

What Do the Tensions in the Maghreb Mean for Europe?

Luis Martinez
Research Director
Sciences Po, Paris

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brutally plunged Europe into the spectre of war returning to the continent. The destruction of cities and the migration of millions of civilians have brought back the dramatic past of the Second World War. In the face of such tragedies, the war against terrorism in the Sahel or the tensions in the Maghreb appear, wrongly, to be relegated to regional problems. Until 24 February 2022, however, the intractable war in Libya, the tensions between Algeria and Morocco and the institutional crisis in Tunisia caused concern in Europe. Indeed, ten years after the euphoria of the Arab revolts and the dashed hopes of a democratic transition, the Maghreb countries are confronted with internal and regional political problems that are paralyzing a region with 130 million inhabitants (the Arab Maghreb Union – AMU) but whose regional GDP (320 billion) does not exceed that of Egypt (360 billion). The overthrow of the Ben Ali regime was not accompanied by an improvement in the living conditions of the population. This economic failure largely explains the success of President Kais Saïed in his desire to restore a “strong” centralized state, capable of meeting the population's expectations. In sum, the weakness of economic development in North Africa has undermined democratic projects. Like many authoritarian regimes, the nationalist and military elites believe they are well equipped to meet the new challenges that are emerging. However, while the economic and financial effects of the Covid pandemic are still being felt, there is also the soaring food prices inherent to the war in Ukraine and the risk of social unrest due to food insecurity. In fact,

the agricultural sector in North Africa is facing the effects of climate change (water scarcity, drought). The drought raging in the region threatens agricultural production and accentuates dependence on imports in a context where the international agricultural market is characterized by a general rise in prices. Algeria is the world's third largest importer of cereals and Tunisia imports 64% of its cereals, including 85% of common wheat. It is clear that, a decade after the Arab revolutions, climate and food issues are of greater concern than the issue of democratic transition. While for the EU, the major concern is Ukraine, for south European countries, the Maghreb remains a priority because of migration, energy, trade and security issues. In any case, the Ukrainian drama is a reminder of the urgent need to better understand the potential conflicts at the EU's borders and to invest in the search for diplomatic solutions while there is still time. In this perspective, Europe can no longer continue to bury its head in the sand in the face of the threat of a conflict between Algeria and Morocco, and should also invest more in the search for a political solution in Libya.

The Algeria-Morocco Crisis, a Challenge for Europe

Historically fraught with suspicion, relations between Algeria and Morocco have gradually shifted towards mistrust, as illustrated by the rupture of diplomatic relations with Morocco announced on 24 August 2021 by Algeria. The reasons for this mistrust go back to the Western Sahara conflict. In fact, in 1976, it was Morocco that decided to break off diplomatic relations with an Algeria then confident in its economic development. Algeria was determined to weaken the monarchy of Hassan II (1961-1999), which was con-

fronted with attempted military coups (1971 and 1972) and violent repression against its political opponents. Spain's hasty departure from Western Sahara (1884-1976) offered the Kingdom the opportunity to annex this territory and to make its defence a sacred cause for the Monarchy. From the beginning of the conflict, Boumediene's Algeria (1965-1979) took a position in favour of the Sahrawis, so as not to see its neighbour increase its territory in the Sahara, whose economic and energy potential was untapped. As for Hassan II's monarchy, it considered that a large part of Algeria's territory was a gift that colonial France (1830-1962) offered to Algiers to the detriment of Rabat. It did not understand Algeria's aversion to seeing Morocco also have a Saharan depth, which for it was a recovery of its territory after the interlude of the Spanish protectorate (1884-1976). It considered itself betrayed by the non-respect of the 1961 commitments, which stipulate that: "The provisional government of the Algerian Republic recognizes for its part the territorial problem posed by the demarcation arbitrarily imposed by France between the two countries, which will find its solution in negotiations between the government of the Kingdom of Morocco and the government of independent Algeria."¹

