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Starting afresh: The Maghreb's relations with sub-Saharan Africa

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SUMMARY

The readmission of Morocco to the African Union (AU), last year, was a very significant moment for Africa. Following its return to the AU, the North African country announced its bid to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is indicative of its interest in consolidating its presence in sub-Saharan Africa.

This comes at a time when the Maghreb region in general is seeking to rekindle its so-far ignored foreign policy towards the rest of the continent. Algeria, which has a long history of engagement in African security affairs has set off on a long journey towards intensifying the traditionally neglected economic ties with the rest of the continent by seeking stronger commercial exchanges with countries of east Africa. Tunisia has followed a similar path as it recently obtained an observer status with ECOWAS and is expected to join the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

In this discussion paper we explore the factors driving this shift in policy; inadequate regional cooperation in the Maghreb, the events of the 'Arab Spring' and their heavy toll on the economy, faltering commodity prices, mounting regional security concerns, and the pursuit of geostrategic influence. However, despite the apparent race to cosy up to the rest of the continent, the depth of the relationship varies from country to country in the Maghreb. Ultimately, geopolitics –be it the pursuit of economic opportunities or vying for political influence across sub-Saharan Africa– are likely to further stimulate the interest in looking further south.

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Acronyms

ACSRT	African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
APSA	Africa Peace and Security Architecture
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ASF	African Standby Force
AU	African Union
BCP	Banque Centrale Populaire
BMCE	Banque Marocaine du Commerce Exterieur
CEDEAO	Communauté Economique des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest
CEMAC	Central African Economic and Monetary Community
CEMOC	Military Joint Operations Committee
CEWS	Continental Early Warning System
CFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
EAC	East African Community
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GCTF	Global Counterterrorism Forum
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNA	Government of National Accord
IEMED	European Institute of the Mediterranean
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
MAD	Moroccan Dirham
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSC	Peace and Security Council
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SWF	Sovereign Wealth Funds
TABC	Tunisia-Africa Business Council
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership
UEMOA	West African Economic and Monetary Union
UN	United Nations
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UTICA	Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts

1. Introduction

Last year the readmission of Morocco to the African Union (AU), described by Moroccan King Mohammed VI as “going back home”¹, marked a significant change in terms of African affairs. Morocco left the AU in 1984 when the majority of AU states voted to admit the Polisario Front as a member. The readmission thus brought to an end Morocco’s isolation from the AU which lasted for 33 years. The North African country’s request for readmission to Africa’s continental body, and its subsequent application to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), is indicative of its interest in further consolidating its relations with the rest of the African continent.

But Morocco is not the only North African country attempting this. Its neighbours are taking similar steps. Algeria, Morocco’s giant neighbour with a long history of engagement in African security affairs, has similarly set out to intensify its traditionally neglected economic ties to the rest of Africa. It announced, for instance, a desire to step up trade with the countries of East Africa.² Tunisia is following a similar path as it recently obtained observer status in ECOWAS and is expected to join the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Egypt, which already is a member of four regional organisations, including COMESA, is looking south as well.³

This paper focuses on the recent endeavours of three Maghreb North African states – Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia – to open up to countries of sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ Though these North African countries have been unsuccessful in bolstering regional cooperation through their own Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), all have now expressed an aspiration to invigorate cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa. First, we explore the reasons underlying this policy shift. Second, we examine the efforts of these countries to step up cooperation in economics and in security. Then we discuss other areas of cooperation, namely, migration and education, mobilised to appeal to sub-Saharan partners and signal an interest in stronger ties. Finally, we draw key conclusions from the analysis.

2. Why the move south?

2.1. The AMU, cooperation despite the stalemate

Establishment of the AMU in 1989 in Rabat raised hopes for the creation of a region of economic and political integration in the Maghreb. The AMU project was ambitious, seeking stronger intra-Maghreb relations and policy coordination on international affairs, defence, economics and cultural affairs. The set-up of the AMU included different political, executive and judicial institutions, most importantly the Presidency Council, which brings together heads of state at yearly meetings. In pursuit of unity, several cooperation projects and regulations were envisaged, including a customs union planned for 1995 and a common market for 2000. In line with the seven other AU-recognised regional economic communities, these institutional structures were “expected to serve their member states with the implementation of the regional integration agenda”.⁵ More than two decades later, neither of the projects had materialised, and hopes of Maghreb unity had diminished.

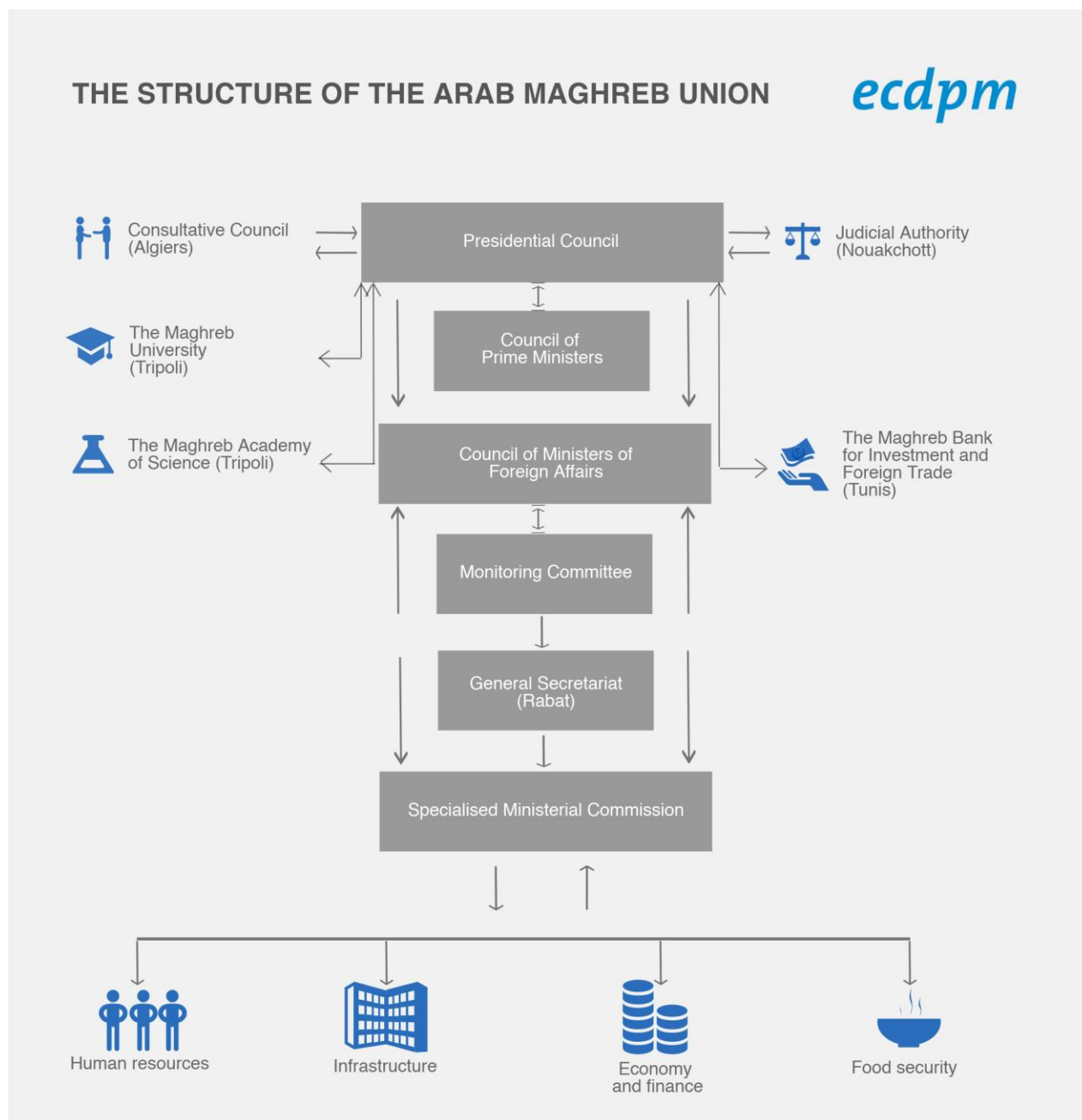
¹ The New Arab (2017).

