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Maghrebi Foreign Policies - A Comparative Analysis

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Comparing the foreign policies of the three Maghrebi states seems to make sense: after all three of them were colonized by France, they became independent almost at the same time. All three of them faced the challenges of independence with some similar characteristics that were simultaneously assets and handicaps: a very young population, with very high initial illiteracy rates, a somehow similar ethnic divide – and I refer here to an important Berber minority –, as well as Islam as the dominating religion. All of these shared aspects bring within them important differences between the three states: Morocco was also colonized by Spain, and while Algeria was under French rule for over 130 years, the Protectorate mandate in Morocco lasted for less than half a century. Moreover, Morocco's Berber minority is far bigger than Tunisia's, and whereas the size of the populations of Algeria and Morocco are broadly similar, Tunisia is far smaller and homogeneous. There are other very important differences, such as the fact that Algeria's territory is very rich in gas and oil, or the fact that Algeria reached its independence after a long and violent war, whereas Tunisia and Morocco's independence were reached mainly – and not exclusively – through negotiated processes. This is to say that the fact that the foreign policies of the three states have often followed different paths should not come as a surprise. Moreover, Algeria's and Morocco's struggle for hegemony in their sub-region has translated into costs and consequences to Tunisia as well as to other potential partners of the two states.

In speaking of the contemporary foreign policies of the three states, these differences are more important. Tunisia, for instance, which under its two previous presidents struggled – and most of the time managed – to strike a balance between its western leaning tendencies and its Arab identity, as well as a balance between its two big neighbors – Algeria and Libya – and between its two hegemon-prone fellow Maghrebi states – i.e., Algeria and Morocco – has seen its foreign policy go to a secondary position after what has been referred to as the Arab Spring. Indeed, since the revolution that brought down the regime of Ben Ali, foreign policy has, to put it mildly, not been the highest priority in that country's policy-making agenda. Moreover, Tunisia's foreign policy has also reflected the instability of the leadership in that country. Between the fall of the Ben Ali regime and the end of 2014, Tunisia has held several election cycles, from electing a constitutional assembly to approving the new constitution, and from electing a new legislative assembly to electing a new president. Moreover, all these changes were punctuated by big crises that shook the new institutions and threatened the viability of Tunisia's progressive and steady move towards democracy. This does not mean that the international has been absent from Tunisia's political agenda: from the security threats coming from the wide instability in Libya to the EU's continuing pressure in controlling migration, and from the need to attract foreign investments and tourists to the intrusion and influence of Gulf states in Tunisia's internal political affairs, that small and nascent democracy has had its share in terms of an overwhelming impact of the international on the domestic realm. But Tunisia has been more reactive than active in leading with these international influences.

As for Algeria, its foreign policy has since independence consistently been "Third Worldist", so to speak. Algeria sees itself as the pivot of the sub-region and a key player on the African scene, and one did not have to look too long for Algeria's foreign policy over the years, as the following examples from different moments of the last 50 years show: Algeria joined the non-aligned movement upon its independence; it consistently sided with the Arab League states that refused any dealings with Israel and that were against peace processes between Israel and its Arab neighbors; it also consistently sided with independent and revolutionary movements; and more recently, in the Sahel crises, Algeria consistently claimed that Saheli problems should be solved by Saheli states, meaning that the US and some EU members had no right to interfere in the security crisis of the Sahel… until France ended up intervening in Mali in March 2012. Another important characteristic of Algeria's foreign policy is the solidity and strength of its diplomatic apparatus, which is well prepared, active and functional. This is an important remark under the current circumstances: the power vacuum caused by President Bouteflika's illness and that has immobilized Algerian politics over the last few months has not had a major impact on Algeria's foreign policy.

Morocco's foreign policy trajectory can be divided into three different periods: an initial, immediately post-independence moment, when Morocco felt and acted closer to colonized people and in solidarity with them; a second moment, broadly speaking under King Hassan II, when Morocco sided clearly with the West; and a third moment, the current one, in which Morocco is attempting to diversify its playing cards, including closer links with the Global South in general, and with Africa in particular, without necessarily distancing itself from the West. As a matter of fact, Morocco's trade links with India, Brazil –which were already visited by King Mohamed VI – and China – where a King's visit was postponed last week due to health reasons – are important, and have considerably grown over the last two decades, whereas Morocco's trade with African states grew five times over the last decade, and Morocco is currently the second African investor, after South Africa, on the African continent. Brazil, for instance, has risen to one of Morocco's main trading partners, and has consistently held the top positions in Morocco's trade. But trade is not the only evidence of current

Moroccan priorities in Africa. Major Moroccan companies are present in many African states, from mining to banking, and from telecom to construction. Morocco also hosts over 12,000 African students in its universities, and has extended an invitation to several African leaders to send Imams for training in Morocco, at Morocco's expense. Moreover, in two recent remarked speeches, Mohammed VI adopted a posture of defending African values and interests vis-à-vis global/western values. Indeed, both at the UN annual general assembly and at a recent global human rights gathering in Marrakesh, Mohamed VI adopted a fine line of not rejecting global values outright, but appealing for these values to become truly global and include African views and philosophies. Although the Arab world has not been completely absent from Mohamed VI's foreign policy – he makes frequent visits to the Gulf and keeps personal friendships with Qatari, Emirati and Saudi power holders –, Morocco has been far less present on the Arab scene under Mohamed VI than under Hassan II, and when at the height of the so-called Arab Spring, the Gulf Cooperation Council invited Morocco to join it, Morocco lukewarmly greeted that invitation and showed incredulity at its formulation. In short, under Mohamed VI, Morocco's African identity has been more pronounced than its Arab identity.

