

6. Regional Cooperation and Permeability to External Influence

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Any assessment of North Africa's prospects would be incomplete without factoring in the role of external actors. At its closest point, Europe is a mere 9 miles from Morocco, and 290 miles of water separate the Italian island of Lampedusa from war-torn Libya, making it clear why external actors would have an interest in shaping the future of the region. This proximity, the role that North Africa plays in exerting control over the contested Eastern Mediterranean basin, and an abundance of resources including oil, coal, and a range of metallic elements, draw the interest of not only European powers but Turkey, Russia, China, and the Gulf states.¹

Regional cooperation among North African states will, however, continue to be instrumental in shaping the future of the region. Such cooperation has an impact on the extent to which these states are open to external influence. Recently, increasing tensions between Morocco and Algeria illustrate how external alignment can continue to shape regional conditions, with Morocco improving its relations with Belgium, France, and Italy, and Algeria turning toward Spain.²

¹ "Mapping Africa's Natural Resources", *Al-Jazeera*, February 20, 2018; and P.P. Raimondi, "The New Energy Geopolitics of 'East Med'", *Aspenia Online*, October 5, 2020.

² S. Karam, "Algeria Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Morocco as 'Tensions Build'", *Bloomberg*, August 24, 2021.

Finally, relations with sub-Saharan African countries, though outside the immediate realm of regional North African alliances, remain a significant focus for North Africa leaders. While some North African states are looking south to garner diplomatic support, others see economic opportunity as well as strategic security interests. A better understanding of these interests will enable external actors with a vested interest in the future of North Africa to better cooperate on furthering common policy agendas, such as curbing migration, encouraging economic development, and stemming security threats.

Morocco and Algeria

The ongoing diplomatic crisis between Morocco and Algeria has underscored the fragility of relationships in the region, emphasizing the need to pursue state interests independent of a regional framework.³ The immediate future of the region will be one defined by the pursuit of such independent interests, with adjustments based on the context of what is happening in neighboring states.

Morocco has and will continue to serve as a prime example of this reality. Relations between Rabat and Algiers recently hit a new low point following allegations that Morocco employed Pegasus spyware made by NSO Group of Israel against officials in other states (in addition to targeting journalists and other Moroccans).⁴ Relations have long been strained between the two amid Morocco's claims on the disputed Western Sahara

³ Ibid.

⁴ C. Timberg et al., "On the List: Ten Prime Ministers, Three Presidents and a King", *Washington Post*, as part of the Pegasus Project, a global investigation, July 20, 2021; and "Pegasus Project: All the Articles", *Forbidden Stories*, accessed September 15, 2021. Note: Morocco denied newspaper reports that "falsely claim that Morocco has infiltrated the telephones of several national and foreign public figures and officials of international organizations through computer software". See: *Washington Post* staff, "Responses from Countries to the Pegasus Project," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2021.

and Algeria's support for the Polisario Front opposing them. While the Trump administration's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara came as a welcome development for Rabat, uncertainty persists about the line the Biden administration will take on the matter.⁵

These developments have and will continue to be a strong catalyst for Morocco to strengthen its position as a regional military power. Morocco has sought to modernize its military and specifically its air force and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) program, and in April 2021 the state used a UAV for the first time in the Western Sahara.⁶ Relations with Israel, formally established more than a year ago as part of the historic Abraham Accords, are particularly relevant given Israel's position as one of the world's foremost drone producers. Relations with Israel will likely strengthen in the coming years, not least because of the strong Moroccan Jewish community residing in Israel and maintaining a cultural connection with its roots. These relations have begun and will perhaps continue to serve as a justification for the worsening of the crisis between Morocco and Algeria.⁷

On the military front, continued strong US support for the modernization of the Moroccan military is anticipated, with deals signed for twenty-four Apache helicopters and twenty-five new F-16 fighter planes.⁸ Despite the importance of the US relationship, an attempt at diversification of alliances by Morocco can already be seen as it seeks to bring other partners from abroad to ensure its strategic position. The recent US exit from Afghanistan – perceived as abandonment – has only underscored the need to have other potential partners in the

⁵ J. Stepansky, “Why Biden's Western Sahara Policy Remains under Review”, *Al Jazeera*, June 13, 2021.

