

The Maghreb and Its Challenges for Europe

by Antonia Colibasanu - April 19, 2021

A battle for influence over the Mediterranean is underway. Its most hotly contested front is in the east, where Turkish designs on oil deposits have pitted Ankara directly against Greece and Cyprus and indirectly against their benefactor, France. Flying under the radar, however, is another contest between Turkey and France on the Mediterranean's southernmost border: the Maghreb.

France is the major European power in the region. For the countries in the Maghreb, relations with Paris were a political and economic necessity; French trade, investment and influence, some of which were holdovers from colonialism, were too much to forego. But things have since changed a little. France is no longer the power it once was, and political upheaval brought on by the Arab Spring revolts has ushered in different governments. France regards the region as important for its security, but it needs to rebalance its position in light of these new challenges.

This partly explains why France's prime minister canceled his trip to [Algeria](#) on April 9. He said the cancellation was due to concerns over the pandemic, but it's hard to ignore how badly relations have deteriorated between the two countries. The past few months have been rife with diplomatic tension. In January, for example, French President Emmanuel Macron refused to officially apologize for France's occupation of Algeria. In April, the head of Algeria's military publicly called on his French counterpart, who thought he was in town to discuss military cooperation, to hand over maps of abandoned nuclear test sites.

But French-Algerian issues are not just French-Algerian issues. They play a role in the affairs of nearly all the areas of the Maghreb – especially [Western Sahara](#), the disputed territory in neighboring Morocco – which butt up against Turkish ambitions in North Africa.

A Divisive Issue

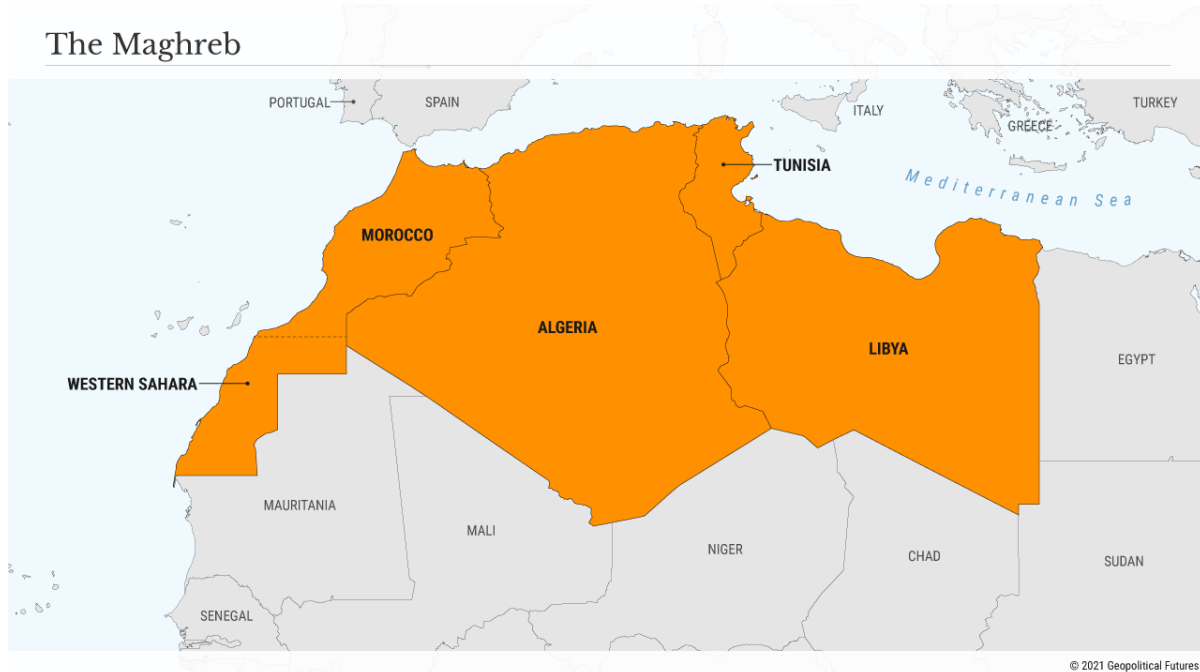
On April 8, Macron's party announced it would open an office in the southern Moroccan city of Dakhla, located in Western Sahara. The statement came just a few days after CMA CGM, France's leading transport and logistics company, set up shop in all Moroccan ports, including Dakhla. Paris' efforts to shore up influence in Western Sahara have led many to suspect the government is gearing up to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the territory.

