

# Morocco and Algeria Beyond the Divide

## From Costs of Non-Engagement to Pathways for Cooperation

Editors  
Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria, Camille Limon



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Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria, Camille Limon

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# Morocco - Algeria

## Beyond the Divide: From Costs of Non-Engagement to Pathways for Cooperation

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# Introduction

Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria and Camille Limon



The dramatic conflicts unfolding in the Middle East not only attract most of the public and media attention, they also absorb significant diplomatic resources of governments across the Mediterranean and beyond. As these crises deepen with heavy humanitarian and strategic consequences, other unresolved conflicts in the region are increasingly sidelined. Among them, the longstanding tensions between Morocco and Algeria risk slipping further down the agenda.

While the Morocco-Algeria conflict undeniably lacks the immediate severity of the Middle Eastern crises and is unlikely to escalate militarily in the near future, the recent history of the Israel-Palestine conflict should serve as a warning against diplomatic passivity. Until October 2023, a near-consensus prevailed that the latter would remain low on the policy agenda. The conflict was seen as “manageable” and the status quo deemed affordable. The events of October 7th shattered this assumption in a sudden and violent manner, affirming the perspective of those scholars and diplomats who have long cautioned that no conflict remains “frozen” indefinitely.

The view that the Morocco-Algeria conflict is “manageable” seems prevalent in Morocco, Algeria, and third-party capitals. Beneath this belief lies a certain resignation: the conflict, with its periodic escalations and lulls, has persisted for decades, and there is little to be done beyond accepting this status quo. In European Union (EU) capitals, this resignation is coupled with the belief that military escalation is unlikely and that the conflict’s costs are limited, given Europe’s continued access to Algerian gas and Morocco’s cooperation on irregular migration. The conflict may even serve some vested interests within the parties themselves or for their foreign partners.

The objective of this publication is to challenge those assumptions and build a momentum to encourage Mediterranean neighbors and the international community to reinvest in bridge building processes between Morocco and Algeria. The sense of urgency comes not only from the analysis that an unexpected and accidental military escalation would have devastating consequences for the parties themselves and for the Mediterranean region as a whole. It also comes from the assumption that the broader deterioration of the relations already bears heavy and unsustainable costs.

The focus of the **first part of this volume** is sectorial. Six experts illustrate the existing costs of the stand-off between both countries on specific sectors for the parties. **Fátima Fernández** recalls that bilateral trade accounts for less than 1% of each country’s total **trade** volume, with the cost of the closed border estimated at 2% of their annual growth rate. The situation has not been improving, with economic exchanges between the two nations reaching their lowest point in 2023 since 1999, leaving vast areas of potential trade cooperation untapped, in the energy and agriculture sectors, as well as in industries such as fertilizer, textile and automobile.

**Ignacio Urbasos** confirms this trend with a closer analysis of the **energy** sector and the very telling example of gas. Since the construction of the Maghreb-Europe pipeline in 1996, natural gas has formed the backbone of the modest bilateral trade. This model of beneficial interdependence became one of the chief casualties of the diplomatic crisis, which culminated in October 2021 when Algeria opted not to renew the transit contract.

Along the same lines, **Luca Danese** and **Alberto Rizzi** highlight the cost of the lack of trans-border connection and the missed opportunities in the **transport** sector, including rail, road, maritime and air transportation.

What is true of economic cooperation seems to be also true in the **security** sector. The diplomatic deadlock between both countries has halted a once discreet yet effective cooperation. **Adel Ourabah** argues that the discord has manifested itself through three main consequences: the absence of intelligence-sharing mechanisms (both in terms of counter-terrorism and in combating transnational organized crime), mutual exclusion from regional security architectures and the -costly- hyper-securitization of borders. These three dimensions have serious security, financial and humanitarian consequences. **Boubker Benkhalef** focuses on migration cooperation or lack thereof. Stalled cooperation has not only resulted in boosting irregular migration but also has had dire humanitarian consequences, with for instance no formal cooperation mechanisms in place to recover bodies or address cases of missing persons in the border regions.

Beyond the economy, beyond security, the diplomatic stand-off risks undermining the invaluable **people to people** bonds. This is the argument **Khalid Mouna** makes in his contribution. Physical barriers are amplified by the growth of aggressive narratives and hate speech in media and social media. Highlighting the erosion of these ties is not merely an act of nostalgia but a stark warning of the political, social and cultural toll such discord is exacting.

However, the costs of the conflict between Algeria and Morocco are not borne solely by the parties themselves. In the **second part** of this volume, **Intissar Fakir** focuses on the **regional dimension**. She explains that the standoff has instilled a zero-sum approach to foreign policy with regional consequences. She provides valuable insights of Morocco's and Algeria's regional approaches. Regional cooperation has remained hostage to these tensions, which have led to further fragmentation of sub-regional cooperation schemes. This rivalry has also complicated the engagement of international partners in the Maghreb, as they navigate the complex web of competing interests, with each country's stance on the Western Sahara issue often serving as a litmus test for their alignment.

In the third part of this volume, **John O'Rourke** focuses on the cost of the stand-off between Algeria and Morocco for the **European Union**. He offers a useful summary of how the EU, both collectively and through its member states, has

strategically engaged with both partners until now. He argues that the balancing effort required to mitigate these frictions is not sustainable as it creates an unstable economic framework for European economic interests, potentially harming some of its strategic interests (energy sources and irregular migration) and politically impacting EU's coherence and credibility.

**Harry Tzimitras** concludes the volume by situating the Algeria-Morocco conflict within a **broader Mediterranean context**. By examining the intricate and interconnected web of conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean, he highlights compelling examples of rival parties in the region engaging in cooperative dynamics. These cases offer unique and inspiring lessons that could inform approaches to conflict resolution in the Western Mediterranean.

Overall, this volume does more than identify the costs of ongoing diplomatic tensions; it seeks to generate momentum for addressing this conflict. It is a call to action for all stakeholders to support initiatives that bridge the divide between Morocco and Algeria. This publication coincides with the beginning of a new political cycle in Brussels. The new leadership will need to show that the EU is able to be the “[credible security provider](#)” it aspires to be, as specified in the 2021 EU's Agenda for the Mediterranean, and reinvent its toolbox. As part of a new security doctrine in the region, championing bridge building initiatives, track II dialogues and discrete conflict resolution mechanisms between Morocco and Algeria could be an impactful start. While the Western Sahara conflict remains a significant point of contention between Morocco and Algeria, it is not the primary lens through which this publication seeks to engage. This longstanding issue symbolizes broader regional challenges and historical tensions. This volume explores the wider landscape beyond this central issue, acknowledging its importance but focusing on the surrounding dynamics and shared opportunities that could foster bilateral and regional cooperation.

Accordingly, the reader will find in each chapter some references to the benefits of renewed cooperation. The volume contains some initial ideas and recommendations on what could be done to get there. In line with its objectives, Diplomats aspires to use this volume as an advocacy tool to promote bridge-building initiatives between both countries.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the contributing authors, whose expertise and dedication have shaped each chapter of this volume. Each contribution reflects the perspectives of its respective author and does not represent the views of the two editors or those of Diplomats. Special recognition is due to all Diplomats board members including Intissar Fakir, whose pro bono contribution greatly enriched this work, to Guillermo Cereza for his graphic design, to Céline Gérard for her valuable assistance and to our esteemed partners at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. This publication was made possible by their collective efforts, for which we are profoundly grateful.

## Chapter 1

# Costs and Potential of Morocco-Algeria Collaboration in Key Sectors

Luca Danese, Boubker Benkhalef, Fátima Fernández, Khalid Mouna, Adel Ourabah, Alberto Rizzi, Ignacio Urbasos





# Trade Dynamics: The Economic Costs of Morocco-Algeria Confrontation and the Opportunities of Cooperation

Fátima Fernández\*

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The cost of the closed border is estimated at 2% of their annual growth rate.

Trade relations between Morocco and Algeria are profoundly conditioned by their postcolonial legacies, divergent foreign policies, and enduring diplomatic rivalry, especially over Western Sahara. This intricate and often contentious relationship has resulted in exceptionally low levels of bilateral trade, with economists citing the Maghreb as one of the least integrated regions in the world. The economic costs of this fragmentation are significant for both countries and the broader region.

## The Impact on Bilateral trade

Historically, trade between Algeria and Morocco has predominantly centered on hydrocarbons, with Morocco importing energy resources from Algeria while exporting metals, fertilizers, and textiles. However, trade volumes have steadily diminished over the last years. Data from the [Observatory of Economic Complexity](#) reveals that Moroccan exports to Algeria have contracted at an annual rate of 20.7% over the past five years, plummeting from \$252 million in 2017 to \$79.4 million in 2022. Similarly, Algerian exports to Morocco have decreased by 19.6% annually, from \$460 million in 2017 to \$154 million in 2022. Presently, bilateral trade accounts for less than 1% of each country's total trade volume, with the cost of the closed border estimated at 2% of their annual growth rate. According to the Moroccan Foreign Exchange Office, economic exchanges between the two nations reached their lowest point in 2023 since 1999, with dates emerging as Algeria's top export to Morocco, and iron and steel as Morocco's primary exports to Algeria.

