GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

Special Collection

TABLE OF CONTENTS

0 | INTRODUCTION

The Middle East and North Africa is a troubled region, and it isn't easy to find a success story to write about or a rewarding political experience to report. This complete work consists of several dozen essays spread out over 8 parts tackling the region's conflicts and historical evolution, relating them to contemporary issues. Each piece includes the publication date to link certain events to a specific period. It specifically questions and analyzes the political, economic, and interstate issues that beset the region without resolving them, either at the domestic or collective level.

The Maghreb marks where the Middle East intersects with Africa and, through the Mediterranean, Europe. This makes it an extremely strategic staging ground for naval access to the Levant and great power competition. This chapter gives an overview of the most pressing geopolitical issues facing each Maghreb country with particular emphasis on the two contenders for regional leadership, Morocco and Algeria.

1 | The US Rediscovers North Africa

Washington has new concerns that have reignited its interest in the region.

October 16, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

Earlier this month, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visited Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco on a diplomatic tour of North Africa. The trip, one month before the U.S. presidential elections, was significant because it came amid a recent escalation in terrorism that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as increased Chinese and Russian naval exercises in the Mediterranean.

The United States has long considered North Africa a friendly region. But the perception of North Africa started to shift after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In 2007, President George W. Bush announced the establishment of the United States Africa Command in response to the rise of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, a group that originated in Algeria, that same year. In August 2014, President Barack Obama held in Washington the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, where economic and security cooperation dominated the agenda. Notably, this was a time when competition between Africa's fast-growing economies was rising and Islamic militancy in the Sahel region was surging. The focus in these interactions was security and counterterrorism efforts. Following Esper's visit, however, the U.S. appears to be shifting its attention in its relations with North Africa to other global challenges, namely China and Russia.

Keeping Others at Bay

While in North Africa, Esper signed separate 10-year military cooperation agreements with Tunisia and Morocco, and discussed cooperation on a number of defense matters with the Algerian president. The partnerships are ostensibly about fighting terrorism and finding areas for collaboration with countries that Washington sees as key to establishing security in Africa, but they're also aimed at keeping China and Russia at bay. Indeed, the U.S. is concerned about Russian, Chinese and, more recently, Turkish efforts to expand their naval presence in the Mediterranean and boost their economic and military influence in the region. Russia is already a major supplier of military hardware – including Su-35 fighter jets, S-400 surface-to-air missiles and Iskander-E ballistic missiles – to Algeria, and China is its top supplier of imports. In 2015, Russia and China began organizing joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean, and in 2017, they held live-fire drills. The two countries are also trying to find a location to use as a port of call in the Mediterranean or the Atlantic off the coast of either Morocco or Mauritania.

Their involvement in North Africa is motivated by different objectives, however. Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to restore Russia's past glory in which access to the Mediterranean was central to achieving great-power status. China, on the other hand, is far more ambitious: It's trying to acquire blue-water capabilities to help protect its access to sea lanes, and North Africa's Mediterranean waters and Atlantic coastline are part of this global strategy. Its push into the Mediterranean is critical for the success of the Belt and Road Initiative. It has already

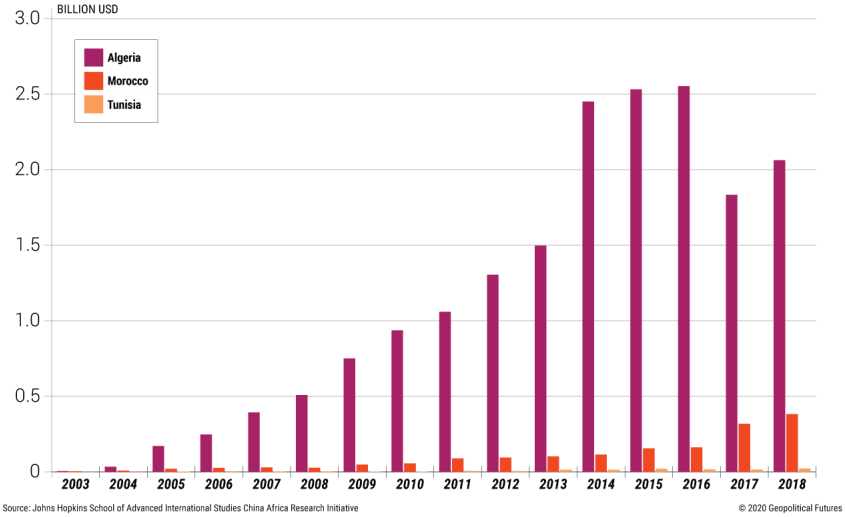
invested in expanding Greece's Piraeus Port, and its Cosco shipping company signed agreements to operate the Tangier Mediterranean Port Container Terminal and Algeria's Cherchell Port.

Washington's top concern, therefore, is Beijing, whose growing influence in North Africa is a result of both the lack of Western backing for countries in the region, at least according to them, and Beijing's desire to expand and promote its own industrial base.

In Morocco, King Mohammad VI has been exasperated with the lack of U.S. support for his country in the dispute over Western Sahara and Washington's unwillingness to provide missile systems that would put Morocco's defense capabilities on par with Algeria's. He has therefore looked elsewhere – namely, to Beijing – for assistance. Following the king's visit to China in 2016, Morocco purchased the WS-2 400 mm multiple-launch rocket system and Sky Dragon 50 surface-to-air missile system from Beijing. China is also competing with France, which has invested heavily in Morocco's infrastructure since the country gained independence in 1956, for a contract to construct the Marrakech-Agadir high-speed rail line. China Communications Construction Co. has also expressed interest in investing $10 billion to build the Tangier Tech City project. But Morocco has yet to decide on the offer given the level of Western opposition to Chinese incursions into the West's historical sphere of influence.

Attitudes Toward China

Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in North Africa



Many in North Africa, however, still prefer partnering with the West over China because of concerns over Beijing's long-term objectives. Tunisia, for example, signed on to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative in 2018 but has yet to translate this into any actual partnership deals. Though China is now the third-largest supplier of imports after France and Italy, the political elite appear unwilling to open up to China beyond providing rhetorical support. They, like others in North Africa, are skeptical of China's charm offensive and question its goals in providing substantial sums of cash for development projects. They're also wary of the cultural differences between themselves and the Chinese that could make cooperation difficult. (One example of this culture gap comes from Algeria, where locals objected to the presence of Chinese construction workers in a suburb of Algiers and disapproved of their culinary habits that conflicted with Islamic norms.)

Still, Algerians and Moroccans find China's pragmatic, business-oriented approach appealing. Both countries' governments appreciate Beijing's emphasis on economic development and willingness, unlike Western countries, to eschew political intervention and human rights issues. Indeed, China is now the top economic partner for both Algeria and Morocco. What concerns them, however, is that accepting Chinese investment could backfire in the future. China has tried to allay these fears, arguing that as a victim of the Opium Wars, it cannot imagine becoming a colonial power itself. It has also reminded Algerians of the tremendous political support it gave to Algeria's National Liberation Front during its independence war against France in 1954-62. (China's treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, however, casts doubt over Beijing's claim to be an ally.)

It's unlikely, however, that the U.S. will allow Morocco to become a Chinese satellite state and to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative. Washington trusts Algeria's independent foreign policy and ability to keep its distance from Beijing. Esper's recent visit to North Africa seems to have opened a new chapter in U.S. efforts to contain China's global economic offensive. There is no reason to assume that China's economic activity in North Africa will achieve better results than it has had in any other region of the world. Moreover, China is likely incapable of using whatever inroads it makes in North Africa to increase its footprint in Africa's heartland.

2 | Algeria and Morocco: Caught in a Losing Battle Over Regional Dominance

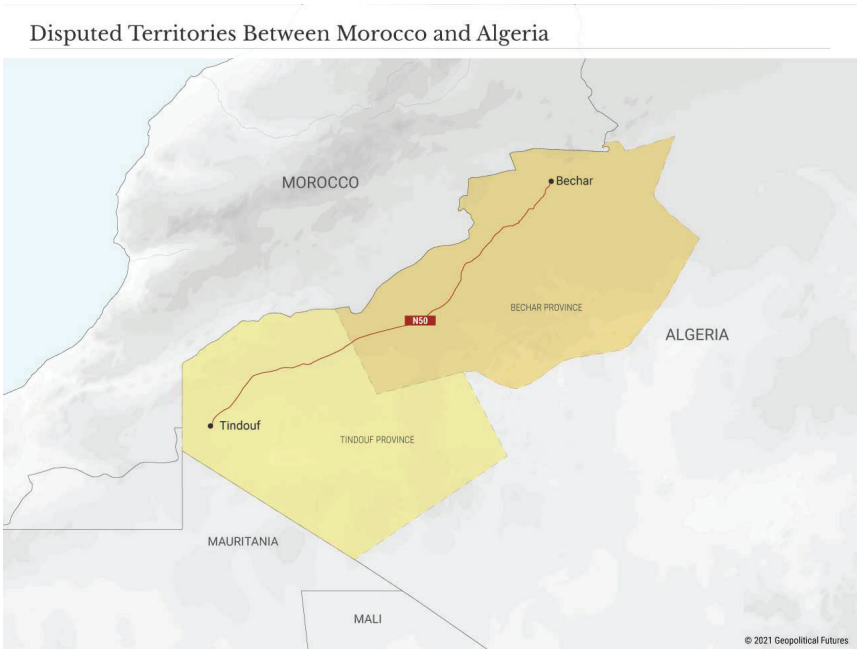
Both countries are fixated on each other, despite having more pressing issues to deal with.

April 22, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

For more than a decade, Algeria and Morocco have been locked in a costly arms race. Their shared border has been closed since 1994, a consequence of tensions over an unresolved border dispute and the conflict over Western Sahara. They are long-standing rivals in the competition over leadership of North Africa, though neither is currently in a position to eclipse the other.

