

1. Political, Economic, and Security Challenges in North Africa

Yahia H. Zoubir, Abdelkader Abderrahmane

The so-called Arab Spring that started in North Africa and the Middle East a decade ago was perceived as a major sociopolitical and economic milestone for the populations of the region. The hope was that the incumbent regimes would finally move away from authoritarianism and allow for greater political participation, good governance, and human security.¹ Instead, North Africa has faced increasing sociopolitical, economic, and security turmoil, impacting in turn the contiguous Sahel region and vice versa. The Arab uprisings have also led to deeper instability englobing the entire Sahelo-Maghreb region, resulting in formidable challenges for this region.² Terrorism, drug and arms trafficking, illegal migration, and internal unrest are among the numerous security issues that these states have faced. By 2015, the instability of the southern Mediterranean area, which includes the Levant, had spilled into Europe, which witnessed waves of tens of thousands of refugees and acts of terrorism.³ Adding to regional instability is the Sahrawi nationalist movement's November 2020 resumption of

¹ Y.H. Zoubir, *Security Challenges in the Maghreb: the Nexus Between Bad Governance and Violent Extremism*, EuroMeSCO Policy Brief, no. 70, 2017, p. 1

² *Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region*, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM), rapporteur Ahmet B. Çonkar, update of December 2020.

³ Zoubir (2017), p. 2.

hostilities in its decades-long Western Sahara conflict with the Kingdom of Morocco.⁴

Domestically, North African governments have yet to satisfy the demands advanced by their respective citizens since 2011. The reasons behind these uprisings remain similar, and lead to recurrent and sometimes massive demonstrations and claims for political change, as witnessed in Sudan and Algeria in 2018-19. Protests movements in North Africa have been cyclical, although those of 2010 have had the greatest impact, particularly in Libya (leading to civil wars) and Tunisia (with its uncertain democratic transition). Bad governance will no doubt incite protests in the next decade. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic, which spares no country, has affected North African economies, which could unleash new forces of contestation. While it is too early to assess its long-term effects, this pandemic may offer windows of new opportunity for these states to assess the shortcomings of their governance and introduce reforms, particularly in terms of human security, which “encompasses human rights, good governance, access to education and health care, and ensuring that each individual has opportunities and

⁴ The Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro), known as Polisario or Front Polisario, was formed in 1973 to fight Spanish occupation of what was then Spanish Sahara. When Spain withdrew from this nonself-governing territory (<https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsqt>), Morocco and Mauritania invaded it despite the International Court of Justice’s nonrecognition of their territorial claims in October 1975. The United Nations recognized the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people and asked for the decolonization of the territory; the UN also recognized Polisario as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people; see UN General Assembly, Resolution 34/37, [Question of Western Sahara](#), A/RES/34/37 (November 21, 1979). Mauritania withdrew in 1979, while Morocco has continued its occupation to this date. The war between Polisario and the Morocco Armed Forces lasted from 1976 until a UN-brokered cease-fire was signed on September 6, 1991. The cease-fire included the creation of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which has never taken place due to Morocco’s refusal. For details, see S. Zunes and J. Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2010.

choices to fulfill his or her potential”.⁵ The nexus between security and development, which includes a wide range of issues related to human security such as economics, food, health, environment, and political security, remain key referents for assessing peace and development.⁶

The North African Context

Before the 2010 regional uprisings, the nature of the political systems accounted for citizens’ frustrations. Authoritarianism characterized the type of regime despite the cosmetic changes the regimes made occasionally. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced social control.

Algeria witnessed a unique protest movement in 2019 as President Abdelaziz Bouteflika sought a fifth five-year mandate, despite ill health, and forced his removal after a twenty-year sultanic rule. The protests began on February 22 and continued every Friday thereafter, with the *Hirak* (literally, protest movement) gathering millions of Algerians. Although Bouteflika was removed on April 2, 2019, the protests continued. Algerians called for the entire political system to be dismantled and replaced by a new form of governance with anti-corruption measures, accountability of officials, political participation, and clean elections. Algerians pursued these demands until the movement suspended its protests due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the potentially lethal consequences of gatherings without social distancing. The movement eventually resumed for a few weeks in February 2021, until the authorities ended it in May.

⁵ Kofi Annan discussed his conception of human security in the following remarks: “[Secretary-General Salutes International Workshop on Human Security in Mongolia](#)”, Two-Day Session in Ulaanbaatar, May 8-10, 2000, Press Release SG/SM/7382, and as seen in “[Definitions of Human Security: United Nations Definitions](#)”, footnote 4.

⁶ United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 1994*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 22.

Since Bouteflika's resignation, the state implemented a road map that included steps such as holding the presidential election in December 2019, which brought to power Abdelmadjid Tebboune; a referendum on a new constitution on November 1, 2020; and legislative elections on June 12, 2021. Though extremely low turnouts at the elections raise questions about representation and democratic prospects – the protest movement boycotted both elections as well as the referendum – US statements, news accounts, and author interviews in Algeria do not suggest rigging or significant irregularities.⁷ Meanwhile, an anti-corruption drive that is continuing has already resulted in a major achievement: the imprisonment of dozens of former prime ministers, ministers, and high-ranking military officers. The leaderless Hirak has contested the road map; however, it has failed to enter any dialogue with the authorities or to propose alternatives. Instead, it accused anyone calling for dialogue of being a traitor.