## Beyond Borders: Morocco-Algeria Trade, European Dependency, and African Influence

Despite the decline, bilateral trade has historically never represented a substantial share of cross-border exchanges. Both Algeria and Morocco have long been heavily reliant on trade with the EU, particularly with Spain, France, and Italy, which collectively account for nearly half of their total trade volume. This dependency, along with their divergent diplomatic agendas within the EU, has shaped the evolution of South-South trade frameworks, ultimately undermining regional economic resilience.

\* Independent Researcher, PhD in Regional Development and Economic Integration.

Integration agreements involving both countries have largely prioritized the creation of energy and electricity markets connected to the Northern Mediterranean, rather than fostering meaningful trade in goods between the two nations. Furthermore, both countries vie for influence across Africa, often employing similar strategies of economic diplomacy, particularly through energy and infrastructure initiatives. The rivalry over Nigerian natural gas routes exemplifies this competition, as each country strives to position itself as a pivotal energy hub.



Significant potential for trade cooperation exists, particularly in hydrocarbons and renewable energy.

## Opportunities for Cooperation

Enhancing trade—and diplomatic—relations would allow both countries to adopt more advantageous common positions in negotiations with the EU, where tensions periodically surface regarding their Association Agreements. Recent examples include the initiation of dispute settlement [proceedings](#) against Algeria for violating trade liberalization commitments, and the [judicial annulment](#) of EU-Morocco trade agreements concerning Western Sahara.

On a continental level, Morocco and Algeria could capitalize on their complementarities to bolster North African leadership in advancing intra-continental trade. Mauritania’s neutral stance, coupled with its current leadership role in the African Union, presents a unique opportunity for mediation in this context.

Sectorally, significant potential for trade cooperation exists, particularly in hydrocarbons and renewable energy, with Morocco ranking as the top country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) on [MIT’s Green Future Index](#). In agriculture and industry, both countries stand to benefit from reinforcing value chains in sectors such as fertilizers, textiles, and the automobile industry. Such collaboration could also extend to improving transportation systems, logistics, and connectivity, paving the way for the development of efficient Mediterranean trade corridors.

## The Risks of Fragmented Security and the Necessity for Joint Algeria-Morocco Cooperation

Adel Ourabah\*

The enduring rivalry between Morocco and Algeria greatly undermines collaborative efforts to combat terrorism and transnational organized crime, significantly impacting the stability and operational effectiveness of the two countries, as well as the broader security framework across the Maghreb-Sahel region. This persistent discord manifests in three critical consequences.

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Cooperation in combating transnational organized crime has been nonexistent.

### Absence of Intelligence-Sharing Mechanisms

Despite long-standing hostilities—intensified by the closure of their land borders since 1994—Algeria and Morocco maintained limited yet functional intelligence-sharing channels, particularly between 2011 and 2016. This discreet cooperation was crucial for tracking Moroccan jihadists who used Algerian transit routes to join ISIS, especially in Syria. For instance, in 2016, Algerian authorities [flagged](#) approximately 500 Moroccan nationals heading towards Libya, who were subsequently repatriated. However, since 2017, this ad hoc security cooperation has sharply declined. This deterioration appears to be fueled by a false sense of complacency in both countries, stemming from the belief that their significant success in dismantling domestic terrorist networks renders a cooperative intelligence-sharing framework unnecessary.

In contrast, cooperation in combating transnational organized crime has been nonexistent, with both states regularly exchanging accusations, particularly regarding drug trafficking, which has intensified along their shared borders. The recent surge in illicit cocaine has [turned](#) both Morocco and Algeria into major routes for trafficking within North Africa. Simultaneously, human trafficking is proliferating along the border, due to the [lack](#) of communication mechanisms about the deportation and readmission of migrants from one country back into the other, especially since diplomatic ties were severed in August 2021. This situation has severe humanitarian consequences, with hundreds of migrants often stranded at the Algerian-Moroccan border for extended periods under inhumane conditions.

\* Independent Researcher.

## Mutual Exclusion from Regional Security Architectures

The deepening distrust between Algiers and Rabat has resulted in their mutual exclusion from key regional security frameworks<sup>1</sup>, although they coexist within other initiatives led by extra regional actors, such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and the 5+5 Mediterranean Dialogue.

The bilateral competition to assert dominance as security providers within the Maghreb-Sahel corridor has led to the [proliferation](#) of security initiatives, diluting collective regional responses. Moreover, Morocco's re-entry into the African Union in 2017 failed to catalyze cooperation between the two countries within African Union frameworks, such as the Mechanism for Police Cooperation, which is essential for combating organized crime.

This situation not only erodes bilateral cooperation but also creates ripple effects throughout neighboring states in the Maghreb and Sahel, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of collective security efforts across the region.

## Hyper-Securitization of Borders

Another consequence of the bilateral rift is the hyper-securitization of the Morocco-Algeria frontier. Both states have increasingly turned to [constructing](#) extensive physical barriers, such as walls, fences, and trenches, justified by diverging security priorities. Morocco frames its border security infrastructure as a counterterrorism measure, while Algeria emphasizes combating drug trafficking originating from Moroccan territory. Though these heightened security postures align with broader concerns over regional instability in the Maghreb-Sahel zone, they have further exacerbated the diplomatic estrangement, pushing the prospect of reopening the borders even further into the future.

The financial burden of this hyper-securitization also imposes a significant strain on both economies. For example, the intensification of security measures at the borders cost Algeria over \$2 billion between 2013 and 2020. These resource-intensive strategies divert funding from crucial socio-economic priorities, undermining both countries' capacity to address their pressing domestic challenges.

The three consequences highlighted above bear unsustainable costs for the parties concerned and speak for practical solutions to mitigate them.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Morocco was not incorporated into the Joint Operational Staff Committee (CEMOC), established by Algiers in 2010. Conversely, Algeria is not a member of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), an organization with a security component where Morocco has maintained a dominant role over the past decade.

## Stalled Cooperation: Addressing Migration and Missing Persons in the Morocco-Algeria Relationship

**Boubker Benkhalef\***

The diplomatic deadlock between Morocco and Algeria, marked by the severing of ties in August 2021, has halted a once discreet yet effective cooperation. For years, the two countries collaborated on the repatriation of irregular migrants and the recovery of bodies of deceased individuals found within their respective territories. However, the current situation has not only exacerbated the divide between these two North African neighbors but also left critical humanitarian issues concerning migration and missing persons unresolved.

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There are compelling arguments for Morocco and Algeria to reconsider limited cooperation on irregular migration.

### Stalled Cooperation: A Boost to Irregular Migration

Although political relations have collapsed, human movement continues to connect the two countries. Despite the land border between Algeria and Morocco being closed since 1994, a growing number of migrants seeking clandestine routes to Europe have turned to the Algerian coast as a transit point. Known as *harga*, this phenomenon has become increasingly organized, with trafficking networks operating along Algeria's Western shores and the Alboran Sea. Migrants frequently depart from the coasts of Oran, Mostaganem, and Tlemcen provinces. While Algerian authorities do not release specific figures by nationality, it is estimated that 10-20% of Moroccans arriving in Spain use this Algeria-Spain corridor. The route's appeal lies primarily in its lower cost compared to other alternatives, though prices are rising due to increased demand and sophistication of departure techniques.

### The Human Toll of Diplomatic Deadlock

The diplomatic deadlock has far-reaching consequences beyond irregular migration. Currently, no legal framework or political mechanism exists to help Algerian and Moroccan families trace their missing loved ones. Desperate families turn to informal networks and local civil society organizations in both countries. Prior to the diplomatic fallout, informal communication between Moroccan and Algerian security forces provided some respite, enabling case-by-case resolution of missing persons and irregular migration cases. Now, this system has disintegrated, and families are left with limited options.

\* Independent researcher.

The impasse also exacerbates the plight of Sub-Saharan migrants. Hundreds perish each year while crossing the Sahara or attempting to reach Europe through Algeria and Morocco, with no formal cooperation mechanism in place to recover bodies or address cases of missing persons in the border regions. NGOs such as AlarmPhone Sahara attempt to mitigate this gap, but they cannot substitute for the role of state authorities. The absence of collaboration has created a vacuum, leaving critical humanitarian needs unmet and families trapped in uncertainty and anguish.

## The Case for Renewed Cooperation

Despite the prevailing hostility, there are compelling arguments for Morocco and Algeria to reconsider limited cooperation on irregular migration. A pragmatic first step would be the reestablishment of a formal repatriation corridor for stranded Algerian and Moroccan nationals. Such an initiative would alleviate the burden on migrants and their families, while reducing the risks posed to those vulnerable to traffickers. Both governments could also work to streamline administrative and judicial processes for irregular migrants, fostering a more coordinated and effective response.

Ultimately, these efforts hinge on the political will of both governments, which has been notably lacking. Renewing dialogue on humanitarian grounds could offer a constructive way forward, even amidst broader political tensions. However, at present, such cooperation appears distant, leaving the issue unresolved.

## Historical People-to-People Bonds at Risk: A Call to Reconnect

Khalid Mouna\*

Moroccan and Algerian societies are bound by deep historical, cultural, and social ties, forged through a shared language, religion, and traditions. Yet, the resilience of these bonds is being increasingly tested by political tensions, threatening the mutual heritage both nations have cultivated over centuries. Highlighting the erosion of these ties is not merely an act of nostalgia, but a stark warning of the political, social, and cultural toll such discord is exacting.