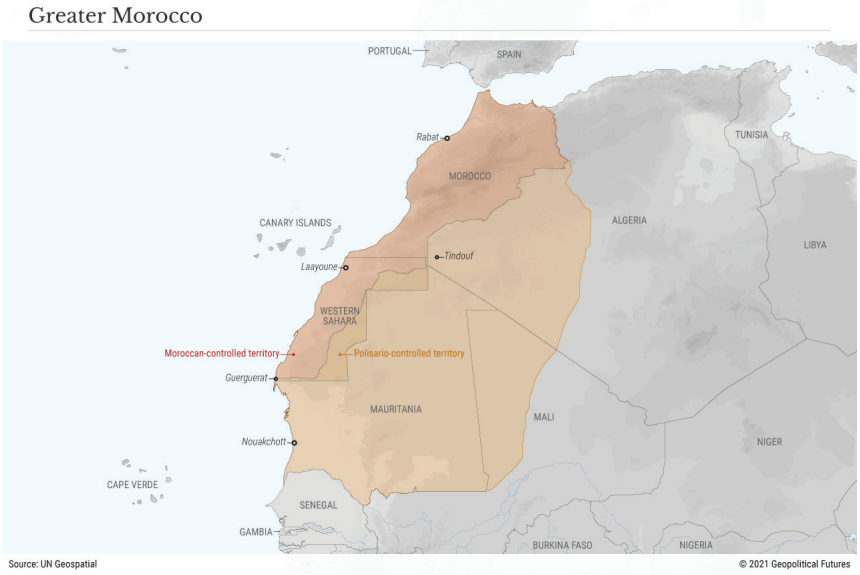
Origins of the Problem

The border dispute between the two countries goes back to France's occupation of Algeria in 1830. Responding to Morocco's support of rebellions against the occupation, France defeated the Moroccan army in the Battle of Isly in 1844. A year later, France coerced Morocco into signing the Lalla Maghnia Treaty, which led to France's annexation of parts of the Moroccan border to its Algerian territories. The French deliberately did not demarcate swathes of desert land, claiming they were barren and uninhabited. In 1950, France annexed them to Algeria after discovering iron and manganese in Tindouf and Bechar. In 1957, France offered to return them to Morocco, if Rabat agreed to form a joint administration to exploit the newly discovered minerals. But Morocco's King Mohammed V refused, preferring instead to wait until Algeria's independence to negotiate their future.



In 1961, Morocco signed an agreement with Algeria's provisional government, which wanted to start talks to settle the land dispute as soon as Algeria won independence. When that happened, in 1962, King Mohammed V visited Algiers and met with Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella, who emphasized his commitment to his country's territorial integrity, which had already cost the Algerian people more than 1 million lives. Rabat responded by presenting a map of "Greater Morocco," which included Western Sahara, Mauritania, parts of Mali and a quarter of Algeria. Algeria's refusal to negotiate the border situation created an enduring atmosphere of distrust and hostility. The two countries fought to a stalemate in the 1963 Sand

War, which left relations between them fractured to this day.



Costly Arms Race

For both Algeria and Morocco, military spending has taken precedence over economic development. Morocco's military is among Africa's best-equipped and most competent. In 2009, the country spent $2.3 billion on deals to purchase U.S.-made F-16 jets, trainer jets and attack helicopters, and to modernize its M1 Abrams main battle tank inventory. Several years ago, Morocco commissioned Harris Corp. to equip its F-16s with electronic warfare systems. In 2013, Francois Hollande, France's president at the time, signed a secret deal with King Mohammad VI to supply Morocco with two advanced Earth observation satellites for $670 million. Morocco also acquired from France Caesar 135 mm howitzers and MICA surface-to-air missiles. The deal prompted Algeria to improve its targeting capabilities by gaining access to the Russian Global Navigation Satellite System.

Last year, Morocco announced a five-year plan worth $20 billion to achieve regional military supremacy. The plan involved rivaling Algeria's air capabilities and developing an indigenous arms industry. The Moroccan army administers two huge military sectors, one in the north near the Algerian border and another in the south near Western Sahara.

But despite Rabat's recent defense push, Algeria still outspends Morocco. Morocco's military spending between 2005 and 2015 totaled $48 billion compared to Algeria's $58 billion. Since 2013, Algeria has spent more than $10 billion per year on defense, a 176 percent increase over 2004, despite budget cuts in other areas due to declining hydrocarbon revenue. In 2009, Algeria surpassed South Africa as the continent's largest arms importer. Between 2013 and 2017, it purchased more than half of Africa's arms imports, 60 percent of which came from Russia.

Algeria has used much of its hydrocarbon revenue, especially over the past decade, to boost its military arsenal, which far exceeds its actual needs. Between 2010 and 2019, Algeria acquired four updated Russian Kilo-class submarines to add to its two Soviet-era submarines, upgraded in the 1990s. In recent years, it commissioned several frigates and corvettes for its rapidly expanding navy. The Algerian air force has plans to withdraw from service its old MiG-25 and Su-24 jets and replace them with Su-34 and Su-35 jets and additional Su-30s. It may also be interested in acquiring Russia's state-of-the-art Su-57.

Thus, despite Morocco's efforts to tip the military balance of power in its favor, Algeria has an overall edge against its neighbor – a fact that Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has

publicly boasted about in the past. The government in Algiers justifies its defense spending by arguing that the country faces enormous security challenges along its 4,300-mile (7,000-kilometer) border with seven, mostly unstable, countries. Though some activists took issue with the increase in spending at a time of financial hardship, most Algerians accepted it, citing fears over potential spillover from Libya's conflict, the French military campaign against militant groups in Mali and Niger, and remnants of armed gangs operating in Algeria's mountainous eastern provinces.

No Regional Dominance

In the 1990s, Algeria defeated Islamic groups in a bloody civil war, convincing the international community that it is a trusted partner in the war against terrorism. Its global image as a peace-loving nation paved the way for its procurement of military hardware from many countries, including nonlethal ordnance from the United States. That image also prompted Morocco to present itself as a dependable regional power. It rejoined the African Union after boycotting it for 33 years when the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, also known as Western Sahara, was admitted as a full member. In 2016, Morocco provided military equipment and troops to help Niger in its fight against Boko Haram. Morocco now has the 13th largest contingent of U.N. peacekeeping forces.

Both Morocco and Algeria have excellent international reputations – the former adopting a staunch pro-Western position and the latter adopting an independent foreign policy with good working relations with the major powers.

But they continue to scramble for regional dominance, believing that North Africa is undergoing a period of drastic change following the Arab uprisings. It's uncertain whether Morocco will be able to achieve military supremacy, given Algeria's determination to maintain its edge, but what is certain is that their arms race reduces the possibility of future cooperation and threatens to intensify regional instability. Morocco hopes that the protests in Algeria – which began in 2019 after its longtime president announced his candidacy for a fifth term – will destabilize the country, helping to usher in Morocco as the region's new leader. It's unlikely, however, that the Algerian army would ever let that happen.

They are caught in a seemingly never-ending rivalry. Instead of identifying a new framework to resolve or let go of their differences, they seem fixated on the past. Indeed, despite having more pressing issues to address like health care and education, they carry their grievances against each other like a ball and chain.

3| In Morocco, Broken Promises and Bleak Prospects

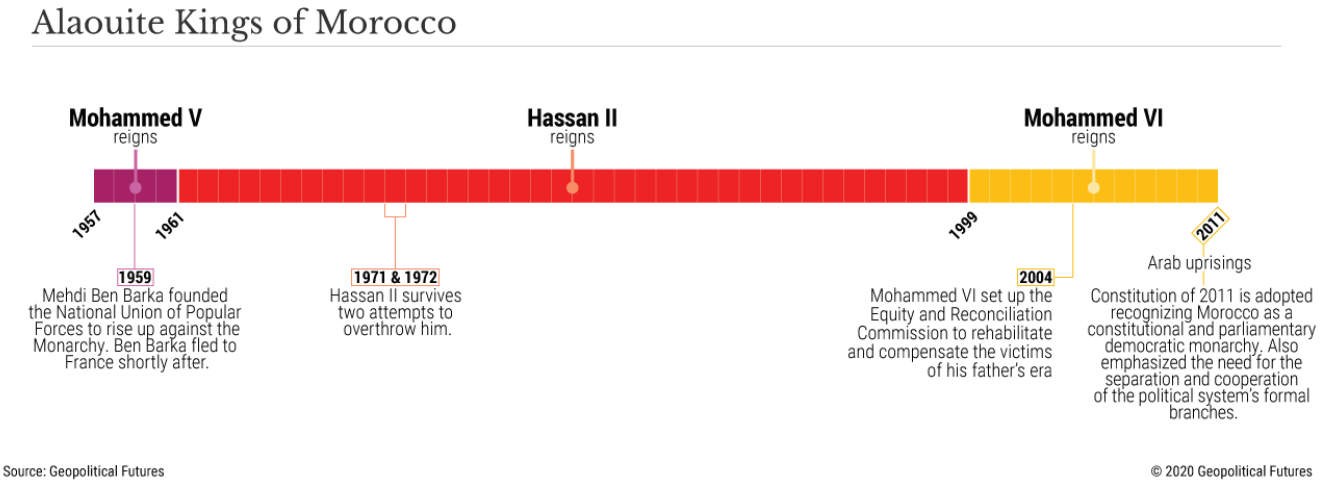
The country's leaders have promised reforms but haven't delivered.

September 16, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

Morocco is a unique country in the Middle East and North Africa region. Having been conquered by the Umayyad Caliphate in the early eighth century, it is the oldest and most established Arab country. It is also the only Arabic-speaking territory that the Ottomans failed to conquer. In 1558, the Saadi Arab dynasty, which ruled Morocco for roughly 100 years, stopped the Ottomans in the Battle of Wadi al-Laban and forced them to retreat to Algiers. Hailing from Hejaz in Arabia and claiming to be a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, Mulay al-Rashid founded in 1666 the Alaouite dynasty, which continues to rule Morocco today. Though it became a French protectorate in 1912, Morocco gained independence in 1956, giving its people hope that it would adopt a democratic system and begin on a path toward economic development that would benefit all Moroccans. However, the country failed to make the necessary changes, and its prospects for growth now look bleak.