The region is a divisive issue within Moroccan politics. Western Sahara was under Spanish control until 1974 and was annexed by Morocco in 1975. This led to a 16-year armed conflict between the Moroccan government and the Polisario, a political group made up of the region's Sahrawi people and supported by regional rival Algeria. In 1991, a United Nations-brokered cease-fire was reached, and Morocco pledged to hold an independence referendum. The referendum never took place, and the Polisario continue their fight.

The ethnic Sahrawi consider their homeland in Western Sahara occupied territory. Northerners believe it is simply another part of the Moroccan kingdom.

The region remains within Morocco's control. The U.N. considers it a conflict area, while Algeria supports its independence. Since Morocco and Algeria gained independence, they have been in conflict over their border, which remains closed and contested even today.

For Algeria, the key strategic priority is controlling the southern territories that threaten its security. The Algerian economy depends on energy production, and most of its reserves and production facilities are in the south. The porous desert borders and militant activity have forced Algeria to establish strong security on two separate fronts: Mali to the southwest and Tunisia and Libya to the east. To secure the southwest, Algeria has established a strategic partnership with Mauritania, which borders most of Western Sahara, making Morocco the only challenging neighbor for Algeria in the Maghreb.



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Morocco, on the other hand, doesn't have the hydrocarbon resources of its neighbors to support defense expenditures. It has invested instead in its relationships with **the United States** and Arab kingdoms in the Gulf, and France.

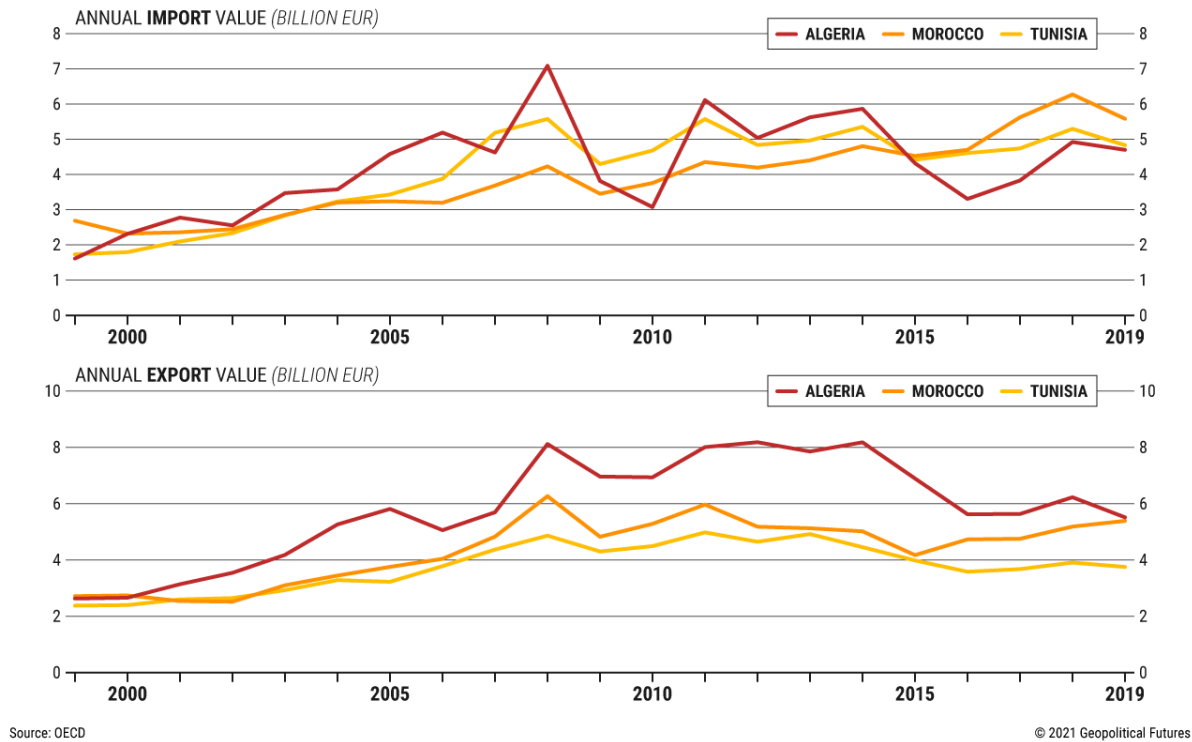
The Broader Picture

Morocco and Algeria are the most developed countries of the Maghreb region. The area is united by the Atlas Mountains as well as its shared history of Ottoman and European domination. Algeria was a French colony while Morocco was a Spanish and French protectorate and Tunisia a French protectorate. The Ottomans tried to reach Gibraltar, but none of the Maghrebian provinces were under their strict control. All this can be explained by geography – while Morocco faces the Atlantic Ocean, which makes it harder to dominate, the other two are Mediterranean states. Strategically, though, both France and the Ottomans wanted to reach Gibraltar, so they had to maintain a careful relationship with Morocco.