⁷ Y. Zoubir conducted separate phone interviews, on September 22, 2021, with two professors at the University of Algiers, who both stated there was no rigging of the elections in the last two years. Laeed Ladgham, Professor of information and communication, stated: "Elections were overall free and fair. ... I did not hear any voices contesting the elections in terms of rigging, but of course speculations were aired about some practices of manipulation, but they remain to be verified". Cherif Dris, Professor of journalism and political science, stated: "There was no fraud during the elections, except perhaps a slight inflation by the regime of the percentage of participation in the different elections. What is sure, the electoral support of the regime has dropped considerably". Regarding the 2019 presidential election, the US State Department, for instance, says: "Observers characterized the elections as ... conducted without significant problems or irregularities, but noted restrictions on civil liberties during the election period and lack of transparency in vote-counting procedures". Meanwhile, Imad K. Harb, Director of research and analysis at Arab Center Washington DC, sees in the 2021 legislative elections "the entrenchment of an electoral authoritarianism that borrows democratic practices without implementing democratic rule. US State Department, "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Algeria", State Department website, accessed September 13, 2021; author interviews; and Harb, *Algeria Reestablished Authoritarianism through Elections*, Arab Center Washington DC, July 1, 2021.

Morocco had its own Hirak during 2016-2017 in the Rif region in the northern part of the nation, mainly in the city of Al Hoceima. Moroccan protesters demanded improved socioeconomic conditions, but were met with harsh repression by authorities and sentencing of protest leaders to long jail terms. Politically, the ruling coalition that emerged from the 2016 legislative elections, led by the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), is fragmented. Though the latter enjoys a comfortable majority in the Parliament of Morocco, the king and his cabinet are the de facto decision makers. Despite the constitutional reforms that followed the protests in 2011, Morocco's political system remains an authoritarian monarchy,⁸ with King Mohamed VI retaining most powers. Like in the other states in the region, the pandemic has exacerbated political and social instability amid high unemployment and reduced income—tourism accounted for 6.9% of gross domestic product in 2018,⁹ and tourism revenue plummeted 53.8% in 2020¹⁰ – causing discontent that might result in renewed protests.

In Tunisia, political wrangling among political elites and popular disenchantment eventually stalled democratization. The promising transition to consolidated democracy,¹¹ thus, has endangered the political democratic transformation. Despite

⁸ H. Chougrani, *Morocco Consolidates Its Authoritarianism*, Arab Center Washington DC, August 26, 2021; see also, I. Fakir and I. Werenfels, *In Morocco, Benevolent Authoritarianism Isn't Sustainable*, Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (website), July 29, 2020.

⁹ “Morocco: Tourism in the Economy”, OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2020, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (website).

¹⁰ B. Alen, “Moroccan Tourism Revenue Dropped by 53.8%”, *Tourism Review News* (portal for tourism industry services), February 28, 2021.

¹¹ The term “democratic consolidation” initially “describe[d] the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, of making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression, of building dams against eventual ‘reverse waves’”. A. Schedler, “What is Democratic Consolidation?”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1998, pp. 91-107.

initial optimism in the early days of 2011, Tunisia is now showing signs of a new form of authoritarianism, with corruption and police brutality being commonplace.¹² Intense conflicts between the three main political figures, President Kaïs Saïed, Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi, and Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, became complicated by a highly fragmented Assembly of the People's Representatives. This squabbling among elites has all but paralyzed political advancement, resulting in rising frustrations among Tunisians. Thus, on June 27, 2021, an initiative for a "Referendum Front" was announced by some political parties, civil society associations, and national public figures to induce the government to organize a national referendum on changes to the country's political and electoral systems.¹³ Less than a month later, President Saïed suspended the parliament on July 25, 2021, seizing control of all powers and dismissing the government by activating Article 80 of Tunisia's constitution.¹⁴ Article 80 stipulates that, "in case of imminent danger threatening the national integrity, the security or the independence of the country and hindering the regular functioning of the institutions, the President of the Republic may take the measures required by the state of exception...".¹⁵ While the state of exception was to last for thirty days, on August 24, 2021, Saïed prolonged it indefinitely. In view of the current political and socioeconomic crisis, it would be hazardous to forecast Tunisia transitioning toward a genuine and stable democratic system anytime soon. However, Tunisians have the ability to forge a national consensus that would enable it to move forward.

The uprising in Libya and the ensuing NATO intervention, coupled with dissensions among elites, have left the country

¹² Z. Boussen, *The Unfinished Revolution: Police Brutality at the Heart of the 10th Anniversary of the Tunisian Revolution*, Arab Reform Initiative, July 13, 2021.

¹³ "Tunisians Launch of Referendum Front to Change Political System", *Middle East Monitor*, June 29, 2021.

¹⁴ B. Delmas, "Coup d'État constitutionnel en Tunisie", *Le Point*, July 26, 2021.