Turbulent Start

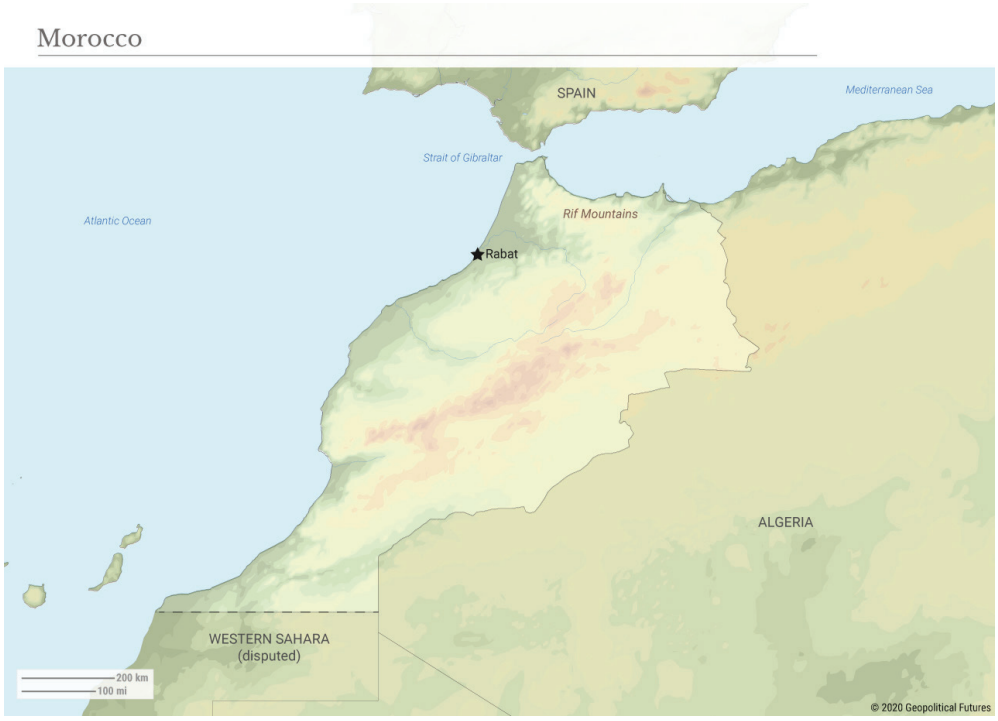
In 1957, Sultan Mohammed V declared himself king of Morocco. He died in 1961 and was succeeded by his son, Crown Prince Hassan II, whose turbulent reign lasted 38 years. Two years after he took over the throne, Morocco claimed sovereignty over Tindouf and Bechar provinces, which instigated the Sands War with recently independent Algeria. Hassan also faced a serious challenge at home with the rise of Mehdi Ben Barka, who in 1959 founded the National Union of Popular Forces and won international recognition. Hassan accused Ben Barka of scheming to assassinate him, and strong indicators suggest that he ordered Ben Barka's abduction. Disillusioned with Morocco's democratic transformation and fearing for his life, Ben Barka sought refuge in France, where he mysteriously disappeared in 1965.



In the early 1970s, Hassan survived two attempts to overthrow him. Citing the king's failure to adopt necessary reforms, two senior and trusted army officers staged a coup attempt in 1971. A year later, Hassan's confidant and minister of interior, Mohammed Oufkir, conspired with the Moroccan air force to shoot down his plane as it arrived from Paris. These two incidents hardened Hassan, who unleashed an unprecedented wave of terror against his opponents, including secret trials, wholesale liquidation of dissidents and widespread arrests of defectors. Hundreds of extrajudicial executions were carried out and many more peaceful activists disappeared. The notorious Tazmamart prison, where dozens of inmates died after being tortured and living in appalling conditions, became a symbol of the country's downward spiral. In 1999, Hassan's son, Mohammed VI, took over as king and, in 2004, set up the Equity and Reconciliation Commission to compensate the victims of his father's era.

Mohammed VI was well aware of the difficulties his father encountered while trying to stabilize his regime. In January 2011, amid the Arab Spring uprisings, he established the Royal Moroccan Youth Movement to try to preempt protests similar to those that took place in Tunisia and Egypt. Its members were dubbed el-Ayasha, or those who say long live the king. It was conceived as a paramilitary organization and comprised delinquent and uneducated young men whose primary function was to prevent the emergence of opposition groups. The movement believed the king was a symbol of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and its members promised to give their lives to defend him. They blamed corruption on the officials surrounding him and warned fellow Moroccans of the dangers of foreign interference.

Still, the group could not prevent the emergence in 2011 of the February 20 Youth Movement, which called for greater freedom and social justice and demanded the introduction of a parliamentary monarchy. The brief pro-democracy uprising paved the way for the adoption of the 2011 constitution, which recognized Morocco as a constitutional and parliamentary democratic monarchy. It also emphasized the need for separate branches of government and making the wielders of power accountable to judicial review. The constitution, however, was not implemented in full and failed to bring the kind of democratic transition its proponents were hoping for.



The Amazigh Question

Another challenge for modern-day Morocco is how to integrate the Amazigh, or Berber, ethnic group. The majority of Amazigh live in northern Morocco, in a re-

gion called the Rif. In the 1920s, Abd el-Krim, an iconic Amazigh leader, fought French and Spanish colonial forces and founded the Republic of the Rif (1921-26). The Amazigh waged the Taflilat revolt in 1957, and Rif wars continued until 1959.

Inspired by the Amazigh in Algeria, the Amazigh in Morocco demanded political integration, cultural recognition and economic development for their communities. But Hassan played a crucial role in suppressing the Amazigh, and in a 1984 speech in the Rif in northern Morocco, he described them as bandits, cannabis cultivators and smugglers and warned them against campaigning for greater autonomy.

Mohammed VI expressed genuine interest in integrating the Amazigh as long as he did not have to make political concessions. He created the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture, made Amazigh an official language on par with Arabic and opened a Tamazight TV station. However, little progress has been made on economic development. In 2016, peaceful protests erupted in the Rif region after an Amazigh fisherman in al-Hoceima, a city on the Mediterranean coast, tried to retrieve his fish that the authorities had dumped into a garbage truck. The protests were led by activist Nasser Zefzafi, who was arrested on charges of threatening national security and given a 20-year prison sentence. Today, thanks to its rugged terrain, the Rif region maintains a de facto semiautonomous status largely outside the control of the state, except when the government decides to launch punitive military campaigns.

Future Prospects

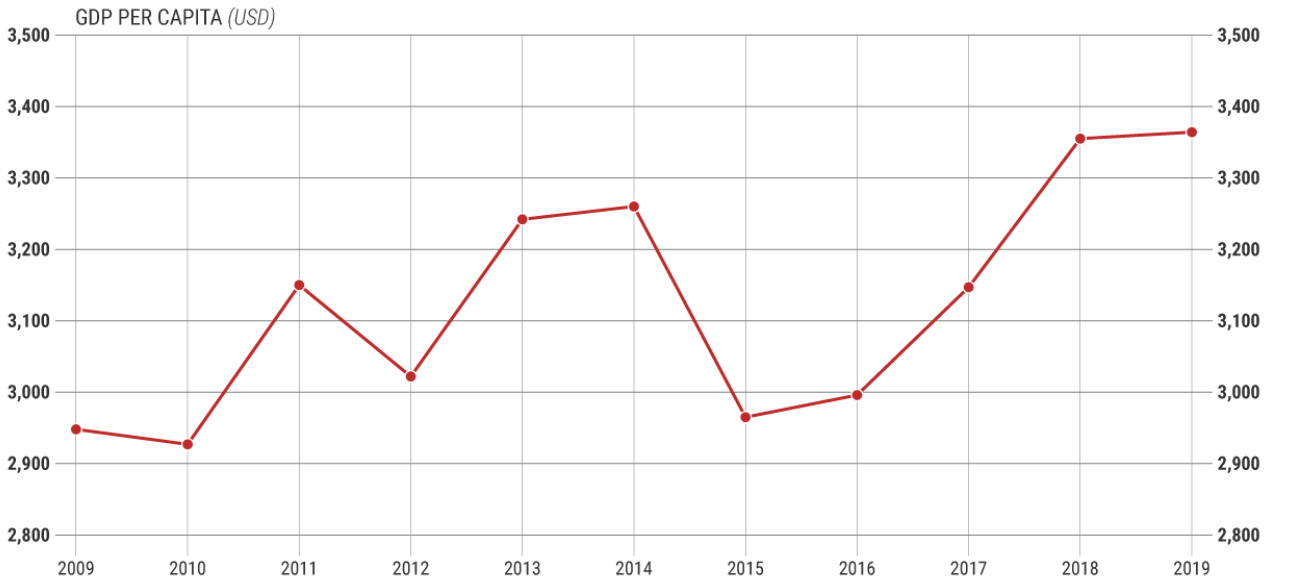
Morocco's progress has been limited in terms of both political reforms and economic development. Mohammed VI has not followed through on his promise to introduce political changes. The king's supporters say that Morocco will become a parliamentary monarchy if and when capable political parties and a responsible civil society emerge. But they also note that it took Britain centuries to institute its constitutional monarchy and argue that Morocco's history, its demographics and regional conflicts mean that the transition will take time. Meanwhile, Moroccan law still does not allow a single party to win an absolute majority in the House of Representatives. The king remains in full control, and parliament is essentially a rubber stamp for the monarch that merely approves the Cabinet's bills. The king keeps parties on a tight leash and a close eye on nongovernmental organizations.

In 2002, 26 political parties ran in the general election. The top vote-getter, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces, won just 12 percent of the assembly's then 325 seats. Instead of appointing the party's leader, Abderrahmane Youssoufi, as head of the new government, the king designated Driss Jettou, an independent lawmaker, as the new prime minister. In the 2016 election, 27 political parties participated and 15 did not win a single seat. The Justice and Development Party, led by Abdelilah Benkirane, came in first place with 125 seats, while the Authenticity Party came in second with 23 seats. After Benkirane failed to form a Cabinet, the king appointed former Minister of Foreign Affairs Saadeddine El Othmani as prime minister.

In addition, many of the social reforms that Mohammed VI introduced after he assumed the throne were not properly implemented. Changes to the civil code, for example, apply only in theory, as polygamy and child marriage are still common. The promise of economic development

has given way to stagnation because of bureaucratic lethargy and poor governance. Public debt exceeds $77 billion, more than 83 percent of gross domestic product, limiting investment in development projects. With a per capita income of $3,400, Morocco is the fourth-poorest Arab country.

Morocco's Sluggish Economic Growth



Source: Morocco's High Commission for Planning

Morocco failed to industrialize, and with economic growth in 2019 at 0.3 percent, it no longer attracts foreign investors. Several years of drought have weakened the agricultural sector, and the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced even more hurdles. These challenges prove that Morocco needs to adopt a new way of thinking about political and economic development.

