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Maghreb-Sahel Nexus

Rapprochement, Rivalries and Realignments

Aicha Elbasri

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Aicha Elbasri

Researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and former United Nations diplomat. She has held several media positions at the UN Department of Global Communications in New York, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Sudan, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) for the Arab states. Her research interests include United Nations peacekeeping operations and African studies. She earned a PhD in French literature from Savoy University in France and in 2015 received a Ridenhour Prize for Truth-Telling for reporting on UN violations in Darfur.

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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Over three decades since the launch of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Maghreb region today finds itself deeply divided. A succession of diplomatic and security crises, mainly between the AMU's lynchpin states, Algeria and Morocco, over regional leadership and their dispute over the Western Sahara conflict, led to the severance of their diplomatic relations. The Maghreb disunion has intensified against a broader backdrop of a major reconfiguration of regional alliances in the Sahel in light of shifting global dynamics. The long-standing hegemony of France and other traditional actors has eroded in the wake of a series of military coups, particularly in Mali (2020-2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). This created an opening for new partnerships, especially with Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf states.¹

As a result of these regional and international dynamics, both Algeria and Morocco are pursuing competing agendas in search of alternative alliances outside the AMU framework that provide them with respective spheres of influence. Drawing on a decade-long African strategy, Morocco launched the "Atlantic Initiative" in November 2023, aimed at providing landlocked Sahelian countries with maritime access to the Atlantic Ocean. By March 2024, Algeria initiated a new Maghreb bloc limited to an alliance with Tunisia and Libya, aiming to enhance consultation and partnership among the three countries.

The competing initiatives launched by Morocco and Algeria in pursuit of regional leadership beyond the framework of the Arab Maghreb Union raise critical questions about the future of this organization, as well as the nature of the Maghreb region's relationship with its African neighbouring countries considering the complex entanglement of political, security, and economic interests and risks between the two spheres.

Maghreb Unity Impossible amid States' Competition

When the leaders of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya founded the AMU in 1989, they pledged to harmonize their policies, achieving development and peace, and ensuring the free movement of people, goods, and capital.² The birth of the Union took place amidst the prospect of a political settlement to the Western Sahara conflict, following a decade-long war between Morocco that claims its sovereignty over this former Spanish colony based on historical rights, and the Algeria-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario) which pursues since 1976 the creation of an independent Sahrawi state through a self-determination referendum. In 1988, both Morocco and the Polisario front, accepted the UN proposals calling for a 1991 UN-monitored ceasefire and a referendum on Western Sahara's independence or integration with Morocco.

1 Nina Wilén, "Stepping up Engagement in the Sahel: Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States," Egmont Institute for International Relations, 29/04/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at <https://acr.ps/1L9GPv7>

2 Treaty establishing the Arab Maghreb Union, The World Bank, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPfI>

The referendum never materialized, mainly due to the parties' disputes over voter eligibility. The failure to resolve the Western Sahara conflict, coupled with Algeria's civil war following the cancellation of the 1992 elections, led to the deterioration of relations between the two countries. In 1994, tensions escalated when Morocco accused Algeria of involvement in a terrorist attack in Marrakesh and imposed visa requirements, to which Algeria reacted by closing the border, which remains sealed.³ The countries' positions became irreconcilable in 2007, when Morocco declared its autonomy plan as the sole basis for a settlement of the Western Sahara conflict, while the Polisario front and Algeria continue to demand a referendum that includes the option of independence. Morocco's normalization of relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords, pursuing military cooperation partnership, further exacerbated existing tensions as Algeria perceived this as a threat to its national security.⁴

The prospects for Maghreb unity have remained bleak since the inception of the AMU, undermined not only by the unresolved Western Sahara conflict but also by the enduring rivalry between Algeria and Morocco over regional leadership, often framed in terms of competing claims to the status of a 'pivotal state'.⁵ Amid the entrenched Morocco–Algeria rivalry and shifting Sahel dynamics, the foundational cooperation underpinning the AMU has steadily eroded, giving way to their respective efforts to expand influence beyond the framework of the AMU.