² Muhmuza (2016).

³ Byiers (2017).

⁴ While this paper focuses on Maghreb countries, it should be noted that Egypt has shown similar attempts towards stronger economic ties with sub-Saharan countries.

⁵ UNECA (n.d.).



The key polarising issue that blocked AMU progress was the divisive topic of the Western Sahara, which particularly split Algeria and Morocco, though this was not the only contentious question. Following the deterioration of relations between these neighbours and the closing of their shared border in 1994, it became clear that activating the AMU would be contingent on resolving this dispute. As a result, “unity was reduced to a mere leitmotiv constantly hailed in rhetoric but lacking reality”.⁶

The ‘Arab Spring’ provided a new impetus for reviving the AMU. Economic and security concerns propelled Maghreb countries to seek cooperation and strengthen ties in their immediate neighbourhood. The resurfacing of a shared aspiration to step up Maghreb cooperation was reflected in the new constitutions of both Morocco and Tunisia and translated into intensified diplomatic efforts to achieve this. In early 2012, former Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki (2011-2014) launched an initiative to activate the AMU and

⁶ Aghrout and Sutton (1990).

undertook visits to Maghreb capitals to begin talks on the subject. Marzouki firmly announced that the Maghreb countries would work on “resuscitating the great dream of a Union of the Maghreb which has been frozen for years”.⁷ Algeria and Morocco expressed a similar interest in activating the AMU. In February 2012, the foreign ministers of the five Maghreb countries gathered in Rabat for an official meeting, the first in over 15 years. During a ten-day visit to Tunisia in May and June 2014, Mohamed VI delivered a speech before the Tunisian Constituent Assembly in which he evoked the urgency of the Maghreb project. Similarly, in a televised speech in August 2016, the Moroccan king expressed the need to renew solidarity and engagement between the Moroccan and the Algerian peoples:

We therefore aspire to the renewal of the commitment and the sincere solidarity that has always united the Algerian and Moroccan peoples, in order to continue to act together, in sincerity and good faith, to serve shared causes in the Maghreb and Arab world and to meet the challenges faced on the African continent.⁸

While the AMU has been inactive as an institution, regional cooperation in the Maghreb has remained, in the form of bilateral initiatives. Cooperation has been facilitated particularly with regard to the free movement of people, but also on other issues of common interest such as security. One example is the protracted conflict in Libya and its political stability. For Tunisia, especially, an unstable Libya represents not only a security threat but also significant economic losses. Trade exchanges between Tunisia and Libya were the highest in North Africa in 2009 and 2010, and registered a record 9% annual growth.⁹ Seeking Libya’s stabilisation, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia adopted a common stance calling for a Libyan national dialogue involving all of the conflicting factions. This was a pragmatic way to deal with an issue of common concern despite the dysfunctional AMU.

Since 2014, the Maghreb countries have continued their efforts to promote reconciliation in Libya. In July 2014, Tunisia and Algeria started ministerial consultations and agreed to protect their borders in order to halt arms trafficking and the infiltration of terrorists into the rest of the region. Algeria and Morocco, both working under the umbrella of the United Nations (UN), initiated efforts to assemble the conflicting parties, though gathering them at the same table proved a bridge too far regarding the complexity of the conflict. In 2015, Rabat hosted talks between representatives of rival parliaments in Libya while Algeria invited representatives of political parties to meet there to negotiate a workable solution. After several months of negotiations a UN-brokered settlement to the crisis was reached. In December 2015, the conflicting parties signed the Libyan political agreement to form a government of national unity in Skhirat, Morocco. This agreement, however, was never implemented. The newly founded Government of National Accord (GNA) that was announced in February 2016 was rejected by the Tobrouk-based parliament, while dispute continued over high military posts within the government. As the crisis persisted, Maghreb countries, particularly Algeria and Tunisia, continued to host talks between the conflicting parties.

⁷ Mahjar-Barducci (2014).

⁸ Original in French: MAP (2016).

⁹ Krüger and Zaier (2017). p. 250.

In December 2016, Tunisia launched a new initiative to resolve the conflict, joined by Algeria and Egypt. Involving Egypt in the regional effort was crucial, considering Egypt's close ties with Khalifa Haftar in Eastern Libya, who was a fierce rival of Fayez el-Sarraj, head of the GNA. Still, a scheduled meeting between Haftar and El-Sarraj in Cairo failed to materialise.¹⁰ Tunisia has since continued to offer its territory to host UN-sponsored meetings and negotiations between the conflicting parties. It remains to be seen if a consensus can be reached on how to amend the political agreement and bring an end to the conflict.

It was hoped that these common political positions and joint efforts could be “a potential point of departure for foreign policy cooperation between these three states”.¹¹ However, the stalemate within the AMU as an institution persists. Despite regular ministerial meetings and joint projects, no significant economic or political progress can be made without resumption of meetings of the Presidency Council, the organ responsible for decision-making within the organisation. The last meeting of this Council was in 1994, and it is not clear if this is likely to change soon. So far, North Africa has no functional regional framework for cooperation like the regional organisations in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the landscape of regional cooperation is much different to the south.

2.2. Africa, the rising continent

Most North African countries have focused mainly on integration with the European market since the 1980s, neglecting trade with sub-Saharan Africa. This almost exclusive focus on Europe was driven by sustained growth in European countries, set against a rather stark sub-Saharan African economic climate which was not perceived as particularly promising.¹² Decades later, the economic crisis in Europe brought a drop in demand for North African exports, leading these countries to seek new markets.

In Tunisia, for example, export growth fell from 12% in 2007 to 1% in 2008, plummeting another 22% in the first semester of 2009.¹³ The fall in demand particularly hit the textile and clothing industry (-16.6%) and the mechanical and electrical industry (-12.6%).¹⁴ Though Tunisia needs to achieve higher economic growth levels to provide for its development needs, it continues to be hampered by both slow growth in Europe and its traditionally weak economic relations with sub-Saharan countries. Despite the recovery of some exports, Tunisian textile exports to Europe have continued to lag, while facing tough competition from Asian products as well.¹⁵ Contrary to hopes and needs, the country's dependence on the European market has not generated the “vibrant external demand” so crucial to boost the economy.¹⁶ Moreover, the excessive concentration of Tunisian exports in Europe has prevented the country from benefitting from the development of other economies. At the same time, economic exchanges between the five Maghreb countries have not exceeded 3% of their total trade, which is one of the lowest rates in Africa.

Africa now has the leading emerging markets, thus offering huge potential for investment, especially in the rapidly growing consumer markets. The continent is home to more than 1 billion people, and that number is expected to grow by 500 million in the next 25 years.¹⁷ Between 2000 and 2010, Africa registered a 5.4% annual growth in average real gross domestic product (GDP). This rate slowed to 3.3% between 2010 and

¹⁰ Noueihed and Hassan (2017).

¹¹ Krüger and Zaier (2017). In: Abderrahim, T. et al (2017).

¹² Lopes (2015).

¹³ Mouley (2013).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Oxford Business Group (2012).

¹⁶ OECD (2015).

¹⁷ Bekkali (2012).

