

**CHATTERED VISIONS OF MAGHREB UNITY
Unleashing the driving forces of regional integration**

**VISIONS CONTRADICTOIRES DE L'UNITÉ DU
MAGHREB**

Libérer les forces motrices de l'intégration régionale

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Abstract:

Despite the inception of the Union of the Arab Maghreb (UMA) in the Moroccan city of Marrakech in 1989, the region remained fragmented and suffered from long stagnation. Indeed, its member States have made no substantial achievements whether in terms of political coordination or economic integration. The Union's Council of Heads of States, which is the highest decision-making of UMA, has not met since the summit held in Tunis in 1994.

Many politicians and analysts in North Africa have stressed that the Maghreb region, much more than Western Europe, possesses all the ingredients to be politically united and economically integrated. However, despite shared history, religion, language and common destiny, the Maghreb States have failed so far to emulate the example of the European Union. It seems that the real potential leading to a union

Key words:

Maghreb Union, economic integration, Arabism, radical Islam.

Résumé:

Malgré la création de l'Union du Maghreb arabe (UMA) dans la ville marocaine de Marrakech en 1989, la région est restée fragmentée et a souffert d'une longue stagnation. En effet, ses États membres n'ont réalisé aucun progrès substantiel que ce soit en termes de coordination politique ou d'intégration économique. Le Conseil des chefs d'État de l'Union, qui est la plus haute instance décisionnelle de l'UMA, ne s'est pas réuni depuis le sommet tenu à Tunis en 1994. De nombreux hommes politiques et analystes d'Afrique du Nord ont souligné que la région du Maghreb, bien plus que l'Europe occidentale, possède tous les ingrédients pour être politiquement unie et économiquement intégrée. Cependant, malgré une histoire, une religion, une langue et un destin communs, les États du Maghreb n'ont pas réussi jusqu'à présent à imiter l'exemple de l'Union européenne. Il semble que le véritable potentiel menant à une union

Mots clés: Union du Maghreb, intégration économique, arabisme, islam radical.

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I-THE MAGHREB REGION: A SPECTRUM TORN APART.

Some decades ago, a prominent Moroccan economist has written a resounding article on the Maghreb unity emphatically entitled: "The Maghreb Union: A utopia still possible."¹ The use of such an oxymoron did not prevent him from believing passionately in the possibility of building a united Maghreb composed mainly of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.² Unfortunately, since the pledge made by Fathallah Oualalou, the Maghreb ideal has remained an illusion, despite some intermittent achievements. Moreover, this ideal is still far remote, in spite of the existence of ingredients for a Maghreb unity, such as common racial stock, history, religion and language as many politicians and analysts have argued at length.³

These common links explain that the peoples of the Maghreb share a common history and the same destiny. They became more tangible as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, the Maghreb elites came close to the ideals of political emancipation carried out by the spread of anti-colonialism in the Southern Hemisphere and the emergence of the Arab-awakening wave represented by liberal thinkers, such as Shakib Arslan and Muslim reformers, like Sheikh Al Afghani, Sheikh Muhammad Abdu and the Algerian Abdel Hamid Ben Badis.

A movement calling for the unity of North Africa and for its independence appeared with the creation of the Etoile Nord Africaine (ENA) in Paris in 1924-5 and later with the setting up of the Association of the North African Muslim Students (AMENA) in Paris in 1948. Some nationalist

¹Fath Allah Ouallalou, " l'Union du Maghreb :Une utopie toujours possible" in Revue Marocaine des Sciences Juridiques, Économiques et Politiques, Rabat, 1968.

²Abdelatif Laabi rightly asked if Oualalou's postulate were optimistic or interrogative. Abdelatif Laabi : Les frères sont têtus : Écrits politiques, EDDIF Paris-Méditerranée, 2001.