Morocco in Pursuit of Sahel's Sphere of Influence

Morocco's efforts to project power in the southern sphere, in the Sahel and along the Atlantic coast rely on its deep-rooted ties with sub-Saharan states and its geostrategic location. In addition to its role as a bridge connecting Europe and Africa across the Mediterranean Sea, the country aspires to play a leading role within the African Atlantic trade networks as part of the "Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation" initiative, led by the United States and comprising 42 countries from Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean.⁶ The country developed the African strategy in light of four shifts: first, its return to the African Union in 2017; second, the wave of military coups that led to the ejection of France in favour of new partnerships; third, the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in January 2025; and fourth, the decline in Algeria's influence in these neighbouring countries.⁷

3 Hasni Abidi and Aboubakr Jamaï, "Western Sahara Figures Prominently in Algeria–Morocco Tensions," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies – Washington DC, 04/11/2021, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPmK>

4 Ibid.

5 See Anouar Boukhars, "Reassessing the Power of Regional Security Providers: The Case of Algeria and Morocco." *Middle Eastern Studies* 55:2 (2019), pp. 242–260.

6 Karim El Aynaoui, "The Atlantic Ocean: A New Frontier for Global Cooperation and African Growth," Brookings, 11/02/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPAj>

7 François Soudan, "Au Sahel, le Maroc a su profiter du vide laissé par l'effacement de l'Algérie," *Jeune Afrique*, 6/1/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPJx>; Zinab Mostafa Roweha, "Morocco Competes with Algeria in the African Sahel", Middle East Political and Economic Institute, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: Morocco Competes with Algeria in the African Sahel – MEPEI

On 6 November 2023, Morocco launched the "Royal Atlantic Initiative",⁸ offering Sahelian states – Mali, Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso – maritime access to the Atlantic Ocean through Moroccan infrastructure, particularly the port of Dakhla, located in the Western Sahara.⁹ The AES confederation welcomed this alliance as a means of freeing itself from dependence on the ports of ECOWAS member states following their withdrawal, and as a recognition of Morocco's regional leadership. The initiative builds on a major geopolitical project launched by Morocco and Nigeria, the Atlantic Gas Pipeline, a continuation of the existing West African Gas pipeline that has been in service since 2010. The mega-project aims to carry natural gas undersea from Nigeria to Morocco through thirteen West African countries, while supplying gas to landlocked Sahelian countries and eventually reaching the European markets.

These Moroccan-led initiatives are part of an African strategy that gained momentum with Morocco's return to the African Union in 2017, shaped by the recognition of the Arab Maghreb Union's failure and prompting a shift toward African-oriented economic, social, and cultural partnerships – reflected in the signing of 949 agreements with African countries between 2000 and 2017.¹⁰ This African strategy, which focuses on the Sahel countries, is based on economic partnerships involving the private sector,¹¹ alongside soft power tools through projects that include training programmes for military and security forces, scholarships, the training of imams, as well as the promotion of African culture through festivals and media initiatives.¹²

Rabat leverages these partnerships and investments as a tool of Moroccan foreign policy on the African continent, with the aim of securing diplomatic gains. Morocco's Atlantic projects, including the new port of Dakhla, aim to integrate the territory into the Atlantic trade and bolster African and international recognition of its sovereignty claim while weakening the Polisario. As of April 2025, around 20 African states have opened consulates in Dakhla and Laayoun cities, while backing for SADR continues to decline, with several African countries withdrawing their recognition – the most recent being Ghana.¹³

However, while these projects advance Morocco's ambitions for regional leadership,¹⁴ they risk further antagonizing Algeria and further straining relations between the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Morocco–Nigeria gas pipeline, for instance, directly challenges Algeria's older trans-Saharan project, which aims to channel Nigerian gas to Europe through Niger and Algeria. A series of sabotage incidents