2015 due to the repercussions of the 'Arab Spring' in North Africa and the effect of shrinking oil prices on the oil-exporting countries, but other parts of the continent have maintained good performance.¹⁸

Despite the mounting economic and political challenges that have halted growth on some parts of the continent, projections still foresee an annual growth rate of 4.3% for Africa as a whole, which would make it the second fastest growing region in the world between 2016 and 2020.¹⁹ North African countries have thus come to realise the importance of looking within their own continent and repositioning themselves; first to benefit from these positive growth trends and second to contribute to and be part and parcel of the expected expansion of inter-continental trade.

2.3. Reshuffling geopolitical priorities

The North African countries' new ventures south represent a policy shift driven by economic and security imperatives as well as a desire to expand influence. With the exception of Morocco, North African countries have been particularly struck by economic and political instability since 2010. While Algeria has mainly been affected by falling oil prices, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt have been impacted by the repercussions of the 'Arab Spring'.

Morocco's engagement with sub-Saharan Africa is not recent. Following its withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the country set out to strengthen its bilateral ties with African countries, a trend that was reinforced under Mohamed VI, who came to power in 1999. His accession to the throne represented a turning point in the history of relations between Morocco and the rest of the continent, as South-South cooperation was elevated to an increasingly central part of Morocco's foreign policy in Africa.²⁰ The country's current presence in Africa evolved in three stages: first Moroccan public companies became involved in basic infrastructure projects; then private companies became active in the services sector, accompanied by an active economic diplomacy; and finally this evolved into a medium and long-term vision of deeper regional integration.²¹ The active diplomacy supporting the country's ventures has included yearly tours established by the king to countries in West and Central Africa, usually including delegations of ministers and Moroccan business representatives. Other diplomatic initiatives have involved royal visits, economic delegations and participation in forums and at fairs. Mohammed VI's first tour in East Africa, in October 2016, underlined the country's interest in exploring new markets beyond West Africa.

Achieving this long-term vision required the country to re-integrate into the continent's highest organ, which was not fortuitous. To woo African leaders, a diplomatic campaign was put in place, including visits to several countries and meetings with heads of state, as well as increased investment in many African countries. Morocco describes its bid to join ECOWAS, which came shortly after its readmission to the AU, as "part of its vision... to advocate regional integration as a vector of economic acceleration in Africa".²² Thus, in its most recent ventures south Morocco has sought to foster its economic and political clout on the continent, including leveraging its position on the Western Saharan, an objective that the kingdom shares with its eastern neighbour.

Algeria, having a long-standing presence in African security affairs, is also working to open up new markets and revamp its commercial exchanges with sub-Saharan countries. Still struggling with the impacts of declining oil prices, Algeria has a growing interest in boosting trade with sub-Saharan Africa and increasing its share of direct investment on the continent. Algerian officials now stress the need for win-win

¹⁸ Leke (2016).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Veiga and Rios (2017).

²¹ Kingdom of Morocco (2014).

²² El Masaiti (2017b).

partnerships, emphasising alongside trade a diversified portfolio of economic activities, recognising that even increased hydrocarbon prices could not cover the continent's development financing needs.²³ At the same time, the rationale for closer security cooperation with Algeria's southern neighbours is now more valid than ever: the events of the 'Arab Spring' and the Mali crisis have left an acute security threat along Algeria's southern borders, pushing the country to increase security cooperation with its neighbours in the Maghreb and the Sahel.²⁴

Economic imperatives have pushed Tunisia, too, to forge new partnerships. The country's transitional process has been marked by significant domestic and regional challenges. These have slowed economic growth and threatened the country's stability. The new context has stimulated successive governments to embrace a relatively active foreign policy, open to new partners. Official attempts to explore opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa started with the Troika government. However, with changes in government and a volatile political environment, little continuity and consistency have been achieved. A new cabinet with a four-year mandate took office in February 2015, after which more serious steps were observed to enhance relations with sub-Saharan countries and reposition Tunisia on the continent. While a new vision embracing Tunisia's "natural place" has now emerged, no comprehensive strategy has yet been put in place. Nonetheless, Tunisian Foreign Minister Khmaies Jhinaoui has announced that opening up to sub-Saharan Africa will be one of Tunisia's key priorities in the coming years.²⁵

²³ Forum African d'investissement et d'affaires (2016).

²⁴ Nickels (2014).

²⁵ El Hiwar Ettounsi (2016).

3. The pursuit of economic opportunities

To intensify economic cooperation with sub-Saharan countries, North African states have sought to reinforce bilateral relations and integrate into regional blocs to facilitate access to blossoming markets. Both Morocco and Tunisia aspire to increase commercial ties with ECOWAS. This West African regional group with 15 member states can be described as “the best-functioning regional organisation in Africa”.²⁶ At its Heads of State and Government Summit of June 2017 in Monrovia, ECOWAS granted Tunisia observer status as requested, and approved in principle Morocco’s admission, though the final decision is still pending. At the same time, Tunisia will officially join COMESA at the organisation’s upcoming summit. Similarly, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia all signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) agreement at the extraordinary AU summit last March in Kigali, further indicating these countries’ interest in stronger African integration.

Bilateral trade between some Maghreb countries, ECOWAS and COMESA in 2016

Country	Imports from ECOWAS	Exports to ECOWAS	Imports from COMESA	Exports to COMESA
Morocco	92,777	785,627	416,891	520,284
Tunisia	52,738	147,421	199,616	506,852
Algeria	124,254	30,615	446,740	290,058

All products, unit: Euro thousand

Source: Trade Map <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>

3.1. Algeria

Following the drop in oil prices, which has significantly impacted the Algerian economy, the government adopted a new economic growth model in July 2016 to steer the country away from dependence on oil revenues.²⁷ The new model is predicated on tax reform, reduction of public expenditure and economic diversification. Already in 2016 this oil and gas rich country managed to cut expenditure by 9%.²⁸ The new model also seeks to reinforce investment in sectors with high added value, such as agribusiness and electronics. In addition, the country became more focused on providing an enabling environment for development of indigenous small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), some of which have indicated their ambition to expand in the Maghreb and West Africa (e.g., Condor Electronics).²⁹

In this context, Algeria has started, at least rhetorically, to emphasise South-South cooperation, win-win partnerships and inter-African trade. Algerian officials frequently speak of Africa as the “strategic depth” for Algeria. However, in a stark contradiction to the country’s activism in African security affairs, particularly in

²⁶ Sävström (2017).

²⁷ Republique Algerienne Democratique et Populaire. Ministère des Finances (2016).

²⁸ Ould Ahmed (2016).

²⁹ Farah (2017).

the framework of the AU, Algeria has maintained few economic ties with the rest of the continent. The economic potential of links southward thus remains largely untested. To bridge this gap, Algeria has said it intends to capitalise on its strong political ties and influence on the continent to market itself as a new economic partner.

The country has undertaken a series of activities signalling its desire to revamp ties with sub-Saharan Africa. In December 2016, Algeria hosted the African Business and Investment Forum, which gathered business leaders and politicians from across the continent. In his opening speech to the forum, Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal stated that Algeria shares with all African countries the goal of development of the African peoples. He went on to emphasise the need to pursue a new dynamic on the continent, and highlighted Algeria's contributions to the continent in the economic sphere, particularly through mega projects such as the Port of Cherchell and the trans-Sahara highway.³⁰ Though the forum offered scope for promoting the country's image as a prospective economic partner, some of this potential might have been lost due to organisational shortcomings that disrupted the forum's workings.³¹ Representatives of more than 40 African countries were present, though attendance was somewhat below expectations.