³The term Maghreb means in geographic terms the East in Arabic or where the Sun comes down. It refers to a geographical entity stretching from Cyrenaica in eastern Libya to the Atlantic shores of Morocco on the West, and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Sahara desert. Nearly all the peoples of the Maghreb are of mixed Berber-Arab stock or Berber-Arab-African pedigree, as in the case of Mauritania. Most of them are Muslims (the natives of the Maghreb became Muslim and more or less Arabic speaking since the arrival of the Arabs in the late 7th Century).

leaders from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, gathered in an office hosted by the Arab League Headquarters in Cairo, created a year later, a committee for the liberation of the Maghreb from French colonial rule.¹

However, all these initiatives failed because of the narrow nationalist line adopted by some Maghreb leaders and by the policies of "divide and rule" pursued by the French authorities that have maintained the Maghreb region under their domination until 1956 when Morocco and Tunisia gained their independence. The French colonial authorities have also vainly resisted the move of Algeria towards self-determination, a status gained in 1962, after a long and bitter struggle for liberation.

The post-colonial Maghreb region was entangled in the East-West rivalry because of sharp differences with regard to political orientations, ideological obedience, economic choices and border disputes. In an attempt to bring a new order in contradistinction to its colonial experiment, new Algeria embarked upon a socialist path of development and became close to the Soviet bloc though pursuing the policy of active non-alignment. Both Morocco and Libya were monarchies and followed, alongside Tunisia, forms of political liberalism and market economies. Conflicts over the delimitation of the frontiers inherited from colonialism led to sharp animosities between Algeria and Tunisia and to a military confrontation between Morocco and Algeria in October 1963.

This kind of cold war in the Maghreb explain the failure of the initiative made by Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia which consisted of trying to pave the way to a graduate regional economic integration through the setting up in 1964 of the Maghreb Permanent Consultative Committee (known as CPCM by its French acronyms).

Dissonances persisted between the States of the Maghreb and worsened by the rise to power of the unpredictable and bubbling Colonel

¹The Maghreb bureau was created at the initiative of the great Moroccan nationalist leader Abdelkrim Al Khattabi, who fiercely fought French colonial occupation in the Rif region from 1921 to 1926.

Kaddafi in Libya in September 1969. The appearance of the Western Sahara issue in the early 1970s induced also sharp disagreements between Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania over the faith of the decolonization of this territory. Morocco claimed the so-called historic rights over the Western Sahara territory, while Algeria supported the right of the Saharawi people for self-determination in conformity with its foreign policy principles and United Nations resolutions.

Despite the creation of the Union of the Arab Maghreb (UMA) in the Moroccan city of Marrakech in February 1989, its member States failed y to coordinate their foreign policies or engage in a viable process of regional economic integration.

The treaty founding the UMA had two major objectives:

- the strengthening of solidarity against any aggression directed against one of the member states;
- the establishment of a common market through the progressive circulation of goods and services as well as capital flows¹.

The first objective did not resist the stubbornness of the realities that have marked the relations between the Maghreb States. Each of these countries engaged separately into cooperation agreements with the European Union (EU) and in a dialogue with the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO).

Indeed, the Maghreb countries succeeded in giving the impression that they were in a constant competition and rivalry as they were not able to achieve a coordination between them to face common security threats or challenges. Algeria fought terrorism alone during a long decade and the Moroccan king observed a 'wait and see' policy, considering Algeria as a laboratory for radical Islam experiment. He also suspected the secret services of its neighboring country of being behind the terrorist attack against a luxury hotel in the tourist city of Marrakech in 1994 and promptly imposed a visa for

¹BelkacemIratni,The Strategic Interests of the Maghreb States, NATO Defence College, Research Division, November 2008, p. 4.

Algerians desiring to enter Morocco. Algeria firmly refuted these allegations and reciprocated with similar diplomatic measures. It also closed the common border, claiming that terrorists operating in its territory had found refuge and logistic facilities in Morocco. Despite repeated calls from the Moroccan side, the frontier remained closed.

