

Inter-Maghreb relations: 'Revolutions' deepen differences

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Relations between the ‘brotherly’ Maghreb states – Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya – have been, and continue to be, marked by a structural specificity that sets them apart from each other. Recent developments, particularly the Tunisian intifada and the Libyan crisis, have further muddied the already murky waters of regional political relations. Instead of coordinating Maghrebian efforts to contain the crisis and prevent it from turning the area into a focal point of instability and a playground for small and large actors, the three more powerful states of the region – Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania – have allowed Arab and international powers to take action while the Maghreb powers remained absent in this, the first crisis of its kind to affect the region. The Libyan situation, in particular, has also become a source of renewed dispute between Algeria and Morocco.

Major implications of the Libyan crisis

Even if the Tunisian uprising shook the Moroccan throne by toppling Tunisia’s ruler, its impact was not as strongly felt in inter-Maghreb relations as the Libyan crisis. This was due to several factors.

1. The Tunisian revolution was peaceful and largely free of any foreign interference or manipulation. The case of Libya is completely different; the uprising quickly turned into a military confrontation because of the regime’s use of heavy weapons against protestors who turned into insurgent-revolutionaries. The result was foreign military intervention.
2. Tunisia is distinct in its level of social and economic development and the institutionalisation of its government apparatus, while Libya’s distinction is the absence of state institutions, with even military institutions being effectively absent, because Gaddafi had dissolved all Libyan state institutions into his Jamahiri (populist) framework.
3. The third factor is the Tunisia’s political history. Tunisia is a country that was characterised by moderation, non-involvement in conflicts, and the fact that it has not been a source of insecurity for its neighbours. Of course, the country’s small size and modest capabilities explain such behaviour, but the fact remains that this was the result of intentional policies by the country’s authoritarian elite. Gaddafi’s Libya, on the other hand, was a major source of trouble and security concerns for its neighbours – either directly, as it was for Tunisia, or indirectly through Libyan funding and support of armed and terrorist groups in the Sahel region in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Tunisian uprising forced Maghreb regimes to take a defensive position, compelling them to promise reforms in order to calm the social forces in their countries and to avoid sustained and organised social protest. The Libyan crisis, on the other hand, has returned to these regimes the relative ‘vitality’ that they had almost lost as a result of the Tunisian uprising. The Libyan crisis has thus allowed them to continue the traditional political game through a war of political posturing and external alliances that works to reinforce their internal strength.

Maghreb countries: Test case for pressing factors

We can summarise the most important and pressing factors affecting inter-Maghreb relations that have resulted from the Tunisian and Libyan crises as follows.

1. A change from the bottom, for the first time in the history of the Arab world, which saw a popular uprising leading to a change in the state’s power structure.

Modern Arab history has been marked by changes from above, either through the death of rulers or through military coups.

2. The Tunisian regime's break, albeit partial, with the Maghrebian consensus as it is expressed in Article 15 of the Treaty of Marrakech (which established the Maghreb Union) which called on member states to consider the security of other member states.
3. By effectively departing from this consensus, the Tunisian interim government contradicted a basic rule of Arab politics, namely the prioritisation of the ruling regime's security (security of the ruling family in monarchical regimes, and security of the strategic governing minority in the case of republican regimes – which are more accurately described as monarchical-republican hybrids due to the practice of power being inherited within families).
4. Foreign intervention in Libya transformed the Maghreb into a focal point of conflict and a playground for large and small, regional and international actors, thus greatly affecting the region's security and its future. This pressing factor is perhaps the most important and most serious in terms of inter-Maghreb relations as it raised the spectre of renewed conflict between the states in the region. The change can be seen as the entry of the region into a new phase that is marked by the individual regime's struggle for survival, and its dependence on outside powers. While in Morocco's case this has taken the form of developing a close relationship with the coalition that is intervening in Libya in order to fortify the Moroccan regime, Algeria and Mauritania have used their vacillation or neutrality (vis-à-vis Libya) to do the same. Since the peoples of the Maghreb oppose their regimes as well as foreign intervention, any opposition to such intervention brings the regimes closer to their people, or, at least, helps to quell their opposition.

Between conciliation and abortion

Maghreb governments were divided on the situation of Tunisia. Some strove to adapt to the developments and expressed 'respect for the will of the Tunisian people' – despite their lack of respect for the will of their own people, while others supported the Tunisian regime from the outset until the last moments before President Ben Ali fled. Still others were more cautious, waiting to see the final outcome before dealing with the facts on the ground. The Maghreb countries did not explicitly support the democratic uprising in Tunisia for a simple reason: if they had, it would have been an open invitation to the peoples of the entire region to follow in the footsteps of their Tunisian brethren.