¹⁵ "Constitution de la République Tunisienne", Publications de l'Imprimerie Officielle de la République Tunisienne, 2015.

in shambles. Foreign interventions have exacerbated Libyan divisions.¹⁶ After three civil wars (2011, 2014, 2020), a cease-fire agreement was reached in October 2020 and included a demand for all foreign fighters and mercenaries to leave Libya within three months. Though the truce is precarious, there is good potential that it will lead to reconstruction of the country. The cease-fire accord resulted in an agreement on a new transitional government of national unity (GNU) and elections, scheduled for December 24, 2021, a rather overoptimistic or unrealistic project. Despite pressure from the United Nations,¹⁷ foreign forces and mercenaries remain in the country.¹⁸ It is uncertain whether Libyan elites are prepared for a genuinely free election to take place, especially since members of the decision-making Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) are divided. Pushing for an election when there is no consensus on the electoral rules, let alone the nature of the political system, might be chimerical at best. Given external geopolitical interests, the prospects for the next decade are not encouraging. Yet, Libya's economic recovery depends largely on political stability. It is thus doubtful whether foreign investors, with the possible exception of China, will be eager to invest in Libya's post-conflict reconstruction amid such political precarity.

Regional Economic Fragility

Since the independence of their respective countries, North African leaders have failed to develop their national economies. Pressed by the Arab uprisings, reform attempts have so far proved insufficient, with limited tangible results. Notably,

¹⁶ Y.H. Zoubir, "The Protracted Civil War in Libya: The Role of Outside Powers", *Insight Turkey*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2020, pp. 11-27.

¹⁷ "UN Boss: Foreign Fighters Still in Libya in Breach of Ceasefire [sic]", *Al Jazeera*, May 15, 2021.

¹⁸ A. Brahimi, "Libya Has a Mercenaries Problem. It's Time for the International Community to Step Up", *Atlantic Council*, May 21, 2021.

youth unemployment – in youth-dominated societies – remains high. Unemployment among university graduates can be worrisome as despair can lead them to join the ranks of jihadist organizations. Therefore, resolving this challenging issue has become a high priority for North African governments, as discussed below. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated unemployment; thus, the governments must find creative solutions (e.g., domestic reforms, integration of the youth in various economic sectors) to avoid more consequential problems.

These economies are largely monolithic, as in many developing countries, and dependent on hydrocarbon resources (Algeria and Libya) or agriculture, phosphate minerals, and tourism (Morocco and Tunisia). Since their respective independence, whether following a liberal or social model, North African economies have failed to create competitive, productive industries. The economic reforms that leaders promised either never happened or remain inadequate. One is hard pressed to identify a development strategy or a vision that could transform them into emerging economies. A Moroccan economist titled a study “Morocco’s Development Is Blocked by Corruption, Income, and Human Capital”,¹⁹ which reflects the damage that corruption has had on North African economies in general. The author explains how, in addition to theoretical concepts of neopatrimonialism,²⁰ two other aspects need to be factored in: the distribution of the rent to co-opt clients, and the endemic corruption engendered by the rent.²¹ Clearly, this is not unique to Morocco but affects the entire region.

¹⁹ A. Akesbi, *Le développement au Maroc bloqué par la corruption, la rente, et le capital humain*, Laboratoire Economie du Développement, October 14, 2019.

²⁰ Neopatrimonialism is defined by Ana Huertas Francisco as “the vertical distribution of resources that gave rise to patron-client networks based around a powerful individual or party...”. It is a system in which the postcolonial regimes have “supplanted the role of the inherited colonial institutions for the benefit of a few individuals.” See H. Francisco, “Neopatrimonialism in Contemporary African Politics”, *E-International Relations*, January 24, 2010.

²¹ Akesbi (2019), p. 10.

Prior to the revolts of 2010 and the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Qaddafi in Libya, the region's unemployment rate was 10% overall, but 20% for the youth. In Tunisia, despite seeming economic and political stability at the time, the Ben Ali regime was unable to create new jobs, resulting in a frightening level of 46% unemployment among the youth.²² Unemployment among those aged 15-24 in 2019 was 35.8% in Tunisia, 22.3% in Morocco, 49.5% in Libya, and 29.7% in Algeria,²³ despite government largesse in the form of easily accessible small business loans that new entrants, i.e., youth, benefited from.

Youth unemployment is not the only challenge. Corruption, lack of accountability, deficient human security, and bad governance remain the root cause for the cyclical protests (Hirak in Morocco and Algeria, strikes and marches in Tunisia, and a precarious cease-fire in Libya). These unresolved issues remain major challenges for the rulers. Importantly, there is a correlation between the emergence of violent extremism and internal socioeconomic conditions, which are impeded and aggravated precisely because of the security conditions.²⁴ While these governments have been able to control domestic terrorism to a large extent, the propitious conditions for its reemergence are intact, as those governments have been incapable of providing adequate development policies. Thus, ten years on, the economic conditions that led to the Arab uprisings loom over those states. According to a 2020 Arab youth survey, nearly 89% of those aged 18-24 are preoccupied with the issue of work, and only 49% of them trust their government to find a solution

²² Wai Mun Hong, "Youth Unemployment in the Southern Mediterranean: Demographic Pressure, Human Development and Policies", in I. Schäfer (ed.), *Youth, Revolt, Recognition: The Young Generation during and after the Arab Spring*, Berlin, Mediterranean Institute Berlin, Humboldt University, 2015.

²³ "Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate): Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia", International Labour Organization data, World Bank, June 15, 2021.