An upward trend in exchanges of diplomatic visits has also been observed. In 2015, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya visited Algeria, signing agreements on trade, security and energy. The Algerian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, for its part, commenced discussions with similar bodies in Uganda and Kenya. To better link the country with the rest of the continent, ultimately to facilitate trade, the Algerian national airline is working to add new routes.³²

However, significant barriers remain to this new orientation south. Regulations in Algeria discourage businesses from expanding abroad.³³ Moreover, new ventures have been hampered by lack of a clear vision and political hesitation regarding Algeria's role and presence in sub-Saharan Africa. In that sense, developing economic partnerships could help counter the challenges presented by Algeria's past limited economic diplomacy and absence from economic issues on the continent.³⁴ It follows from this that more needs to be done to translate the rhetoric into action to overcome these obstacles.

3.2. Morocco

Morocco's economic strategy in Africa is to position itself as a "regional hub serving co-development" in areas of common interest on the continent.³⁵ The kingdom has strengthened its economic and commercial ties with the rest of the continent since the 2000s. Morocco achieved a steady 14.7% annual growth in trade with sub-Saharan Africa between 1999 and 2014.³⁶ Moreover, 62.9% of Morocco's external investment was in sub-Saharan Africa between 2008 and 2013.³⁷

Overall, Morocco's economic relations with sub-Saharan Africa show several positive trends. The country's trade balance with sub-Saharan Africa has registered a surplus since 2008. This balance reached US \$992 million in 2015 (equivalent to 1% of GDP), rising further to US \$ 1,091.5 million in 2014.³⁸ Besides, exports from Morocco to sub-Saharan countries have continually increased since 2009. The number of products

³⁰ Forum African d'investissement et d'affaires (2016).

³¹ The North Africa Post (2016b).

³² Muhmuza (2016).

³³ De Saint Perier (2017).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kingdom of Morocco (2014).

³⁶ Lo (2016).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Berahab (2017).

that Morocco exports to sub-Saharan Africa has also risen, from 83 products in 1995 to 187 products at the time of this writing.³⁹ Imports, however, declined between 2012 and 2014, though they rebounded in 2015, reaching a growth rate of 70%. Morocco is today one of the key African investors in the continent, alongside Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria.

Morocco has particularly strong interests in West Africa, where it has for instance started agriculture and gas exploration projects with Nigeria, a powerhouse in ECOWAS. In 2016, Morocco and Nigeria signed a deal to develop a trans-African pipeline to transport Nigerian gas to Europe through Morocco. This project is expected to benefit all of the countries along the route, enhancing access to energy and in the process reducing barriers to development.⁴⁰ Mauritius, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Senegal and Mauritania were the top five recipients of Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2015.⁴¹ Morocco has furthermore signed several bilateral and regional agreements with sub-Saharan countries regarding trade and investment promotion and protection, as well as double taxation.⁴² Most of the kingdom's investments in sub-Saharan Africa are in fields with high added value, such as banking and telecommunications, led by high-profile companies and banks such as Maroc Télécom, Attijariwafa Bank, Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE), Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP) and Royal Air Maroc. So far, the banking sector stands as the main FDI recipient, as it attracted 41.6% of FDI between 2008 and 2013.⁴³

Morocco's transport infrastructure has allowed it to be a transshipment hub for West Africa, through Tangier's transshipment port. The growth of Morocco's FDI and trade on the continent has been supported by the expansion and growth of Moroccan banks in sub-Saharan Africa. Two Moroccan banks, Attijariwafa and Groupe BCP, were ranked among the continent's ten largest financial institutions in 2013.⁴⁴ The growth of Moroccan FDI on the African continent is expected to continue in the coming years, in step with Morocco's commitment to intensify its ties to sub-Saharan Africa and the significant growth expected on the continent.

Morocco's investments in sub-Saharan Africa have been facilitated by legislative reforms. In August 2014, investment abroad was liberalised up to a maximum of MAD 30 million per year for corporations with at least a three-year history of operations, provided that the company's accounts were certified by an external auditor and the proposed investment was directly linked to the corporation's area of business. In December 2015, it raised the transferable amount for investment abroad to a maximum of MAD 100 million for Africa and MAD 50 million elsewhere. In addition, a MAD 200 million fund was established to strengthen the presence of the Moroccan private sector in African markets.⁴⁵

Despite these developments, sub-Saharan Africa's share of Morocco's external trade (3.4%) remains low compared to the share of the European Union (EU) (56.7%) and that of the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries (15.3%) for the year 2015.⁴⁶ This is explained by several factors, one of which is the lack of robust transport systems, be they maritime, road or rail. Another is the limited diversification of the products exported and the inadaptability of export products to demand, alongside limited and insufficient cooperation frameworks and competition from sub-Saharan countries' more established investors and

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Financial Nigeria (2016). For more on energy access in West Africa and the role of regional organisations, see Karaki (2017).

⁴¹ Berahab (2017).

⁴² Kingdom of Morocco (2014).

⁴³ Lo (2016).

⁴⁴ Raymond (2014).

⁴⁵ Kingdom of Morocco (2014).

⁴⁶ Berahab (2017).

economic partners, particularly from Europe and the United States.⁴⁷ Morocco has tried to invigorate economic ties with sub-Saharan Africa through agreements, such as the draft trade and investment agreement signed in 2008 with the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). The country is also seeking to join the free trade zone of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), which is being gradually established. Yet, delays in implementations have presented challenges for Morocco's development of relations with its sub-Saharan partners.

The most recent remarkable, and controversial, step taken by Morocco in pursuit of strategic partnerships is its application for full membership of ECOWAS. A final decision on Morocco's accession to the regional group was expected at the last, 52nd, ECOWAS Summit, held in December 2017. However, it was postponed. Ultimately ECOWAS decided to set up a committee of heads of state and government, including Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Nigeria, to supervise a comprehensive study of the implications of the addition of Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania as members.⁴⁸

Concerns regarding potential economic and political impacts of Morocco's full membership emerged particularly in Nigeria, where questions were raised by parliamentarians, civil society and business groups. Concerns revolve around a possible threat that the prospective new member could pose to Nigeria's strong influence and leadership role in the region. Opponents have argued that Morocco, a North African country, does not qualify for ECOWAS membership, as ECOWAS aims to foster the integration of West African states. Morocco's non-tariff economic partnership with the EU is another source of concern. The fear here is that once Morocco becomes a full member of ECOWAS, Nigerian markets could be flooded with European goods, possibly affecting Nigeria's own production and manufacturing.⁴⁹ In Senegal as well, business groups and civil society associations voiced concerns about potential implications of Morocco's membership for more fragile economies in Western Africa.⁵⁰ Thus, it appears that the North African country underestimated the influence of domestic dynamics in West Africa on its membership request.

A Moroccan official reportedly responded to these concerns by explaining the membership request as "a strategic decision with strong political and economic dimensions" and not an attempt to topple the power of any West African country. Morocco has said that it will adopt a progressive and gradual approach towards its integration into this community.⁵¹ According to Nigerian Foreign Affairs Minister Geoffrey Onyeama, "In principle, there is nothing against Morocco joining ECOWAS but it is just whether it would add value, whether it would be a win for the ECOWAS region or not."⁵² It remains to be seen whether Morocco will finally be able to address the concerns in West Africa and successfully integrate into the West African regional group.

3.3. Tunisia

Since 2011, transitioning Tunisia has been on the lookout for new strategic partners, including attempts to forge a fresh approach towards the African continent. While Tunisia contributed to the formation of the OAU, and the country's first president, Habib Bourguiba, entertained good bilateral relations with many sub-Saharan African countries, Tunisia became almost completely absent from African affairs under Bourguiba's successor, former President Ben Ali. Though the country was long rhetorically promoted by the Ben Ali regime as a "door to Africa", this never translated into concrete action. On the contrary,

⁴⁷ Lo (2016).