In the midst of the Tunisian uprising, Arab leaders counted on the Tunisian regime's ability to contain the popular intifada. This was due, in part, to their confidence in the abilities of their own authoritarian regimes to contain developments and rebrand themselves after every political crisis. They did not anticipate rifts in the Tunisian regime and the entry of the army on the side of the protestors. As such, an abortion of the change in Tunis may indeed take place during this transitional period so that the Tunisian situation would be gradually and quietly contained under the old-new elite's financial and political guidance in a way that would allow the Arab 'brothers' to closely monitor and direct the process and its outcome. The problem that Arab states have with Tunisia is that these authoritarian entities cannot allow the birth of democracy in their midst because such a development would represent an alternative and would thus be a threat to their own stability. An Arab democracy is like a dagger in the heart of Arab authoritarian regimes.

It is expected that Arab rulers will hope for the failure of the Tunisian experiment, and for the country to be plunged into chaos as a result of the failure of a calm transition to a new system, or through the democratic seizure of power by a fundamentalist Islamic movement that would then eliminate the democratic process altogether. Both cases would provide an affirmation of the ‘chaos’ thesis of Egypt’s Mubarak and Tunisia’s Ben Ali who said, ‘It’s either me or chaos,’ (echoing the Umayyad formula of ‘either Yazid or the sword’, a formula uttered by Muawiyah when he bequeathed power to his son) thereby mimicking the worst approach to power in Islamic history.

By virtue of its size and location and in the case of a transition to real democracy while the status quo is preserved in other Arab countries, Tunisia cannot afford to become a centre of attraction for Arab and Maghrebian democrats, their safe-haven and the new headquarters of free Arab media. Such a possibility will make Tunisia a target of the Arab and Maghrebian ‘brothers’ who will regard the country as the backyard of those movements opposing their regimes. In such an instance, other Maghreb states will work to enforce the strategic clause of the Marrakech Treaty. Since there exists an Arab agreement on the prohibition of a ‘brother’ country disrupting bilateral relationships (by supporting the opposition movement of another Arab country, for example), a democratic Tunisia – if it emerges – will be forced to respect this rule to avoid alienating her Arab neighbours. It would thus be a truncated democracy, because democracies do not expel foreign opposition figures or foreign free media if these people respect local laws. The red line for Tunis, from the perspective of other Arab regimes, is its playing host to and supporting Arab opposition figures and movements.

Implications for the prevailing balance

The new regional situation has a particular effect on Algerian-Moroccan relations. Tunisia and Libya, because of the processes that they are currently undergoing, are now beyond the regional equation. Mauritania has neither the domestic nor the regional power that might allow it to play a significant role. As such, the current situation seems to have returned inter-Maghreb relations to first principles: the stock exchange-like flux of Algerian-Moroccan relations. Morocco considers Algeria to have lost a regional asset with the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. This is not entirely accurate because Libya has always been an annoying and volatile neighbour to Algeria, and a source of problems and insecurity. Gaddafi’s demise is thus not a loss. Algeria’s main concern is a security breakdown in its neighbour that would lead to a tumultuous civil war. It seems clear that the changes taking place in the Maghreb have increased political polarisation between Algeria and Morocco. The changes did not affect the structural balance in the region, but what is new is the exit of Tunisia and Libya – and even Mauritania – from the pool of local clients for the region’s two main competitors.

Interestingly, Algeria and Morocco are not immune to democratic uprisings similar to Tunisia’s – a fact we would expect would result in a reduction in the regimes’ regional antagonism. However, tension in the new regional situation rose as if the two regimes were certain not to be affected by the winds of change in the Arab world. The common denominator between them has been their respect for the will of the Tunisian and Libyan peoples despite their lack of respect for their own peoples. The same can be said for all the Arab regimes supporting the rebels in Libya: they violate the will of their own people while proclaiming their respect and support for the will of the Libyan people. What is forbidden at home, it seems, is legitimate abroad. In summary, the new regional situation has increased competition and fuelled conflict in the positions towards the Libyan crisis, which has been utilised to serve other purposes.