⁶ A. Helou, “Here Are Morocco's Top Priorities for Modernizing Its Air Force”, *Defense News*, August 18, 2021.

⁷ R. Bassist, “Algeria Partly Blames Israel in Decision to Cut Ties with Morocco”, *Al-Monitor*, August 25, 2021.

⁸ H. Reyes, “Raytheon to Supply Morocco with F-16 Engines in \$212 Million Contract”, *Defense Post*, July 29, 2021.

pipeline. In this regard, Russia and China are the primary contenders, along with the continued development of relations with European partners, namely Belgium, France, and Italy.

Aside from concerns related to the Western Sahara and its push to garner support among sub-Saharan African allies, Morocco can be expected to continue its push south, after having rejoined the African Union in 2017. King Mohammed VI has over the course of his reign made it a priority to increase Moroccan foreign direct investment in African states, particularly furthering the reach of his country's banking and telecommunications sectors. In the longer term, the Moroccan government's aim is to establish itself as an economic gateway to Africa that is too important for the West and China to ignore, drawing in new allies who will need to align with its own diplomatic aims.⁹

With the French language being a cultural connector between Morocco and many African nations, Morocco will continue to project elements of soft power via its Moroccan International Cooperation Agency. Such efforts will persevere on the religious front as well, with Morocco making use of its Mohammed VI Foundation to promote its own moderate vision of Islam.

Algeria will in the coming years be shaped by a mix of factors, some of which are related to its conflict with Morocco, but primarily linked to its desire to increase international cooperation and reclaim regional influence. This aim was exemplified by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's mid-2020 creation of the Algerian Agency for International Cooperation for Solidarity and Development, which is meant to "infus[e] a new dynamic in Algeria's international cooperation, especially toward African countries".¹⁰

⁹ Y. Abouzzohour, "Israel, Africa and Libya: Morocco's Foreign Policy Trump Cards", Lawfare (blog), Lawfare Institute in cooperation with Brookings Institution, August 16, 2021.

¹⁰ S. Bliidi, "Algeria Is Seeking to Recapture Lost Influence in Africa", *Arab Weekly*, April 25, 2021.

While Algeria's foreign relations outside Africa, particularly with France, have been focused on fighting terror and countering extremism, on the continent Algeria will continue to seek to develop economic and cultural cooperation with African states. The need for further strengthening regional economic ties began when the hydrocarbon-focused economy bore the brunt of the dramatic fall in oil prices in 2014. The strategy for engagement with Africa was evident in a 2019 speech given by Tebboune, who listed his focus on relations with Africa as a priority.¹¹ The manifestation of these plans was seen with the 2020 opening of a trans-Saharan highway connecting Algiers with Lagos, sub-Saharan Africa's largest city.

Unlike Morocco, Algeria has not and should not be expected to focus its regional alliances around military buildup, although regional security in the Sahel should be expected to remain a priority. It is around issues such as this that its relationship with the United States will continue to be based on the question of Libya's future. As a neighbor, Algeria will continue to take a keen interest in the role that foreign forces play there: US State Department official Joey Hood, on a recent visit, described «common goals, which are to talk with our allies and partners about how [to] improve the situation to set a strategy for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Libya as quickly as possible».¹² This interest in Libya will be strengthened by the economic and diplomatic interest its regional rival Morocco has begun to take in the issue.

Permeability to external influence in the Algerian case very much runs through Ankara, which continues to be one of Algeria's central allies. The strength of these relations stem from a common outlook on regional security issues, including developments in Libya and Tunisia, alongside strong economic ties. Both of these issues were emphasized in a recent visit to

¹¹ B. Hafiane, "Allocution du Président Tebboune au 33ème sommet de l'UA à Addis-Abeba", *Algerie Presse Service*, February 9, 2020.

¹² "US Official Discusses Regional Security, Libya on Algeria Visit", *Arab Weekly*, July 31, 2021.