Where French-Moroccan relations have always been comparatively good, Paris has slowly lost ground in Algeria and Tunisia since 2011. The European economic crisis weakened the French economy, so former colonies started seeing less French trade and investment coming their way. Both grew increasingly unstable, but Algeria was hit hard starting in mid-2014 when oil prices started

to decline. With no economic reforms in place, and without French investments and aid, both countries saw increased protests that triggered political change. Naturally, anti-French sentiment also grew.

French Trade with the Maghreb | 1999-2019

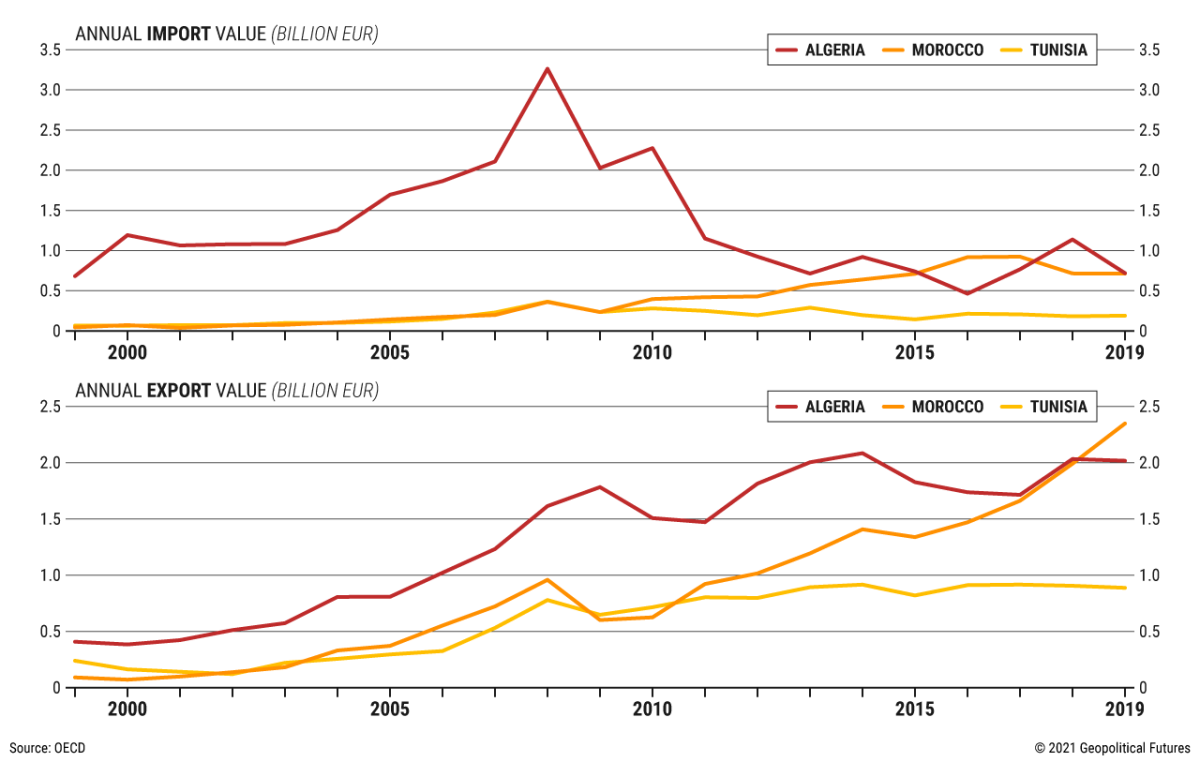


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Many in the Maghreb had to look for a replacement for France. Enter Turkey, which wants to reclaim the influence it lost since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Since 2011, Turkey has supported popular revolts toppling the region’s autocrats, has backed Islamic movements and has promoted the image of Turkey as a defender of the Muslim world.

In practical terms, Turkey has focused its strategy on trade and investment. The approach worked best in Algeria, where more than 1,200 Turkish companies have set up shop. While Algeria has become Turkey’s fourth-largest gas supplier over the past decade, Turkey has become the third-largest importer of Algerian products. Turkey gets a reliable source of cheap energy, and Algeria gets an economic shot in the arm.