### A Shared History of Migration and Integration

Migration between Algeria and Morocco has played a central role in shaping their intertwined histories. In the 19th and 20th centuries, many Moroccans, particularly from the Rif region, migrated to Algeria in search of economic opportunities, contributing to the growth of Moroccan communities in cities such as Oran and Algiers.

Migration was also deeply linked to political developments and shared anti-colonial struggles. For instance, Moroccan volunteers fought alongside Algerians during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), while many Algerian fighters operated from bases in Morocco or sought refuge in cities like Tétouan, Meknès, and Tangiers.

### Political Rifts Undermining Social Ties

These migratory movements cemented solidarity between the populations, facilitated intermarriage, and forged enduring social networks. However, political conflicts have periodically strained these relationships. Twelve years after the 1963 "War of the Sands," fought over border disputes, Algeria's 1975 expulsion of tens of thousands of Moroccans—many of whom had lived in Algeria for decades—in response to Morocco's Green March over Western Sahara further entrenched the divide.

Tensions escalated in 1994 when the Moroccan government, suspecting Algerian involvement in the Marrakech hotel bombings, imposed visa restrictions on Algerians. In retaliation, Algeria closed the land border—a closure that persists to this day, symbolizing the protracted diplomatic deadlock. The suspension of train services between Oujda (Morocco) and Maghnia (Algeria) further entrenched this physical and symbolic barrier to the movement of people and goods.

\* Anthropologist, Moulay Ismail University; President of Rabat Social Studies Institute (RSSI).

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Reopening channels of communication and rebuilding connections are essential steps to prevent further fragmentation and to preserve the social fabric that has long mitigated political divides.

## Adding to the Physical Barriers: How -Social-Media Narratives are Widening the Gap between both Societies

The 2021 collapse of diplomatic relations ushered in a new era of hardship. Travel between the two countries, already cumbersome, became even more complicated. Families separated by mere kilometers are compelled to take indirect, lengthy routes, as [entry](#) into Algeria now requires visas.

As physical barriers multiplied, social media emerged as a new arena for cultural conflict. Shared symbols of heritage—such as caftans, couscous, and Zelig tiles—have become contested objects in a growing national rivalry.

Discourse on both sides increasingly revolves around accusations of cultural appropriation, deepening antagonism and fragmenting the shared cultural identity. In the context of the war in Gaza, Morocco's relationship with Israel, normalized in 2020, has also become a focal point for hostile narratives, further intensifying the [divide](#).

### Urgency for Dialogue

Despite disputes between governments, societal ties between Morocco and Algeria had proved relatively resilient until recently. However, there is growing concern that this resilience is now rapidly eroding, particularly among younger generations.

The consequences of this breakdown go far beyond mere symbolic losses. The erosion of social bonds removes a vital buffer against political confrontation. Families and communities that once served as bridges between the two nations, even during periods of heightened tension, now risk losing their shared sense of community and belonging. This increases the potential for future conflict.

Reopening channels of communication, rebuilding connections, and addressing cultural hostilities are essential steps to prevent further fragmentation and to preserve the social fabric that has long mitigated political divides.



# Energy at Stake: The Costs of the Algeria-Morocco Standoff and the Opportunities of Renewed Cooperation

Ignacio Urbasos\*

The diplomatic standoff between Morocco and Algeria has disrupted one of the few remaining avenues of productive bilateral cooperation: energy. Following the closure of their border to people and trade in 1994, hydrocarbons and electricity were among the few physical commodities that continued to flow between the two countries.

## How Diplomatic Strain is Reversing Algeria-Morocco Energy Integration

Since the construction of the Maghreb-Europe pipeline in 1996, natural gas had formed the [backbone](#) of the modest bilateral trade. The pipeline provided Morocco with generous transit royalties and Algeria with a shorter, less technically complex route to export gas to the Iberian Peninsula. This model of beneficial interdependence became one of the chief casualties of the diplomatic crisis, which culminated in October 2021 when Algeria opted not to renew the transit contract. Today, the Maghreb-Europe pipeline operates at minimal capacity in [reverse](#), with Spain exporting natural gas received through its Liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals to Morocco.

The electricity interconnection between Morocco and Algeria was also a key driver of regional development. This infrastructure, together with the Morocco-Spain interconnection, enabled the synchronisation of the power grids of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria with the EU's Continental Synchronous Area. Operating on the same frequency, it helped [improve](#) grid stability, efficiency and the potential for electricity trade within the region and with Europe. This integration was part of broader regional energy cooperation efforts, including the Maghreb Electricity Committee ([COMELEC](#)), which sought to develop cross-border infrastructure and harmonize electricity systems across North Africa. While technical synchronisation persists, actual bilateral electricity exchanges have remained limited. The tense political situation and the lack of a fully liberalised electricity market in the region have hampered the expansion of cross-border electricity trade.

## Missed Win-Win Connections

The current standoff is curtailing future cooperation, putting significant opportunities at risk. One such opportunity lies in the growing penetration of renewable energy and the potential value of interconnections. Morocco, having

\* Researcher, Elcano Royal Institute.

made [strides](#) in developing renewable energy, would find an ideal complement in Algeria's natural gas-based electricity system. Leveraging existing infrastructure, the integration of Algeria's gas assets with Morocco's renewable energy production could have contributed to a more balanced energy mix, enhancing energy stability while supporting the region's green transition.

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Another missed opportunity lies in the potential for shared expertise and collaboration in energy development.

Another missed opportunity lies in the potential for shared expertise and collaboration in energy development. Algeria's vast oil and gas reserves, coupled with its operational experience could bolster Morocco's efforts to develop its relatively modest upstream gas assets. Conversely, Morocco's experience in renewable energy deployment, paired with Algeria's expertise in oil and gas exploration and production, could be mutually beneficial exchanges. Shared language and cultural ties would further facilitate collaboration between energy companies and regulators from both countries, paving the way for cross-border investment and innovation. Unfortunately, these prospects remain stalled, as the enduring political impasse continues to hinder progress across all aspects of the bilateral relationship.

# The Impact of Morocco-Algeria Rivalry in the Transport Sector and Why Connectivity Matters

Luca Danese\*, Alberto Rizzi\*\*

In 2024, thirty years after Algeria and Morocco closed all land borders, transport links between the two nations remain severed. Persistent challenges in cross-border collaboration continue to impede the development of the transport sector, despite the significant potential of connectivity to drive regional cooperation and economic growth.

## Rail and Road: Missed Inter-Connectivity Dividends

This ongoing standoff keeps blocking the development of the Trans-Maghreb railway<sup>2</sup>, a pivotal project designed to connect Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia through a unified rail line along the Casablanca-Algiers-Tunis route. Plans for this project include revamping a 360 km track from Fez in Morocco, to Algeria, passing through Oujda (Morocco) and Zouj Beghal (Algeria), along with the construction of new railway lines within Algeria.

The lack of cross-border connectivity hampers economic integration and limits growth potential. It reduces the region's appeal to international investors. Major transportation investments by Algeria and Morocco are also less effective due to this disconnection, as projects are designed with only domestic objectives in mind and lack interoperability, preventing a cohesive regional infrastructure.

## Parallel -and Suboptimal- Investments in Transport Infrastructures

Morocco has made significant strides in its high-speed rail and port infrastructure. Aiming to build 1,500 km of [high-speed](#) rail lines, Morocco seeks to connect its Atlantic coastal lines with the Rabat-Oujda route. At Tangier Med Port, a €650 million [investment](#) will expand both passenger and cargo capacity. Additionally, the "[Road Plan 2035](#)" targets a comprehensive road network, including 5,550 km of new roads (3,400 km of highways and 2,100 km of expressways), backed by an investment of over €9 billion, supporting long-term economic growth and mobility.

\* President of the Eurispes Observatory on Infrastructure, Transport and Logistics.

\*\* Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations

<sup>2</sup> The grant to conduct a feasibility study into a 1200 km line across the three countries was awarded by the African Development Bank in 2014.

Similarly, Algeria is [planning](#) a substantial expansion of its public railway and road networks, aiming to add 6,000 km to its 4,000 km of rail and build 1,216 km of new highways. Key projects include a \$2 billion investment to modernize the “east mining line” and develop rail links from interior regions to the new central port of El Hamdania, designed to compete with Morocco’s Tangier Med Port.

## Missed Opportunities in Maritime and Air Connectivity

Maritime transportation is another casualty of the Rabat-Algiers standoff, as Algeria banned goods transshipped through Moroccan ports, forcing [companies](#) like Maersk to reroute shipments through Spanish ports. This shift has increased costs and delays for shippers and importers, while preventing both countries from capitalizing on heightened traffic to Western Mediterranean ports due to disruptions in the Red Sea. Instead of collaborating to address this demand, Rabat and Algiers remain locked in rivalry, foregoing mutual economic benefits.

In September 2021, Algeria [closed](#) its airspace to Moroccan aviation, highlighting how connectivity has become a casualty of regional tensions. Although direct flights had already been suspended since March due to pandemic-related restrictions, this move further isolated air travel between the two nations. The closure has bolstered Tunis as a transit hub between the two countries, raising travel costs and durations for passengers. It also weakened Air Algérie’s competitive stance in North Africa against Royal Air Maroc, which maintains its dominance as the region’s primary carrier.