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The Western Sahara conflict appears to be the main political factor blocking the construction of regional integration. It illustrates Algeria and Morocco's inability to overcome a relationship of mistrust, or even hostility, since the Sand War of 1963. The conflict in Western Sahara was above all a tremendous political

opportunity for each of them to establish their authority. The Moroccan monarchy was able to appropriate the nationalist sentiment embodied by the *Istiqlal* movement, which made the cause of a greater Morocco one of its political battles. Western Sahara allowed the Algerian regime to justify the power of the army and to fuel nationalist sentiment. The advantage of the Saharan conflict was obvious: the establishment of authoritarian political regimes under the guise of nationalist sentiment. In the 1970s and 1980s, the conflict was a pretext for the establishment of hostile relations between the two countries. Faced with internal criticism of human rights violations, corruption, concentration of wealth and lack of freedom, Algeria and Morocco found in the Western Sahara conflict an opportunity to spread prejudices and clichés about each other through a complacent press, in the hope of rallying a population frustrated by the deterioration of living conditions to their cause. It is clear that in 2022, sixty years after Algeria's independence, Morocco is no longer just a rival; it has become a potential enemy for the Algerian military leaders. While the question of an open conflict between the two countries has been raised, with cataclysmic consequences for the interests and security of Europe, it is clear that there have been few initiatives to overcome the mistrust between these two North African countries. On the contrary, both France and Spain maintain tense relations with Algeria, which are likely to accentuate Algeria's mistrust.

Tensions between Algeria and France

On 2 October 2021, the newspaper *Le Monde* reported on remarks made by President E. Macron during an exchange with young people from families linked to the history of Algeria. The president criticised a "political-military" system that maintained a "memorial annuity" and "hatred of France." And he asked: "the construction of Algeria as a nation is a phenomenon to consider. Was there an Algerian nation before French colonization?" Against all expectations and incomprehensibly, Macron took up the ideas held by the supporters of "French Algeria"! In this historical misguidance, President Macron, exac-

¹ Convention on reciprocal commitments between Morocco and Algeria signed in Rabat on 6 July 1961.

erbated by Erdogan's aggressive policy in the Mediterranean, dared to make an erroneous historical comparison between French colonization and Ottoman domination, he was "fascinated to see Turkey's capacity to make people completely forget the role it played in Algeria and the domination it exercised."

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In Algiers, these implausible remarks provoked a wave of indignation, including among opponents of the regime. Qualified as "irresponsible" by the presidency of the Algerian Republic, Algeria recalled its ambassador to Paris, Mohamed-Antar Daoud, for consultations and then banned French military aircraft from flying over its airspace. The Algerian authorities skilfully exploited this crisis with France in the hope of restoring a semblance of legitimacy after the protests by the Hirak, a peaceful movement that aspires to a democratic transition. In the media and on the Internet, incendiary remarks were made against France and its persistence in denying the existence of a pre-colonial Algeria. In an interview granted on 6 November 2021 to the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, President Tebboune stressed that "Macron has reopened an old conflict in a totally useless manner" and specified: "I will not be the one to take the first step... No Algerian would accept that I contact those who have insulted us." On 9 November, President Macron stated he "regrets the controversies and misunderstandings generated by the reported remarks" and expressed his "greatest respect for the Algerian nation, for its history and for the sovereignty of Algeria." This desire for appeasement on the part of France has in fact come up against a relationship that has lacked common interests and a shared vision of regional issues for a decade.

The disagreements between Algeria and France were first illustrated upon the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in October 2011. With 900 km of borders with Libya, Algeria could not but be concerned about the

destabilizing effects on its security. The attack by terrorist groups from Libya on the In Amenas gas site in 2013 dramatically illustrated the fear of seeing post-Gaddafi Libya turn into a refuge for jihadist groups. From the overthrow of the regime in 2011 to the Paris Conference in November 2021 on ending the crisis by organizing a presidential election on 24 December 2021, France and Algeria have not managed to develop a common vision for the future of the country. On the contrary, Algeria joined Turkey in its opposition to General Haftar's failed offensive on Tripoli in spring 2019. Similarly, Algeria did not accompany France in its intervention in Mali within the framework of Operation Barkhane in 2013. On several occasions, Algeria has publicly expressed its satisfaction at not having accompanied France in this intervention and has often criticized the creation of the G5, perceived by Algiers as an instrument "created to counter the CEMOC," a joint military staff of African countries around Algeria. Today, Algeria measures the failure of France in Mali and appreciates its replacement by Russia, a partner country of Algeria. The economic and commercial effects of these tensions have not been long in coming. The Algerian-French trade fell by - 24% in 2020 and by - 18% in the first half of 2021. Only the war in Ukraine saved French cereal producers from losing the Algerian market.