8 "SM le Roi adresse un discours à la Nation à l'occasion du 48ème anniversaire de la Marche Verte (Texte intégral)," Royaume du Maroc, 06/11/2023, accessed on 29/7/2025, at : <https://acr.ps/1L9GPoM>

9 Abderrafie Zaanoun, "Morocco's Atlantic Initiative and Potential Challenges to Regional Leadership," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10/2024, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPKj>

10 "Full Speech of King Mohammed VI at 28th African Union Summit," Morocco World News, 31/01/2017, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPz4>

11 Olivier Monnier, "Morocco's Southward Investment Push a Win for Africa," International Finance Corporation, World Bank Group, accessed on 29/7/2025, <https://acr.ps/1L9GPVA>

12 Sanae Hanine, Moulay Driss Saikak, and EL Boufi Nazha, "Moroccan Soft Power in Africa: Assessment and Outlook," Journal of African Studies and the Nile Basin, Democratic Arab Center, 27/06/2023, accessed on 29/7/2025, at <https://acr.ps/1L9GPvk>

13 Ama Oprah, "Ghana Ends Support to Western Sahara, Backs Moroccan Autonomy Plan Instead," Omega Tv Uk, <https://acr.ps/1L9GPC2>

14 Abderrafie Zaanoun, "Morocco's Atlantic Initiative and Potential Challenges to Regional Leadership," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10/10/2024, accessed on 29/7/2025, at <https://acr.ps/1L9GPo2>

in Niger, coupled with the deterioration of diplomatic relations between Niger and Algeria, have cast increasing doubt on the feasibility of the pipeline project, positioning Morocco's Atlantic project as an alternative, though costlier and more complex, option.¹⁵ In seeking to expand its role as an energy hub by becoming one of Africa's top five producers of renewable energy and entering gas pipeline geopolitics, long dominated by Algeria and Libya, Morocco-Algeria rivalry for regional leadership can only intensify.¹⁶

Algeria Seeking the Maghreb's New Alliance

Algeria has traditionally wielded influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Sahelian states of Mali, Niger, and Mauritania with which it shares borders, positioning itself as a political mediator and economic partner. The country led the negotiations of the 2015 Algiers Accords to end the Mali War between the government of Mali and the Azawad movements, and opposed any ECOWAS military intervention in Niger following the military coup. It cancelled \$900 million in debt for 14 African countries and, in 2023, pledged \$1 billion to the Algerian Agency of International Cooperation for Solidarity and Development to support African development.¹⁷ In February 2024, Algeria announced plans to establish free trade zones with Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Tunisia, and Libya to boost trans-Saharan infrastructure and economic ties,¹⁸ alongside energy initiatives such as Sonatrach's planned power plant in Niger,¹⁹ and the Algeria-Nigeria trans-Saharan gas pipeline.

However, many of these projects, including the Trans-Saharan pipeline, have stalled, largely due to the complex interplay of escalating instability in the Sahel – intensified by the security vacuum following the withdrawal of French and European Union forces and the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) – which has fuelled the resurgence of armed jihadist groups and the expansion of illicit drug and arms trafficking networks. A key fallout of these developments occurred in December 2023, when Mali accused Algeria of interfering in its internal affairs by supporting separatist groups and hosting their leaders on its territory, prompting Mali's withdrawal from the Algiers Accord in January 2024; tensions escalated after Algeria downed a Malian drone in March 2025, leading the entire AES alliance to cut ties with Algiers the following month.²⁰ These developments reflect shifts in the political landscape of the three Sahel countries and their efforts to reposition themselves strategically by distancing themselves from traditional alliances such as France and Algeria, and opening up to alternative blocs, most notably Russia.²¹

15 "Algeria: Insecurity Endangers Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline," APA-Algiers, 14/03/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPV8>