Furthermore, neither terrorist upsurge that occurred in Tunisia after the "Arab Spring revolution, " nor the political and security chaos that hit Libya, have led to effective common response to terrorist activism of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) or to the recent threat represented by groups claiming obedience to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (IS) or Daesh.

The second objective related to the setting up of a common market was also hindered by the nationalistic policies pursued by the Maghreb States, the level of underdevelopment of their economies and the competitive character of their products whether agrarian (Morocco and Tunisia), hydrocarbons (Algeria and Libya) or mineral resources such as phosphates (Morocco and Mauritania).

Such an economic structure explained the low level of trade exchanges between Maghreb States (merely 3% of their overall foreign trade). Thus, the customs union planned for 1996 and the common market scheduled to take place in 2010 have never taken form.

The cost of non-Maghreb, as argued by many political analysts as well as economists (evaluated at nearly \$10 billion yearly) should not conceal the bitterness of the disagreements between the Maghreb States, the aspirations of their elites to impose their leadership on the region and their opposed external alliances.

Many pending questions between Morocco and Algeria persist, whether concerning Moroccan territorial irredentism,¹ the compensation of

¹Morocco made claims on portions of Algerian, from time to time, depending the balance of power in the Maghreb and the international pressures exercised on the monarchy in order to

expropriated people and the huge drug flows coming from Morocco¹. The opposition of this country to the implementation of the right of the Saharawi people for self-determination remains one of the most important obstacles to achieve Maghreb Unity. Should, then, the national rights of the Saharawi people be sacrificed in exchange for financial gains, as the supporters of the cost of non-Maghreb seem to advocate?

The prevalence of narrow nationalist policies pursued by the Maghreb States over the union process will prevail as the UMA confronted, from the start, two major obstacles:

-One related to its status, under article 2 of the Union Charter, which stated 'the pursuit of a common policy in all domains,' while article 3 stipulated the safeguarding of the independence of each Member State on the defense level. It seemed clear that from these assertions that the declared intention did not envisage an evolution towards a supra-national entity.

-The other problem concerns the principle that the Presidential Council of UMA should take decisions unanimously. The principle, which gives a de facto veto right to each Member States, takes no account of differences in

fulfill the referendum in the territory of the Western Sahara it still occupies. Morocco's territorial irredentism arose from the fact that this country was divided into three administrative zones during the colonial era (French and Spanish protectorates, and international status for Tangiers). Morocco also based its contention on the fact that the LallaMaghnia treaty Morocco signed with France, after its defeat in 1844, set the common border from the Mediterranean coast to Teniet Al Sassi, and established a delimitation line as far as Figuig. South of this city, there was no demarcation because the land was uninhabited. In 1862, the French authorities in Algeria codified the Varnier line and set the border portion of Teniet Al Sassi. The Algerian leaders retorted that the borders of their country were delimited by the blood of their martyrs who fought not only for the liberation of Algeria but also for the independence of Morocco and Tunisia. See BelkacemIratni, "The Interests of the Maghreb States", op cit, pp 22-23.

¹ According to many statements made by the United Nations Office against Drug and Crime, Morocco has become the biggest producer of cannabis in the World. Algerian media report nearly every day, the seizure by Algerian Customs of important quantity of hashish coming from Morocco.

power and influence and reduces the possibility of reaching a consensus or decisions based on majority votes.¹

II-QUESTIONNING THE INGREDIENTS NEEDED FOR THE MAGHREB UNION:

The main prerequisites for a unity (common stock, history, religion, language and geographic contiguity) do exist in the case of the Maghreb, but they, still, proved not enough to work for a Maghreb united politically and integrated economically. The reason for the failure to achieve a union in this region is not merely due to the lack of political will of the ruling elites, as many political analysts have argued, but to the lack of pre-conditions that have prevailed in the cases of successful regional grouping experiments.