⁴⁸ ECOWAS (2017b).

⁴⁹ Byiers and Abderrahim (2018).

⁵⁰ Seck (2017).

⁵¹ El Masaiti (2017b).

⁵² Ibid.

Tunisia's continuous absence from AU meetings reduced its visibility and weight on the continent.⁵³ Consequently, the country's economic clout has remained very limited southwards. Tunisia's trade with sub-Saharan countries makes up just 2.4% of its total commercial exchanges.⁵⁴ Between 2010 and 2013, Tunisia's imports from the East African Community (EAC), COMESA and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) totalled, respectively, 4.2%, 4.3% and 3.7% of Tunisia's GDP.⁵⁵

The country is seeking to step up economic partnerships with sub-Saharan Africa, to find new markets for Tunisian goods and increase its share of external investment on the continent. At the same time, Tunisia has the potential to contribute to the development of infrastructure, health services and medical tourism, education and information technology.⁵⁶ To build a positive perception of Tunisia and position it on the continent, there is recognition that a new approach is needed, based on reviving and strengthening bilateral relations and closer cooperation and integration with regional economic organisations. Intensified economic diplomacy will be required to achieve these objectives.

Tunisia's first attempts at economic diplomacy took place under the Troika government, with the first African tour of former Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, who visited Mali, Chad, Niger and Gabon in June 2014. Marzouki stressed that "Africa is the future" and stated the need for Tunisia to invest more in its African identity, especially considering shared interests such as overcoming dependence on external actors and the fight against terrorism.⁵⁷ These visits have intensified under subsequent governments, suggesting that opening up to sub-Saharan Africa has become an increasingly compelling priority within Tunisian foreign policy.

The Tunisian private sector has propelled this new dynamic. After the revolution, Tunisian businesses began organising visits to African destinations, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Cameroon, inviting Tunisian ministers to join them. These efforts culminated in the formation of the Tunisia-Africa Business Council (TABC) in 2015. TABC President Bassem Loukil explained that the quick changes in government after the revolution had impeded formation of a national strategic vision towards sub-Saharan Africa, and the country's volatile political situation had made it very challenging to discuss the need to strengthen ties with sub-Saharan Africa with the successive governments.⁵⁸ Representatives of Tunisian business directly concerned with this issue thus took the lead in approaching new partners. "It was not possible anymore to wait for the governments to initiate change", Loukil said.⁵⁹ Reasons for the emphasis on Africa were multiple. The Tunisian private sector endured several difficulties in the years following the revolution: the financial crisis that hit the European market, the closing of the Libyan market and competition within Tunisia from imported Turkish and Chinese products. New markets were thus urgently needed, and sub-Saharan Africa represented a promising new direction.⁶⁰

The Tunisian government has become more active in economic diplomacy and introducing Tunisia to the African market. Head of Government Youssef Chahed acknowledged that the repositioning of Tunisia on the African continent remains "dependent on a global diplomatic action which gives priority to cultural communication and economic exchanges".⁶¹ To increase its diplomatic presence, Tunisian Foreign Minister Jhinaoui announced in November 2016 that his country would open two embassies, in Burkina Faso and in

⁵³ Interview with senior official from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tunis. March 2018.

⁵⁴ Diop (2017).

⁵⁵ UNECA (2017).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Présidence Tunisie (2014).

⁵⁸ Alaraby TV (2017a).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Maghreb Emergent (2017).

Kenya, and establish five commercial delegations in East, West and Central Africa. These offices are to provide more proximity and better information on investment opportunities. In total, Tunisia now has ten embassies on the continent. Moreover, the government has pursued activation of joint commissions with sub-Saharan countries.

In March 2017, Head of Government Chahed undertook a visit to Sudan, along with a delegation of ministers and business representatives, to participate in the Tunisian-Sudanese High Joint Committee. During that visit, an agreement was signed to establish a joint business forum. In early April 2017, Chahed embarked on a tour of several African countries, including Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, accompanied by a delegation of more than 100 business representatives. Joint business forums were organised in each country visited. In Burkina Faso, Chahed inaugurated the Tunisian embassy in Ouagadougou as well as the first African representation of the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), which is the Tunisian business owners' association.⁶² Following that visit, visa waivers were granted to citizens of both countries, and a number of further agreements were signed between the countries and their chambers of commerce.⁶³ These are expected to strengthen not only bilateral economic relations but also cultural and educational ties.

To tap into the full potential of cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa, Tunisia will need stronger ties with the regional economic communities, as “countries that are members of these regional groupings are bound by their regional agreements”.⁶⁴ Concluding agreements with these regional bodies could provide Tunisia easier access to their markets. The country has already taken steps to tighten links with COMESA and ECOWAS.

Tunisia applied for COMESA membership in 2016. Legally, the North African country qualifies for membership because it is an immediate neighbour of a COMESA member state, Libya. Negotiations started in March 2017, and are now at an advanced stage.⁶⁵ Tunisia is expected to sign the COMESA Treaty at the organisation's next summit, making it COMESA's 20th member. This would not imply immediate full integration into the organisation, however, as transitory stages will be needed to ensure a gradual and coherent full accession.

Full membership of ECOWAS presents more legal challenges. Nonetheless, Tunisia aspires to reach an agreement with ECOWAS that will help unlock the potential for economic cooperation. According to Tunisian Trade Minister Omar El-Behi, Tunisia would like to see its trade flows with ECOWAS increase from the current 1% to 10%.⁶⁶ Marcel de Souza, President of the ECOWAS Commission, has characterised Tunisia as a country “very advanced in terms of trade, hospitality and tourism”, saying that “other African countries can benefit from it”.⁶⁷ Last year, Tunisia applied for observer status at ECOWAS, which was granted at the Monrovia summit in June 2017. With this observer status, a senior official at the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, “we now have our ambassador to ECOWAS and we are able to attend meetings”, which offers Tunisia more visibility and direct access to the regional group.⁶⁸ In addition, Tunisia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with ECOWAS during a visit made by De Souza to Tunis in November 2017. While that MoU has no legal bearing, it seeks to create a roadmap to promote economic relations between Tunisia and ECOWAS.⁶⁹

⁶² UTICA (2017).

⁶³ Mosaïque FM (2017).

⁶⁴ Interview with senior official from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tunis. March 2018.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ TAP (2017).

⁶⁷ ECOWAS (2017a).

⁶⁸ Interview with senior official at the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tunis. March 2018.

⁶⁹ TAP (2017).

In general, two key hurdles could slow Tunisia's progress in this new direction. The first is the absence of solid transport links between Tunisia and the rest of the continent. The second is the lack of Tunisian banks on the continent. Key steps are being taken to address these challenges. The national airline, Tunisair, has developed an expansion plan to boost its reach on the continent between 2017 and 2020. The company hopes to increase its sub-Saharan African destinations from 7 to 13 by 2020 and increase the frequency of trips from 13 to 33 per week.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Tunisian carrier Air Express Cargo announced a new strategy to expand its activities in sub-Saharan Africa covering both francophone and anglophone countries.⁷¹ Last December, a new shipping line between Tunisia and China was inaugurated. This could potentially create a triangular trade platform linking China, East Africa and Tunisia, giving Tunisia new access to certain regions on the African continent.⁷² Tunisia is set to launch a new maritime route as well. Linking Tunisia with West Africa, the route will connect the ports of Gabes or Sfax in Tunisia to Dakar (Senegal), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) and Tema (Ghana). This could help Tunisia diversify and increase the goods it can export.⁷³ As for the banking sector, Tunisian banks have started to develop partnerships with banks in African countries to cater for this blossoming cooperation.