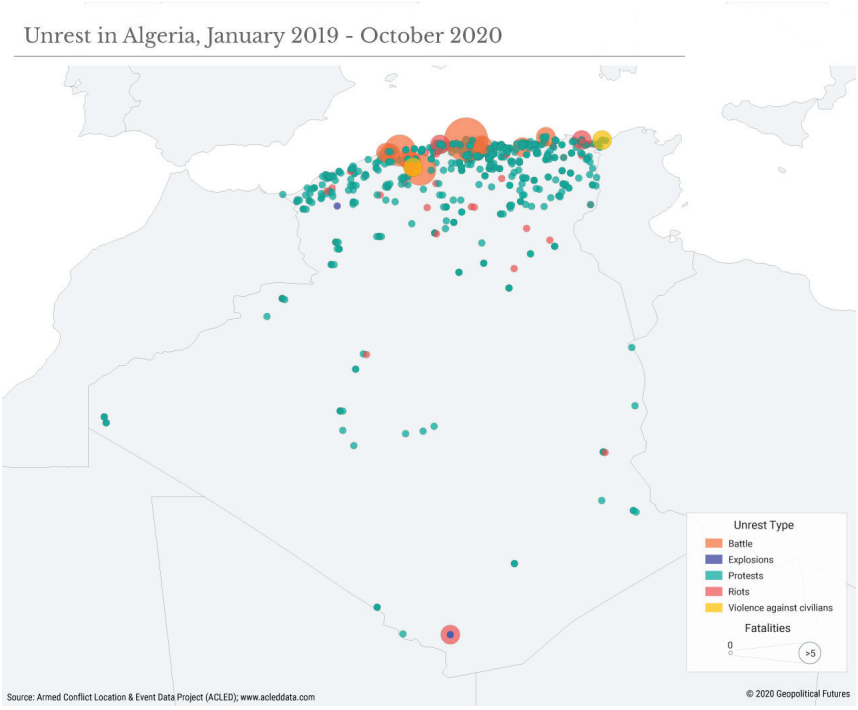
4 | In Algeria, a New Constitution Fails to Deliver

The constitutional changes fall short of protesters' demands.

October 23, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

On Nov. 1, the anniversary of the launch of Algeria's war of independence, the country's new constitution will be put to a referendum. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who was elected in December 2019, announced the vote in a bid to resolve Algeria's long-standing identity crisis and meet the demands of protesters calling for greater democratization. The protests, part of the unrest that has swept across the Arab world over the past decade, began in February 2019 and forced ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who led the country for 20 years, to resign.

The proposed changes would modify a key aspect of Algeria's military doctrine. Ever since its independence from France in 1962, Algeria has boasted about its constitutional prohibition against armed intervention in other countries' internal affairs. The new constitution would end that policy. With the ongoing Libyan civil war simmering to its east and al-Qaida and the Islamic State expanding into the Sahel, Algeria hopes that constitutional changes will help keep these security threats at bay.

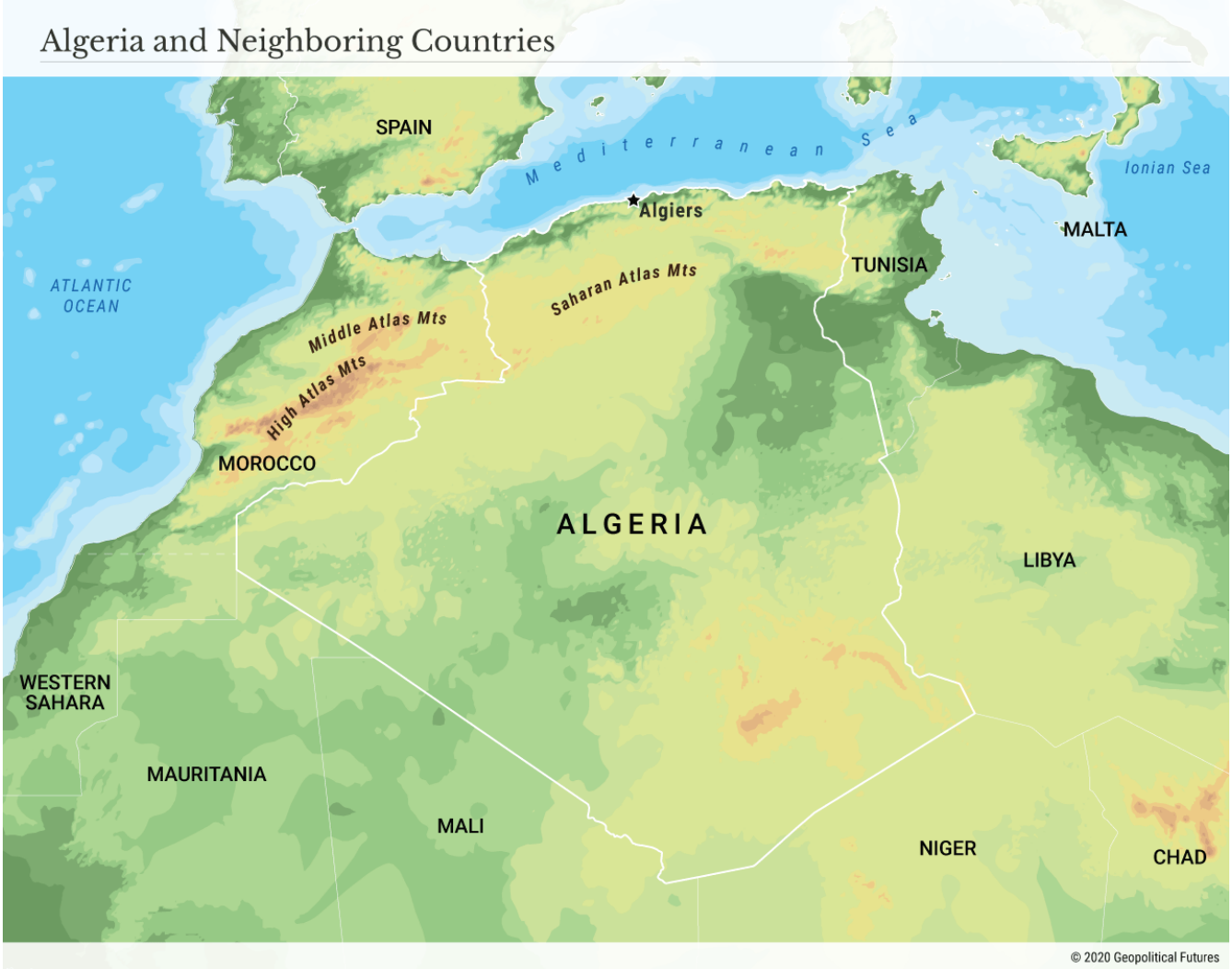


Rethinking Algeria's Military Doctrine

Algeria's 1976 constitution banned the army from taking part in foreign operations, effectively nullifying the country's significant military capabilities and reputation as having Africa's second-strongest military after Egypt. The noninterventionist constitution also left the country vulnerable and unable to respond to security threats in the region.

For example, Algeria could not intervene in Libya in 2011. This paved the way for NATO's erratic intervention, which transformed the country into an open battleground for jihadists and foreign countries such as Russia, Turkey, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. It was also unable to respond militarily to the 2012 kidnapping of seven Algerian diplomats in the Malian city of Gao by an al-Qaida-linked group; the government instead chose to hold secret talks with the kidnappers. Algeria also refused France's requests in 2012 to participate in its counterterrorism operation in Mali and

Niger, a stance that it reiterated when French President Emmanuel Macron met with Algeria's powerful army chief in 2017.



In 2013, al-Mourabitoun, an al-Qaida-affiliated terrorist group originating from Mali, attacked the In Amenas gas plant along the Algerian-Libyan border, taking hundreds of Algerian and foreign workers hostage. The operation to free them resulted in the death of 68 people, including 38 foreigners, 29 terrorists and one security guard. To prevent future attacks, the Algerian army merely bolstered its defenses on the border, instead of going after the terrorists' bases across the border.

Algeria still participated in some select foreign operations, however. Former President Houari Boumediene deployed Algerian soldiers to fight alongside Egypt in its 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel. And even after the ban, the government sent token contingents to participate in the United Nations peacekeeping missions in Angola, Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo and the Eritrean-Ethiopian border.

The new constitution would enable the president to send troops abroad on peacekeeping or security missions, if he secures two-thirds support in parliament for the operations. It should be remembered, however, that the military is already a formidable force within Algeria itself. In fact, it was formed before Algeria became an independent nation. It helped to establish the state and continues to openly rule the country to this day. It chose Tebboune, a member of the ruling National Liberation Front, to serve as president. Algerians consider him responsible for ensuring that the government does not deviate from its mandate. Tebboune also wants to restore Algeria's reputation as a defender of the oppressed and Algiers as a top international mediator. In the past, the city hosted the signing of several landmark agreements, such as the 1975 deal that settled the Iraq-Iran dispute over the Shatt al-Arab Waterway, the 1981 deal between the U.S. and Iran that freed 52 American hostages seized in Tehran, and the 2000 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The powerful military establishment strongly backs the new constitution, which it believes will help unite the ideologically and ethnically divided country and give it the ability to tackle serious security threats, mainly in Libya and Mali. But even with the power to wage war abroad, Algerians would likely be wary of doing so. The country's war of independence led to more than 1 million deaths, and its 10-year civil war cost more than 200,000 lives. The political elite as well as the military establishment have therefore grown averse to large-scale conflict.

But Algerians are aware that they live in a region that is prone to instability. Though they want to establish peaceful relations with Morocco, a country with which Algeria has a long-running dispute over Western Sahara, they also want to play a role in taming the region's myriad conflicts. The country is therefore positioning itself to wield influence in Libya independent of Egypt, Turkey and other foreign actors and to establish a balance among all the different players of the region.

A Democratic Facade

In theory, the new constitution is also aimed at creating a more democratic system of governance, a change that protesters demanded following two decades of rule by one president. If approved, it would grant people the right to form associations and organize demonstrations without government authorization. (Algeria already has 40 political parties, either existing or in development, and more than 15,000 nongovernmental organizations.)