²⁴ Zoubir (2020).

to their challenge.²⁵ Consequently, an increasing number of the youth in the region dream of migrating elsewhere.²⁶ This migration trend is very acute in Tunisia, where doctors, for instance, prefer to migrate rather than remain in their country, which saps the health sector.²⁷

This trend is not unique to Tunisia but is present across North Africa. The neighboring Sahel region to the south suffers even more from the political and economic woes that have triggered migration, drug trafficking, social unrest, and terrorism.²⁸

Challenges in and from the Sahel

North African nations face security challenges emanating from southern Sahelian neighbors. The Sahel, depicted by a former Algerian prime minister as the corridor of all dangers,²⁹ was dubbed in a book title as “Sahelistan”,³⁰ though wrongly, considering the differences. The analogy with Afghanistan pertains to a region whose states do not have total control of their respective territories, thus providing a safe haven for foreign fighters (jihadists groups) to train for military battle and international terrorist attacks.³¹

²⁵ *A Voice for Change*, Arab Youth Survey, Twelfth Annual Edition, ASDA'A BCW.

²⁶ S. Mardam Bey, A. Ajoury, C. Hayek, J. Kebbi, and E. Saikali, “I – Dix ans après les printemps arabes, une génération en rupture avec l'ancien monde”, *L'Orient-Le Jour*, February 2, 2021.

²⁷ “‘Enterré vivant’: en Tunisie, l'exode des médecins fragilise le secteur de la santé”, *France 24*, April 1, 2021.

²⁸ R. Muggah and J. Luengo Cabrera, “The Sahel Is Engulfed by Violence. Climate Change, Food Insecurity and Extremists Are Largely to Blame”, article published as part of the World Economic Forum's annual meeting, January 23, 2019. Separately, the Sahel includes parts of northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, the southernmost part of Algeria, Niger, the northernmost region of Nigeria, central Chad, central and southern Sudan, the extreme north of South Sudan, Eritrea, Cameroon, Central African Republic, and the northern reaches of Ethiopia, as noted in Zoubir (2017).

²⁹ Y.H. Zoubir interview with a former Prime Minister of Algeria, September 2011.

³⁰ S. Laurent, *Sahelistan: de la Libye au Mali, au cœur du nouveau jihad*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.

³¹ Zoubir (2017), p. 134.

In the last two decades, the Sahel has presented a depressing picture. This is a distressing observation because this stretch of about 10 million square kilometers has for centuries been an area of interface between “Arab/Mediterranean Africa” and “Black Africa,” and characterized by all kinds of human, economic, and religious interactions.³² Now, though, drugs and arms have been flowing across the broader Sahelo-Maghreb region; the smuggling worsened after the fall of Qaddafi in 2011, and poses a major threat to regional stability as terrorists have easy access to armaments.³³

Drug trafficking constitutes a serious menace. While cocaine consumed in Europe travels from Latin America through West Africa and the Sahel region, cannabis comes mainly from Morocco.³⁴ Northern Mali plays a key role as a passageway for drug trafficking between Africa and Europe through the Maghreb.³⁵

Since 2011, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and other affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), as well as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), regularly conduct attacks in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. In June 2021, for instance, ISGS massacred 160 people in Burkina Faso.³⁶ On July 20, 2021, on the festive day of Eid al-Adha, an assassination attempt targeted Mali’s interim president, Assimi Goïta.³⁷

³² Ibid.

³³ H. Koné, “With Arms Flows from Libya Declining, Military Barracks and Poorly Controlled National Stockpiles Are Being Targeted”, *ISS Today*, Institute for Security Studies (website), February 12, 2020.

³⁴ P. Tinti, “Drug Trafficking in Northern Mali: A Tenuous Criminal Equilibrium”, ENACT (a project enhancing Africa’s capacity to respond more effectively to transnational organized crime), September 2020.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 1.

³⁶ “At Least 132 Civilians Killed in Burkina Faso’s Worst Attack in Years”, *Reuters*, June 6, 2021.

³⁷ “Mali’s Interim President Goïta Doing ‘Very Well’ after Assassination Attempt”, *France 24*, July 20, 2021.

Migration due to climate change is another factor contributing to conflicts in the Sahel. Environmental conditions, induced by climate change, are affecting rural areas as a heightened frequency of drought, flooding, and erosion threaten agricultural livelihoods and contribute to dislocation.³⁸ Thus, climate change is a “multiplier of threats,” worsening existing tensions in Sahelian societies, especially in those so-called failed states with limited resources.³⁹ The demographic upward trends intensify those dangers. It is expected that the Sahelian population of the G5 (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) might reach 200 million by mid-2050.⁴⁰ (See chapter 5 for an in-depth look at the region’s demographic challenges.) No government in the region has the capacity to eradicate poverty or tackle the prevailing inequalities. It is a daunting task to deliver basic services to people in poor areas.⁴¹ Indisputably, the connection between food security and migration plays a role in internal and cross-border movements.⁴² This explains why problems in the Sahel, as dangers to international security, have attracted attention in many capitals.⁴³ Moreover, North Africa’s geostrategic position, in between Europe and the Sahel, makes it a battleground for different external players including Turkey,

³⁸ “The Sahel: Converging Challenges, Compounding Risks: A Region under High Pressure”, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (information sheet), May 2016, p. 1; and R. Barras Tejudo, “Climate Change and Demographic Trends: Security Challenges in the Sahel”, in D. Ghanem-Yazbeck (ed.), *The Sahel: Europe’s African Borders*, EuroMeSCo joint policy study, IEMed, April 2018, pp. 96-120.