Algiers by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, who stated that both countries aim to increase their bilateral trade volume to \$5 billion. With relations still contentious between the current administration in Washington and Ankara, and while the Biden administration reviews policies in the region and shifts its priorities to counter China, Turkey may seek to fill a perceived void in North Africa.¹³

Beyond Libya, where thousands of Turkish soldiers and Turkish-funded mercenaries are currently deployed, there is another space where Turkey may reassert its position in North Africa in the coming years: mitigating tensions between Algeria and Morocco. Turkey is well-positioned to play the role of go-between: It has sixty-five years of diplomatic relations with Morocco, and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes its relations with Algeria as based on “common history as well as deep-rooted cultural and brotherly ties”.¹⁴

Tunisia

The political crisis in Tunisia is indicative of the political path to expect for the country in the coming years. As discussed in chapter 1 of this larger report on North Africa, the crisis began in July 2021 when Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, and subsequently suspended the Assembly of the People’s Representatives and invoked the emergency powers of the Tunisian constitution’s Article 80. “The coup is losing momentum”, opines David Hearst, commentator and *Middle East Eye’s* editor-in-chief.¹⁵ Tunisia relies on foreign aid and is saddled with \$6 billion of national

¹³ N. Danforth, *A Cool, Cautious Calm: US-Turkey Relations Six Months into the Biden Administration*, Brookings Institution, July 15, 2021.

¹⁴ “Relations between Turkey-Algeria”, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (website), accessed August 29, 2021.

¹⁵ D. Hearst, “Tunisia Coup: Why Its Days Could Be Numbered”, *Al-Monitor*, August 5, 2021.

debt, which in theory could make it open to the nudges of Western allies. Yet the pace of appointments to replace those forced out is slow, and Tunisia's strongman does not appear to be budging.

This clear process of democratic backsliding – in the country in which the 2011 Arab Spring broke out and had been viewed as the only “success story” – will necessarily have a negative impact on its alliances with Western actors, particularly the United States and Europe.¹⁶ US Senators Jim Risch and Bob Menendez made abundantly clear the risk that the ongoing seizure of power poses to US-Tunisia relations, recently stating, “President Saied must recommit to the democratic principles that underpin US-Tunisia relations, and the military must observe its role in a constitutional democracy”. The European Council expressed similar concern: “Preserving democracy and stability in the country is a priority”.¹⁷

The continued fallout with Western allies is already leading Tunisia's new government to strengthen alliances with regional actors such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Flush with cash, both of these countries share with Tunisia's new government a desire to deal a significant blow to political Islam in all its forms. In the case of Tunisia, this comes in the form of the Ennahda Movement, or Renaissance Party. The UAE's support for military strongman Khalifa Haftar in Libya stemmed from similar motivations, such as a desire to defeat “extremist militias”.¹⁸ The opposite is true with Turkey, which views with great concern the ongoing governance crisis in Tunis, particularly in light of President Erdoğan's own strong domestic relationship with Islamists. This should be expected to have negative effects on the Turkish-Tunisian relationship

¹⁶ I. Bremmer, “Why Tunisia's Democracy Could Be on the Verge of Collapse”, *Time*, August 12, 2021.

¹⁷ European Council, “Tunisia: Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the European Union”, Press Release, July 27, 2021.

¹⁸ A. El Yaakoubi, “Haftar's Ally UAE Says ‘Extremist Militias’ Control Libyan Capital”, *Reuters*, May 2, 2019.

moving forward, with reports already published that Tunis is seeking an urgent review of its trade deals with Ankara.¹⁹

Saudi Arabia and the UAE also see the potential to undermine the interests of regional rival Qatar. The Tunisian offices of Qatar-backed *Al Jazeera* remain closed, after this news organization became one of the first targets in the new Tunisian government's crackdown. Given the expectation that Saied will remain in power for the foreseeable future and will prohibit free and fair elections, Tunisia should be expected to strengthen relations with these two countries at the expense of Western backers.

