

## **INSECURITY IN THE MAGHREB: A GROWING CATALOGUE OF THREATS**

*With a frozen conflict now thawing, the rivalry between the leading regional powers increasingly evident and domestic and international factors piling up that heighten the ruling elites' perceptions of insecurity, the prospects appear bleak for intra-Maghrebi relations and the security of the countries in the region – which also has implications for their neighbours.*



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A small window of hope opened in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Coinciding with the end of the Cold War, the leaders of Morocco and Algeria reached out to one another, an Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) was created in the image of the European Union and, soon after, in Western Sahara a ceasefire was declared between Morocco and the Polisario Front and MINURSO was launched – the United Nations mission meant to help resolve the conflict.

However, hopes of peace in the region were short-lived. A bloody decade in Algeria, the closure of the border between the two countries in 1994, the impasse in the negotiations over the Sahara as two plans championed by James Baker, personal envoy of the UN Secretary-General, failed, and the manifest dysfunctionality of the AMU made Maghrebi integration little more than a mirage.

At the time of writing, there is concern over rising violence in the Sahara and the rapid deterioration of relations between Morocco and

Algeria. Added to the border closure in place since 1994 are the diplomatic breakdown and the closing of Algerian airspace in August and September 2021, respectively. Morocco has been blamed for the attack on an Algerian convoy as it transited through an area controlled by the Polisario Front on the route between Mauritania and Algeria on November 1st 2021, as reported by *Menadefense*. The attack set off various alarms. It is not a good sign that publications like the *Atlas Stratégique de la Méditerranée et su Moyen-Orient* of the French Fondation Méditerranéenne d'Etudes Stratégiques are devoting attention to the military capabilities of Morocco and Algeria and the potential scenario of an armed confrontation between them.

Further east, to complicate matters, Libya is struggling to escape the spiral of conflict in which it has been immersed since 2011. Meanwhile, to the south, the Sahel has for some time been a key area of concern for regional security. That both Morocco and Algeria are projecting their influence in these spaces, whether by offering mediation or to coordinate regional dialogue forums or bilateral cooperation initiatives, is significant. Algerian–Moroccan competition is not responsible for the high levels of instability in Libya and the Sahel, but it does not help find ways to reduce tensions either.

A key feature of the insecurity in the Maghreb is that hybrid threats are used alongside shows of force more typical of a conventional confrontation. The Maghreb exemplifies how rather than replacing conventional threats, the hybrid can precede or even encourage them. The conflict in Western Sahara, the links with other conflict spaces and the attempts to delegitimise or weaken the regime of a rival country will help us better understand this interrelation.

### **The Sahara conflict: guess who?**

Who are the opposing parties in this conflict? The lack of a unanimous answer to this question is a clear sign of the hybrid nature of the conflict and the differing perceptions of the threats. Algeria maintains that the clash is between Morocco and the Polisario Front. Rabat, meanwhile, argues that Polisario is a proxy for Algeria. In other words, in the Moroccan narrative, Algeria is one of the parties in the conflict, while the Algerian narrative rejects that outright.

The 50th anniversary of the Sahara conflict approaches. From 1991 to November 2020 it fit squarely within the frozen conflict category. Hostilities had ceased. The conflict had not been resolved, but continued through non-military means and modalities. The troops were still deployed, but the

diplomatic competition to kickstart or reverse recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) played a larger role.

The lack of progress and growing frustration among Polisario's supporters made it a matter of time before the situation worsened, and in November 2020 the conflict was definitively removed from the freezer. In response to Morocco's operation to retake control of the **Guerguerat** border crossing with Mauritania, Polisario announced the end of the ceasefire. Shortly after, US President Donald Trump recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, encouraging a more assertive **Moroccan policy** that fuelled diplomatic crises with Germany and Spain in 2021. On the ground, a Moroccan drone killed the head of the Polisario gendarmerie in April 2021, as confirmed by **Sahrawi sources**. Meanwhile, occasional episodes of hostility have occurred in the area separating the territories controlled by the two parties without any talk of a return to war. But the situation could change if the Polisario Front follows through on its **threat** to launch attacks against the Sahrawi cities under Moroccan control.

The confusion around who the parties are in the conflict – is Algeria one? – as well as the arms race in which the two Maghrebi powers have become embroiled increase the risks of the conflict in the Sahara thawing. If the Polisario Front acts on its threats, will Morocco see it as a form of hybrid attack directed from Algiers? And if so, how will it react? And how will Algeria respond if its nationals suffer new attacks in Polisario-controlled areas, especially, if the confrontation reaches Tindouf? Such scenarios are highly delicate but not insignificant and strengthen the argument that the hybrid is spreading: the conventional and the unconventional feed off each other.

### **Porous borders and theatres of conflict**

Among the most worrying security dynamics in the Maghreb is the growing interconnection with other theatres of conflict. After Muammar Gaddafi was toppled in 2011, the nexus of insecurity between the Maghreb and the Sahel became especially visible as criminal gangs, arms and people traffickers, militias and terrorist groups took advantage of porous borders. The conflict in northern Mali in 2012 provided definitive proof. A decade ago, change in the Maghreb contributed to destabilising the Sahel. Now, the insecurity also flows the other way. Well aware of this situation, both Morocco and Algeria have used the tools at their disposal to show the Sahel countries – as well as the global powers with interests in the region – that they are essential actors. In doing so, Rabat and Algiers have added a further dimension to this relationship of competition and open hostility.