The lessons learnt from the attempts of Europeans to build a sound political, economic grouping have singled out a paramount condition for political union, and economic integration, namely free market-oriented social forces and liberal groups. These economic and social categories have sustained the efforts of European politicians to build a unified Europe. This regional grouping, based on the free circulation of capitals and the promotion of capitalistic-driven mentalities, would not have been possible without the emergence of socioeconomic project builders.

1-Unleashing social and market forces:

A strong civilian society is still lacking in the Maghreb region. However, signs of the awakening of autonomous forces have emerged with the mobilizing role of social networks that have helped to topple over the regimes of Ben Ali and Gadhafi during the Arab Spring uprisings. The activism of such forces became tangible in the whole Maghreb region.

In Algeria, protests occurred in December 2010 to denounce unemployment, food-price inflation and restrictions of speech movement.¹ In

¹BelkacemIratni, "the Interests of the Maghreb States," opcit, p15.

Morocco, *the movement of February 23*, the first mass movement in the history of Morocco, organized popular riots in 2011, in order to demand a new constitution, the change of the government and the end of corruption. In Mauritania, *the 25 February Movement* campaigned against the intention of President Abdel Aziz to stand for another mandate in 2011, while a group such as *Touche pas à ma Nationalité*, has organized public protests against the supposed wide practice of slavery in the country.

The most successful autonomous forces consisted of the *Quartet*, a coalition of trade unions and professional organizations that have succeeded in bringing secularist forces represented by the party of *NidaaTounes* and the main Islamist movement, *Ennahda* around a historic political compromise in Tunisia.² In all four countries, these social forces appeared to be independent either from public authorities or from structured political opposition. Libya remains an exception, with the apparition of extremist religious groups, which call for the setting up of a Caliphate based on the implementation of Sharia (Islamic law), and rigorist precepts of Islam.

2-The impetus of a driving engine:

It was the enlightenment of French and German politicians that gave birth to the European Union. They have understood that war, border disputes and rivalry over regional leadership are no longer useful for the development of their countries. Instead of claiming sovereignty over Alsace and Lorraine or competing over the mines of steel and coke of the Ruhr valley, the leaders of France and Germany have put together their riches for the good use of their peoples.

Therefore, the nucleus of European integration came from the setting up of the Community of Steel and Coke and, then the French-German couple became the driving engine of the union of Europe.

¹ IEMED, the Arab Spring. Is Algeria the exception? *Policy Brief*, October 20, 2011, iemed.org/publications.

² This consensus resulted in the adoption of a new constitution based on a national consensus.

Why should not Algeria and Morocco emulate the French-German example? Both countries have witnessed violent tensions sometimes and are still pursuing opposed foreign policy stances. The construction of a united Maghreb or the reviving of UMA should not continue to rely on a gathering of five States that remains static, but rather on dynamics engineered by Algeria and Morocco at the start of the process of unification. The other Maghreb countries would then naturally join the process and contribute to its success.

Why precisely Algeria and Morocco? Both countries have ancient and rich history. In modern times, Algeria was the most important Regency of the Ottoman rule in North Africa (from 1525 to the conquest by France in 1830). It was the most important colonial asset for France. Morocco remained aloof from the Ottoman influence and was able to strengthen the political and cultural foundations of the *Makhzen* State. The superpowers courted these two countries during the cold war era and the US considered them as major security stakeholders in the Maghreb.¹ Recently, both Russia and China have viewed these two Maghreb countries as strategic economic partners in North Africa.²

Algeria is the central country in the Maghreb geographically, and is the largest territory not only in the Maghreb but also in the whole Africa. It represents, also, the only country that has common borders with all other Maghreb States. Therefore, there may be no sound Maghreb union without Algeria, let alone against this country. Morocco is the only country in the

¹ President George W. Bush hailed Morocco as 'a major non-NATO ally' in June 2004, a month before the visit of King Mohammed VI to Washington. Algeria became a pivotal State in the US fight against terrorism in North Africa as well as in the Sahara region.