Under the new constitution, the president would designate the head of the leading party or party coalition to form the Cabinet within one month of a general election; if he or she is unable to do so, the president can select another person to form a government irrespective of the size of that person's party in parliament. Presidential term limits would also be introduced; a president would be able to serve only two five-year consecutive or separate terms in office. The limits would also be applied to members of parliament, which could interfere with public choice in legislative representation and prevent political parties from growing.

In addition, Amazigh would be recognized as a national language, though not on par with Arabic, the country's official language. Despite early attempts to avoid referring to Islam as the state religion, the constitution committee backed down, after overwhelming opposition from

Islamic political parties.

However, the new constitution would also give the president overwhelming powers, including the authority to appoint judges, the head of the Supreme Court, and senior civilian and military officials without consultation. He would also be able to veto parliamentary initiatives and dissolve parliament. His oversight powers would extend to the ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs. Opposition groups have been highly critical of the lack of presidential accountability and the placement of the president outside the executive branch. It probably wouldn't be an overstatement to describe the role of president under the new constitution as akin to that of Iran's supreme leader.

Constitution Under Fire

Opponents of the new constitution, ranging from Islamists to leftists and socialists, see it as nothing more than a media stunt that ignores more than 18 months of demands from protesters for genuine political reform. Some also argue that involving the army in foreign combat missions would risk getting entangled in attrition warfare and invite terrorist reprisals. In addition, the draft constitution ignores the heritage, history and values of the Algerian people, as it hints at omitting references to articles about Islamic, Arab and Amazigh identities in future iterations of the constitution. It assigns a special status to some Amazigh municipalities – a step toward decentralization, which Islamists and nationalists adamantly oppose.

If voters approve the new constitution, it will be Algeria's seventh in 58 years. The six previous versions failed to modernize the economy, democratize governance and keep the military focused on national defense – and it's unlikely that the latest installment will be any different. At best, it will shift the public's attention away from the military's excessive control over people's lives.

5 | Western Sahara: A Forgotten Conflict

Morocco's claims to the disputed region seem to be getting stronger.

January 22, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

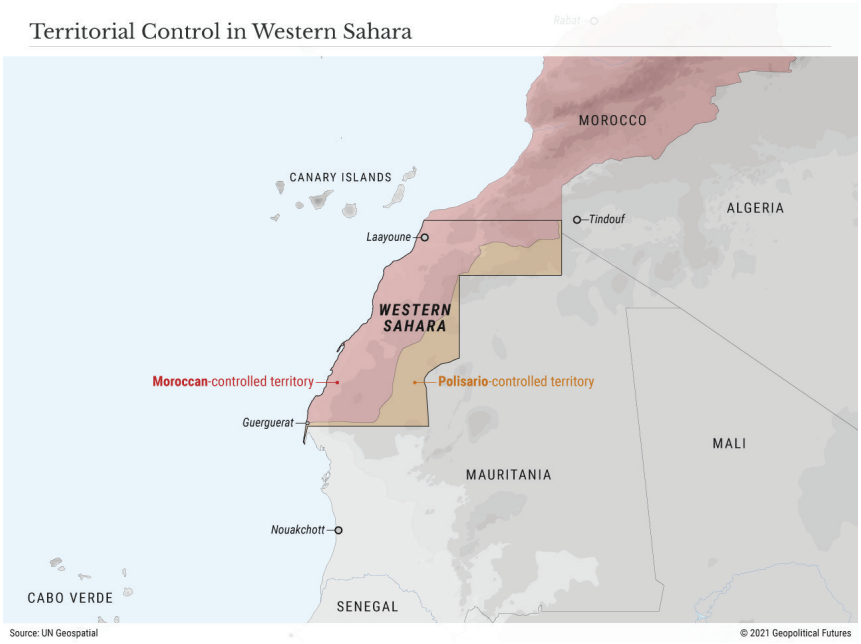
The standoff over Western Sahara is Africa's longest ongoing conflict. Covering 266,000 square kilometers and with a population of some 600,000 people, the disputed territory is claimed by both Morocco and the rebel Polisario Front. Morocco controls 80 percent of the territory, while the Polisario Front administers the remaining 20 percent – pockets of land along the region's borders with Algeria and Mauritania.

Though the conflict has been largely muted for years, recent developments brought Western Sahara back into the spotlight. Last October, the Polisario Front blocked a key road in the Guerguerat border zone linking Western Sahara to Mauritania. The move may have been motivated by the rebel group's desire to increase international interest in the forgotten conflict. Either way, the Moroccan army quickly launched an operation that reopened the crossing.

Then, in December, the United States recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara and said it would establish a consulate there. The dramatic shift in U.S. policy, which coincided with the normalization of Moroccan-Israeli relations, may have dealt a defining blow to Western Sahara's quest for independence.

Independence Struggle

Morocco historically saw this barren desert region as a lawless land because it laid largely outside its jurisdiction. Its tribal sheiks accepted the Moroccan sultan in his religious capacity – a fact that Morocco uses to justify its claim to the Western Sahara, which it considers its "southern provinces."



Following the 1884 Berlin Conference, however, Spain was allowed to occupy Western Sahara, which it renamed the Spanish Sahara in 1934. In the 1958 Treaty of Angra de Cintra, Spain removed Tarfaya from Western Sahara and ceded it to Morocco. In 1963, the U.N. Special Committee on Decolonization urged

Spain to grant independence to Western Sahara, and two years later, the U.N. demanded that Spain end its occupation. In 1970, the Spanish colonial army brutally suppressed an uprising in Zamlah, near Western Sahara's largest city, Laayoune, and executed the independence movement's first leader, Mohammad Bassiri.

Spain's concession of parts of the region to Morocco sparked the rise of Sahrawi nationalism. The Sahrawis, literally meaning "desert inhabitants," are a multiracial group of people of Arabic, Amazigh and Black heritage whose culture is predominantly Arab. The Polisario Front was formally established in 1973 in Mauritania with the aim of creating an independent state in Western Sahara. But its origins go back to a 1971 student movement aimed at freeing the region from Spanish control.

The pan-Arab movement, inspired by leaders like Egypt's Gamal Abdel Naser, Algeria's Houari Boumediene and Libya's Moammar Gadhafi, heavily influenced the Polisario Front. Its revolutionary and anti-imperialist worldview alienated it from the West; its biggest backer was Algeria, which recognized and armed the Polisario Front from the beginning of the conflict. Algeria and Morocco have been at odds over the issue ever since.

Morocco's Claim and Invasion

Morocco made its claim to Western Sahara not long after the country's independence in 1956, when it expressed its desire to establish a Greater Morocco under King Mohammad V's leadership – a policy that has overwhelming public approval. In October 1975, King Hassan II organized the Green March, a rally comprising 350,000 demonstrators who marched toward Western Sahara to pressure Spain to surrender it to Morocco. A month later, Spain, Morocco and Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords, which led to Spain's withdrawal from Western Sahara. But the Polisario Front objected to the deal and, in February 1976, announced the formation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, with its capital-in-exile in Tindouf, Algeria. A low-intensity war followed for 16 years.

In 1979, Mauritania abandoned its territory in the region, which was immediately annexed by Morocco. The Moroccan army's inability to prevent guerrilla attacks in areas it controlled prompted the government to construct throughout the 1980s an elaborate 2,700-kilometer sand barrier, patrolled by 100,000 troops. Libya's cessation of military aid to the Polisario Front in 1984 and Algeria's preoccupation with domestic issues strengthened Morocco's claim to Western Sahara.

In 1991, the Moroccan government and Polisario signed a U.N.-brokered cease-fire. Having recognized Polisario as the sole legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people in 1979, the U.N. repeated its call for an independence referendum in Western Sahara – though one was never held.

Around 125,000 Sahrawis who escaped Morocco's 1975 military offensive still live in five refugee camps administered by Polisario in Tindouf. It's unlikely, however, that they would return to Western Sahara since many of them have been joined by relatives. The Algerian government granted many of them citizenship, and others benefited from government housing projects.

Rabat continues to reject sovereignty for Western Sahara but offered in 2006 to give Sahrawis expanded autonomy.

Why Western Sahara Matters

It's impossible to understand the conflict in Western Sahara without first understanding the turbulent relationship between Morocco and Algeria. Soon after Algeria's independence in 1962, tensions flared over Rabat's claims to Bechar and Tindouf provinces, leading to the 1963 Sand War. That conflict left permanent scars on their relationship. Algeria's growing interest in the economic potential of Western Sahara, especially as its own hydrocarbon revenues decline, has intensified the competition between the two countries. Western Sahara has abundant phosphate deposits, excellent fishing grounds and potentially exploitable offshore oil resources.

A key factor in the rivalry between the two countries is the failure to integrate the economies of the Maghreb region in Northwest Africa and the difficulty in accessing the European market. Both countries have made efforts to facilitate this integration, with varying degrees of success. In 2015, Morocco introduced a $1 billion plan to develop Western Sahara, which included creating 120,000 jobs, promoting ecotourism and building infrastructure to link the region to European and African economies. And in 2016, Morocco constructed a highway to expedite truck traffic between Western Sahara and Mauritania in a U.N.-patrolled buffer zone near Guerguerat village, which violated the 1991 cease-fire agreement. Algeria, for its part, constructed in 2018 a desert road from Tindouf to Mauritania – which could be used to circumvent the Guerguerat border crossing to reach West Africa. However, the long route through rugged terrain is not a practical alternative.

In addition, Morocco's approach to Africa is a more pragmatic than Algeria's. Moroccan King Mohammad VI has developed a robust Africa policy. To demonstrate Africa's importance to Morocco's economic plans and the pivotal role of Western Sahara in the endeavor, the country rejoined the Organization of African Unity in 2017, after pulling out in 1984 because of Western Sahara's acceptance into the group. When Morocco rejoined, despite fierce Algerian opposition, King Mohammad VI said, "Africa is my home, and I am coming back home."

In contrast, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika failed to prioritize Africa during his 20 years in office. And unlike in Morocco, where the public supports the government's position on Western Sahara, the Algerian government is facing resistance from some segments of society. Algerian youth, for example, are demanding change to address domestic issues like rising unemployment and lack of political representation.

The U.N. continues to advocate for a referendum to end the impasse in Western Sahara, but Morocco has been unwavering in its claims to sovereignty over the disputed region. The stability of its monarchy and its strong ties with the U.S., Israel and the Gulf states have given Morocco the upper hand.