Turkish Trade with the Maghreb | 1999-2019



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For Tunisia, Turkish overtures have been a source of both progress and friction. Ankara’s efforts to revive Muslim sites and communities haven’t translated into much of a trade and investment partnership. Trade grew substantially after 2011, mostly to the benefit of Turkey, as local Tunisian businesses, especially those working in the textile sector, got hit by low-cost Turkish products. This forced the government in Tunis to reimpose some import duties in 2018.

Tunis has since turned to Paris for help. In 2020, the two signed a three-year framework agreement worth 350 million euros (\$420 million) to “support Tunisian public policies in various fields,” and Paris has also sent medical support in the fight against COVID-19. In exchange, Paris is pressing the current Tunisian leadership to organize the 50th anniversary of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, a symbolic move for a society that remains divided. Still, local support for the Turkish cultural model challenges the government extending ties to France.

Morocco was the most difficult country for Turkey to woo. The free trade agreement they signed in 2004 was revised in October 2020, raising taxes on imported Turkish goods by up to 90 percent. For Morocco, the motivation behind it was as political as it was economic. Not only were cheap Turkish

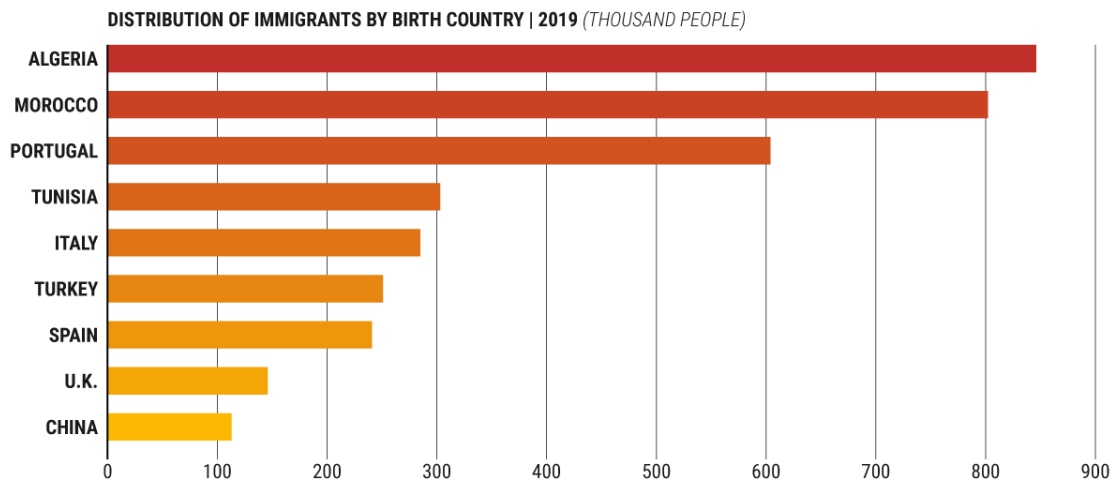
goods flooding its market, but officials wanted to placate other allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are natural competitors of Turkey. The move is rightly seen as support for the informal Saudi-led boycott of Turkish products.

Implications

The diplomatic conflict between France and Turkey is not new. However, the growing war of words between the Turkish and French presidents is heightening tensions between Turkey and its Gulf allies like Qatar on one side, and between France and Gulf allies like the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the other. It may have the same effect in the Maghreb, where the sides are becoming increasingly clear. Things will likely be more complicated for Tunisia, where France and Turkey are pushing to win more influence.

Religion, especially Islam, has increasingly become a contentious issue in France. Almost 10 percent of the French population identify as Muslim, and according to media reports, most of the poorer neighborhoods known as “banlieues” are inhabited by immigrants believed to belong, in their majority, to the Islamic faith. Many immigrants in France are from the Maghreb – a third of the total and about 100,000 more than it has received from other European Union countries. In 2019, the Algerian immigrant community in France stood at about 850,000. About 300,000 of France’s population are Tunisian. As Turkey is influencing the politics of both former French colonies, it is likely that their populations, including those entering France from these countries in search of economic opportunity, are equally influenced by Turkish cultural diplomacy.

France's Immigrant Population



Source: France's National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies

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In the Maghreb, the more countries recognize the Western Sahara region as part of Morocco (even unofficially), the more it could fuel tensions with Algeria. Considering the current economic environment, neither Morocco nor Algeria wants a full-blown conflict. However, history shows that countries can't always control the scale of tensions, particularly in mountainous and desert areas where seemingly minor escalations can quickly escalate. The situation is not helped by the fact that Algiers and Rabat embarked on an arms race some 15 years ago, with both countries building up their supplies for a potential conflict. The border – and the Maghreb in general – needs a close watch since any conflict between the two countries would implicate Turkey and France, affecting European security and stability on the whole.

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