The lack of a trans-border connection between Morocco and Algeria remains a significant problem, despite the operational capacity of the two states. Resolving the standoff would enable cross-Maghreb connectivity, ending decades of economic fragmentation and facilitating the movement of goods and people from Tunis to Marrakech, thereby strengthening regional cohesion and economic growth.

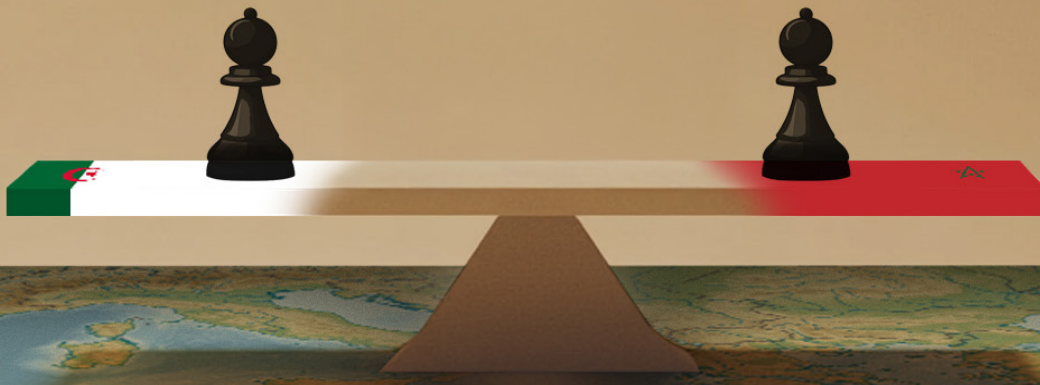
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Resolving the standoff would enable cross-Maghreb connectivity, and facilitate the movement of goods and people from Tunis to Marrakech, thereby strengthening regional cohesion and economic growth.

## Chapter 2

# Strategic Powerplays in North Africa: Tensions between Algeria and Morocco Reshaping Regional Dynamics

Intissar Fakir\*



\* Diplomeds Expert and Supervisory Board Member.  
Senior Fellow and the Founding Director of the North Africa and Sahel Program at the Middle East Institute.



The 2021 diplomatic rupture between Morocco and Algeria has reshaped regional dynamics.

The 2021 diplomatic rupture between Morocco and Algeria has reshaped regional dynamics across two critical dimensions. First, already limited regional cooperation has effectively become paralyzed by the intensification of long-standing tensions. Second, the breakdown of the United Nations (UN) [brokered ceasefire](#) on the Western Sahara conflict reinstated an active conflict zone between Morocco and the Polisario Front, with Algeria's backing of the latter raising the specter of regional escalation.

Beyond the immediacy of the diplomatic rupture lies a long animosity that reflects different political ideologies and perceptions that has, at times, foreclosed the horizon for cooperation. While sharing deep historical and cultural traditions, both states have developed opposing visions for regional leadership that have severely constrained economic integration potential; weakened collective security frameworks; and generated a zero-sum approach to foreign policy that often pushes regional and international partners into difficult and often unsuccessful balancing acts. While both countries engage in strategic positioning, their actions often prioritize short-term tactical gains over long-term strategic vision, creating a pattern of reactive rather than proactive policy-making.

## Historical Evolution of Regional Postures

The modern rivalry emerges from two related dynamics. First is the post-colonial political evolution of each country. Second is the post-independence border delineation disputes that erupted into armed conflict, setting a pattern of antagonism that continues to define regional politics. The Western Sahara conflict became a proxy conflict that crystallized their competing ideological visions and regional ambitions. The territorial dispute became the primary arena where Morocco and Algeria could project their divergent conceptions of state legitimacy, sovereignty, and post-colonial-identity. For Morocco, the issue represented the completion of its territorial integrity. For Algeria, supporting the Polisario's independence claims aligned with its revolutionary anti-colonial principles and its vision for state formation through self-determination.

The regional order that developed reflected an unstable equilibrium, with Mauritania carefully balancing between its powerful neighbors, Tunisia maintaining strategic neutrality, and Libya under Ghaddafi playing an unpredictable but resourceful role in regional affairs.

## Contemporary Power Dynamics

Two pivotal developments in the 2010's reshaped regional dynamics. Libya's descent into civil conflict and Algeria's political paralysis under an ailing President Bouteflika created a strategic opening for Morocco. Rabat seized this opportunity to expand its regional influence through mediation in the

Libyan conflict, enhanced counter-terrorism cooperation, and a landmark return to the African Union in 2016. This increased engagement was wrapped up in its national interests: the Western Sahara conflict, economic development, and, to a lesser extent, security engagement in Africa. This period marked a significant shift in Morocco's regional posture, as it pursued a more assertive diplomatic and economic strategy across Africa.

By contrast, Algeria was less active during this period, prioritizing domestic stability in the lead up to the Hirak movement. However, since the military leadership concluded the domestic transition in the aftermath of the Hirak Movement, Algeria has adopted a more active regional agenda.

## Competing Strategic Visions

The two states pursue fundamentally different approaches to regional leadership. Morocco favors a [pragmatic](#) diplomatic engagement backed by economic incentives and Western-aligned security cooperation. In contrast, Algeria maintains an ideology-driven approach centered on energy partnerships, Sahel-focused security arrangements, and traditional non-aligned positioning. These divergent strategies reflect deeper differences in how each state envisions its role in the region and its partnership with international partners.

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The two states pursue fundamentally different approaches to regional leadership.

Morocco's approach to African engagement has been focused on the entire continent since its return to the African Union in 2016, while Algeria's focus remains its immediate Sahel and Maghreb neighborhoods. Based on this, Morocco has deployed a range of economic cooperation initiatives, investment opportunities entering new African markets including banking, real estate, agricultural and renewable energy sectors. By comparison, Algeria's economic ties in the region have been limited to energy resources as the key tool to build partnerships particularly with other energy producers. For Algeria, cooperation is viewed through the need to prioritize non-aligned anti-colonial stances, whereas Morocco is willing to engage without prior ideological alignment favoring a more opportunist approach.

In Africa especially, Algeria has focused on institutional engagement within the African Union. By 2016, Morocco began to compete with Algeria by running for key positions and generating support for their candidates. In terms of soft power, both provide opportunities for educational and cultural exchanges, but Morocco utilizes a multifaceted soft-power strategy that combines its religious role and legacy, prioritizing South-South cooperation, and a more robust record on migration management, while Algeria focuses on its revolutionary legacy and security cooperation, while ultimately favoring mediation rather than intervention.

In terms of security cooperation, Morocco approached it in a dual fashion: a big

role within multinational organisations, especially UN peacekeeping missions dating back to the 1960's, that has allowed it to become one of the [top 20 contributors](#) of uniformed personnel. Algeria's engagement in this arena is more recent and smaller in numbers and focused on regional theaters rather than a global presence determined by UN needs.

Both play a role in global security cooperation, but each has a different approach. Morocco focuses on domestic and Western Mediterranean security while Algeria is focused more on the [Sahel](#). Morocco is a trusted intelligence partner for Europe and the United States (US) while Algeria prioritizes African partnerships. In the past, despite different approaches, the two neighbors agreed on the need to cooperate on issues such as security given the transnational nature of it.

## Escalating Rivalries

Since his election, President Tebboune has focused on reenergizing Algeria's diplomatic engagement in Africa and the Middle East. This renewed focus required in some way curbing Morocco's growing role. Central to this dynamic is the enduring Western Sahara conflict, which has reemerged as the primary point of contention. The escalating tensions between the two nations were evident in their increasingly hostile rhetoric, intensified verbal exchanges at the UN regarding the Western Sahara, and the growing bilateral ties between Morocco and Israel—a significant development, as Israel had no formal partnerships or presence in the Maghreb since the second intifada until 2020. In response, Algeria has actively opposed international actors, such as the US, Spain, and France, who have expressed support for Morocco's stance on the Western Sahara issue.

Beyond the Western Sahara issue—and pushing back against Morocco's progress in that area, Algeria has sought to re-energize its regional diplomatic standing by seeking mediation roles in neighboring conflicts. The President showed interest in helping mediate the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia, made efforts to bring Syria's beleaguered President Assad back into the Arab fold during its presidency of the Arab League and to help negotiate the stalled Mali and Libyan conflicts. These attempts have largely aligned with Algeria's traditional foreign policy priorities of supporting state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. Moreover, Algeria has sought to expand its non-Western partnerships, as exemplified by its application to join BRICS in 2023. [Algeria's application](#), while unsuccessful, represents a strategic effort to diversify its international partnerships.

As Algeria reinvigorates its foreign policy, the struggle between the two neighbors to expand their respective spheres of influence continues. The intensifying bilateral rivalry underscores competing narratives and efforts to assert influence over the Maghreb region. This dynamic presents a significant challenge for global partners, who must navigate the complexities of diverging interests in the region.



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Morocco and Algeria’s pipeline projects serve as a clear illustration of competing dynamics.