Europe still holds a key place in the foreign policies of all three Maghrebi states. It constitutes their main economic trade partner, as well as a key political and social partner. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Initiative (EMPI), often referred to as the Barcelona Process, launched almost two decades ago now, and through which the European Union established the basic framework for dealing with Mediterranean states, served also as a framework for EU-Maghrebi relations. As a matter of fact, EU and Maghrebi states were also engaged in the so-called "4+5 process", in which 4 EU member states (France, Italy, Portugal and Spain) negotiated directly with the 5 Maghrebi states (the Maghreb being defined in its larger sense as it included both Libya and Mauritania on top of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). The very weak progress made in that process led to its progressive phasing out and replacement during the last decade with the European Neighbourhood Policy and, currently, Morocco holds what is referred to as an Advanced Status in its relations with the EU. All these frameworks deal, in one way or the other, with economic and trade relations, political and security relations, and social issues.

Algeria holds a strong position with the EU in terms of economic and trade relations. As a big oil and gas producer, Algeria plays a key role for Europe as it can contribute to alleviating the EU's reliance on Russian gas, at least in the case of some EU member states. As such, it negotiates its trade deals with Europe from a very comfortable position, and the very high oil prices – up until very recently – reinforced Algeria's negotiating position with the EU in that regard. Politically, and with very few exceptions, Algeria has held uncomfortable relations with the West in general, since it sees its role in its neighborhood being potentially threatened by Western – and French and US in particular – interventions in the Sahel and West Africa. Since

Algeria is also critical of Middle Eastern mediations that tend to undermine what it sees as key Arab and Palestinian interests, Algeria's political relations with Europe are limited and sometimes tense. However, recent French moves in admitting responsibility in the Algerian independence war and in bridging the gap regarding that painful episode has contributed to bringing France and Algeria closer on political terms. Moreover, Spain and Italy have had closer and more cooperative relations with Algeria than France. Socially, Algeria's main issues are with France again, as a considerable migrant community has resulted in many personal issues that have occasionally marred French-Algerian relations. Illegal migrants using Algerian territory to – directly or indirectly – reach Europe is another important challenge in Algeria's relations with its European partners.

Morocco's trade relations with the EU are strong but dependent. Strong in the sense that the EU is, by far, Morocco's main trading partner, but dependent in the sense that Morocco's trade negotiations and agreements with the EU traditionally favor the EU's interests and positions. Still, Morocco has managed to advance through several stages of cooperation and partnership with the EU, and was the first partner to have signed an Advanced Status agreement with the EU, which former EU chief Romano Prodi referred to informally as "all but membership". As a result, Morocco has tried to take the biggest advantages of its mature relationship with the EU, both in terms of infrastructure and institutions, as in the case of the Tanger-Med port as an instance of the former and the Tangier Free zone in the case of the latter. Politically, Morocco is close to Europe. For instance, Morocco has participated in several UN peacekeeping operations in cooperation with European contingents, Morocco and the EU also support a negotiated solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and Morocco closely cooperates with the EU and its member states in controlling their borders and stopping not only illegal migrants but also drug traffickers and potential terrorist activities. Migration, which is simultaneously a political and social issue, eloquently illustrates the close relations of Morocco with the EU in general, and some of its member states in particular. Paradoxically, the partnership between Morocco and the EU in general, and Spain in particular, in controlling illegal migration, has the potential of being counterproductive with its fellow African partners as Morocco is increasingly seen by illegal migrants as the Gendarme of Europe.

In economic and trade matters, what applies to Morocco also applies to Tunisia: Tunisia is highly dependent on its trade with the EU, and all the negotiations it held with it have finished in terms more favorable to the interests of the EU than to those of Tunisia. As some observers say, in free trade agreements, the EU has consistently managed to include all its items and its products in the terms of the agreements, whereas Morocco and Tunisia, which can export agricultural products and cheap labor, see permanent restrictions imposed by the EU on these two issues. However, the recent instability in Tunisia has undermined its economic activity, and its tourism industry was badly hit by it. Europe has tried to provide Tunisia with exceptional financial support to sustain its move towards democracy, but that support is not enough when compared to Tunisia's real needs. In this sense, the economic and political baskets tend to coincide in Tunisia's current relations with the EU. Socially, the issue of migration is also a sticking issue in Tunisia's relations with the EU, and the finalization of the transition to a full-fledged democracy brings the expectation that these issues will be dealt with more efficiently in the near future.

In summary, despite some important similarities among the three Maghrebi states, their foreign policies in general and their relations with the European Union in particular differ widely. Whereas under the fallen regime of Ben Ali, Tunisia's and Morocco's foreign relations looked similar – which rarely meant that they were allies –, since the Tunisian revolution and the political instability in that country, this has no longer necessarily been the case. Moreover, in a way, the competition for regional hegemony between Algeria and Morocco also brings some similarity to their priorities, although these are very often competing similarities. But one should not disregard the fact that despite all the competition and mistrust that exist between Morocco and Algeria, their respective security apparatus cooperate intensely in their dealings with terrorist groups, which underlies the complexities of politics in the Maghreb.