³⁹ N. Safir, “Nouveaux enjeux migratoires régionaux: Nouveau contexte sahélien et perspective (2e partie et fin)”, *Le Soir d’Algérie*, April 2, 2017.

⁴⁰ Calculated by the authors using data from the Population Reference Bureau’s *2020 World Population Data Sheet*.

⁴¹ D. Ghanem-Yazbeck (ed.), *The Sahel: Europe’s African Borders...*, cit., p. 11.

⁴² A. Knoll, F. Rampa, C. Torres, P.B. Molina, and N. Cascone, *The Nexus between Food and Nutrition Security, and Migration: Clarifying the Debate and Charting a Way Forward*, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), discussion paper no. 212, May 2017.

⁴³ Y.H. Zoubir, “The Sahara-Sahel Quagmire: Regional and International Ramifications”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2012, pp. 452-58.

the United Arab Emirates, China, and, inevitably, France. The proactive role of Turkey in Libya and its agreement with the UN-backed government in Tripoli, as well as its rapprochement with Algiers and Rabat, underscore Ankara's ambition to play an influential role in North Africa, both in terms of geopolitics and economic gains.⁴⁴

Responses to Regional Security Issues

The Sahel is of vital importance for the North Africa region, particularly Algeria, which shares borders with Sahelian states. Algeria perceives the Sahel as a highly vulnerable region critical to its own security and stability, as well as to Europe's.⁴⁵ It thus seeks to play a key stabilizing role, committed to fighting international terrorism and related activities such as arms and drug trafficking,⁴⁶ aiming to keep them outside its territory. Algiers has forged strong security ties with Washington, which sees Algeria as a key contributor to the fight against international terrorism,⁴⁷ undertaking 60% of the burden in antiterrorism in the region while Morocco, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania cover the remaining 40%.⁴⁸ Algeria also has had a major influence on the issue of counterterrorism within the African Union and through its Peace and Security Department, arguing that the scourge was a shared transnational threat.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ I.N. Telcip, "Turkey's Quest for Influence in the Mediterranean in the Post-Arab Uprisings Era", in R. Mason (ed.), *Transnational Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 173.

⁴⁵ A. Abderrahmane, "Understanding Algeria's Foreign Policy in the Sahel," in Y.H. Zoubir (ed.), *The Politics of Algeria*, London, Routledge, 2020, p. 201; and Y.H. Zoubir, "Algeria and the Sahelian Quandary: The Limits of Containment Security Policy," in Ghanem-Yazbeck (2018), pp. 70-95.

⁴⁶ Abderrahmane (2020), p. 199.

⁴⁷ Zoubir (2018), p. 81.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 81.

⁴⁹ L.T. Shiferaw, *Peace and Security in Africa: Drivers and Implications of North Africa's Southern Gaze*, ECDPM, discussion paper no. 262, October 2019, p. iii.

Though Morocco is not a Sahelian state, it has sought to play a role in the region, backing the G5 Sahel, which was initiated under French leadership following jihadists' attempts to advance to southern Mali. Five Sahelian states – Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad – make up the G5, an antiterrorist coalition. The G5 also is tasked with fighting transnational criminal activities in the Sahelian region.⁵⁰ Although concerns about the stability and multiplication of armed groups are legitimate, Morocco's backing of the G5 Sahel is driven by political, geostrategic, and economic motivations.⁵¹ Morocco's involvement in the Sahel has been described as economic diplomacy aimed at swaying some sub-Saharan African states to support Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara and its annexation by the kingdom.⁵² Rabat retains its ambition to become a regional economic hegemon,⁵³ a policy it pursued rather successfully amid paralysis of Algeria's foreign policy during the last decade of rule by the ailing Bouteflika, given it was his reserved domain. Morocco astutely exploited Algeria's neglect of sub-Saharan Africa, long a sphere of its influence. Although Morocco had left the Organization of the African Union in 1984, it joined the African Union in January 2017. One of the objectives was to offset Algeria's influential role in the organization and thus undermine Algeria's support for the Saharawi cause, which numerous African states support. Weary of Algeria and Spain's policies, Morocco saw alignment with francophone Africa, which is dependent on France, its main ally, as an absolute necessity.⁵⁴ As a result, Rabat pursued its international policy with the intertwined objectives of positioning itself both as Europe's entryway to sub-Saharan Africa and as a continental economic power. In doing so, Rabat aims to further strengthen its grip on the Western Sahara.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ivi, pp. 13-14.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ivi p. 9.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ M. Bishku, "Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa: In the Shadow of the Western

Migration threats

Sub-Saharan migration is perceived as a political, economic, and security threat by both European and North African states. European leaders see the arrival of migrants as a political menace because of the internal upsurge of right-wing populism. They also find the influx difficult to justify to their electorates in a period when Europe itself is confronted with challenging economic conditions.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, for the North African states, the arrival of sub-Saharan migrants also is problematic, creating an additional burden and greater financial challenges amid their already dire economic situation.⁵⁷

Migration to Europe from and through North Africa is not new. The North African states have traditionally been countries of migration; since the early 2000s, however, they have become countries of transit and final destination for sub-Saharan Africans.⁵⁸ The current volatile situation in the Sahel has aggravated economic conditions and hindered any sense of improved job and life prospects, which are factors influencing migration flows to North African countries and, in turn, to Europe.⁵⁹ This migration has long been an issue of contention between European and North African states. However, Europeans have sought to partner with “key third countries of origin and transit” and to initiate further agreements, the so-called compacts with Sahel states such as Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and Ethiopia.⁶⁰ One of the major consequences of this reorganization of persons’ mobility in Europe is the unleashing of irregular migration

Sahara Dispute,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, vol. 8, 2021, pp. 273-89.