16 Hamza Meddeb, "Economic Statecraft as Geopolitical Strategy: New Dimensions of Moroccan-Algerian Rivalry," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22/07/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPGM>

17 "Security Council Calls for Strengthening Africa's Role in Addressing Global Security, Development Challenges, Adopting Presidential Statement ahead of Day-long Debate, 9633rd Meeting," SC/15706, 23/05/2024, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GP4R>

18 Yahia H. Zoubir and Abdelkader Abderrahmane, "Bordering on Crisis: The Future of Algeria-Mali Relations," Issue Brief, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 03/07/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPQR>

19 "Sonatrach Plans Refinery and Petrochemical Complex in Niger," Energynews, 15/01/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPWb>

20 Yahia H. Zoubir & Abdelkader Abderrahmane, *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

In light of its declining influence in the Sahel, Algeria has sought to reassert itself by projecting power within neighbouring Maghreb states, launching a tripartite bloc with Tunisia and Libya in 2024 so as to move "from slogans to actions", in "a first step towards establishing a North African alliance that Mauritania will join someday."²² The small-scale Maghreb alliance excludes Morocco and holds it responsible for the failure of the Maghreb union. It rests on an Algerian-Tunisian alliance following Tunisia's departure from its neutrality on Western Sahara, marked by its reception of the Polisario leader at the 2022 TICAD summit, which sparked a diplomatic rift with Morocco.²³ Since President Qaes Saied's 2021 constitutional coup and the ensuing economic crisis, Tunisia has become increasingly dependent on Algeria, which has leveraged this growing relationship to strengthen its regional presence – seemingly as a strategic response to the Moroccan Atlantic initiative and Rabat's efforts to expand its influence southward and westward across the Sahel and Atlantic regions.²⁴

Mauritania's Challenged Neutrality

As opposed to Tunisia, Mauritania seems to be emerging as a pivotal actor in the shifting dynamics of the Sahel and the Maghreb. The country is internationally courted for its natural resources and strategic location, being a key land corridor to Sub-Saharan Africa for both Morocco and Algeria, securing Morocco's strategic linkage to sub-Saharan Africa through Western Sahara, and providing Algeria with its most direct trade route to West Africa and the Atlantic. Since the 1980s, Mauritania has sought to maintain a position of "positive neutrality" despite its recognition of SADR.

However, its recent stance toward the Polisario Front may signal the beginnings of a potential rapprochement with Morocco, with which it shares more developed and diversified relations.²⁵ In a notable development following the reopening of the Guerguerat border crossing, Mauritania and Morocco inaugurated a new land border crossing in February 2025, linking the Western Sahara to Mauritanian territory under the framework of the Atlantic Initiative. The move was seen as a clear challenge to the Polisario Front, which warned that it "would drag Mauritania into the war."²⁶ In May 2025, Mauritania took the unprecedented step by closing the Lebriga border area near Algeria and declaring it a "closed military zone," despite an official Polisario request to reopen it – an act that reflects a major shift in Nouakchott's approach to managing its eastern borders.²⁷

22 "Le G3 est né à Carthage: Le Maghreb de l'action succède au Maghreb des slogans," Algérie Presse Service, 29/04/2024, accessed on 29/7/2025, at : <https://acr.ps/1L9GP6C>

23 Khadija Tachfine, "Expert: Morocco's Decision to Leave Tunisian Ambassadorial Post Vacant Signals Lasting Diplomatic Rift," HESPRESS English, 25/03/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at : <https://acr.ps/1L9GPID>

24 Safae El Yaaqoubi, "Maghreb Disunion: Morocco and Algeria's Divergent Strategies in Shaping Future Regional Geopolitics," Wilson Center, 27/6/2024, accessed on 29/7/2025, at : <https://acr.ps/1L9GPYf>

25 Wolfram Lacher and Isabelle Werenfels, "Mauritania's Balancing Act amid Intensifying Algerian-Moroccan Rivalry", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Megatrends Spotlight 49, 07/04/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at : <https://acr.ps/1L9GPCE>