6 | The Tug of War Over Libya

The country has a long history of occupation and intervention by foreign powers.

June 12, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

Cordiality has not been a characteristic of relations between nations in the modern Middle East and North Africa. Rather, relations have been more commonly defined by rivalry and competition for influence over the region's most vulnerable states.

In the 1950s, it was Syria that became the main battleground in which Middle Eastern powers competed for regional domination. In the 1960s, Yemen was the arena in which Egypt and Saudi Arabia battled for control following a republican coup in Sanaa in 1962. (Yemen again became a major battleground in 2015 as the Saudis allied with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Sudan to halt the advance of the Iran-backed Houthis.) During the 1970s and 1980s, Arabs settled their differences in religiously fragmented Lebanon and fueled its civil war, which ended in 1989 following Saudi-led Arab efforts to find a resolution to the conflict. The impending crisis posed by the growth of political Islam and Iraq's rise as a regional power required refocusing Arab political and military resources to deal with new threats.

In 2011, the Arab uprisings exacerbated turmoil across the MENA region and introduced new theaters of open competition, namely in Syria and Libya. Like in Syria, where Russian intervention was a major factor in determining the balance of power in the conflict, in Libya, Turkish involvement has proved to be a game-changer.

The Disintegration of Libya

In September 1969, a coup led by Moammar Gadhafi overthrew the Senusi monarchy, which had reigned in Libya since the country gained independence in 1951. Gadhafi's erratic rule included a combination of heavy-handed policies and bizarre proclamations about the institution of direct democracy. His "Green Book" laid out his vision for Libya, which included popular congresses and people's committees that would mobilize the entire population in political action and economic production. In practice, however, Gadhafi wielded excessive authoritarian powers and gave critical political, security and military positions to immediate relatives and trusted members of his Gadadfa tribe. He banned all types of political opposition and clamped down on Islamic activists. In 1996, he ordered a massacre in Bu Slim prison that killed 1,200 inmates. But Gadhafi viewed Libya as too small to fulfill his grandiose leadership ambitions. When his hopes to preside over a pan-Arab state failed to materialize, he entertained the thought of ruling over Africa as the king of all kings.

In 2011, however, his hopes for regional domination came to an abrupt end. Inspired by the initial success of the Egyptian uprising in January 2011, a rebellion began in Benghazi and spread to the capital, Tripoli, three weeks later. NATO's intervention led to the demise of Gadhafi's regime and his death at the hands of rebels in October 2011. The National Transitional

Council failed to stabilize Libya as it fragmented into unruly mini-states administered by local militias. In August 2012, the council disbanded and was replaced by the newly elected General National Congress.

In 2014, retired army Gen. Khalifa Haftar established the Libyan National Army and launched Operation Dignity to flush out radical Islamic rebels from Benghazi. Days later, he called for general elections to supersede the GNC because it colluded with the militants. As a result, Libya had two governments – one led by the GNC in Tripoli and another in the east known as the Tobruk Parliament.

Haftar rejected the 2015 U.N.-brokered Libyan Political Agreement and pledged to reunite Libya under his leadership. He quickly seized the oil crescent after allying with tribes in the east and south. In April 2019, he launched a major operation to take Tripoli and dismantle the Government of National Accord, led by Fayez al-Sarraj. Haftar's forces reached the suburbs of Tripoli and seemed poised to overrun the city.

His forces were backed to varying degrees by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Russia, France and Sudan. The UAE, Haftar's primary source of military assistance, operates two air bases in the eastern region of Cyrenaica, one south of Benghazi and the other southwest of al-Sarir, Libya's largest oil field. Since 2014, it has organized a steady airlift, which accelerated over the past year, to replenish Haftar's military arsenal. It also helped send 3,000 Sudanese mercenaries to Libya, mostly from the Rapid Support Forces, and covered their salaries. Saudi Arabia paid mercenaries from the Wagner Group to take part in the offensive to capture Tripoli, which ultimately failed.

Haftar adamantly refused to abide by the cease-fire agreements reached in Paris, and talks that took place in Palermo, Italy, proved futile. He withdrew from the Berlin Peace Conference in January 2020 and pressed the offensive on Tripoli.

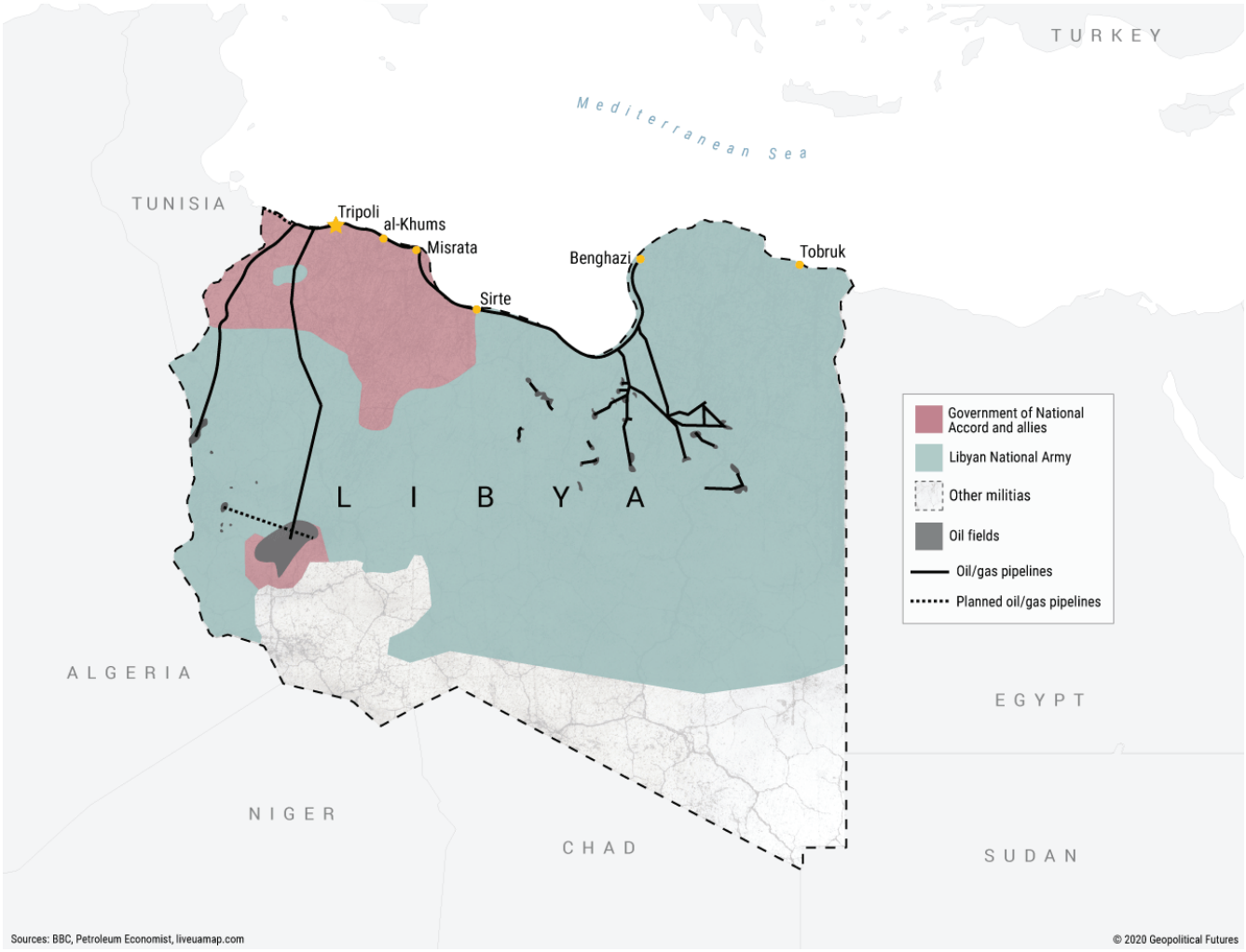
Ultimately, though, it was the Turkish parliament's vote to send troops to Libya following the failure of the Berlin conference that turned the tide against Haftar. By June 2020, Haftar's forces were chased out of eastern Libya and to the outer perimeter of Sirte. Turkish and Qatari support for the GNA has been instrumental in preventing Haftar from seizing Tripoli.

High Stakes

For all the foreign powers involved in the Libyan conflict, the stakes are high, though their level of involvement and objectives vary. The UAE's goals there are the most ambitious. They include three primary objectives: defeating the pro-Islamic GNA government, pushing Turkey out of Libya and establishing a permanent presence in the country as part of its plan for controlling weak states in the MENA region and the Horn of Africa in the post-oil era. Since the U.S. started disengaging from the region, Abu Dhabi has seemed even more willing to assume greater military responsibilities abroad. But in Libya, it appears to have overextended itself, especially when facing a strong and determined adversary like Turkey.

Egypt's goals in Libya are relatively modest compared to Abu Dhabi's. Cairo has grave security

Territorial Control in Libya



concerns related to the infiltration of radical Islamists from eastern Libya to Egypt, including Sinai. It shares a 1,150-kilometer (715-mile) porous border with Libya despite the presence of tens of thousands of Egyptian troops in the area. President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi hoped that he could collaborate with Haftar to secure the border. But he opposed Haftar's decision to capture Tripoli last year because he understood that Turkey wouldn't allow the city to fall.

El-Sissi is keen on avoiding a direct military confrontation with Ankara and instead prefers to involve Egyptian companies in Libya's reconstruction and assist in the return of more than 1.5 million Egyptian workers who fled the war. He is also wary about Saudi-supported Libyan Madkhali Salafists and the possibility that they might link up with Egypt's Salafi movement, which he has been unable to control. El-Sissi considers transnational Islamic movements a direct threat to his regime even if they are not militant. As for the Saudis, they have modest expectations in Libya and want only to secure a modicum of religious influence to contain Islamic political movements.

Despite both supporting Haftar, the objectives of Russia and France in Libya are contradictory. Both countries are interested in having access to Fezzan in the south but for different reasons. For France, Fezzan would give it access to the sub-Saharan states that are central to France's Africa policy. In these states, French strategy focuses on combating radical Islamic movements, cutting off the flow of illegal immigrants to Europe and securing energy supplies. Russia, meanwhile, is keen on ensuring that France continues to rely on Russian energy supplies, and wants to control the illegal immigration route as a bargaining chip against Europe.

