, displays of animosity and retaliatory threats.

Clearly, Trump’s move –which was not reversed by the Biden Administration but was not pushed further either– made the job of the latest Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Western Sahara, Staffan de Mistura –who was appointed in October 2021– an almost mission impossible. In over a year and a half, the Personal Envoy has not been to the territory of Western Sahara –the Polisario Front [claims](#) that Morocco has been blocking his visit– and attempts to relaunch direct negotiations between the parties have failed so far. Also, the support that Morocco has received from certain countries to its 2007 autonomy plan for the disputed territory has not been as unequivocal as it would have wished, leaving Rabat’s negotiating position in a less advantageous situation than it initially expected in late 2020.

⁴ See the UN list of non-self-governing territories at <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsqt>.

Israel's entry in the Maghreb and growing diplomatic activism

Morocco and Israel have a long history of secret cooperation on intelligence, military and migration matters. However, it was not until 2020 that both countries established formal diplomatic relations when they agreed to normalise ties as part of the so-called Abraham Accords, a series of agreements mediated by the US between Israel and four Arab countries. For Rabat, that move gave it the long-sought US recognition of its claims over Western Sahara, but also [strengthened cooperation](#) with Israel in areas such as security, intelligence and military affairs. In November 2021 Morocco and Israel [signed](#) a first-ever defence agreement that lays the foundation for security cooperation, intelligence sharing and arms transfers, such as [drone technology](#). This dynamic is viewed by Algeria as a direct threat to its national security. When the Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, visited Morocco in August 2021 he openly criticised Algeria's developing ties with Iran. The Algerians were furious, not for being criticised by Israel but by the fact that criticism came from next door Rabat. The Algerian Foreign Ministry accused Rabat of dragging Israel into the dispute between the two countries in what it [described](#) as a 'dangerous adventure'.

For most of the last decade, Algeria's diplomacy was in a [state of semi-lethargy](#), in part due to the perceived paralysis of the political system. Rabat took advantage to activate its diplomacy. In January 2017 Morocco [rejoined](#) the AU more than three decades after it left the continental organisation after the admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as a member state. Following the election of a new President in 2019, Algiers has also reactivated its diplomacy, trying to regain the influence it used to have in international affairs. In November 2022 Algiers [applied to join](#) the BRICS group of leading emerging economies –Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa– in a move that seeks to cement relations with the group that already accounts for [43%](#) of the world's population and has a larger share of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than the G7. It could also give a boost to Algeria's borrowing capacity through the group's New Development Bank, which offers an [alternative financing system](#) to existing institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. Also, in June 2023, Algeria [was elected](#) to a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council for the period 2024-25, with 184 countries voting in favour and six against (including Morocco, Israel and the United Arab Emirates). Such a competition in foreign policy assertiveness between the two neighbours [comes without a collective vision for the region's future](#).

A regional cold war heating up?

Several authors have described the structural geopolitical tension pitting Morocco and Algeria against one another as a 'cold war', which would be the [North African version of the 'Arab cold war'](#), a term used to describe the struggle for regional primacy between Egypt under President Gamal Abd al-Nasir and other Arab nations during the 1960s. In recent years, some observers share the feeling that a 'cold war' climate is reviving in the Maghreb and that there is a desire to show that the conflict is not only diplomatic and that [it could take on a military dimension](#). However, other analysts are more of the opinion that tension, not conflict, has become the norm, [arguing](#) that the costs of a military conflict –both for the regimes in place and for societies at large– continue to make active hostilities unlikely, even on a reduced scale.

In their own ways, both the Moroccan and the Algerian political systems are displaying an increasingly militant nationalism, chiefly directed at each other. In Tunisia, militant nationalism is combined with [conspiratorial and xenophobic rhetoric](#), with the President espousing the 'great replacement' theory publicly. The fact is that many citizens across the region would leave their countries to seek a better life elsewhere if they could. This widely shared willingness to migrate shows that adverse socioeconomic conditions continue to affect large swaths of the region's populations. It also reflects ample domestic questioning of the political systems and of the respective states' ability to discharge their functions effectively (to provide public services, create economic opportunities, combat corruption and guarantee social rights and economic freedoms).

Defence budgets in both Algeria and Morocco are set to break historical records in 2023, with considerable increases compared with previous years, confirming that the arms race between the two countries is intensifying. In 2021 Algeria's military expenditure stood at [US\\$9.1 billion](#) (5.6% of its GDP), while Morocco's was [US\\$5.4 billion](#) (4.2% of its GDP). In 2023 Morocco's defence budget is expected to reach [5.2% of GDP](#), while Algeria is expected to [almost double its own defence budget to US\\$18 billion](#). Growing energy revenues resulting from the rise in the price of hydrocarbons is allowing Algeria to finance such a [bloated defence budget](#), which [suggests](#) the signing of large arms contracts and a possible financing of operations outside the national borders. Interestingly, in November 2020 the Algerian constitution was [amended](#) to allow its armed forces to be deployed outside the country, in a clear indication that Algiers could intervene in neighbouring countries –like Libya– and also participate in peacekeeping operations under the AU, the United Nations or the Arab League.