⁵⁶ Zoubir (2017), p. 137.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ H. Boubakri et al., *Migration in North Africa between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean, Policy Paper, 4, 2021.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Zoubir (2017), p. 137.

toward the Continent, precisely from these third countries.⁶¹

In periods of tension, Southern Mediterranean states can use migration as leverage in their relations with Europe. On different occasions, when tension mounted between Ankara and Brussels, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan brandished the threat of opening his country's borders to let Syrian migrants to pour into Europe. State authorities and security forces may sometimes be complacent when facing illegal migration, by turning a blind eye, accepting bribes by would-be migrants, and even providing these migrants with forged passports.⁶²

More recently, Morocco used this type of migration blackmail with Spain. In May 2021, Rabat opened its borders between Tangiers and the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, allowing eight thousand Moroccans including many underage youths, to enter the enclave, taking Spanish forces by surprise. This diplomatic incident led to real tension between Rabat and Madrid, with Morocco even recalling its ambassador to Spain for consultation.⁶³ This diplomatic rift highlights lingering migration and other issues. EU financial incentives to Morocco – such as a €140 million border-control cooperation program between Morocco and the EU⁶⁴ – do not constitute a guarantee that Rabat will hew to the line.

Rabat's opening of its borders also indicates it can conceal serious internal socioeconomic conditions for political purposes, and that the government was aware that "Spain could not easily return the numerous minors to Morocco".⁶⁵ This approach had

⁶¹ Boubakri et al. (2021), p. 6.

⁶² F. Molenaar and T. Van Damme, *Irregular Migration and Human Smuggling Networks in Mali*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations "Clingendael," Conflict Research Unit (CRU) Report, February 2017.

⁶³ "Le Maroc rappelle son ambassadrice en Espagne pour consultation", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, May 18, 2021.

⁶⁴ A. Niemann and J. Blöser, "Migration and the Mediterranean: The EU's Response to the European Refugee Crisis", in R. Mason (ed.), *Transnational Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 95.

⁶⁵ J.I. Torreblanca, *This Time Is Different: Spain, Morocco, and Weaponized Migration*,

been taken earlier, in 1975, when King Hassan II mobilized the “Green March” of three hundred and fifty thousand soldiers and civilians to occupy Western Sahara.⁶⁶ Such a strategy is part of the “connectivity wars,” whereby the interdependence created by globalization is used as a weapon of war rather than for prosperity.⁶⁷ For the influential *Le Monde*, the 2021 incident in Ceuta revealed “the real nature of the Moroccan regime,” and signals it is time for the EU to shed its diplomatic naivete about Morocco.⁶⁸ If Morocco ignores diplomatic rules and resorts to such blackmail of Spain, the thinking goes, Rabat could someday resort to similar tactics toward the EU overall: if the migration gates are opened for adults seeking to enter Europe, terrorists could potentially infiltrate their ranks.⁶⁹ Additionally, this incident indicates that the Moroccan government can use migration to put pressure on Spain regarding its stance on Western Sahara. Rabat’s move has been interpreted as a way to force Spain to join the United States and France “in acquiescing to a solution to the Western Sahara conflict that involves integrating the territory into Morocco,”⁷⁰ while other European countries including Germany adhere to international legality and do not support Morocco’s claims to Western Sahara.⁷¹

As a clear sign of the difficult bilateral relations between Morocco and Spain, Madrid decided to withdraw from its planned participation in the annual African Lion military

European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), European Power program, May 26, 2021.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ U. Franke and M. Leonard, *Connectivity Wars*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), January 20, 2016.

⁶⁸ “Crise des migrants à Ceuta: Il est temps de sortir d’une certaine naïveté dans le regard porté sur le Maroc”, *Le Monde*, May 21, 2021.

⁶⁹ K. Götsch, “Alleged Terrorists, Refugees, and Radicalized Muslims in Europe: A Wicked Discursive Conjunction”, *Sicherheit und Frieden (S+F)/Security and Peace*, vol. 34, no. 1, Themenschwerpunkt: Migration, Sicherheit und Frieden/Migration, Security and Peace, 2016, pp. 38-45.

⁷⁰ Torreblanca (2021).