² Morocco signed a declaration on a strategic partnership with Russia during the visit of King Mohammed VI to Moscow in October 2002 and Algeria followed suit during the visit of President Putin to Algiers in September 2006. Algeria was the second country in the Arab world after Egypt to sign a declaration on a strategic partnership with China.

Maghreb that enjoys two maritime facades (Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean).

Both Algeria and Morocco have sizeable population as each country encompasses around 40 million inhabitants, a proportion that remains bigger than the populations of the three other Maghreb countries put together. Both countries have the largest GDPs in the region in 2010: Algeria (\$ 149. 97 billion) and Morocco (\$110 billion). The latter's GDP is much larger than the total GDPs of Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania.

An English scientist Francis Ghilès also recommended the setting up of joint industrial ventures between Moroccan and Algerian state and private companies.¹ For example, Sonatrach (Algeria's oil and gas Company) and the Moroccan Phosphates Company could buy into each other's capital, and that leading banks should do the same. Given the long-standing suspicion and rivalry between the two countries, the prospects of these ventures of joint capital would appear to be extremely unlikely.

The two countries have substantial natural resources and complementary economies: gas and oil in Algeria² and Agriculture, mining and tourism in Morocco.³ Both countries have youth potential (70% of their total populations are under 30) and made substantial efforts to spread education and literacy. They have also big companies: Sonatrach, the State-owned oil corporation in Algeria, supposed to be the 14th largest

¹Ghilès, Francis, Le non-Maghreb coùtecher au Maghreb, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 2019, p.6.

²Algeria is the leading natural gas producer in Africa, the third -largest natural gas supplier to Europe, and is one of the top three oil producers in Africa. This country may hold the third-largest amount of shale gas resources in the world and the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that Algeria contains 707 trillion cubic feet and 5.7 billion barrels of technically recoverable shale gas and oil resources, respectively, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.cfm?iso=DZA>.

³ Morocco detains the largest phosphate deposits in the world, which account for around 77% of global known reserve, <http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/morocco-mining-code-increases-legal-clarity>.

hydrocarbons firm in the World and the mining group ONA that belongs to the Makhzen and a private bank (Al-TijjariWafa Bank).

Yet, in the last few years, the sector of hydrocarbons in Algeria has deteriorated because of old equipment, the lack of investments and the absence of new discoveries, while in Morocco, the agriculture sector has suffered from the lack of fertile land and severe droughts.

Algeria and Morocco can emulate the French-German example because they have more problems between them than with other Maghreb countries. Just like the two European countries in the past, the two Maghreb States have entertained a spirit of suspicion and apparent distrust against each other for more than three decades. What is striking, however, is that all the issues that have been subject to friction may easily find satisfactory solutions. Compensation of expropriated nationals may be achieved with no much burden on the national budget and Morocco's territorial irredentism could be tempered for the sake of a unified Maghreb.

III-OBSTACLES TO THE EMERGENCE OF UNION-DRIVEN FORCES:

Two major obstacles may undermine the emergence of social and liberal forces whether in the Arab world or in the Maghreb region: the so-called re-Islamizing of the society and the State omnipotence in the economic sphere:

1-The illusions of re-Islamizing the Maghreb societies:

The twilight of the Arab Spring revolutions have brought radical Islam in the forefront and not entrepreneurial forces or modernization thinkers. It did not generate citizenship and moral values but it brought a mentality of believers more concerned to show up their religiosity than acting as responsible citizens. The search for a comfortable eternal life after death has prevailed over the necessity to live a short but useful life on earth; alongside worship and religious practice on an individual basis. The holy

Quran prescribes that the believer should work to win both life and paradise and the Prophet Mohamed (Peace be upon him) taught us that religion was basically adopting good social and civic practices as well as showing a good behavior towards others.