Morocco and Algeria’s pipeline projects, both designed to transport Nigerian natural gas to European markets through their respective territories, serve as a clear illustration of these dynamics. The competing projects exemplify how the bilateral tension transforms infrastructural projects into zero-sum competitions hampering regional development. [Algeria’s Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline](#) (also known as the Grand Sahara Pipeline) was the first proposed project, with Algeria, Niger, and Nigeria signing initial agreements in 2009. The plan envisions a route passing through Niger, connecting to Algerian facilities, and exporting via subterranean pipelines. However, the project has faced significant security challenges from the outset. In 2016, Morocco introduced a competing initiative—the [Atlantic Gas Pipeline project](#)—seeking to ensure its inclusion in gas transport routes to Europe, particularly as prospects for renewing the Maghreb-Europe pipeline remained bleak. Morocco’s plan proposes a circuitous and more expensive coastal pipeline network designed to bypass Algeria entirely. Despite their strategic ambitions, neither project has secured funding, as investors remain wary of the high costs, security risks, and political uncertainties surrounding both ventures.

Europe’s efforts to limit investment in fossil fuel infrastructure had dimmed interest in the project—and while gas shortages after the suspension of Russian gas imports sparked interest in African routes, the long-term nature of the project combined with other challenges failed to give it a boost in momentum. Nigeria, the source of gas, has kept a practical interest in both projects prompting Morocco and Algeria to read Nigeria’s position as support for their plans.

## Impact on Regional Institutions and Cooperation

The Arab Maghreb Union, a regional institution established to foster economic and political integration among its member states, is frequently cited as a casualty of the longstanding animosity between Algeria and Morocco. The Union has remained largely inactive, hindered in part by the lack of cooperation between the two neighbors. The closure of the Algeria-Morocco border since 1994 had already cost the Maghreb region an estimated 2-3% of GDP annually due to lost trade and investment opportunities. While the Morocco-Algeria rivalry is the most visible obstacle to regional institutional effectiveness, it may also mask deeper structural challenges including divergent economic models, weak inter-regional trade networks, and varying levels of state capacity.

At the wider regional level, the impact of this rivalry becomes more diffuse, for instance at the African Union or the Arab League, where both countries are jockeying to shape the agenda and influence alignments. Algeria traditionally leverages its revolutionary credentials and non-aligned stance to position itself as a champion of Arab nationalist causes. During its presidency from 2022 to

2023, Algeria pushed to readmit Syria, highlighting its commitment to state sovereignty and resistance to Western intervention. It also tried to recenter the Palestinian cause, in a bid to both reassert its ideological commitment while challenging Morocco's bilateral ties with Israel. Morocco maintains its pragmatic approach at the Arab League too, coalescing with Gulf States on specific issues to emphasize their proximity and amplifying its own influence through alliance; gathering support on the Western Sahara conflict; and claiming the role of a bridge between the Arab League and African nations. The bilateral tension complicates consensus-building on regional issues where the two have diverging interests, which adds to polarizing pressures within these regional entities, and paralyzes initiatives that require Maghreb cooperation.

The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is another example of the institutional impact of Morocco-Algerian tensions. The two compete for leadership roles and project initiatives looking to North-South cooperation to advance respective national interests. Morocco is more active in the economic and environmental initiatives, whereas Algeria is more focused on energy partnerships and security cooperation. Each looks to push back against initiatives that would strengthen the other's hand institutionally, as exemplified recently with Algeria opposing Morocco to take over the Southern Mediterranean co-presidency of the UfM.

Similarly, the 5+5 Dialogue, a forum for cooperation between five Maghreb countries and five European countries, has weathered the rivalry. The 5+5, which emerged in the 1990's as a dialogue format in the Western Mediterranean, maintains some success compared to other frameworks. It is unique in that it brings the five Maghreb countries with their Southern Mediterranean counterparts. The informal nature of the structure, unlike the UfM, has allowed for more candid dialogues and flexible cooperation. The sector area focus has allowed the 5+5 to maintain policy-relevance with tracks on [defense cooperation](#) being the most active of the remaining areas of cooperation including migration management, economic integration, environmental protection and water resources, security cooperation among others. However, what makes the 5+5 sustain as a dialogue mechanism is also what sets limitations. Its informal nature limits its defensive posture during moments of acute crisis, it is meant as a complementary structure to other formal avenues, and it retains an asymmetric power dynamic reflecting the realities of North-South cooperation—although the informality somewhat mitigates this aspect.

## Prospects and Recommendations

While fundamental tensions persist, specific opportunities for de-escalation might now be limited to technical cooperation on shared challenges, revitalization of multilateral dialogue frameworks and carefully structured economic incentives. Technical cooperation on shared challenges such as water scarcity and climate impact does not necessarily lend itself to a competitive approach. Working

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through platforms such as the 5+5 to deepen this cooperation is a viable path, though one that will require increased international support and attention.

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International partners can play a role by facilitating dialogue and creating conditions conducive to practical cooperation.

International partners can play a role by facilitating dialogue and creating conditions conducive to practical cooperation. Providing incentives for cooperation through international investment is a way to draw the private sector and to compel governments to lower barriers for trade and focus on improving connections and streamlining regulation, which helps build momentum for stronger regional integration. Without such efforts, the Maghreb risks remaining trapped in a cycle of competition that undermines its potential for regional development.

Chapter 3

# The EU's Balancing Act in Morocco-Algeria Relations: Navigating Friction, Credibility, and the Need for a Strategic Shift

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The evolution of the EU's relations with Algeria and Morocco since the 1990's shows that it is increasingly difficult for the EU to avoid friction with one or the other. The balancing effort required to mitigate these frictions is not sustainable as it creates an unstable economic framework for European firms and undermines the EU's coherence and credibility. A shift in the EU's approach is therefore essential.

## An Impossible Balancing Act

The EU signed Association Agreements<sup>3</sup> with Morocco in [1996](#) and with Algeria in [2002](#). Subsequently, Morocco showed more interest than Algeria—isolated in the post-cold war order and emerging from its “black decade”—in developing close relations with the EU. It signed an [Open Skies agreement](#) in 2006, an Agreement providing for reciprocal liberalization measures on agricultural and fish products (the “[Liberalization Agreement](#)”) in 2012 and the EU-Morocco [Green partnership](#) in 2022. In parallel, energy interests largely shaped Algeria-EU relations.

The Western Sahara issue has been the Achilles heel of EU's bilateral relationships with Morocco and Algeria. Although Algeria is formally not a party to the conflict over the Western Sahara—opposing Morocco and the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Polisario Front)—that began in 1975, it stands as the most visible expression of the deeply-rooted rift between the two countries.

From the outset, the European position regarding Western Sahara was that the conflict must be settled by referendum, under the aegis of the UN. This is a principled position, supportive of democratic choice and of a rule-based international order. It also has the two-fold merit of glossing over nuances in the position of different European states and avoiding taking sides between Rabat and Algiers.

However, for Morocco, obtaining international recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara has become the overarching goal of its foreign policy, particularly following such a recognition by the US in December 2020. The EU itself, as distinct from its individual member states, is the easiest target of pressure to achieve this. In December 2016, in a case (C-104/16 P) brought by the Polisario Front, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled that the EU-Morocco Association Agreement and the Liberalization Agreement could not be applied to the Western Sahara, inter alia because the assent of the Sahrawi people had not been obtained. This led to Morocco suspending contacts with the EU until it received assurances that a solution around the CJEU's ruling would be found. Morocco also issued a thinly-veiled [threat](#)

<sup>3</sup> Association Agreements are international treaties with a wide range of enabling provisions, allowing the development of political convergence and economic integration, and binding provisions on trade liberalisation.

that obstacles to Moroccan agriculture and fishing exports to Europe might lead to a renewal of the migration flows that Rabat had heretofore contained.

The European Commission advanced a solution purporting to demonstrate that the assent of the Sahrawi population had been obtained. This was subsequently challenged in new cases brought before the CJEU, which issued a definitive ruling on 4 October 2024, invalidating the applicability of the agreements to the Western Sahara. The detailed chronicle of the maneuvers to ensure the applicability of the EU-Morocco agreements to the Western Sahara is beyond the scope of the present article, but undoubtedly the credibility of the EU suffered as a result.

Similar pressure has been applied by Morocco on EU member states individually. In April 2021, following Spain's admission for medical treatment of a leading figure of the Polisario Front, Morocco recalled its ambassador in protest. An important illegal crossing of migrants into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla followed<sup>4</sup>. The crisis was not resolved until the President of the Spanish government, Pedro Sanchez, [wrote](#) to King Mohamed VI stating that "Spain considers the Moroccan autonomy initiative, presented in 2007, as the most serious, realistic and credible basis for the resolution of this dispute".

But what pleases Morocco irritates Algeria. Algiers was quick to react to Spain's endorsement of the Moroccan autonomy initiative. It [recalled its ambassador to Madrid](#) and unilaterally suspended the Friendship Treaty in force between Algeria and Spain since 2002.

A parallel set of developments has played out among Morocco, France and Algeria. In July 2024, seeking to improve France-Morocco relations, which deteriorated in recent years<sup>5</sup>, the French President [wrote](#) to the King of Morocco, stating that "for France, autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the framework within which this question must be resolved". Algiers immediately recalled its Ambassador to Paris.

## EU Unity as a Collateral Damage

At various points since 2016, the Western Sahara issue put the European institutions at odds with each other (namely the European Council and the European Commission on one hand, and the CJEU—and on occasion the European Parliament—on the other).

