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DOUBTS REMAIN ABOUT REOPENING THE ALGERIA-MOROCCO BORDER

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North Africa has been gripped for two generations by any number of fears that have resulted in relations between Algeria and Morocco being frozen. The border between the rival powers in North West Africa have been closed since 1994. The situation is all the more absurd if one considers that countries in the Maghreb al-Aqsa - Land of the Setting sun - are doing much better, individually, than most of their Arab peers bar the oil-rich Gulf states.

Even though Morocco's fertiliser industry requires growing amounts of energy and Algerian gas is the cheapest feedstock, Rabat has bought a minimum amount of energy from its neighbour, despite the existence of a pipeline that has been carrying Algerian gas through Morocco to the Iberian Peninsula since 1996. Morocco can supply Algeria with foodstuffs and a range of manufactured goods. It remains an attractive destination for many Algerians who take holidays abroad every year. An estimated 150,000 Moroccans work in Algeria, on three month visa contracts.

While Morocco would gain the most, economically, from reopening the border, private entrepreneurs in both countries would quickly take advantage of freer movement between the countries. Exports of Algerian gas to Morocco could pick up at a later stage but rebuilding trust between the two estranged nations will be an arduous and long term affair. If that is the case, what economic advantage would Algeria gain from open borders?

Lakhdar Brahimi, Algeria's foreign minister from 1991 to 1993 and a respected international diplomat, argued at a recent conference on inter Arab affairs in Algiers that Algeria and Morocco should start talking to each other seriously. He referred to the vastly expanded relations between China and India, two erstwhile enemies. The two Asian giants fought a bitter war in 1962 when China seized border territory in the Himalayas disputed with India.

Algeria and Morocco fought a shorter war in 1963, which had no serious consequences. Despite China and India failing to reach agreement on the territorial dispute, the two countries have worked to increase their bilateral economic relations – trade flows have increased dramatically and are expected to rise further. Why, Brahimi asked “can Algeria and Morocco not take a leaf out of the China-India rapprochement book?” Building trust could take the form of investment

while both countries put aside, for the moment, their bitter dispute over the future status of the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara, which Morocco annexed in 1975.

The United Nations has failed to make any progress on the issue. The European Union has been hostage to the French political class' unconditional support for Morocco, which is predicated on the idea that the very survival of the monarchy would be at stake were the country to agree a compromise solution. This view is not shared by all observers of the Maghreb because it smacks of blackmail.

China and India did not expect any good will from an outside power to help them resolve their dispute. Nor should Algeria and Morocco. It is worth remembering that, in 1984, Algerian president Chadli Bendjedid convinced King Hassan II of Morocco that their two countries should put the West Saharan issue on hold while the border was reopened and the gas pipeline built.

The pipeline project was backed by international oil and gas companies, the US, Portugal and Spain. It runs today at less than half its capacity while Morocco embarks on building a regasification plant in Safi, a major centre of fertiliser manufacturing and export. Such a move hardly speaks of any intention to increase its use of Algerian gas nor does the recent announcement of an agreement with Nigeria to build a gas pipeline to bring gas from the latter to the kingdom.

Those in Algiers who are adamant in their opposition to opening of the frontier point to the benefits of it remaining closed including what they claim is a sharp fall in drug trafficking and easier control of Moroccans travelling to join the Islamic State (ISIS). There are thousands of Moroccans and Tunisians fighting with ISIS in Syria, Iraq and Libya but few Algerians. Their possible return to the mother countries is a major preoccupation of Algerian and Tunisian security services.

Opening its border with Morocco might offer Algeria greater goodwill in the EU but it is anybody's guess whether it will bring greater diplomatic leverage. What it will not do is change France's pro-Moroccan stance. Many senior Algerians doubt whether current domestic circumstances, which include an ailing president and the economic stress resulting from the halving of oil prices, are propitious for a bold initiative.