Trying to construct a grouping on ideological or cultural basis only, would be a fiction. Neither the Arabs nor the peoples of the Maghreb have been able to expand Arab nationhood or Maghreb union just because they share common racial stock, religious values and cultural beliefs. The process of uniformity in terms of religious practice, theocratic State foundations and political obedience as preached by *Salafi* preachers would not resist the realities of the globalized economy of the world today. Yet, the grandiloquence of the virtues of the Caliphate, as zealously put forward by Al-Qaida or Daesh leaders, are widespread in the entire Arab world.

2-The State's omnipotence in economic activities:

Privatization of public companies is not on the agenda of the ruling elites in the Maghreb, as it seems hard to relinquish State-owned companies to private sector. Trade unions are relatively strong in this region. Besides, populist conceptions see the private sector as largely benefiting from State's fiscal incentives and loan facilities. Therefore, any temptation of privatizing State owned firms will certainly be harshly opposed. To many people, securing their jobs is much important than economic performance of the country. Furthermore, in the turmoil generated by 'Arab Spring ' revolutions, the option of transferring public assets to private ownership will only fuel the risks of internal instability.

Besides these structural problems, the economies of the Maghreb countries suffer also from non-tradable activities such as construction, public works and low value-added service. They are also confronted with informal economic activity which comprises between 40 and 50% of the GDPs of the Maghreb countries. Regional instability that emerged from political upheavals in Tunisia and Libya has certainly reinforced black market economies in the Maghreb because of the widespread of smuggling networks, often linked to

terrorists groups and transnational crime, which operate along immense but porous borders.

Still, there is a need of structural reforms in the medium term at least, whatever painful they might be for some segments of the population. Promoting a free-market economy that operates under the rules of regulation by efficient State structures will certainly enhance economic performance and competitiveness. Therefore, the economies of the Maghreb countries should not remain hamstrung by an omnipotent State control and heavy bureaucratic practices.

Yet, the gloomy economic prospects brought by world recession, the drop of prices of raw materials may push the ruling elites of these countries to opt for a more centrally planned economy and for the policies of social transfers and subsidizing food prices. Indeed, security threats generated by the ongoing 'Arab Spring' upheavals require also the need to meet the challenge of persistent vulnerability and inequality in the Maghreb region. The question is whether the ruling elites can foster the openness of the economic system without giving up some of their substantial privileges.

CONCLUSION

The process of building a unified Maghreb proved hard and strenuous and seems ever far away from the possibility of making this dream comes true. Despite their geographic, common identity similarities, and destiny, the Maghreb States have accentuated nationalistic options, carried out individual foreign stances and exalted egoist tendencies based on the reliance on oneself capabilities.

Ingredients, whether, economic, social or cultural to deepen regional integration and strengthen political unity are there. They need, only, to be mobilized and used adequately.

The lack of political will and the animosities occurring between Maghreb States cannot sufficiently explain the stagnation of the Union of the

Maghreb Union. Lessons from the European Union experience taught that, beside the political commitment and engagement of the political elites in favor of the unity ideal, there is an urgent need to unleash economic and social forces, which represent the real impetus for building a sound regional economic integration and a reliable transnational political entity.

These forces, in contrast to ruling elites, tend to forge out commonalities and utilities that force countries to live and work together. They create corporatist mold, bring together contradictory interests to work for fruitful consensus and manage the balance of advantages for the common sake, for common prosperity and welfare and even for common survival.

Despite some structural discrepancies and weaknesses, the Maghreb enjoys valuable geostrategic considerations, sound economic assets, and a considerable youth potential. It has an identity subtract with the Arab world, an African strategic and cultural depth with the African continent and shares with the Southern rim of Europe, the Mediterranean space that represents a dynamic impetus for economic interdependence, trade exchanges and a coordination of policies over security issues.

It may not be farfetched to consider that the States of the Maghreb need each other to develop and turn this region into a viable power house, and at the same time they need other foreign powers to contribute in the world's peace and stability.

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¹ IEMED, the Arab Spring. Is Algeria the exception? *Policy Brief*, October 20, 2011, iemed.org/publications.

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