<sup>4</sup> Also in May 2021, branding Germany's continued support for the UN-led conflict resolution process a "destructive attitude" and "antagonistic activism on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara", Rabat recalled its Ambassador to Berlin for consultations and contacts with the German ambassador to Rabat were suspended.

<sup>5</sup> In July 2021, Morocco was accused of spying on some 1000 French nationals, including President Macron, in the Pegasus spying scandal; in September 2021 France announced a 50% reduction in the number of Schengen visas to be issued to Moroccan nationals, citing problems with the execution of repatriation orders; and finally in January 2022 was the object of a resolution of the European Parliament that was highly critical of its record on freedom of the press (Morocco considered that French MEPs were instrumental in its adoption).

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A striking feature of Europe's relations with Algeria and Morocco is the lack of a coordinated approach by member states.

It also challenged the unity of the EU as a bloc. A striking feature of Europe's relations with Algeria and Morocco is the lack of a coordinated approach by Member States. Spain did not inform any other member states in advance of its change of position on the Western Sahara in 2022 and, unsurprisingly, these did not seek to defend Spanish interests when Algeria retaliated against Spain (even though in doing so it was contravening an Association Agreement that had been ratified by all Member States). On the contrary, France and Italy increased their exports to Algeria even as Spanish exports were blocked.

Similarly, when France announced that it would reduce by 50% the number of visas delivered to Moroccan and Algerian nationals (in view of the very low rate of execution of return orders to these countries), the number of visas delivered by Italy and Spain increased. This led to [France reversing its position within a year](#).

This lack of coordination and solidarity makes it easier for the Maghreb countries to manage relations and strike deals on their terms, since European counter-measures are ineffectual. The somewhat paternalistic policy of “more for more” (e.g., Europe granting greater benefits to those partners that engage in cooperation more constructively) has been turned into a policy of “more for less” (e.g., Europe making greater concessions to partners that are less cooperative).

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The CJEU's ruling on the inclusion of Western Sahara in trade and fisheries deals with the EU should be seen as an opportunity for the EU's institutions and Member States to reshape their relations with North African neighbors.

## An Economic Toll with Geopolitical Ramifications

Frictions between Algeria and Morocco not only hinder the EU's ability to develop harmonious bilateral relations with both countries, but the lack of dialogue and coordination between Algiers and Rabat also incurs an economic cost for the EU.

The portfolio of loans financed by the European Investment Bank in the Maghreb illustrates the cost of the Morocco-Algeria stand-off. The sort of cross-border infrastructure projects (transport, energy or telecoms) that the bank frequently finances, and that would bring added-value to the [Trans-European Network infrastructure](#), is strikingly absent. [Desertec](#), a project aiming to harness solar energy in North Africa and create a Euro-Mediterranean electricity transmission network was abandoned, a victim of the instability in the region. Similarly, the triangular Europe-Maghreb-Sub-Saharan Africa cooperation that the EU proposes to develop is complicated by rivalries among the Maghreb countries, since Sub-Saharan partners are reluctant to be perceived as taking sides.

In the wake of the recall of its Ambassador to Spain in 2022, Algeria blocked payments to and from Spain, effectively bringing non-gas trade to a near halt<sup>6</sup>. Although Algeria did not suspend its gas deliveries to Spain, it threatened to do so if some of these were to be sent on to Morocco. Political instability and

<sup>6</sup> Between June-July 2021 and June-July 2022, imports of goods from Spain fell by some 70%.

diplomatic tensions with the Europeans inevitably accelerate the penetration of the Algerian and Moroccan markets by third parties<sup>7</sup>. They also impede European geopolitical objectives, such as diminishing the role of Russia and China as arms suppliers in the region, or the de-risking of Europe's supply chains in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic by nearshoring in the Maghreb.

## The Impact of Uncontrolled Migration on Domestic Politics

The Western Mediterranean migration route has become a major vector of irregular migration, and Morocco has openly [voiced](#) its willingness to use it as a political lever with the EU. Algeria has also proved to be a difficult counterpart on migration-related issues. In the wake of the 2022 diplomatic crisis with Spain, Algeria suspended cooperation temporarily on the returns of its Haraga. The rates of execution of return orders pronounced against both Moroccan and Algerian citizens are among the lowest in the world (approximately 8%). When the non-executed return orders concern persons suspected of violent crimes, the impact on public opinion is incendiary.

The instrumentalization of migration has contributed to the perception that migration is out of control. The resulting rise of far-right parties across Europe in recent years, including in the European Parliament elections of June 2024, can thus be partially counted as a 'cost' of the conflict.

## A Way Out of the Impasse

For the EU and for its member states, the policy of passively supporting the UN on the Western Sahara issue has never fully achieved the goal of fostering peaceful relations with both Algeria and Morocco. It is now becoming untenable as increasingly acute frictions with one side or the other take their toll on trade relations, investment, and cooperation in areas such as migration or security. These tensions also affect domestic politics, particularly in member states that have sizable Maghrebi minorities. Furthermore, this policy undermines the EU's credibility as an international actor. The dramatic increase of defense budgets on both sides<sup>8</sup> and the risk of the frozen conflict transforming into an open one are dire and would multiply all the costs described above, including in terms of migration flows.

The CJEU's ruling on the inclusion of Western Sahara in trade and fisheries deals with the EU has brought matters to a head. It should be seen as an opportunity for the EU's institutions and member states to reshape their relations with North African neighbors. Rather than reacting to pressure and intimidation, they should:

<sup>7</sup> For example, China's share of imports to Algeria has increased from 8.3% in 2013 to 20.5% in 2023, while in the case of Morocco it has increased in the same period from 5.2% to 10.6%.

<sup>8</sup> Already in November 2020 the Algerian constitution was amended to allow its armed forces to be deployed outside the country. In 2021, Algeria's military expenditure stood at \$9.1 billion (5.6% of its GDP), while Morocco's was \$5.4 billion (4.2% of its GDP). Since then, the defense budgets of the two countries have grown considerably, both in real terms and as a proportion of GDP.



unite around shared principles and structural interests (such as the rule of law, support for the UN-led process, and coherence in trade and migration policies); actively engage with Morocco and Algeria in asserting the EU's interest in seeing more dialogue and cooperation between both countries; and offer tangible incentives to both Algeria and Morocco to encourage this. In parallel, the EU should initiate with Morocco a broadly-based reflection, involving civil society, on what would credibly constitute an assent of the Sahrawi people regarding the EU-Morocco agreements, and identify the necessary steps to secure it.

The biggest challenge in the pursuit of such a policy would be ensuring a truly coherent position of the Member States. As Francis Ghilès [put](#) it, failure in this regard “...speaks an EU unable to think strategically about a region which is important for its security because its Member States are divided”.

Chapter 4

# Constructive Engagement between Rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean

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The Mediterranean is a region where rivalry and opportunity coexist uniquely, holding key strategic importance for both coastal nations and major global powers. Historically marked by frequent conflict, it also reflects the world's most pressing challenges, including climate change, migration, and human security. Yet, with its vast energy resources, critical trade routes, and abundant human capital, the Mediterranean holds immense potential—provided cooperation can be fostered.

Today, the nature of both challenges and opportunities supersede narrow geographic regional confines and call for a broader concerted action. Their effective tackling requires geographical and thematic threading, connecting the dots across subjects (climate, energy, migration, security), and regions (Western Mediterranean to Eastern Mediterranean).

This chapter examines the costs of conflicts and the dynamics of cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. It aims to offer compelling examples of rival parties in the region engaging in cooperative efforts, thereby offering insights and lessons that could inform approaches to conflict resolution in the Western Mediterranean, particularly between Morocco and Algeria.

## The Cost of Conflict: Rivalry as an Obstacle to Common Security, Progress, and Prosperity

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The Mediterranean is a region where rivalry and opportunity coexist uniquely, holding key strategic importance for both coastal nations and major global powers.

The Eastern Mediterranean region hosts a complex typology of rivalries, contributing to a highly volatile and unpredictable security environment. At the core of this are deeply rooted ethnonationalist conflicts (the Cyprus issue; Greek-Turkish disputes; Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Palestinian discords; etc.). Due to the protracted nature of these conflicts, new layers have constantly been added: the Syrian conflict; the Libyan situation; non-traditional new asymmetric threats and challenges (including terrorism, the consequences of climate change like floods and wildfires, irregular migration, radicalization); potential conflicts (e.g., over energy resources in contested areas or maritime delimitation disputes); and an additional set of challenges not usually considered within a narrowly construed security mindset, such as human security issues (including water, food, health, gender inequality, rule of law).

In essence, these long-standing and traditional disputes persist as unresolved issues, continually serving as a fertile ground for rivalry. Their protracted nature reflects the inability or unwillingness of the states involved to address and resolve them, allowing new tensions to be superimposed over time. This gives rise to a complex web of multiple levels, actors, layers, and issues, making it exceptionally challenging to address in a comprehensive and effective manner. In turn, this leads to a multitude of obstacles to progress, prosperity and security: the inability to work together to deal with crucial

common challenges and benefit from opportunities that can only be harvested through cooperation; the creation of a high-risk environment that hinders business ventures, raises costs, and deters investment; and the spilling-over of disputes to other vulnerable geographic and thematic regional entities.

A pragmatic approach to addressing these challenges with a reasonable chance of success would involve adopting an incremental strategy: untangling the complex web by focusing on individual issues one at a time, and focusing on solving problems that are feasible to tackle.