26 Adil Faouzi, "Polisario Threatens War Against Mauritania Over New Morocco Trade Route", Morocco World News, 25/01/2025., accessed on 29/7/2025, at : <https://acr.ps/1L9GQOQ>

27 "L'armée mauritanienne se montre inflexible face au Polisario à Lebriga," Institut Géopolitique Horizons, in Atalayar, 05/06/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at : <https://acr.ps/1L9GPax>

If Mauritania's alignment with Morocco is confirmed, it would mark the end of the long-stalled Arab Maghreb Union project and could further deepen polarization and tensions across the Maghreb and Sahel regions. Amid the intensifying Sino-Russian-American competition in Africa, Mauritania emerges as a pivotal arena within the geopolitical landscape of the Atlantic–Sahel region, where each strategic alignment presents a complex mix of opportunities and risks. This is particularly evident as the United States resorts to imposing sanctions to dissuade Nouakchott from deepening its partnerships with rival powers.²⁸

The eastern front of the Maghreb is no less marked by instability and rivalry. Khalifa Haftar's forces maintain a presence on the Libyan side of Algeria's western border, which Algeria perceives as a potential security threat. Simultaneously, these forces are strengthening their ties with military regimes in the Sahel through cross-border economic and security cooperation, while Russia is expanding its foothold in the region via the Libyan corridor.²⁹

Conclusion

The Maghreb union project has not merely stalled; it is effectively disintegrating not only under the weight of Algeria–Morocco antagonism and impasse over Western Sahara, but also as a symptom of broader geopolitical reconfigurations. As its Sahel reach contracts, Algeria's look east strategy – anchored in its alignment with Tunisia and the UN-recognised government in Tripoli – reflects an effort to project power within a Maghreb subspace underpinned by a pan-Arab, anti-Israel orientation that privileges Arab regional solidarity. In contrast, Morocco's go south approach signifies a departure from the pan-Arab Maghreb Union framework in favour of a pan-African vision that seeks to anchor its leadership in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, capitalizing on the vacuum created by France's departure and Algeria's declining influence, and the engagement of new actors.

Simultaneously, Mauritania's gradual leaning towards Rabat represents a double-edged dynamic. On one hand, it could reinforce Morocco's strategic corridor to the Sahel and West Africa, bolstering its broader regional agenda. On the other, it risks intensifying tensions with Algeria and the Polisario Front, both of which view any deepening of Rabat–Nouakchott ties as a tacit endorsement of Morocco's sovereignty claims over Western Sahara. Tensions might be exacerbated by the fact that Libya, divided between eastern and western governments, has become a contested theatre of influence and tensions between Algeria, the Sahelian juntas, and international actors.

28 Olivier d'Auzon, "US sanctions: Mauritania trapped in Sino-American standoff," Réseau International, 14/2/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPFC>; on the US interest in Mauritania see Sarah Zaaimi, "How Mauritania–Israel Normalization May Boost US Posture in the Sahel," Atlantic Council, 16/07/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPss>; Olivier d'Auzon, "US sanctions: Mauritania trapped in Sino-American standoff," Réseau International, 14/2/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPFC>

29 Ahmed Ahmed, "How Haftar's Focus on Southern Libya Relates to a Growing Regional Strategy," Chatham House, 24/03/2025, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPrK>



Amid intensifying global competition, the relationship between the Maghreb and the African Sahel is increasingly taking shape as a geopolitical corridor, marked by shifting alliances and fragile balances of power. The emerging landscape is defined by an Atlantic–African axis led by Morocco, a Maghrebi axis anchored by Algeria, a deeply-divided Libya facing a range of possible scenarios, and a rising Mauritania that has become pivotal to either stabilizing or polarizing the two regions. These overlapping dynamics have rendered the regional order increasingly complex and unpredictable.

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