Saied will likely be susceptible to this influence, especially if Saudi Arabia and the UAE prove useful in helping the country emerge from its current financial crisis. Its fiscal deficit reached 11.4% last year, with government debt reaching 88% of gross domestic product (GDP) at the end of 2020, and the rating agency downgraded Tunisia to a B- rating with a negative outlook.²⁰ Average economic growth stood at 1.5% through 2019, but last year the economy contracted 8.6%. Unemployment is verging on 18%, with youth unemployment clocking in at 35%. Thus, with Tunisia currently on the verge of default, needing at least \$3 billion this year to pay down foreign debts and the wages of hundreds of thousands of public-sector employees, it will be left with little choice but to be guided by UAE and Saudi interests.²¹

This trend is even further pronounced by the expected hesitancy of Western governments to continue providing economic support. An International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, which was meant to be for \$4 billion is now frozen, and certainly won't progress in light of political circumstances and government-reform conditions that are part of IMF funding.

¹⁹ "Erdogan Emphasizes Democracy in Call with Tunisia's Saied", *Daily Sabah*, August 2, 2021.

²⁰ "An economic recipe for unrest ignites in Tunisia", *Al-Jazeera*, July 26, 2021.

²¹ "Tunisia's political crisis forewarns economic collapse", *Al-Monitor*, October 16, 2021.

Tunisia's future relations will thus be shaped by those that can help bail it out economically, which would in turn strengthen the perception of the new government in the eyes of citizens and especially the youth, who have been particularly vocal about the economic crisis and the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.²²

A similar strengthening of relations should be expected with Cairo, with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry affirming, "The full support of the Arab Republic of Egypt for the stability and the fulfillment of the will of the Tunisian people", and noting that Tunisia is undergoing: "a historic moment, undertaken by a person who attaches the highest importance to the values of democracy, the constitution and institutions".²³ The logic behind Egyptian support is clear, with President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi waging a similar battle against political Islam in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood and his ousted predecessor, Mohammed Morsi. Sisi, a former military general, also understands the importance of the West's former darling relying heavily on military rule similar to his in Egypt.²⁴

Libya

The dissolution of Libya's social contract, which traded basic rights for petrol wealth, thrust Libya into a fierce civil war in 2014. A tenuous cease-fire has been in place since June 2020, but it is unlikely that it will outlast the short term. Libyan society has fragmented along pre-state cleavages, with ordinary Libyans seeking to protect their rights and wealth. International intervention was decisive in ending the fortytwo year tyranny of

²² S. Speakman Cordall, "'People Are Hungry': Why Tunisia's Youth Are Taking to the Streets", *the Guardian*, January 20, 2021.

²³ "Egypt Vows 'Full Support' for Tunisian President", *Africanews*, August 4, 2021.

²⁴ "Egypt Is Again under Military Rule, but Sisi Lacks Nasser's Appeal", *Economist*, August 24, 2021.

Mu'ammarr Gaddhafi in 2012. Shortly after this point, Libyan elites moved to capture a share of Libya's wealth, inviting a new set of international actors to Libya. In exchange for that help, these Libyans promised international actors a range of political and economic concessions. Numerous countries – prominently France, Egypt, the UAE, Turkey, and Qatar – sought out such parties, conducting covert operations within Libya and funding, arming, and training different Libyan factions. Turkey outright intervened in Libya in January 2020, dispatching over a thousand Turkish troops to the country in addition to an unknown number of Syrian mercenary fighters.

Today, Libya is best understood in a Venn diagram as the epicenter of multiple simultaneous and interlocking international competitions. The Libyan vacuum, in the absence of an international arbiter or preeminent political faction or figure, has invited international factions to incorporate Libya into their own visions for the region's geopolitical future, and to attempt to impose their own visions of order onto the region. The principal competitions involve: Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and Egypt and the United Arab Emirates on the other, beginning with the Arab Spring; Turkey and France, which have fallen out over similar issues, in addition to growing disputes about migration and the Eastern Mediterranean; and Turkey and Russia, with the latter seeking leverage over the former, as has been the case for centuries.²⁵ The internationalization of Libya's second civil war has been and continues to be the key roadblock to the settlement of the Libyan crisis. The impasse is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Along with Turkey, Russia is one of the key protagonists in Libya's civil war. Russian strategists view Libya as a low-cost, high-reward theater for power projection, and as a useful form of leverage over Turkey and the European Union. Turkey views Libya as an essential component of its broader regional strategy.