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When there is a will or overwhelming need, there is a way, even in the case of seemingly intractable conflicts.

Moreover, the multifaceted conflicts and issues within the Eastern Mediterranean are deeply interconnected, and these links extend beyond the region, intertwining with dynamics in other areas, particularly in the Western Mediterranean. Simply put, what happens in one region directly or indirectly affects the other in a number of ways. Indeed, the Mediterranean needs to be viewed and dealt with as a unified space of commonalities, encompassing both common challenges and opportunities. For example, environmental problems do not recognize political boundaries—be it state borders or ceasefire lines—but instead challenge extended geographical areas. Similarly, energy reserves to be explored and exploited extend beyond national borders. It would be artificial and ineffective to attempt to address these issues or seize opportunities in geographically limited, fragmented ways. Common issues—from climate concerns to energy opportunities, and from migration questions to security threats—unite the Mediterranean from East to West and from North to South and must be treated by regional states in a holistic manner. Finally, the policies of major actors, including third states, global powers, as well as key multinational corporations—like international energy giants—are usually informed by broader takes and hence are likely to affect all sides of the Mediterranean.

## Cooperation While in Conflict: Pragmatism in Action

Amid this reality of rivalry and disputes, regional actors have engaged in cooperative ventures, often out of necessity, but at times out of choice, as the outcome of a realistic and sober appraisal of risks and opportunities. However, at the end of the day, the combined effect of the two indicates that solutions are possible, and that when there is a will or overwhelming need, there is a way, even in the case of seemingly intractable conflicts. Examples can be found in the history of the region and beyond.

In the Eastern Mediterranean region, Greece and Türkiye, two countries with decades-long disputes that have occasionally flared up, have both successfully managed to run periods of rapprochement and initiated various connectivity mechanisms. Under the first pillar, a productive decade of disaster diplomacy, leading to rapprochement between 1999 and 2010 was established by the then Foreign Ministers George Papandreou and İsmail Cem, legitimized through the

devastating earthquakes that hit both countries in 1999. During that period, bilateral trade experienced an unprecedented surge, accompanied by numerous initiatives in areas of low politics. Under the second pillar, various attempts at institutionalizing cooperation and establishing crisis management mechanisms have been made, including a High-Level Cooperation Council led by the two heads of state; a permanent Confidence Building Measures Council run by top brass at the two militaries; an Exploratory Talks Committee discussing bilateral disputes (especially maritime delimitations); and a Business Council.

Furthermore, Türkiye and Greece have established electrical interconnectivity between them and have currently even reached a point of modest electricity trading. Additionally, more recently, the two countries have collaborated on their candidacies within the framework of international organizations, including the UN Security Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the International Maritime Organization. Lastly, there is an ongoing ‘Positive Agenda’ initiative, led by the two Deputy Foreign Ministers, focused on pursuing initiatives of common interest and furthering rapprochement. This example highlights how diplomatically important international solidarity can be in times of crisis. Just as Greece and Türkiye were able to overcome their differences after the 1999 earthquake, Algeria's support for Morocco after the September [2023 earthquake](#), despite diplomatic tensions since 2021, shows that it is possible to put political differences aside. This kind of gesture, which goes beyond diplomatic issues, can indeed encourage a change in relations between these two historically divided countries. While it does not guarantee immediate change, it can pave the way for some sort of technical assistance and more constructive dialogue in the future.

Another example from the region is the [agreement](#) between Israel and Lebanon on the delimitation of their maritime border. Although the deal is fragile, it is meaningful that Israel and Lebanon, which do not recognize each other and experienced periods of war, managed to negotiate a diplomatic agreement. This challenges the notion that settlements are unattainable, conflicts are intractable, and meaningful action is impossible in such contexts. It was a case of pragmatic local leadership with political will, combined with effective third-party intervention through facilitation and mediation, and the (at least indirect) backing by key international energy companies. Similar schemes of pragmatic cooperative relations—despite other political tensions—can be found in the collaboration between Israel and Jordan regarding water resources, and Egypt and Israel regarding supply of natural gas. Breakthroughs of this kind could form the basis for similar thinking outside the box in other cases, like Algeria-Morocco, where arrangements could also be within reach.

A third instance of interest from the Eastern Mediterranean region is Cyprus. The two sides in Cyprus—the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus (RoC) which is predominantly Greek Cypriot, and the Turkish Cypriots in the island's North that have established the self-declared ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’ (recognized solely by Türkiye)—are divided by a [UN-](#)

[controlled Buffer Zone](#), with neither side recognizing the other's legal status. Furthermore, Türkiye, the country in effective control of the North, does not recognize the RoC. Yet, the two sides cooperate in various ways both through established structures and institutions, as well as on an ad hoc basis when necessary. One form of such cooperation takes place through the trade of goods and services standardized by the [EU's Green Line Regulation](#).

Another form of cooperation is the [Bilateral Technical Committees](#) operating under the auspices of the UN. There are 12 Technical Committees, with Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot members, designed to improve the everyday lives of ordinary Cypriots. Regular dialogue helps resolve conflict and increase interaction and trust between the two communities. Areas of discussion include environment, humanitarian affairs, economic and commercial matters, cultural heritage, health, criminal matters, broadcasting and telecommunications, education, gender equality, crossings, and crisis management.

A third avenue of cooperation is facilitated by the Chambers of Commerce and Trade on each side, which not only regulate matters within their respective jurisdictions, but also serve as channels for broader communication by undertaking activities on behalf of political authorities that cannot, or do not, engage directly. A fourth form of collaboration is the interconnection of the two sides' electrical grids, allowing mutual support during periods of excessive demand or system failure. Notably, following the [devastating 2011 accident](#) that destroyed the RoC's main power plant, immediate assistance came from the North through the provision and sale of electricity.

Moreover, alongside and importantly complementing state-level cooperation, numerous examples of collaboration emerge from the unofficial sphere. A multitude of civil society initiatives, people-to-people diplomacy, and track-two efforts serve as constructive tools. In Cyprus, at least 60 bicomunal organizations, initiatives, and bodies—dealing with a variety of issues across the buffer zone and working on bridging the gap between the two sides of the divide—can be found. These include civil society groups that operate to bypass cooperation obstacles due to the lack of recognition. Indeed, civil society in Northern Cyprus is particularly strong as it substitutes for the lack or weakness of state functions due to the nature of its internationally non-recognized political entity. Between Greece and Türkiye, a great number of bilateral initiatives pursued by civil society have been in place for decades in areas such as policy dialogue, education, journalism, business, and culture.

Also, in the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are decades of proven experience in joint pro-peace civil society activism, ranging from the grassroots to the policy level. This unofficial engagement is coupled with an effective coordination mechanism between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, in fields such as economy, security, and public health. The two are also benefiting from joint membership, on equal footing, in regional organisations (the UfM and the East Mediterranean Gas Forum).

Finally, more recently, the war in Gaza has added another layer of complexity to the already intricate network of regional conflicts by presenting regional states with an additional set of challenges, dilemmas, and power relations. The Gaza conflict has deepened divisions among states with regard to their approaches and stances, further accentuating the already existing divides. It also has serious regional repercussions impacting areas such as environment, energy, migration, and security. However, within this crisis environment—and partly because of it—cooperation also grew (although mainly within the international community). One such instance pertained to international cooperative efforts to secure humanitarian assistance and corridors, such as the [‘Amalthea’](#) scheme supported by Cyprus, the US, and the EU, or Egypt’s facilitation of the Rafah crossing. Another example is the increased cooperation between Egypt and Israel in the energy sector, with Israel doubling its natural gas exports to Egypt during a time of need, despite the underlying political tensions between the two nations.

## Cooperation Instead of Conflict: The Way Forward

These examples indicate that when there is political will, ways for cooperation can be found. States and entities in the Mediterranean region are united by the bonds of common suffering and challenges, and at the same time, are often presented with opportunities. Addressing the former, and capitalizing on the latter necessitate cooperation or, at the very least, derive significant advantages from it. This requires states to act swiftly, with pragmatism, and a willingness to move beyond entrenched narratives.

One way of doing so as a first step could be shifting part of the attention from solution to management. Efforts could be diverted from exclusively trying to comprehensively solve entrenched bilateral conflicts, to managing certain aspects of them through an incremental approach.

Another approach could focus on addressing immediate, on-the-ground challenges that require tackling, regardless of the broader resolution of the underlying conflict (e.g., climate change challenges, water issues, wildfires, etc.). This would offer two advantages: (i) effectively managing and solving shared problems; and (ii) through this, establishing or cultivating a culture of cooperation between the communities or states. As there is a risk of successfully managing a conflict while allowing the status quo to persist, crisis management must be integrated into a broader strategy that includes a clear vision for the desired outcome—a diplomatic horizon that is defined and actively pursued, moving beyond concerns over ‘restrictive’ timelines.

A third way, to take a practical example, could be collaboration on energy matters in innovative ways, moving beyond established narratives. The future of the region’s energy lies most likely in electrification, making interconnectivity

essential. Interconnectivity creates interdependence, interdependence brings cooperation, and cooperation leads to peace.

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Even without formal diplomatic ties, Morocco and Algeria could explore opportunities for cooperation on practical, non-political issues.