[According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute \(SIPRI\)](#) that monitors global arms transfers, during the period 2017-21, Algeria and Morocco were, respectively, the 11th and 25th largest recipients of major conventional weapons at the global level. Jointly, both countries import more arms than the rest of the African continent combined. This arming spree is inevitably feeding into what theorists of international relations describe as a 'security dilemma'. This dilemma appears when, in the anarchic context of international relations, 'many of the means by which a state [tries to increase](#) its security decrease the security of others'. When that happens, states that feel threatened compete for increasing their power to feel more secure. Consequently, security-increasing measures can lead to tensions, escalation or conflict, which [could produce](#) an outcome that no party truly desires. The vicious circle of the security dilemma is considered by some scholars as a root cause of war.

Even though both Algeria and Morocco –together with Tunisia and Mauritania– actively participate in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue,⁵ direct cooperation and communication on security and defence matters between the two main neighbours is almost nonexistent in the current context. Many observers believe that the ongoing military build-up, combined with inflammatory rhetoric by officials and in the social media, serves the leaderships of both countries as a way to distract public opinion from domestic problems,

⁵ NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue is a forum launched in 1994 that promotes political dialogue and practical cooperation between NATO and seven of its southern neighbours: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52927.htm.

as well as to justify the allocation of massive funds to strengthen their respective armies. This is especially relevant in the case of Algeria, where the military play a prominent political [role that was threatened](#) following the removal of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in the aftermath of the *Hirak* protest movement of 2019. Needless to say, the large resources spent on arms purchases and defence are taken away from other necessary and urgent national needs involving social services, infrastructures, sustainability and state modernisation.

Accumulating tensions in the Maghreb are a reminder of the fact that what happens there has repercussions well beyond its territory. Nowadays, the members of the AMU are far from being a security and stability provider for their neighbouring regions. Not only is there a resemblance of a cold war between Algeria and Morocco, but Tunisia [is also facing](#) a socioeconomic crisis that has only deepened following the power grab staged by president Kais Saied in July 2021. Libya, for its part, is still suffering the consequences of over a decade of deep instability, armed conflict and [failed attempts](#) to heal the profound internal fractures and build legitimate state institutions. As things currently stand, an accidental or deliberate spark could ignite the Maghreb, destabilising its neighbours to the north across the Mediterranean and to the south in the already fragile Sahel region.

In the current context, the idea of advancing regional integration in the Maghreb seems completely obsolete and out of touch with reality, whereas it has never been so important as it is today. The five member states of the long-dormant AMU face a grim future if they choose to live giving their backs to one another. There are good reasons to feel dispirited about the region's future; however, the breadth and depth of the challenges facing Maghrebi countries, individually and combined, leave some space for cautious hopes for the future improvement of intra-regional cooperation.

Conclusions

The Maghreb is a fragmented and increasingly disintegrated region. In 2021 intra-regional trade between the five member states of the AMU stood at a mere 2.4% of the group's total trade, which is one of the lowest percentages of intra-regional trade in the world. It is even set to shrink after the closure of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline in November 2021.

Defence budgets in both Algeria and Morocco are expected to break historical records in 2023, with considerable increases compared to previous years, confirming that the arms race between the two countries is intensifying. This arming spree is inevitably feeding into what theorists of international relations describe as a 'security dilemma', whereby security-increasing measures can lead to tensions, escalation or conflict, which could produce an outcome that no party truly desires. As things now stand, an accidental or deliberate spark could ignite the Maghreb, destabilising its neighbours to the north across the Mediterranean and to the south in the already fragile Sahel region.

The ongoing competition in foreign policy assertiveness between the two most populated Maghrebi countries comes without a collective vision for the region's future. In their own ways, both the Moroccan and the Algerian political systems are displaying an increasingly militant nationalism, chiefly directed at each other. The ongoing military build-up, combined with inflammatory rhetoric by officials and in social media, could well serve the leaderships of both countries as a way to distract public opinions from their domestic problems, as well as to justify the allocation of massive funds to strengthen their respective armies.

Nowadays, the members of the AMU are far from being a security and stability provider for their neighbouring regions. In the current context, the idea of advancing regional integration in the Maghreb seems completely obsolete and out of touch with reality, whereas it has never been so important as it is today. However, the breadth and depth of the challenges facing Maghrebi countries, individually and combined, leave some space for cautious hopes for the future improvement of intra-regional cooperation out of sheer pragmatism.