The Libyan crisis has thus increased the complexity of inter-Maghreb relations, especially between the main actors – Algeria and Morocco. As for the future, the matter is subject to unfolding events. In the event of successful political transition in Tunisia and Libya, it is

likely that the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco will diminish because Tunisia and Libya will have dropped out of the Algerian and Moroccan pools of potential local clients, and both transformed countries will aim to avoid confrontation with the two regional powers in order to maintain their neutrality and safeguard their internal transitions. In case of failure or subversion of the transition, the tension will inevitably increase, especially since Morocco determines its policies and positions in concert with its western and Arab allies, while Algeria adopts a position independent of external forces. This is what makes the Maghreb a site of struggle between external influences in which Algeria and Morocco are often on opposing ends, as has been the case since independence.

Factors affecting Algerian and Moroccan strategies

As a result of the long border between Algeria and Libya, Algeria considers the armed conflict and NATO intervention in Libya to be a threat to Algerian national security, fearing a movement of arms to terrorist groups in the Sahel region. The Libyan crisis has thus become an opportunity to strengthen Algerian cooperation and coordination with Mali, Niger and Mauritania to combat terrorism and organised crime. Algeria, which does not participate in international meetings on the Libyan crisis, plans to convene a meeting in September 2011 to discuss Libya's repercussions on terrorism and arms smuggling. The meeting will bring together several Sahel states, the United States, Britain, France, China, Russia and the United Nations. Algeria claims it is committed to neutrality with regards to the parties engaged in the Libyan conflict. There are five main reasons behind this position.

1. Algeria has always been against foreign interference, regardless of the pretext.
2. Support for the Libyan rebels implies support for local demands for rapid change.
3. Because of the common border, any military conflict in Libya directly involves Algeria – with potentially drastic security implications for Algerian borders and territory.
4. It seems the Algerian position is based on the understanding that it will not be harmed whether Gaddafi remains in power or steps down, and that there are no expected political gains to justify support of one belligerent against another in the Libyan conflict.
5. Algeria is primarily concerned with its domestic matters. The regime is in a difficult situation because of the diversity and multiplicity of internal protests, and has little interest in involving itself in a conflict on its eastern border.

The Moroccan regime does not see the situation in Libya as a threat to its national security because of the geographical distance between the two countries. It thus has a larger margin to manoeuvre compared to Algeria. The coastal supply route to Libya also does not affect Moroccan security. This explains the Moroccan decision from the beginning to support international intervention. Beyond this, however, the Moroccan positioning serves the higher political objectives of the regime because it is a means to obtain support on the Western Sahara issue, especially given Algeria's oppositional stance. Morocco hopes that its support for intervention in Libya will result in a Libyan Transitional Council supporting Morocco's position on Western Sahara. The big issue is not the power or influence of the Council, but the forces behind it. The Council has become the passage through which to woo the active powers and win their support, above and beyond the potential gains in the energy sector.

While Algeria, with concerns for the security of its Libyan border, takes action in the Libyan crisis with its sights on terrorism and arms smuggling in the Sahel, Morocco acts with its

sights set on Western Sahara. The latter is Morocco's Achilles heel, and the prime factor in its determination of regional and international policies. That is why Morocco occasionally takes positions that irritate or attempt to outmanoeuvre Algeria. The two countries' strategic calculations are well-grounded in political realism, and unrelated to democratic scruples, especially since non-democratic regimes cannot support the demands of democracy beyond their borders while suppressing their people domestically. If they do, it does not reflect a commitment to democracy, but to pragmatic calculations, as is the case of all Arab countries that are supporting the Libyan rebels.

Passing the buck

It is customary in the Arab world to place on others the responsibility for turmoil and the burden of managing and solving crises. Maghrebian state attitudes towards the Libyan crisis are no exception. Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania are unable – and perhaps unwilling – to influence the course of events in Libya, preferring to stick to the customary approach. Algeria and Mauritania use the pretext of following the African Union (AU) and adhering to its proposed road map. Morocco's initial pretext was the position of the Arab League, followed by that of the United Nations and NATO.

Morocco claims to want a political solution to the crisis, but it chose to side with the interventionist camp from the outset. It participated in the special international meetings on the Libyan crisis (in Paris, London and Doha) in which participants focused on decisive military victory. The Moroccan foreign minister did, however, go through the motions of meeting with representatives of Gaddafi and of the Libyan Transitional Council. Mauritania also claims that a political solution is necessary, and its president is a member of the AU's presidential delegation tasked with finding a political settlement on the basis of the AU road map. Algeria also calls for a peaceful solution but, unlike Morocco, it has criticised foreign intervention and did not participate in the international meetings, preferring to support the AU initiative for a cease-fire, protection of civilians and migrants in Libya, and an internal dialogue that brings together all the Libyan role-players.