In the midst of this falling out with France, the state visit of Italian President Sergio Mattarella on 6 November 2021 reinforced Italy's central position in Algeria. On the occasion of the national holiday on 1 November, a message from the Italian President stressed that: "Algeria and Italy are linked by a historical friendship, which has allowed us to develop an intense and fruitful cooperation in many sectors of common interest over time." Moreover, in its desire to diversify its gas supply, Italy signed an agreement with Algeria on 9 April 2022 to increase gas exports to Italy by an additional 9 billion cubic metres per year via the Transmed pipeline. After Italy, Algeria's rapprochement with Erdogan's Turkey has resulted in an increase in Turkish investments in Algeria (by 5 billion dollars) and an increase in trade, with Turkey becoming Algeria's third largest customer in 2020. Relations with the Erdogan regime are described as "excellent" by President Tebboune, but this rapprochement raises many concerns, particularly in the Sahel. Turkey and Russia no longer hide their desire to replace France in Africa and Algeria is a remarkable relay for these two countries on the continent.

Spectacular Rapprochement between Spain and Morocco

Since the rupture of Algeria's diplomatic relations with Morocco, announced on 24 August 2021, the risk of a conflict between the two North African powers has caused a wave of concern in Europe and Africa. Both countries are engaged in a military build-up and each is trying to persuade its population of the superiority of its military power. In 2021, Algeria's army ranked 27th out of 140 armies by Global Fire Power and is theoretically more powerful than Morocco's, ranked 53rd. The land border between these two countries extends over more than 1,778 km (1,941 km if Western Sahara is included). This means that a conflict today would take on proportions far beyond those of the 1963 "sand war." With a population of 45 million inhabitants in Algeria and 37 million in Morocco, a possible conflict would force the populations to fall into a herd nationalism with devastating effects for the whole region. The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly put the military tensions between these two major North African countries on hold. It is in this context that Spain has dramatically changed its foreign policy in the region. In March 2022, the Spanish authorities publicly supported Morocco's autonomy plan for the Sahara. Until then, Spain had maintained good relations with Algeria because of its policy on the Western Sahara issue, which Algiers considered balanced. But the "turnaround" of the Spanish government's position on Morocco's solution to the Western Sahara conflict has provoked incomprehension and anger in Algiers. Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune described the Spanish about-face as "morally and historically unacceptable." This diplomatic success for Rabat was also accompanied by an agreement with Spain (reversing the flow of the pipeline) to compensate for the shutdown in October 2021 of gas imports from Algeria via the Maghreb-Europe pipeline. Inaugurated in 1996, it has transported annually 10 billion m³ of gas to Spain and Portugal via Morocco. But Algiers has threatened to cut off its gas supply to Spain if the gas delivered by Algeria "to Spanish customers" is redirected to Morocco. After France, Spain has become the second major European country to have strained relations with Algeria.

The war in Ukraine should not distract Europe from the tensions in North Africa. Moroccan diplomatic victories over Western Sahara accentuate Algerian frustrations, which should not be taken lightly. Europe must work to find acceptable political solutions before it is too late. North Africa is already facing a conflict – post-Gaddafi Libya – , in which Europe seems invisible compared to Turkey, Russia, Egypt, Qatar, etc. If war has returned to the European continent, it never really left the African one. It is imperative that Europe and in particular the south European countries reconsider their relations with North Africa. The failure of democratic transitions must not lead to regional conflicts like the one threatening to break out between Algeria and Morocco. Russia has important levers in North Africa and the Sahel to destabilize Europe; let's hope that the EU will not repeat in North Africa its strategic mistakes in Ukraine.

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