

## THE MAGHREB: A BATTLE GROUND FOR THE INTRA-SUNNI COLD WAR

**Youssef Cherif**, Deputy Director of Columbia Global Center in Tunis

### Introduction

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Turkey have been competing in North Africa since 2011 through financial investments and the cultivation of political clients. This is driven by three main factors: (1) countering Qatar on one side and supporting Qatari foreign policy on the other; (2) opposing political Islam on one side and supporting it on the other; and, finally, (3) investments and economic gains. Among the above-mentioned actors, Turkey is the one most in need of the third factor.

Qatar and Turkey's political influence peaked in the first two years following the Arab uprisings (2011-13) as their allies took leading positions in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Some observers even claimed that Qatar was leading the Arab Spring. But from 2013 on, the emirate's geopolitical role began to diminish, even if its media empire (Al-Jazeera and co) remained intact. The UAE, on the other hand, has been expanding together with Saudi Arabia since 2013, as demonstrated in Egypt and Libya.

Turkey, in the meantime, because of its strong coordination with Qatar, which reached its pinnacle during the 2017 Gulf Crisis, took over as the leader of the coalition. It worked as a division of labour: the Turks were in charge of political and military involvement and the Qataris were responsible for the financial and media or disinformation part. Thus, from 2017 onwards, the cold war between the four countries intensified, taking place in several geographic locations. The Maghreb is one of them.

### Libya

Libya is the epicentre of the intra-Sunni cold war. Actually, several Libyan leaders and prominent figures live in exile in Turkey, Qatar or the UAE. The country hosts an Emirati military airport, Turkish garrisons, perhaps soon a Turkish military base, Sudanese and heavily armed Russian

mercenaries possibly paid for by Saudi Arabia, and so on. More than 10,000 mercenaries are estimated to be fighting in Libya and being largely paid by the warring Sunni states.

Since 2018, an air war has been taking place in Libyan skies between drones provided to General Khalifa Haftar's army by the UAE, and others given by the Turks to the Tripoli government (the Government of National Accord - GNA). This game of drones transformed Libya into the biggest drone war-theatre in the world. More than 1,000 drone strikes were recorded in 2019 alone. In 2020, the conflict intensified, with Turkey moving in thousands of Sunni Syrian fighters as well as tens of technical advisers and special forces.

The international efforts to broker a peaceful and political resolution were smashed by the different protagonists. Hence, in April 2019, when the United Nations (UN) Secretary General landed in Tripoli, Haftar decided to invade the city. The invasion coincided with a major peace conference led by the UN. Haftar was actually emboldened by Arab and Western support, starting of course by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, but also by France and the US administration of Donald Trump.

By early 2020, Germany brought the foreign actors involved in Libya to the negotiating table. A temporary agreement was sealed but the Emirates and Turkey kept arming their allies in the subsequent weeks, in unprecedented dimensions. Between January and March 2020, for instance, flight trackers recorded more than a hundred cargo flights between the UAE and Benghazi, suspected of transporting weapons. A smaller number of planes and ships originating from Turkey was also observed during the same time. The calm did not last, and Haftar started advancing again. In early March, the UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salame resigned, in large part due to this situation.

When the Covid-19 crisis began, there was hope that the protagonists would calm down, and another ceasefire was declared. But the Tripoli government took the opportunity to stage another attack, emboldened by massive Turkish support, which includes a new variety of drones, jammers, and even warships stationed near the Libyan shores. By June 2020, Haftar was defeated in western Libya, and Turkey seemed to be establishing some sort of protectorate there. Eastern Libya, however, remains largely within the Emirati orbit. This intra-Sunni strife participated in dividing the country and continues to punctuate its daily life.

### **Tunisia**

Tunisia, Libya's immediate neighbour, is trying to navigate these uncharted waters. The involvement of the four Sunni states in Tunisia, unlike the case of Libya, is more on the disinformation level than the military one. Through their media, Emiratis and Qataris demonise each other, consequently delegitimising their respective allies in the country and contributing to political polarisation. Yet rumours about their political meddling abound.

The Gulf countries and Turkey see in Tunisia's Ennahda an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, hence their interest in Tunisian politics. They also want to use Tunisia in their Libyan endeavour. Tunisia, in parallel, needs financing for its weak economy and it always looks to the Gulf countries for that. It also signed important military and security deals with Turkey to counter a terrorist insurgency. It maintains close ties with Qatar and Turkey; it is on good terms with Saudi Arabia but not so much with the UAE.

Qatar is the most important Arab investor in Tunisia and the second largest Foreign Direct Investor after France. It does not have major investments in the country but it provides jobs, pumps cash into Tunisia's Central Bank, and gives Tunisia diplomatic backing internationally. Turkey, in parallel, has signed several security and military agreements with Tunisia since 2011, such as a credit of around 200 million USD to improve its military and security forces. Turkey is also an important trade partner of Tunisia. Qatari and Turkish leaders visit Tunisia on a quasi-annual basis.

Relations with the UAE, in contrast, remain tense. Pro-Qatar figures and outlets often accuse the UAE of attempting to destabilise Tunisia. Mohamed Bin Zayed, the UAE strongman, has not met with any Tunisian leader in the last five years, and no Tunisian high level official was invited to Abu Dhabi recently. During and after the 2019 elections, a pro-authoritarian political party was accused of receiving Emirati money (although no serious investigation has followed). For the Emirati leadership, as long as Ennahda is in power, Tunisia will be blacklisted.