These latest developments could provide favourable grounds for revamping Tunisia-Africa relations. Besides stepping up diplomatic exchanges, it will be critical to follow through on implementation of the signed agreements and ensure that activities can be sustained regardless of changes in government. Though Tunisia has a vision of investing on the continent, it is still exploring the terrain and a coherent strategy towards Africa has not yet been settled on.

⁷⁰ Alaraby TV (2017b).

⁷¹ Allani (2018).

⁷² Hellenic Shipping News (2017).

⁷³ Interview with senior official from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tunis. March 2018.

4. Security cooperation

The Sahel, West Africa and North Africa face multiple security threats, including the proliferation of terrorist groups, illicit trafficking, arms smuggling, unstable governments and civil conflicts. Security and stability are thus interests shared among all countries in these closely interlinked regions. While Tunisia's involvement in security affairs on the continent has been mainly through peacekeeping missions organised under the auspices of the AU,⁷⁴ Algeria and Morocco are far more active and playing critical roles in driving regional security cooperation between North Africa and the Sahel. Algeria has historically made significant contributions to African security through its leadership in structures of the AU and its predecessor the OAU. Morocco, traditionally excluded from security affairs on the continent by Algeria, has started to eke out a presence in the landscape of regional security cooperation, employing both hard and soft power tools.

4.1. Algeria

Africa has always been at the heart of Algeria's foreign policy. This is evidenced in the country's long-standing presence and influence in security affairs on the continent. Between the 1960s and 1990s, Algeria played the roles of developer, mediator, anti-imperialist and supporter of liberation movements, capitalising on the legitimacy it earned through its anti-colonial war against France.⁷⁵ The country's internal conflict, however, slowed its involvement in African affairs. As it emerged from its 'dark decade', it was critical for Algeria to reposition itself on the international stage. To this end, invigorating the country's foreign policy has rested on two pillars: its key role in the global war against terrorism, particularly following the 9/11 attacks, and increased activism in African affairs.⁷⁶

Algeria's increasingly central role in the fight against terrorism dates from the late 1990s, during which time it has actively contributed to the creation and financing of institutions to counter terrorism. Algeria's activism has been driven inter alia by a very national interest: the desire to establish the credibility and legitimacy of a regime that had been shaken from the inside and outside. As calm was restored in the country in 1999, Algeria hosted the 35th summit of the OAU, a step that sought to reassert the country's role on the continent, especially in the face of rising aspirations from North African rivals Morocco, Egypt and Libya. During this summit, Algeria played an instrumental role in securing the OAU's adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. This was followed by the adoption of an action plan at the inter-governmental high-level meeting of AU member states hosted by Algeria in September 2002.⁷⁷ Moreover, the country had a key role in promulgation of the protocol relating to the establishment of the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC). Besides, it was in Algiers that the AU African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) was inaugurated. ACSRT's role is to deliver studies on terrorism that the PSC can use for its analyses and in the operationalisation of international conventions on terrorism. In 2009, the AU adopted a resolution criminalising the payment of ransom to hostage-takers, to curb funding to terrorists, again following an Algerian proposal.

Algeria's vital role is reflected in the presence of Algerian diplomats in key positions in different AU structures, especially the PSC. For instance, Algeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ramatane Lamamra was commissioner of the AU Peace and Security Department between 2008 and 2013. Another Algerian replaced Lamamra in this position, Smail Chergui (2013 to the present). Before Lamamra, the Algerian Said Djinnit was in the position. Djinnit was the first commissioner of the AU Peace and Security

⁷⁴ Republic of Tunisia. Ministry of the National Defense (2015).

⁷⁵ Zoubir (2015).

⁷⁶ Ghanem-Yazbeck (2016).

⁷⁷ Zoubir (2015).

Department from 2002 to 2008 and played an important role in designing the Africa Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Algeria was actively involved in establishing the APSA and its five core components: the PSC, the Panel of the Wise, the AU Peace Fund, the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and the African Standby Force (ASF). Algeria also launched its own initiatives, such the regional command for joint counter-terrorism operations in Tamanrasset.

Algeria's involvement in key AU institutions could explain the similarities in views between Algeria and the AU.⁷⁸ For example, the Algerian stance is generally aligned with that of the AU on opposing military intervention and condemning the military coup in Mali. Also, the AU and Algeria embraced similar views in the early days of the revolution in Libya, as both argued that only a political solution could achieve reform and democracy in the country.⁷⁹

Algeria's involvement in the AU has not been immune to criticism, however, as it has been accused of using the structures of the OAU and later the AU to serve its own interests. It has also been perceived by some as seeking to dominate its neighbours in the Sahel.⁸⁰ Still, Algeria's long-standing proactive attitude on security affairs in the Sahel is generally acknowledged as having played a necessary role in responding to the conflict in Mali. Algeria was also instrumental in negotiations and mediation between the Tuareg of northern Mali and the government in Bamako in 2012 and 2014. In 2015, Algerian diplomacy succeeded in persuading the Malian government and six armed Tuareg groups to cease the use of violence,⁸¹ an agreement that paved the way for further negotiations towards a peace accord. In this case, once again, Algeria demonstrated its clout as a mediator on the African continent.

Algeria's performance in the Mali conflict however revealed not only contradictions in its foreign policy but also limitations to its leadership on security affairs. While Algeria opposed military intervention, it ultimately provided substantial support to the French Operation Serval.⁸² This was a remarkable development in Algerian foreign policy, as it traditionally opposed foreign interventions. Two pivotal factors pushed Algeria to make concessions: the secessionist drive among the Tuareg, which represented a national security threat to Algeria, and the terrorist attack on a hydrocarbons facility in the Algerian desert.⁸³ Moreover, this North African country had failed to act, either alone or with partners in the region, to solve the crisis. Neither was it able to effectively deploy the Military Joint Operations Committee (CEMOC), which was created in 2010 in partnership with Mali, Mauritania and Niger to coordinate the fight against terrorism, the main problem being limited resources and a lack of training among the Sahelian armed forces.⁸⁴ Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia said that Algeria had dispensed US \$100 million over a period of seven to eight years to help countries in the Sahel, particularly Chad, Mali, Niger and Mauritania, in the fight against terrorism, mainly financing equipment and training.⁸⁵ Since its inception, however, CEMOC has lacked effectiveness, as shown by Mauritania's request to France – unbeknown to its CEMOC partners – for help in conducting a military operation against Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northern Mali.⁸⁶ In any case, these latest concessions should not be taken to suggest that Algeria is willing to cooperate with international partners at any cost, "but only to the extent that it is able to dictate the terms of cooperation itself".⁸⁷

⁷⁸ Zoubir (2015).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Chauzal and Van Damme (2015).

⁸¹ France24 (2015).

⁸² Zoubir (2015).

⁸³ Porter (2013).

⁸⁴ Iratni (2017).

⁸⁵ Huffpost Maghreb (2017).

⁸⁶ Yahia, Zoubir and Dris-Ait-Hamadouche (2013).

⁸⁷ Porter (2013).

Algeria's involvement with the AU has come at a cost, in terms of bilateral relations with sub-Saharan countries. Moreover, the country is perceived as performing below its potential in regional security cooperation.⁸⁸ Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Algeria's president since 1999, has never visited an African country outside AU summits. Algeria's consolidation of its leadership on security has become even more important in light of the challenge that rival Morocco represents to its regional standing.