⁷¹ Ibid.

maneuvers scheduled to take place in Morocco, Tunisia, and Senegal in June 2021. Since part of these maneuvers could have been held in Western Sahara (as Morocco alleged), Spain refused to give any legitimacy to Morocco's claim to this occupied territory.⁷²

The nonresolution of the Western Sahara and regional repercussions

President Donald Trump's decision, shortly after his electoral defeat in December 2020, to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara has upset the regional balance of power, increasing the risk of confrontation between Algeria, which supports the Sahrawi claims, and Morocco. Trump's surprising decision has increased Morocco's determination to undermine Algeria's policies, and Algeria's to curb Morocco's influence over Western Sahara and among some sub-Saharan African countries supportive of Morocco.⁷³ Trump's decision and President Joe Biden's reluctance to rescind it have inevitably exacerbated already tense Algerian-Moroccan relations. Algeria has, for instance, nudged Mauritania to minimize its diplomatic relations with Morocco and, in April 2021, signed a strategic memorandum of understanding to strengthen Algerian-Mauritanian economic and security cooperation.⁷⁴ Although the question of Western Sahara is not the only source of contention between Algeria and Morocco,⁷⁵ it was one of the contributing factors in Algeria's August 24 decision to break

⁷² M. González, "España rehúsa participar en unas maniobras de EE UU para no legitimizar la ocupación del Sáhara", *El País*, May 29, 2021.

⁷³ A. Chahir, "Morocco: The 'Deal of the Century' and the Misfortunes of Mohammed VI", Opinion, *Middle East Eye*, June 13, 2021.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Y.H. Zoubir, "The Algerian-Moroccan Rivalry: Constructing the Imaginary Enemy", in I. Mansour and W. Thompson (eds.), *Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2020, pp. 179-200.

diplomatic relations with Morocco.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Morocco's current tense relations with Spain and recent suspension of contact with the German embassy in Rabat over "deep misunderstandings" related to Western Sahara may reduce Rabat's space to maneuver on its Western Saharan claims with them and other countries that support UN resolutions and Sahrawis' right to self-determination.⁷⁷

COVID-19 and Its Economic Impact on North Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the region, and while it is too early to assess the long-term effects, the economic impact is felt and will be for years to come.⁷⁸ The pandemic death toll has not reached the peaks seen in countries such as Italy, France, or Brazil, but the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences are significant in North Africa.

In Algeria, shortages of basic food commodities such as cooking oil and pasta have prompted people to queue for food, "a phenomenon that has not been seen in fifty years".⁷⁹ Prices have risen for most other foods, such as potatoes and tomatoes.⁸⁰ Together with the oil price slump, which began in 2014, and the ongoing political crisis in Algeria, the pandemic has further exposed the economic fragility of this rentier state, whose budget depends almost exclusively on oil revenues.

⁷⁶ "Algeria Breaks Off Diplomatic Ties with Neighboring Morocco", Associated Press, August 24, 2021.

⁷⁷ M. Bachir, "Crise Berlin-Rabat: Pourquoi l'Allemagne irrite tant le Maroc", *Middle East Eye*, March 2, 2021.

⁷⁸ R. Mason, "Rethinking the EU Approach", in R. Mason (ed.), *Transnational Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 255.

⁷⁹ G.D. Porter, *Algeria's Economic Challenges: Opportunities for US Engagement*, Policy Analysis, PolicyWatch 3493, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 28, 2021.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

The COVID-19 pandemic enabled the authorities to crack down on the Hirak,⁸¹ without exerting violence. Meanwhile, the government had done very little to overcome the economic crisis since March 2020, when COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. Prime Minister Aïmene Benabderrahmane, a technocrat with finance experience who was appointed in June 2021,⁸² is entrusted with redressing the economy and focusing on social stability, a daunting task. Faced with these multiple challenges, the authorities have been forced to review their economic development strategy. Successive Algerian governments had for years failed to bring about the required reforms to reduce dependency on hydrocarbon revenues, expand economic activities, bolster private initiatives, and address the high levels of unemployment, particularly among young segments of the population, which have experienced a worsening of conditions during waves of the coronavirus, the latest in July and August 2021. Earlier, the government's financial burdens had deepened as oil prices fell; unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the multifaceted disparities and fiascos that emerged under Bouteflika's rule. Indeed, the pandemic has exposed the many failures of a regime that did not invest enough in human security.

In July 2021, the Algerian government, which first requested to join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1987, announced the resumption of the process of dialogue and negotiations for its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). For years, Algerian authorities had expressed reservations about the conditions of access.⁸³ However, the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on the national economy have further underlined the weakness of the Algerian economy,

⁸¹ Y.H. Zoubir and A.L. Jacobs, *Will COVID-19 Reshape Algeria's Political System?*, Brookings Institution, May 10, 2020.

⁸² H. Saleck, "Nouveau premier ministre en Algérie: Face aux menaces extérieures, Tebboune cherche l'unité à l'intérieur du pays", *Sputnik news agency*, July 1, 2021.

⁸³ S. Rabia, "Commerce multilatéral: L'Algérie reprend son long chemin vers l'OMC", *El Watan*, June 19, 2021.

which is largely based on imports. Such a foreign dependency remains a major handicap for Algeria, whose ambition is to be financially and economically self-reliant. Having made regular announcements about the need to reduce this dependency,⁸⁴ Algeria may now be motivated to join the WTO and embark on genuine reforms. In fact, it has begun to show more pragmatism in terms of trade and foreign direct investment (FDI). There seems to be political will to revise the country's economic approach.⁸⁵

Authorities at the highest level realize that dependency on hydrocarbon revenues is an unsustainable policy. As a recent Institute for Security Studies report has shown,⁸⁶ Algeria has the human and material resources to generate a real takeoff, which also requires political will. Algeria hopes that the virtual elimination of the 51/49% rule, which required 51% of all ventures be held by Algerian nationals (and which still applies to strategic sectors), will attract foreign direct investment, as President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has insisted that Algeria will not resort to borrowing from international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have opened new windows of opportunity in North-South cooperation, especially in the healthcare sector. For instance, closer cooperation to fight COVID-19 and other potential diseases might take place between the EU and North African states by improving public health clinical capacity building.⁸⁷ In this respect, both Morocco and Algeria have partnered with China and Russia to produce Sinopharm and Sputnik V, respectively; these vaccines will be

⁸⁴ Y. Bourdillon, "L'Algérie multiplie les efforts pour diversifier son économie", *Les Echos*, July 16, 2018; and A. Sanz, "L'Algérie mise sur la vente de participations pour diversifier son économie", *Atalayar*, August 9, 2021.