The relationship is different with Saudi Arabia. High level visits are frequent and cooperation on multiple topics continues to evolve. Different from the Emiratis, the Saudis accept the current status quo as long as Tunisian leaders refrain from criticising them and do not forge strong ties with Iran. For the Saudis, North Africa is of secondary importance in comparison to Egypt or the Gulf, so, as long as they are not directly threatened, they are reluctant to intervene. Tunisia is in fact important for those countries directly involved in Libya, i.e. Turkey, Qatar and the UAE, more than Saudi Arabia.

### **Algeria**

As in the case of Tunisia, annual transactions between Algeria and the Gulf countries is limited to a few hundred million USD. Both Saudis and Emiratis have pledged to invest in Algeria. It is yet to be seen with Saudi Arabia, but the UAE announced in April 2018 that it was investing around 1 billion USD in a steel project. There is also a joint Emirati-Algerian military production facility (Nimr). Qatar has been investing in Algeria, too, inaugurating a 2 billion USD steel project in 2014.

Traditionally, Algeria has been close to Russia and Iran, in the opposite camp of the Gulf countries. Moreover, Algeria often clashes with Saudi Arabia on the oil production strategy that

OPEC should adopt. Libya is another point of contention; the Emirati-Saudi axis backs a military solution that the Algerians oppose. Furthermore, as the Maghreb's hegemon, Algeria feels threatened by the advance of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt in its regional security complex. Therefore, when the 2017 Gulf crisis sparked, and while the Bouteflika Government took a neutral stance, many moves signalled an alignment with Iran, which was slightly pro-Qatar.

With the fall of Bouteflika in April 2019, some pointed to the Emirati ties of the strongman who took over, deputy defence minister Ahmed Gaid Salah. In some of the slogans of the Hirak, he was considered an Emirati puppet. And, actually, his first trip abroad was to the UAE (followed by Qatar). His successor, Said Chengriha, the interim Chief of Staff, similarly visited the UAE for his first trip abroad. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune visited Saudi Arabia in February, his first state visit abroad since his December 2019 election. Furthermore, one of his first acts as president was to kick out the CEO of Qatari telecom giant Ooredoo.

However, Tebboune also hosted the Turkish foreign minister in January, followed by the Turkish president, who became the first head of state on a state visit to Algiers since Tebboune's election. Erdogan was followed by Qatar's emir Tamim a few weeks later. The Libyan dossier pushes Algiers closer to Doha and Ankara than Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In fact, Algeria's well organised military institution, its traditional nationalist and isolationist policies, and its economic power, limit foreign meddling. Algiers wants to deal with the major interventionist Sunni regimes according to its own rules, not theirs.

### **Morocco**

Morocco is perhaps the North African country that best exploited the Gulf rivalries. Already close to the Saudis and the Emiratis, and too important in the region to be abandoned, Morocco was able to benefit from its already existing Saudi/Emirati ties, while at the same time getting more Qatari funding and avoiding Qatar from getting closer to Algeria, Morocco's nemesis.

Qatar has therefore been increasing its investments in Morocco in recent years, with frequent mutual visits by the two countries' leaders. Qatar also supported Morocco in brokering the 2015 Skhirat agreement on Libya, which gave the kingdom an international aura needed for both internal and external propaganda. Furthermore, Moroccans can easily travel and work in Qatar. As for Turkey, Rabat has fewer historical and economic ties with Ankara, which limits the latter's involvement on its lands.

In parallel, there are signs of contention between Rabat and the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis. When Mohamed Bin Salman visited North Africa in December 2018, he did not stop by Morocco. Furthermore, King Salman stopped spending his summers in Tangiers. In 2019, Morocco withdrew from the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen, which it had joined in 2015. Between

2019 and 2020, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the UAE withdrew their respective ambassadors from each other's capital several times. Yet Saudi and Emirati investments and aid projects in Morocco did not stop, whereas Qatar increased its presence; Morocco can claim to be its own master facing these countries.

### **Mauritania**

Mauritania is the poorest and least inhabited country in the Maghreb, traditionally close to Saudi Arabia and with limited ties with Turkey. It joined the Saudi-Emirati axis in 2017, cutting its diplomatic relations with Qatar. Therefore, several high level visits from the axis' countries were arranged, and aid started flowing. Furthermore, in 2019, Mauritania had a peaceful transition of power between a putschist general and his elected civilian protégé. This model of a military-led transition was highly praised by the Saudis and the Emiratis, who contrasted it to the "chaotic" democratic models of Tunisia and elsewhere. In the meantime, massive Emirati investment was announced: 2 billion USD, for a country GDP of 5 billion USD. Unlike the other North African countries, Mauritania's choices are limited.

### **Conclusion**

As the 2017 Gulf Crisis dust settles, the picture of North Africa gets clearer. Libya remains the junction point of the warring states, Mauritania stays in the Saudi-Emirati orbit, Algeria keeps its distance, whereas Tunisia and Morocco keep swinging and trying to benefit. Yet the changing nature of world affairs with the 2020 oil crash, the Covid-19 pandemic, and its subsequent global crisis, may unsettle the situation.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, rich and influential, may have fewer resources to fund proxies abroad. Turkey, a strong regional hegemon, might overstretch its forces. However, in the opposite direction, the same conditions can weaken Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, thereby inviting more direct meddling by the four competing states. Either way, instability and insecurity will increase in the Maghreb in the upcoming years.

Published jointly with Aula Mediterrània.