4.2. Morocco

Morocco has not been hit as severely as other countries in the Maghreb and Sahel by terrorist attacks. Still, the country faces ample security challenges in its direct neighbourhood, which have pushed it to increase its international and regional cooperation on counterterrorism. Its resources and relative stability in comparison to nearby countries have allowed it to play a growing role in regional stability.⁸⁹

In 2005, Morocco joined the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) to increase cooperation in the fight against terrorism in West and North Africa. Through military exercises, this programme seeks to improve the capacities of militaries and law enforcement authorities in counterterrorism operations and improve coordination among countries in North Africa and the Sahel.⁹⁰ More recently, in 2011, Morocco played a key role in forming the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), along with Algeria and other Arab countries. This body adopted the Algiers Memorandum on Good Practices on Preventing and Denying the Benefits of Kidnapping for Ransom by Terrorists. Morocco further hosted the meeting of the Rule of Law Working Group within the GCTF, which resulted in the Rabat Memorandum on Good Practices for Effective Counterterrorism Practice in the Criminal Justice Sector.⁹¹

Morocco played a role in the military intervention in Mali, allowing France, Spain and Portugal to access its military bases. Following the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta as Mali's president in August 2013, Morocco stepped up its efforts to help in the area of counter-radicalisation, particularly emphasising the need for military support to go hand in hand with a cultural approach to respond to extremist trends.⁹² Morocco's efforts to stabilise Mali have included dispatching physicians and medical units from the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces to Bamako to provide health care assistance.⁹³ In July 2016, Morocco joined the fight against Boko Haram in Niger, providing this country with military equipment. This was Morocco's first time to offer military equipment to help a sub-Saharan country in its fight against terrorism.⁹⁴

In addition to the use of hard instruments in security cooperation, Morocco "has demonstrated the centrality of soft power... in strengthening both counterterrorism measures and regional cohesion more broadly".⁹⁵ When attending the inauguration of President Keïta, Morocco's king announced a programme of assistance including the education and training of 500 Malian imams to contribute to the fight against radicalisation and terrorism.⁹⁶ Morocco has positioned itself as a promoter of a tolerant brand of Islam known as Sufi-Maliki Islam to counter the Wahhabist tendencies prevailing in the Sahel. Morocco has sought to play this role through the Mohammed VI Institute for Training Imams, which opened its doors in 2015, and its Foundation for African Ulema, which began operations in 2016. The country has further

⁸⁸ Boukhars (2017).

⁸⁹ Pham (2013).

⁹⁰ Moroccan American Center for Policy on behalf of the Kingdom of Morocco (2016).

⁹¹ Pham (2013).

⁹² Boukhars (2017).

⁹³ Pham (2013).

⁹⁴ The North Africa Post (2016a).

⁹⁵ Boukhars (2017).

⁹⁶ Pham (2013).

capitalised on its already strong religious links in West Africa, where the Tijaniyya Sufi order which originated in Morocco attracts millions of adherents.⁹⁷

Thus, Morocco seems to have taken concrete steps to enhance its role in the security of the continent. These recent ventures have also sought to counter the country's traditional exclusion from security affairs by Algeria. With Morocco's readmission to the AU and its success in securing a seat in the AU's PSC in 2018, it is expected to continue to carve out a key position for itself in African security affairs.

5. Cooperation on multiple fronts

5.1. Migration

North Africa has always been linked to sub-Saharan Africa through migration, both regular and irregular. Migration routes from West Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa meet in North Africa. As such, it is a region of both transit and destination; push and pull factors are both distinct and changeable here. Though accurate statistics on migrant arrivals remain elusive, literature prior to 2010 suggests that between 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans entered Maghreb countries yearly.⁹⁸

Migratory flows became more complex after the 2011 revolts.⁹⁹ Before the Arab uprisings, Libya hosted some 2.5 million migrants, most from sub-Saharan Africa, who came to fill the country's substantial labour needs. The outbreak of violence and chaos and the proliferation of smuggling networks in Libya have transformed it into the principle gateway to Europe. In Tunisia, most regular migrants are sub-Saharan African students and highly skilled employees of the African Development Bank and their families. Algeria and Morocco, both important transit countries, have traditionally attracted sub-Saharan migrants pursuing employment opportunities abroad. With the diminishing job prospects in Libya and hardening economic conditions in some countries of origin, Algeria and Morocco now seem to be attracting more newcomers. Though many migrants still head to Algeria and Morocco with the intention of continuing their journey to Europe, increasing numbers end up staying as a result of tougher border controls. Changing migration patterns within Algeria and Morocco are also observed. For instance, more migrants now head to coastal cities in Algeria rather than settling in border regions.¹⁰⁰ Thus, a new dynamic seems to be emerging with North African countries turning into destinations. The evolving situation in Algeria is very notable in this regard.

Amid mounting complaints about sub-Saharan migrants begging in the streets of Algiers and other Algerian cities, and rising concerns about migrants monopolising jobs, spreading disease and engaging in crime, the social media campaign "No to Africans in Algeria" went viral in June 2017. A press declaration by Farouk Ksentini, an advisor to President Bouteflika and head of Algeria's Human Rights Commission, compounded the problem by accusing sub-Saharan migrants of spreading HIV in the country.¹⁰¹ A counter campaign was soon launched by Algerians denouncing the claims as racist and reminding their compatriots of Algerians' own African identity.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Boukhars (2017).

⁹⁸ IOM (2013).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Houttuin and Huson (2016).

¹⁰¹ The North Africa Post (2017).

¹⁰² Memo (2017).

The official response seemed favourable as the government announced a regularisation campaign for sub-Saharan migrants, as they are needed to fill construction and farming jobs, sectors that are not attracting enough Algerians. To this end, the country has said it will undertake a census of foreigners and then define exact numbers of migrants to be offered legalised work permits. Though there are no official statistics, Algeria is thought to be home to some 100,000 migrants from sub-Saharan countries.¹⁰³ Speaking in June 2017, then Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune asserted that Algerians are not racists. “We are Africans, Maghreb and Mediterranean”, he said.¹⁰⁴ As legal status will not be granted to all migrants on Algerian territory, the country will seek to establish readmission agreements with the origin countries.¹⁰⁵ Between August and October 2017, the Algerian authorities forcibly repatriated more than 3,000 migrants, including women and minors, to Niger, Mali, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea and others.¹⁰⁶ A few months later, a group of Malians who were returned home attacked the Algerian embassy in Bamako to protest the poor conditions of their repatriation and “the inhumane treatment” they had received.¹⁰⁷ This situation underlines the need for a migration policy reform that takes into consideration these evolving dynamics not only to ensure the integration and rights of those who stay but also to preserve the dignity and human rights of those who are returned.

The regularisation campaign announced by the Algerian government is likely to be influenced by the country’s aim of bolstering ties with sub-Saharan countries, in addition to being influenced by similar initiatives launched by its neighbour Morocco a few years ago. Discussions on the rights of migrants and the government’s handling of this issue were an integral part of the development of Morocco’s migration policy. Morocco has in the past been accused of breaching migrants’ rights in such a way as to “[cause] major international embarrassment” for the kingdom.¹⁰⁸ In 2013, Morocco launched a comprehensive immigration reform including a significant shift from a restrictive migration policy that criminalised irregular entry towards embracing the country’s emerging status as a host country. In step with this new policy, Morocco announced a regularisation programme in 2014, offering legal status to 25,000 migrants; a similar plan was launched in 2016. Despite the progress registered since then, some note that ill treatment has persisted, such as random arrests of migrants by the police.¹⁰⁹

In general, irregular migrants in North Africa continue to face limited access to public services, substandard jobs and discrimination, especially that Migration has not traditionally been part of development policies in these countries. Further, migrants’ situation has been exacerbated by the media’s handling of the issue, as the lack of balanced messages about migrants has reinforced stereotyping.¹¹⁰ Integration difficulties also remain for regular migrants as well, though to a much lesser degree than for irregular migrants. Ongoing migration reforms, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia, should help to address these difficulties in the long term.