²⁵ See J. Mens, "Blue Homelands and Red Strongholds: The Libyan Civil War in Turkish and Russian Strategy", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 41, no. 4 (forthcoming).

Russia views Libya as a crucial gateway to sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean, and Russian publications regularly discuss resurrecting Gaddafi-era negotiations for a naval base in Benghazi and establishing an air base in Tobruk.²⁶ After the failure of the Libyan National Army's (LNA) offensive in 2019-20, Russia began covertly pushing for the partition of Libya, as doing so would enable Moscow to leverage its array of partnerships in the country.²⁷ When a cease-fire was reached, Russia embraced the status quo, as did the other supporters of the LNA: Egypt and the UAE.

Egypt and the UAE are highly unlikely to accept any solution that involves opportunities for political Islamism to take hold in Libya, or the presence of Turkish troops or political influence in Libya. Cairo began its stealth intervention in Libya in 2014 as Sisi saw in Haftar a natural ally to partner with to contain the perceived Islamist threat in eastern Libya and to protect Egypt's western border. A wave of terrorist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula prompted Sisi to provide Haftar with military and diplomatic assistance in January 2015. Egyptian involvement in the conflict has been closely coordinated with the UAE, which also views Libya as a central battleground for the shape of postrevolutionary states' orders and the role of political Islamist groups – such as the Muslim Brotherhood – which it has sought to repress both domestically and regionally. In the Libyan context, the UAE's goals have been the same as they have been elsewhere: expelling from Libya the foremost supporters of political Islam, namely Qatar and Turkey.

Qatar and Turkey are at the other end of the spectrum. For Turkey, the stakes are much higher than they are for Qatar, which has effectively been crowded out of Libya since 2014. Turkey sees a hegemonic presence in Libya as a necessary step to expand influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa,

²⁶ R. Mustafin, “Nuzhny li Rossii voyennyye bazy v Livii”, (“Does Russia Need Military Bases in Libya?”), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 19, 2017.

²⁷ M. Katz, “What's the Meaning of Moscow's Murky Moves in Libya”, *Responsible Statecraft*, May 30, 2020.

two regions seen as critical to Turkey's international status, as outlined in the Blue Homeland doctrine.²⁸ Libya also is a key component of Turkey's energy plans,²⁹ and offers an estimated \$16 billion in backlogged construction contracts.³⁰ Additionally, Turkey has worked to prevent Libya from adopting an Egypt-style secular authoritarian system. The 2013 coup in Egypt drastically eroded its influence in North Africa, and Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is ideationally aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood.³¹ Since January 2020, Turkey has deployed troops, tanks, Syrian mercenaries, drones, aerial defense systems, and electronic warfare systems to stave off an LNA offensive. When the October 23 ceasefire was declared, Turkey had established itself as the decisive international stakeholder in Libya.

In view of this impasse, the Libyan crisis will likely go through another round of fighting before a proverbial rock bottom is reached. Going forward, there are three likely outcomes in Libya.

The first and most likely is a condominium between Russia and Turkey, in which the interests of the two most present actors are accommodated. This outcome could involve a peaceful settlement or de facto partition of the country in which Russia preserves its influence in eastern Libya, and Egypt acquires an effective buffer zone in that part of the country; Turkey would be preeminent in the western area, and would retain some residual military presence, if not bases. Because of the existential interests of Egypt and Turkey, and the involvement of a panoply of external players, it is highly unlikely that a

²⁸ A. Erdemir and P. Kowalski, "'Blue Homeland' and the Irredentist Future of Turkish Foreign Policy", *War on the Rocks*, September 30, 2020.