The three Maghreb powers – Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania – agree on certain minor points: the call for a peaceful solution to the crisis; affirmation of Libya's territorial unity and integrity; and a rejection of foreign interference. The latter is a point of Algerian-Mauritanian consensus because Morocco supports the interventionist camp and voted for UN Security Council Resolution 1973, while Algeria said it would 'register' a Security Council vote on the UN resolution, meaning that it is not in favour of the resolution, but it does not oppose it – so as not to be in opposition to international law. Algeria also emphasises its call for an immediate cessation to all acts of violence.

State motivations aside, reliance on others to solve the region's problems remains the common denominator. The behaviour of these countries has contributed to the 'Mashreqisation' or 'Middle Easternisation' of the Maghreb in light of the fact that the Maghreb has not previously been the site of inter-state conflict or direct international intervention. This has been a hallmark of the Mashreq (Arab states east of Egypt), which continually have been an arena of foreign intervention with the support and blessing of Arab states. The Maghreb now seems to be following in the Mashreq's footsteps. As for Tunisia, it has been out of the game due to its internal transition and its local and regional vulnerability. Its eastern border has been a source of major concern, due both to the arrival of hordes of Libyan refugees into its territory and because of a direct military threat posed by the infiltration of Gaddafi's troops into its territory, as well as the ever-present risk of weapons smuggling.

Algeria, Morocco and US strategy

Morocco's accusation that Algeria supported the Gaddafi regime with mercenaries and weapons has increased the tension between the neighbours. The Moroccan behaviour seems paradoxical; on the one hand it articulates its desire to reopen the Algerian-Moroccan borders, and on the other hand it accuses Algeria of supplying mercenaries to Gaddafi. The latter claim aborts the previous desire, and nullifies its potential for the medium term. Algeria denies the accusations, saying it wants a political settlement to the Libyan crisis, and that it will maintain neutrality towards it based on the premise that the solution must come from Libyans themselves.

Due to the sensitivity of the situation, the US position is not arbitrary, neither in terms of substance nor timing. During his visit to Algeria early in June, AFRICOM (US Africa Command) commander Carter Ham announced, 'There is no evidence of Algerian involvement in sending soldiers and mercenaries to Libya.' He also acknowledged Algerian fears, saying, 'Algeria has the right to express concerns about the proliferation of weapons. This poses a real threat to the region, and we share the Algerian concern that some of these weapons could reach al-Qaeda and terrorist groups in the Sahel.' Ham also expressed his appreciation for military coordination between Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania, and called on the four countries to tighten border controls and share intelligence. Three factors help explain the US position.

1. The United States believes that Algerian action to combat terrorism and arms smuggling to and from Libya serves the goals of the US and the international coalition intervening in Libya. That is, that Libya's transformation into a bastion of terrorism and an international transit point of fighters armed with the latest weapons of the Gaddafi regime serves neither US nor Algerian interests. As such, the US understands the Algerian position and does not see it as contradicting its Libya strategy, but rather as supportive of it, even if indirectly.
2. The US is attempting to remedy the situation with Algeria after its announcement during the first days of the military intervention in Libya that it would support Morocco's autonomy plan for the Western Sahara.
3. Ham's remarks express his country's desire to defuse the political tension between Morocco and Algeria after the former's accusation against the latter. The US is aware that any additional tension between the two countries does not serve the interests of NATO intervention in Libya. The Algerian position calling for the tight monitoring of weapons and for terrorist elements moving across the Libyan-Algerian border is also in the interest of the coalition, even if the Algerian position is based on Algeria's own national security considerations.

Divided whichever way they look, whether facing their own region or abroad. This is the situation of the Maghreb countries. It is no exaggeration that the widening of the gap between Algeria and Morocco is one of the most significant strategic consequences of the Libyan crisis. This widened gap makes the normalisation of bilateral relations between the two virtually impossible in the medium term. Morocco, which again offered Algeria the opportunity to reopen their common border, completely aborted any goodwill contained in the offer by accusing Algeria of sending mercenaries to support the Gaddafi regime. Thus, this pressing factor reinforces existing structural factors, and will become a structural factor itself. This is especially so since the Libyan crisis, by virtue of geography, poses a direct threat to Algerian national security.

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