For Turkey, having influence in Libya is critical to securing its status as regional power. This explains why it has adopted an aggressive stance, even signing a Maritime Boundary Treaty with the GNA on Nov. 27, 2019, to delineate each country's exclusive economic zone for gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey knowns that Egypt, Greece and Cyprus want to exclude it from any gas deal in the region. It's also clear that Turkey and Russia have come to some sort of compromise on Libya since their interests there are somewhat compatible. The organized withdrawal from Tripoli of mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group indicates that the two countries are in agreement about the division of the spoils so long as Turkey does not try to advance into eastern Libya, and it is unlikely that Ankara would venture eastward beyond Sirte.

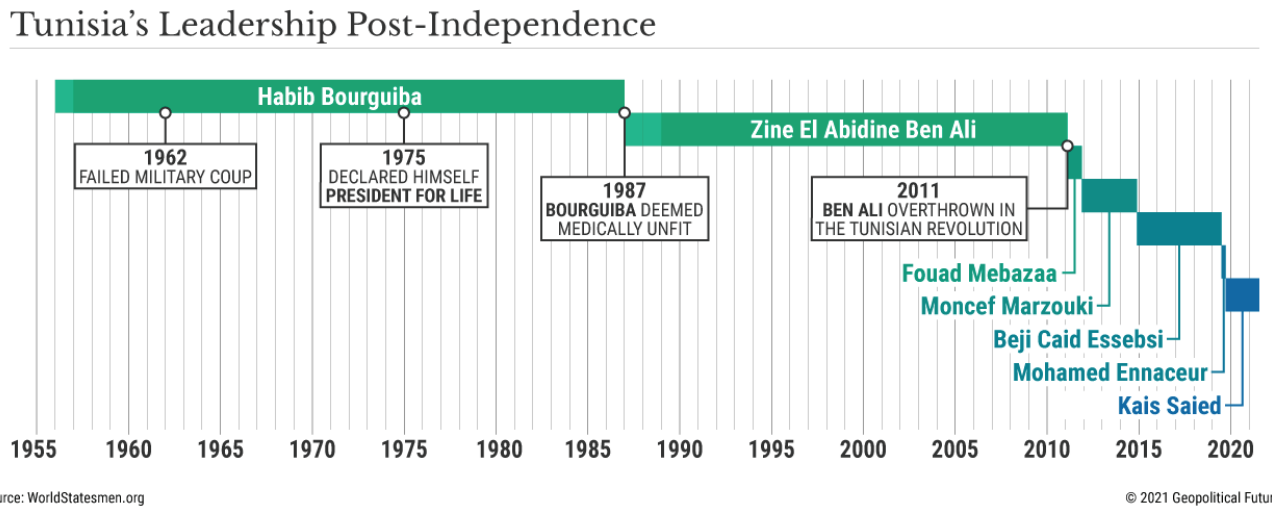
Italy occupied Libya in 1911. U.S. forces worked alongside the British Empire in Libya against German and Italian troops during the Second World War. In 1943, Free French soldiers occupied Fezzan, and during the Potsdam Conference in 1945, Stalin tried in vain to secure a Soviet mandate over Tripolitania in western Libya. The U.S. helped the country gain its independence in 1951, and since then it has functioned as a minimalist state. Its three provinces share very little in common due to the heavily tribal structure of its society. King Senusi was able to keep Libya together because he enjoyed traditional religious legitimacy. (He descended from Muhammad bin Ali Senusi, who founded a mystical religious order in the 19th century that appealed to the local population across tribal affiliations.) It's not easy to imagine a functioning unitary state in Libya outside this context. It's equally difficult to imagine that foreign powers will leave Libya to determine its own future.

7 | Tunisia's Return to Authoritarian Rule

After little more than two years in office, President Kais Saied has reversed all of Tunisia's democratic reforms.

January 13, 2022 | Hilal Khashan

In 2019, former constitutional law professor Kais Saied was elected Tunisia's new president. An unlikely candidate for the country's top political post, Saied launched a modest election campaign, painting himself as a defender against the corrupt and self-serving ruling elite that betrayed the country's 2011 revolution, which ousted longtime president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. But last July, Saied, claiming to be acting within the bounds of the constitution, dismissed the prime minister, suspended parliament and lifted its members' immunity from prosecution. Two months later, with the country still under a state of emergency, Saied froze the constitution and, ruling by decree, arrogated legislative, executive and judicial powers to himself. Saied vowed to introduce a presidential system with extensive prerogatives. Many observers suspect Saied's real intention is to restore the authoritarian rule that prevailed in Tunisia between 1957 and 2011. His actions suggest that he is not the populist hero he portrays himself to be but a reckless demagogue obsessed with power.



Unlikely President

Saied ran as an independent and conservative presidential candidate. He views legalizing homosexuality as a Western conspiracy and has endorsed the Sunni Muslim doctrine that opposes gender equality in inheritance and divorce. He gained popularity with voters after the government failed to address Tunisia's longstanding economic woes following the 2011 uprising. His most substantial base of voter support came from the youth, whose unemployment rate exceeded 36 percent.

But his election did not solve any of Tunisia's problems. Factionalism and political wrangling grew among the many parties that emerged after the uprising. Political instability became the norm, Tunisia's social and political problems escalated, and its economic crisis was exacerbated by the pandemic. The friction came to a head when Saied rejected Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi's Cabinet reshuffle, even though it was not his prerogative. Saied essentially created a political crisis in order to eliminate his opponents, justifying his rule by decree by citing article 80 of the 2014 constitution, which allows the president to take certain measures in exceptional situations that threaten the state. The constitution explicitly states that such measures should be taken in consultation with the prime minister, whom Saied dismissed, and the speaker of the house, whom he accused of treason.

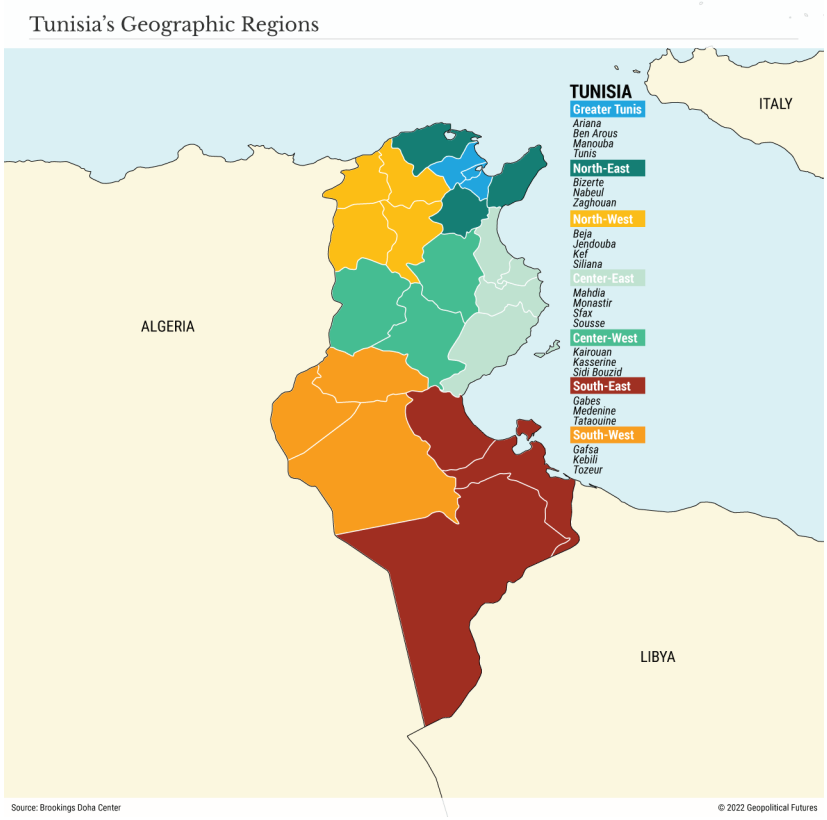
Saied is not a fan of Tunisia's political parties, especially the Islamic Ennahda Movement. He takes issue with the 2014 constitution that promulgated a parliamentary system, where no party can win a simple majority in the constituent assembly. The law effectively promoted accommodation and led to widespread corruption. In December, Saied announced three months of online public consultations to formulate a new constitutional and electoral platform in preparation for a referendum on constitutional and other changes set for next July, ahead of legislative elections in December. However, Tunisia, where 76 percent of citizens have access to the internet, is a digital police state. Activists who speak their minds are often prosecuted. Former President Moncef Marzouki, who lives in self-exile in France, believes that Saied will use participants' data to rig the election and arrest critics. Saied perceives all opposition leaders as treacherous foreign agents, regardless of their political orientation.

Saied even turned against those who backed his palace coup, namely the leftist parties and Tunisia's influential General Labor Union. They naively thought the president was opposed only to Ennahda but soon realized that he didn't want to share power with any party or political figure. He refused to start a national dialogue on Tunisia's future and even banned politicians from appearing on state TV. Saied constantly criticizes the media, political parties and civil society organizations. Marzouki was prosecuted in absentia and given a four-year prison term for his participation in a protest in Paris against Saied's measures and for demanding that the French government not support his regime. He also failed to consult with the Independent High Authority for the Elections, the body that organizes elections, about the referendum and legislative elections. He also said that it must be clear to all Tunisians that the head of the state is the supreme leader of the armed forces and society.

Exacerbated by Saied's rash changes, the G7 ambassadors urged him to set a timetable for reactivating Tunisia's democratic institutions, including a transparently elected constituent assembly. But Saied has already outlined his plan for Tunisia. He says he wants to implement a system of democratic decentralization, giving the country's seven geographic regions a chance at self-rule in a post-political party system. In reality, he wants to replicate former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi's Jamahiriya, or "state of the masses," a system to control Tunisia through his informants and lackeys.

Autocratic Leader

According to Human Rights Watch, Tunisia's human rights record has deteriorated since Saied launched his changes. Saied's despotism is chipping away at his popular support, and



resentment of the total concentration of authority in his hands is giving rise to civil society groups. Last December, the Citizens Against the Coup initiative demanded that he be dismissed from office because he "hijacked the state and blatantly usurped the people's freedoms." The United Nations condemned the extrajudicial arrest of Ennahda's deputy chief and a former senior Ministry of Interior official, and demanded that they be released or put on trial.