²⁹ S. Hacaoglu and F. Kozok, "'Turkish Offshore Gas Deal with Libya Upsets Mediterranean Boundaries'", *World Oil*, December 6, 2019.

³⁰ "'Turkey Ready for Fast Reconstruction in Conflict-Torn Libya, Official Says'", *Abram Online*, June 19, 2020.

³¹ A. el-Gomati, "Turkey: The Geopolitical Knot", in *The Great Game*, Sadeq Institute, 2021, pp. 48-51.

solution to the conflict could be reached without the agreement of both parties. As the impasse on the ground deepens, and despite the deep animus between both countries, the key players will likely come to an agreement behind closed doors. Because of their reliance on external support, their Libya proxies will have to play along. Because Europe has arrived to the party so late, and because the United States has been effectively checked out of the Libyan crisis since the murder of Ambassador Chris Stevens in 2012, there is little that can change the situation on the ground in favor of an alternative party. An entrenched Turkish and Russian presence in Libya is more likely than not in the long term.

The second option is partition, but this is unlikely. As outlined above, it is possible for Russia, Turkey, and Egypt to achieve the same result in Libya without *de jure* partition. Partition is widely opposed by Libyans and would draw more attention from the international community, particularly from the United States and the EU, than has to date been given to Libya. While Russia and Egypt, as outlined above, have considered this option, it is unlikely that Turkey would agree to this solution given the juridical implications that partition would have for its claimed energy rights in the Eastern Mediterranean; since 2019, Turkey has used an agreement with the Libyan government as the basis for expansive drilling claims in that area including in waters claimed by Greece. This agreement would be affected by partition, and Turkey would be unlikely to abide by the creation of another military dictatorship in North Africa, let alone one where Russian weapons systems could feasibly be deployed, affecting Turkey's ability to operate freely in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The third option is total victory, but this is highly unlikely. The extent of vested international interests is such that no single party could take over in Libya. More importantly, no single party is trusted within Libya. The last two decades have drained Libyans' confidence in their nascent political class and institutions. On the Libyan political scene, tribal, ethnic, and

geographic provenance are all sources of suspicion, making it unlikely that any single candidate or body could unify Libya's fissiparous body politic. Libya's heated constitutional debates and the seeming intractability of the constitutional question evidence this very point, and further contribute to the argument that contrary to the expectations of Haftar's backers, the end of Libya's twenty-year crisis will be neither quick nor painless.

Conclusion

Since the nineteenth century, North Africa has been subject to international intervention. Since then, the world has grown smaller and the Middle East and North African (MENA) region has evolved into a geopolitical arena in its own right. The traditional players in the region – France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and the United States – continue to play a role. Yet newcomers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are also playing a growing role in both ordering and destabilizing North Africa, each hoping to create national and regional orders in their own mold. This role will continue to grow across North Africa as the role of the United States becomes less certain, and as EU members continue to struggle to act decisively and in concert in the international arena.

The role of resources will, as ever, continue to play a significant role in organizing the region's politics and determining the interests of international actors. While the environmental, social, and governance transition in the financial arena continues at full steam, oil and natural gas remain important factors in determining international interest in the region, particularly as energy politics becomes a defining issue in the Mediterranean. Beyond energy resources, the role of rare earths and precious metals will continue to grow and may yet serve to attract China to a region with which it has not yet created deep ties. Resources will also have an impact on the ability of North African states to cooperate among themselves, as they compete for resources and foreign investment. As the push to economic

and political modernization continues to grow, particularly amid the energy transition, foreign investment will become more important than ever. The need for economic engagement will be yet another outlet for foreign influence.

Finally, the question of migration continues to loom large. While the EU has not been able to determine a common and coherent agenda for dealing with foreign policy, let alone with the North Africa region, the question of migration is one of profound importance to individual member states and to the political unity of the union writ large. As population growth and climate change continue apace, this question will become more acute over the course of the next decade. International intervention could see migration weaponized by Europe's adversaries, used as a tool for leverage and so-called grey zone warfare, and there will be a growing need for Europe to work out a framework to engage with those on its own doorstep.