⁸⁵ *Algeria Resumes Dialogue with WTO*, Algeria British Business Council (ABBC) website, July 22, 2021.

⁸⁶ S. Kwasi and J. Cilliers, *Stagnation or Growth? Algeria's Development Pathway to 2040*, Institute for Security Studies, March 31, 2021.

⁸⁷ Mason (2021), p. 256.

made locally.⁸⁸ One can surmise that even if the EU has taken a security approach in its relations with North African states to date, the approach may now expand to earnest cooperation. For instance, “health-related euros will help prevent infections back in the EU”.⁸⁹

Conclusion

North African populations are becoming increasingly exasperated with their governments. It is therefore vital that these governments initiate credible short- and long-term reforms. They also need to address citizens’ lack of trust in their leaders.⁹⁰ Consequently, a new social contract is urgently required. European neighbors have a role to play. The EU’s security approach to North Africa must be balanced with strong economic partnerships, prerequisites for lasting stability. The EU’s interaction with North Africa and the Sahel has, however, been largely based on a military and security viewpoint, rather than one of promoting effective economic development. While terrorism, migration, and transnational trafficking (drugs, weapons, etc.)⁹¹ are justified concerns, they cannot be remedied without addressing their socioeconomic root causes.

Unquestionably, the region is facing new challenges (ranging from an increased number of refugees and the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 to climate change), and North African states must adapt and devise realistic development approaches through effective reforms. The states can exploit the competition among external states interested in the region such as Turkey,

⁸⁸ “COVID-19: Le Maroc annonce un projet de fabrication locale du vaccin Sinopharm”, *Le Figaro*, July 5, 2021; and “Production du vaccin Spoutnik V: Sidal débutera les formations prochainement”, *Algérie Presse Service*, April 14, 2021.

⁸⁹ Mason (2021), p. 244.

⁹⁰ A. Abderrahmane, *Algeria’s Parliamentary Elections: A Bumpy Road Ahead*, Atlantic Council, June 3, 2021.

⁹¹ Mason (2021), p. 244.

China, Qatar, Russia, the United States, and the traditional European actors to engage in beneficial cooperation. Though the long-lasting Libyan crisis poses a security threat to the region, peace could produce dividends for Libya and the region as a whole.

Yet the ongoing instability in the Sahel and the recognition by Washington of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara are two factors that are likely to further destabilize the entire Sahelo-Maghreb region, representing serious security risks for North Africa and its immediate northern European neighborhood. The resolution of the conflict in Western Sahara is an exigency to avoid a disastrous escalation that would inevitably involve foreign powers. Morocco's confidence that its normalization with Israel has empowered it and given it the upper hand against Algeria is a misguided calculation. Domestically, the normalization might already have alienated Moroccans, most of whom are attached to the Palestinian cause. Regionally, it has widened the rift with Algeria, which could adopt a radical position toward Morocco,⁹² as foreshadowed by the break in diplomatic relations. Algeria's decision not to renew the gas contract with Morocco, which expires on October 31, 2021, is a case in point.⁹³ The two developments put an end to any short-term prospects for a revival of the Arab Maghreb Union, which has hardly been functioning since 1996.

Regional integration remains part of the wider solution to the economic development of the region. Unfortunately, a mere

⁹² A. Charef, "Pour l'Algérie, une offensive Israélienne se profile derrière la menace Marocaine", *Middle East Eye*, July 25, 2021.

⁹³ The Maghreb-Europe Gas (GME) pipeline became operational in 1996. It runs from the Hassi R'Mel field in Algeria through Morocco to Spain, where it connects with the Spanish and Portuguese gas networks. Morocco receives 80,000 cubic meters of gas as well as US\$35 million for this right of passage. Algeria will now ship gas to Spain and Portugal directly from Algerian territory, under the Mediterranean Sea, though the MEDGAZ pipeline. Ediallo, "Brouille Algérie-Maroc: un défi pour l'approvisionnement gazier au Maroc", *Africa Logistics Magazine*, Septembre 5, 2021.

4% of trade now occurs within North Africa,⁹⁴ and the level will certainly drop in the coming years because of intraregional tensions. The involvement of foreign powers in the region and the formation of alliances could result in Algeria ending its own long-standing nonalignment to engage in open alliances with Russia and China. This scenario would transform the North African region (as already seen in Libya) into a fighting ground between Morocco's Western and Gulf patrons and the US and EU's strategic rivals. Short of addressing geopolitical and economic issues rationally, North Africa and Europe will inevitably face unpredictable consequences.

⁹⁴ Kwasi and Cilliers (2021), p. 22.