¹⁰³ Chikhi (2017).

¹⁰⁴ Huffpost (2017).

¹⁰⁵ Huffpost (2017).

¹⁰⁶ HRW (2017).

¹⁰⁷ Huffpost (2018).

¹⁰⁸ Naama (2017).

¹⁰⁹ Alarmphone (2017).

¹¹⁰ IOM (2013).

North African countries' responses to the migration question have clearly been largely shaped by their changing relationship with sub-Saharan countries. Despite this, at the 10th Extraordinary Summit of the AU, which witnessed the signature of the African CFTA agreement, all North African countries refrained from signing the Free Movement of People Protocol. Morocco reportedly explained its decision by saying that it needed more time to analyse the potential impact of the agreement.¹¹¹ Tunisia stated its belief that a "gradual" approach was needed.¹¹²

5.2. Education

North Africa has traditionally been an attractive destination for sub-Saharan students lured by educational opportunities, good quality programmes, wide variety of offerings and a relatively low cost of living and tuition. Hardening conditions for the admission of sub-Saharan students to universities in Europe and North America have further accentuated the status of some North African countries as a destination for sub-Saharan students abroad.¹¹³ Many educational institutions in the Maghreb, particularly Morocco and Tunisia, rely on attracting sub-Saharan students and also seek to foster knowledge and academic exchanges more generally in order to strengthen ties with the rest of the continent.

Morocco is a key destination for sub-Saharan students thanks to its geographical proximity to the countries of West Africa, its educational quality and variety, including programmes directly relevant to Africa's development needs, and scholarships offered through the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation. The kingdom currently hosts more than 18,000 sub-Saharan students, including 6,500 recipients of scholarships from the Moroccan government.¹¹⁴ Sub-Saharan students can enrol in three different types of education: executive training, vocational training and higher education.¹¹⁵ The Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation, established in 1986, oversees the reception of foreign students, provides administrative support and ensures students' distribution over the territory.¹¹⁶

Educational exchanges are also encouraged through bilateral cooperation agreements with sub-Saharan countries. Attracting foreign students is in concordance with Morocco's emphasis on South-South cooperation and is considered to be of strategic importance for the country, as exchange programmes attract potential leaders and influential actors from countries that are becoming increasingly central to Morocco's foreign policy. However, sub-Saharan students continue to face obstacles, for example, social integration can be difficult and cases of discrimination continue to be reported.¹¹⁷

Tunisia, also a traditional destination for students from sub-Saharan Africa, is developing a new vision for cooperation in higher education.¹¹⁸ Tunisia would like to use its substantial expertise and know-how to either attract more students from sub-Saharan Africa or export its expertise through exchanges of delegations of students and university professors. Indeed, Tunisia, is among the best countries in Africa in scientific research, for instance, ranking second in scientific output on the African continent in 2016. The country would like to capitalise more on its research infrastructure by attracting foreign researchers to its more than 600 research units and laboratory facilities.¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ Infoglitz (2018).

¹¹² Interview with senior official from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tunis. March 2018.

¹¹³ Lionel (2015).

¹¹⁴ El Masaiti (2017a).

¹¹⁵ Lionel (2015).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Alami (2013).

¹¹⁸ Alaraby TV (2017b).

¹¹⁹ Alaraby TV (2017b).

Tunisia currently hosts more than 5,000 sub-Saharan students. Some 1,500 are enrolled in public universities, mostly through scholarships offered by the Tunisian government, while the majority undertake studies at private universities. These numbers, however, represent a decline from more than 12,000 students before 2010. The drop in student numbers has represented a strong blow to Tunisia's private universities, which are highly reliant on foreign students. A number of factors have caused Tunisia to lose its charm as a destination for sub-Saharan students. One of these is the country's failure to implement cooperation agreements.¹²⁰ Another is the multiple problems that many foreign students endure, including slow and inadequate administrative procedures and delays in obtaining residence permits. This has even rendered some students' irregular residents, making them subject to fines. Other obstacles are difficulties in social integration and cases of discrimination.

To address these issues, Tunisia has indicated an interest in increasing coordination between the different ministries involved. In addition, the country's new migration strategy could produce improved conditions for foreign residents in the country in the mid and long term. Moreover, the country is set to launch a new programme to encourage sub-Saharan students to enrol in public Tunisian universities at reduced fees, as Tunisia aspires to raise student numbers to 20,000 by 2020.¹²¹ The opening of new Tunisian embassies and consulates in sub-Saharan countries and establishment of new consulates and embassies from these countries in Tunisia will attract more students to Tunisia. Both the government and the private sector have accelerated efforts to achieve these objectives. In August 2017, the first Tunisian African Empowerment Forum was organised in Tunis to promote Tunisia as a *destination de choix* for sub-Saharan students, be it for professional training or for higher education. The idea is to help orient students who are interested in Tunisia and build trust with African partners.

North African countries are likely to increase in importance as destinations for sub-Saharan students, as bilateral relations are strengthened and greater investment is made in transport systems linking North Africa with sub-Saharan Africa. Inflows of students are important not only for geostrategic reasons but also to support private universities in these destination countries. At the continental level, such exchanges could bolster inter-continental dynamics and further link different regions of the continent as well as enrich exchanges of knowledge and experiences.

6. Conclusions

Maghreb countries share the stated common objective of achieving more openness towards and cooperation with sub-Saharan countries. The shift in policy towards the south has been driven by a mix of factors: the failure to launch regional cooperation in the Maghreb, the events of the 'Arab Spring' and their heavy toll on national economies, faltering commodity prices, mounting regional security concerns and the pursuit of geostrategic influence. Nonetheless, some countries remain more advanced than others in the process.

¹²⁰ Jawhara (2017).

¹²¹ Interview with senior official from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tunis. March 2018.

Morocco has traditionally maintained an active diplomacy on the continent, especially in West Africa. It has numerous advantages over its neighbours, particularly, a more developed transport infrastructure, the strong presence of Moroccan banks on the continent and the financial means to drive investment. Despite notable progress, Morocco's trade with sub-Saharan Africa is still substantially below its potential. Closer Moroccan cooperation with sub-Saharan African countries hinges on stepping up the implementation of existing agreements with these countries and further strengthening transport systems. Bolstering regional integration, as envisaged by Morocco, will depend on the country's success in assuaging mounting worries and precaution within West Africa with regard to Morocco's interests in the region.

As for Algeria, while the country has maintained a steady, strong presence in continental bodies, a more active diplomacy in particular will be needed to make up for the historically rather neglected bilateral relations. Despite announcing its desire to boost economic cooperation with the rest of the continent, more concrete steps have as yet been lacking, for Algeria to translate this 'new vision' into action. Limits to diplomatic outreach within the continent represent a challenge to Tunisia as well. This country has scaled up its efforts to increase its visibility, demonstrated by its more active diplomacy, encouragement of the establishment of Tunisian banks on the continent and development of transport linkages. While Tunisia has a new vision for its role on the African continent and cooperation with African peers, developing a comprehensive strategy will require financial resources that Tunisia lacks at present. Tunisia benefits, however, from its active business groups which have taken the lead in exploring opportunities and promoting Tunisia as an economic partner in sub-Saharan countries.

These developments are all the more important as they come at a time when the African continent is moving towards stronger integration, as evidenced by the signing of the historic African CFTA agreement, as well as the memberships of many countries in multiple regional economic communities. Yet, as North African countries engineer integration into successful African regional organisations, they should be reminded to look within their own ranks and seek a way out of the current impasse, especially as the political, security and economic reasons for integration and intensified cooperation are now more compelling than ever before.

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