The other nexus links the Maghreb with the Middle East. Over the last decade, the Maghreb has become a sphere of competition between Middle Eastern regional powers. This competition involves both traditional powers like Egypt and Turkey and smaller countries with resources and ambition, like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Libya has become the setting par excellence for this regional competition, with these five countries supporting either the Tripoli government or Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Often they justify their political, financial and military support by citing

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national security. However, they have also occasionally shown that their support for rival groups in Libya aligns with opposing views on the region's future and, specifically, the role the groups related to the Muslim Brotherhood can play.

The most striking change, however, and perhaps the most significant, is the normalisation of relations between Morocco and Israel. This rapprochement has occurred within the framework of the so-called «Abraham Accords» promoted by the US administration. In December 2020, despite having already lost the elections, in consecutive tweets Donald Trump welcomed the announcement of normalisation and at the same time recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Joe Biden reaching power has not affected this process, and the rapprochement between Morocco and Israel was sealed with visits to Rabat by then Israeli foreign minister and now prime minister, Yair Lapid, as well as by defence minister Benny Gantz, which brought the signing of the first security and defence agreement between the two countries. The Algerian authorities have made their **opposition to** Morocco's cooperation with Israel clear.

Whenever handling their complex neighbourly relations, the Algerian authorities have always trusted in their military superiority. But Israel's arrival on the scene in areas as diverse as **drone building** and **intelligence** has aroused major concern in Algeria, especially when it comes to unconventional confrontations.

To further complicate matters, it is worth noting that Morocco has for years been accusing Iran of providing support to the Polisario Front through

Hezbollah. Most recently, Israeli officials have argued that Algeria and Iran are part of the same regional bloc. The Maghreb is not only more divided, more and more actors from outside the region see it as a space in which to project their rivalries.

### **The battle for legitimacy and the catalogue of retaliation**

Since their respective independences, Morocco and Algeria have built very different political models, both in their internal organisation and their international support. Morocco set itself up as a conservative monarchy with good relations with the West, while republican Algeria aspired to be a model for revolutionaries around the world. This is neither the only nor perhaps even the main reason for the mistrust and poor relations between the countries' ruling elites, but it must be taken into account. What is more, as Tilila Sara Bakrim makes clear, it is not only the ruling elites who participate in the battle of narratives, but also media allies on each side.

Despite this, Miguel Hernando de Larramendi has described how the Arab Springs generated a feeling of shared vulnerability that temporarily reactivated bilateral relations between Algeria and Morocco. But, as the fears of weakness in the face of their respective people's protests eased, the rivalry resurfaced.

In the run-up to the pandemic, both Morocco and Algeria saw protests revive. In Morocco they were highly localised in the north of the country and specifically the Rif region. In Algeria, they spread further and the Hirak movement that began in 2019 forced the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Nevertheless, far from generating conditions for rapprochement, these types of protests increased suspicions and even accusations that the neighbouring country was meddling in internal affairs and seeking to contribute to the destabilisation.

The situation peaked in summer 2021. Morocco's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Omar Hilale, issued a document in which he dismissed Polisario and the SADR as a «chimerical republic self-proclaimed in the Algerian capital» and criticised Algeria for setting itself up as a fervent defender of the right to self-determination while denying «this same right to the Kabyle people, one of the oldest peoples in Africa». The «valiant Kabyle people», he went on, «deserve, more than any other, to fully enjoy their right to self-determination». The support for the Kabyle independence movement, articulated around the Mouvement pour l'autodetermination de la Kabylie (MAK), whom Hilale proposed inviting to the meetings of the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization, generated a strong

rejection by the Algerian authorities and was, ultimately, the argument used to justify *severing diplomatic relations*. Before making this decision, Algiers accused the MAK – and therefore indirectly Morocco – of having encouraged the *forest fires* that affected Kabylia in August 2021. It is difficult to think of a more hybrid threat than this.

Shortly afterwards, in October 2021, the Algerian government closed one of the two gas pipelines that connect Algeria with the Iberian Peninsula,

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specifically the Maghreb-Europe whose construction began during the brief thaw in relations between Algiers and Rabat in the early 1990s, and which runs through northern Morocco before flowing into Andalusia. In exchange for the rights of passage, Morocco received a kind of toll in the form of gas at prices below market rates. The gas played an important role in electricity production. Algeria has not gone as far as saying that closing the gas pipeline is part of an attempt to weaken Morocco and, formally, no contract has been broken – rather, it has expired. Nevertheless, the effects and perceptions are not much different and they therefore reinforce the hybrid aspects of the tools deployed in the intra-Maghrebi competition.

The proliferation and diversification of threats are rarely confined to one geographical space. Neighbours tend to be dragged along, and they also end up suffering the repercussions of any escalation of the conflict. The growing hostility between Morocco and Algeria and the thawing of the conflict in Western Sahara are having a significant impact on Spain. For now, this has materialised in diplomatic crises,

legal proceedings against former members of the government, suspicions of espionage, the use of energy and migration as a political weapon, and reprisals in the fields of trade and mobility. Authors like *Javier Jordán* say that Morocco employs hybrid strategies in its relations with Spain. The catalogue of threats is mainly used among the Maghreb countries themselves, but neighbours like Spain can also end up suffering. Normalising the threats would pose a risk to all European partners.

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