Many of the people who celebrated Saied's move against the political establishment expected him to address Tunisia's economic crisis, create jobs, especially for the youth, and improve their standard of living. They were less concerned about his political and constitutional revisions. His critics, on the other hand, view him as a dictator struggling to bring Tunisia back to the era of despotism, ending the last remaining stronghold of the Arab uprisings. Fighting corruption is ostensibly Saied's premier policy objective, but he seems more concerned with consolidating his authority and eliminating the opposition.

He talks about democracy, but his actions are dictatorial. His offensive discourse resembles that of Arab dictators such as Syria's Bashar Assad, who described the rebels as germs and rats, and Libya's Gaddafi, who compared the opposition to stray dogs. In his speeches, he describes those who oppose him as microbes, snakes, crows, viruses, devils and betrayers.

The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia welcomed Saied's measures, which significantly curtailed the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Ennahda. To help Tunisia cope with its COVID-19 outbreak, Emirati and Saudi medical supplies poured in right after Saied seized the political system and sidelined the entire political class. Tunisia's central bank is dependent on financial assistance from Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and others to stabilize the country's finances. During his recent visit to Tunis to express solidarity with Saied, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune promised Tunisia $300 million in loans.

Saied's fate will be decided by the Tunisian army, but it will not move against him to protect the opposition, for whom it has little respect. Only a popular uprising like the one in December 2010 that led to the ouster of Ben Ali will motivate the army to remove Saied. There are still some Tunisians who see Saied as their savior. The odds are that they will become disillusioned after seeing him for what he is: an autocratic leader.

8 | Mauritania's Extremism Problem

The government has merely paid lip service to tackling the country's numerous social issues.

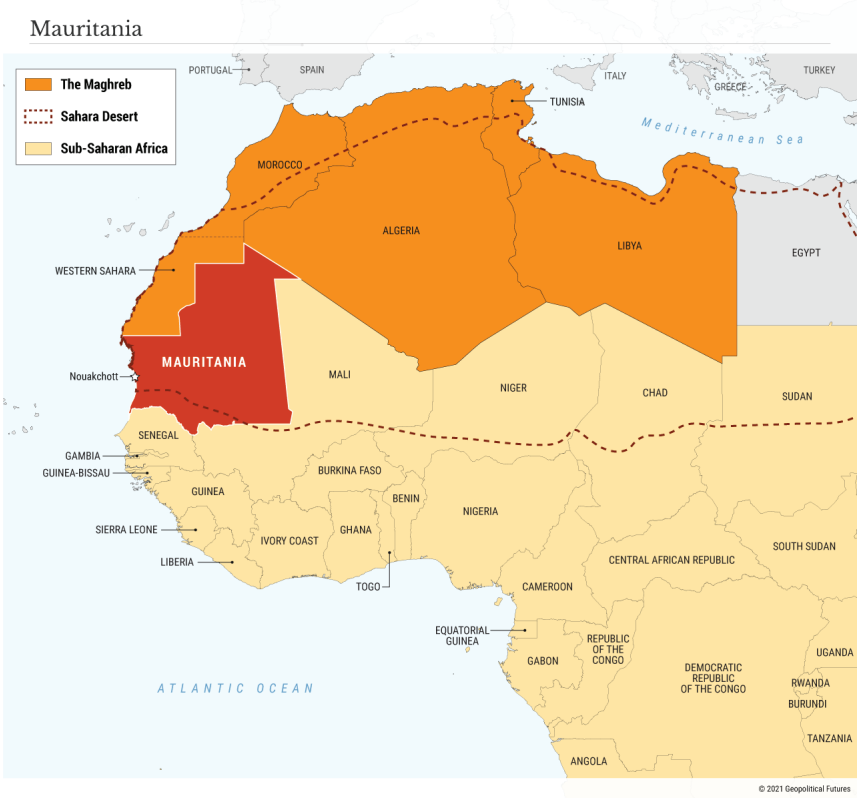
May 13, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

Despite Mauritania's immense mineral and fishery resources, it's ranked 159th out of 189 countries in the United Nations' human development index. Its population of 4.4 million has an average per capita income of less than $1,700. Since independence in 1960, it has seen four military coups, and its only smooth transition of power took place after the 2019 presidential election.

The ethnically diverse country has also been a hotbed of extremism at times. It experienced a spate of Islamist attacks between 2005 and 2011 and was hailed by the U.S. for its ability to control radical Islamists. But Mauritania's success was about pacifying local Islamic movements without dismantling their structures. The underlying conditions that led to six years of violence still exist and are being exacerbated by unresolved ethnic, social and gender issues.

Uncomfortable Alliance

Mauritania straddles the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, displaying cultural and ethnic characteristics of both distinct regions. Because of its ethnic diversity and location far from the Middle East, many Arab commentators view Mauritania as a state on the periphery of the Arab world. Yet, it wields disproportionate influence on Islamic teachings and Islamist militant movements. It has a powerful religious establishment, which also wields immense power domestically and played a key role in the 1991 decision to change the country's official name to the Islamic State of Mauritania.



In 2018, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) urged its followers to target Westerners in the five Sahel countries: Chad, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Despite a surge in violence in the others, Mauritania hasn't seen a spike in AQIM activity.

Mauritanian clerics are strongly represented in AQIM's hierarchy. Though

the government has been tough on the local religious establishment of late, it has also maintained an uncomfortable alliance with the country's Islamic elite. It chose to give religious leaders space instead of banning extremist ideology outright, recognizing that Islamists are a vital part of Mauritania's precarious peace. They won the freedom to inject political issues in their discourse and sermons, and even advocate for jihad, provided they do not expressly advocate violence against Mauritania's government. The clerics have used their influence to prevent the government from reforming the civil code, which many believe discriminates against women, allows for polygamy and reinforces male-dominated social norms.

The government maintains a tight grip on mosques and Islamic religious schools, which have deep roots in Mauritania. The schools attract students from across the country and other sub-Saharan African states, including the Sahel countries. Thousands of their graduates end up joining jihadist groups in neighboring countries, especially Mali, while many others end up living on the streets of the country's capital, Nouakchott. Children are often sent to these schools by poor families living far away with no money to pay for their basic needs. They are often forced to beg for money to cover their living costs and do not learn to read or write while away at school.

These problems have been compounded by demographic dislocation. Over the past few decades, Mauritania has seen significant demographic changes resulting from massive rural-to-urban migration. The country's failure to develop economically led to increasing poverty, loosened family bonds and a huge problem with street children. (In a country where more than half of the children do not have identity documents, there are no official stats on the number of street kids, but UNICEF reports that at least 143,000 children need immediate humanitarian aid.)

Human Rights Issues

Though Mauritania has ratified many international human rights treaties, it has done little to implement them. Among its many human rights issues, one of the biggest is slavery. Slavery in Mauritania was abolished in 1981 and criminalized in 2007, but it's still a huge problem. It's often tied to the country's agricultural and rural social structures, and thus more akin to serfdom in Tsarist Russia than the slave trade in the United States.

Slavery's legacy remains part of the collective memory of the Beidane (descendants of white moor enslavers) and the Haratin (descendants of black moor slaves). Centuries of the practice gave rise to an enduring caste system that isn't recognized by the state but nevertheless remains embedded in society. The Haratin are the poorest of Mauritania's major ethnic groups and comprise roughly 40 percent of the population. The Arab-Berber Beidane dominate the country's politics, economy and military, and account for 30 percent of the population. Sub-Saharan tribal groups represent the remaining 30 percent of the population.

The Haratin are technically free but remain limited by their past. Some even accept their place as servants of the Beidane to this day. The problem is that Mauritania's size, exceeding 1 million square kilometers, and its sparse population have prevented social change from taking hold. The country's vastness isolated certain groups and precluded the rise of a national political community.

Mauritania's Islamic elite are also part of the problem. They have failed to take a stand against slavery or pressure the government to enforce the ban against it. (Islamic jurisprudence does not prohibit slavery and even accepts it as a spoil of war.) Their position on the issue largely coincides with that of the country's ruling elite.

Another major issue in Mauritania is gender equality. Much of the problem here stems from the influence of Saudi Wahhabism on Mauritania's Salafists during the oil boom of the 1970s. The Salafists integrated certain beliefs into their system of values that civil rights groups view as obscurantist and chauvinist. The list of grievances ranges from discrimination against women and domestic abuse to force-feeding of young girls. (Force-feeding, or leblouh as it's known locally, is a common practice among traditional Mauritanians who see obesity as a sign of wealth and status. It's often used in preparation for marriage but can have severe health and emotional consequences.)

Lip Service

The government has paid lip service to tackling these issues but has done little to actually address them. In 2017, for example, it carried out, in collaboration with Interpol, a campaign to rescue homeless children in Nouakchott, but the program took custody of only 30 kids. The Mauritanian military, meanwhile, managed to stamp out Islamist attacks in 2011 but has yet to eradicate the homegrown Salafi movement altogether.

To boost its legitimacy, the government allied with the influential Salafists rather than initiating a modernization program. The rise of Algeria's so-called Group for Preaching and Combat in 1998 influenced the subsequent Salafist violence in Mauritania. The rise of civil society and a secular movement risks the return of religious-inspired violence, especially as other Sahel countries – which share some of the same social, religious and ethnic problems facing Mauritania – confront Islamist terrorism themselves.

The government's tenuous alliance with the Islamists is problematic. Public pressure on the government to introduce political reforms, modernize the country's civil laws and universalize education is bound to put the military on a collision course with the restive Salafists. Modernization will require abolishing religious schools that are centers for militancy and crime. Mauritania's future does not lie in an alliance with an anachronistic form of Islam; it hinges on fundamental reforms and progress toward a viable state.

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Hilal Khashan is a contributing analyst at Geopolitical Futures. He is a Professor of political science at the American University of Beirut and a respected author and analyst of Middle Eastern affairs. He is the author of six books, including Hizbullah: A Mission to Nowhere. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019.) He is currently writing a book titled Saudi Arabia: The Dilemma of Political Reform and the Illusion of Economic Development. He is also the author of more than 110 articles that appeared in journals such as Orbis, The Journal of Conflict Resolution, The Brown Journal of World Affairs, Middle East Quarterly, Third World Quarterly, Israel Affairs, Journal of Religion and Society, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, and The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies.

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