While the historical and territorial tensions between Morocco and Algeria have undeniably shaped their relationship, there remains a significant opportunity for cooperation. Drawing on the experiences of the Eastern Mediterranean, which has navigated, and still does, similar challenges, it becomes clear that dialogue, supported by pragmatic political will and, where necessary, external mediation, could allow both countries to collaborate on common issues. Even without formal diplomatic ties, Morocco and Algeria could explore opportunities for cooperation on practical, non-political issues. Such efforts might help pave the way for constructive dialogue in the future, fostering shared progress and growth for both nations and the broader Mediterranean region.



# Cooperation and engagement mechanisms between rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean

● Türkiye & Greece ■ Israel & Lebanon ▲ Cyprus (North & South)



## Nature of the conflict

- Long-standing territorial disputes including maritime delimitations
- Ethnic issues
- The Cyprus conflict
- Lack of mutual recognition
- Prolonged periods of active conflict, particularly over territorial and maritime disputes
- ▲ Division of the island between the South recognized internationally as the Republic of Cyprus, and the self-declared North as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus only backed by Türkiye
- ▲ No mutual recognition



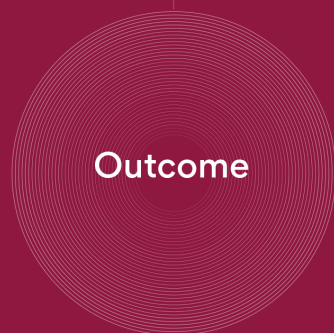
## Trigger of cooperation

- Political will and solidarity after the devastating 1999 earthquakes in both countries.
- The need to delimit maritime borders with international mediation to exploit resources
- ▲ The need for cooperation despite political division, driven by practical necessities



## Cooperation mechanisms

- High-level Cooperation Council led by the heads of state
- Military confidence building measures council
- Exploratory talks committee
- Business Council
- Electrical interconnectivity
- Ongoing 'Positive Agenda' initiative
- Negotiations facilitated by third-parties
- Indirect backing by international energy companies
- ▲ Green Line Regulation trade of goods and services
- ▲ Bilateral Technical Committees under UN auspices
- ▲ Interconnection of electrical grids
- ▲ Chambers of Commerce and Trade cooperation
- ▲ Civil society and track-two diplomacy

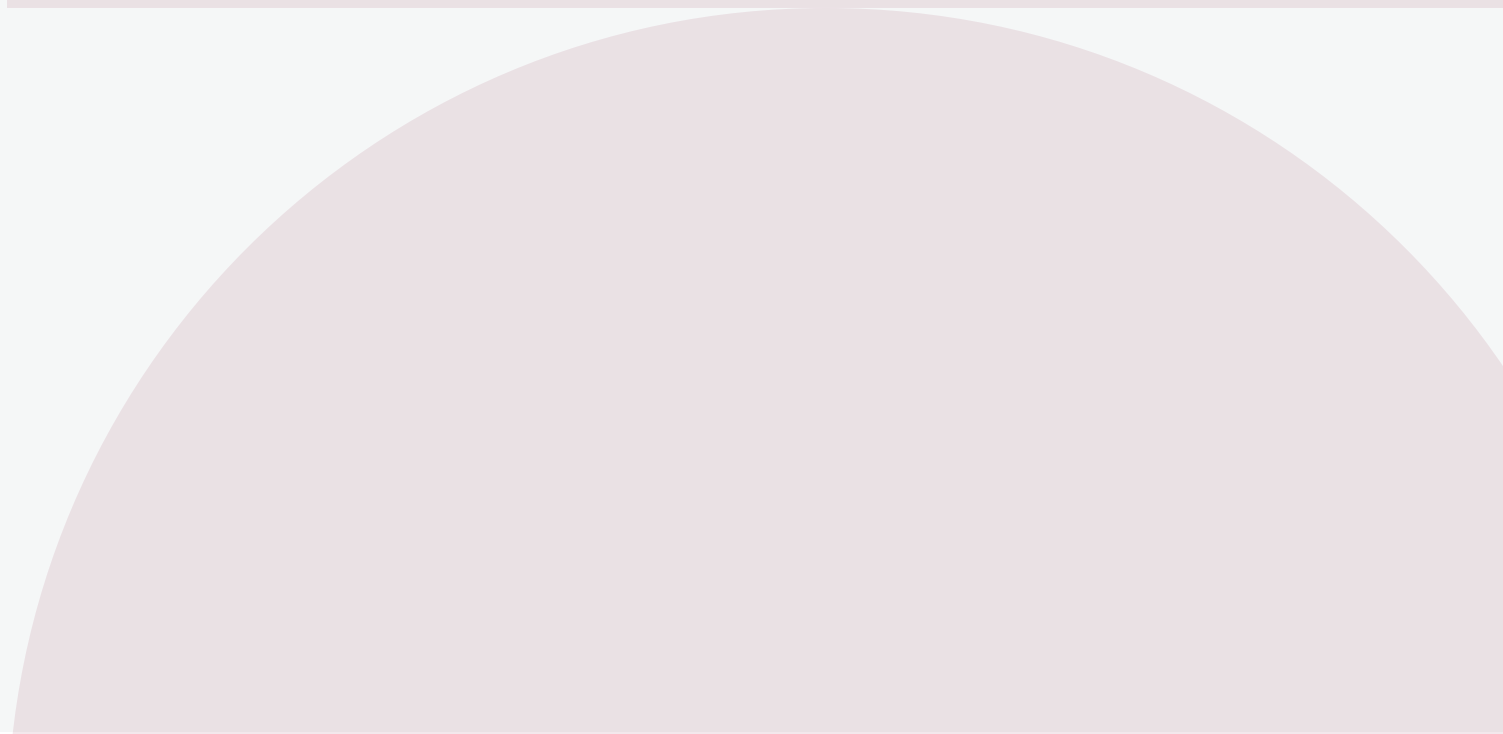


## Outcome

- Unprecedented surge in bilateral trade
- Development of institutionalized cooperation mechanisms
- Modest electricity trading
- Collaborative efforts within international organizations
- Improve diplomatic relations
- Agreement on maritime border delimitation, including provisions on gas exploration
- Pragmatic local leadership and political will
- Possibility of further cooperation despite ongoing political tensions
- ▲ Regular dialogue fostering trust and cooperation
- ▲ Improvements in everyday life for ordinary Cypriots
- ▲ Ad hoc cooperation, such as electricity support during crises
- ▲ Civil society and people-to-people diplomacy initiatives

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# About the Contributors





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**Luca Danese** serves as a Senior Advisor at Willis Towers Watson and as a Member of the Board for White Italy Investment Fund. He is also a Member of the Board of Founders and the Operating Committee at Eurispes. Previously, he held prominent public roles, including Budget Councillor for Lazio Region, Member of the Italian Parliament, and Undersecretary for the Ministry of Transport and Navigation. His private sector expertise includes serving as Senior Advisor at Citi Group in Global Banking and as Chairman of Luspio University.

**Intissar Fakir** is a member of the Supervisory Board of Diplomeds – The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy. She is a Senior Fellow and Founding Director of the MEI’s North Africa and Sahel program. Her work focuses on North Africa, the Sahel, and key regional thematic issues. She has written extensively on North Africa’s evolving politics, socio-economic trends, regional dynamics, governance, and security. Prior to joining MEI, she was a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace where she was also the editor-in-chief of the bilingual (English and Arabic) Middle East platform Sada. She has also implemented programs at various NGOs in support of political, economic, and social reform in North Africa and the Middle East. She has consulted for and advised different entities in the US and Europe on Maghreb developments.

**Fátima Fernández** is a Policy Lead at the School of International Futures (SOIF), where she oversees the Action Research Programme on long-term governance, focusing on embedding foresight and systems thinking into policy frameworks. As an independent researcher, she specializes in human mobility, urban governance, and the political economy of Mediterranean trade and EU post-colonial relations. She holds a PhD in Economic Integration and Regional Development from the University of Santiago de Compostela and Université Hassan II Casablanca, where her research explored the political economy of Association Agreements in the Maghreb, with a focus on trade dynamics. Previously, she served as Human Mobility Coordinator at United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), collaborating with local and regional authorities across

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# About Diplomeds



## What is Diplomeds?

Diplomeds - The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy is a policy group working to improve relations between countries in the Mediterranean, promote regional cooperation, increase inclusivity, resolve conflicts, and advance peace. Diplomeds originates from the Mediterranean, acts for the Mediterranean, and is operated by Mediterraneans. It applies a modern outlook on diplomacy and integrates innovative concepts and tools, as well as emerging global agendas, while dealing with traditional diplomatic issues and striving for real-world policy impact.

## Why is Diplomeds Needed?

A variety of conflicts and tensions in the Mediterranean prevent the region from fulfilling its political, economic and societal potential. Shifting regional dynamics are presenting a changed environment and possibly new opportunities. Increased diplomatic engagement between regional actors should be enhanced and more wholly embraced. Traditional interventions and formal frameworks do not always adequately address the Mediterranean's diplomatic needs. A number of regional organizations acknowledge that they lack a conflict resolution mandate and are therefore limited in what they can contribute. Some also face an asymmetry of capabilities between sub-regions, which needs to be addressed. Diplomeds can contribute to complementing the role and efforts of these organizations.

## How Does Diplomeds Work?

Diplomeds operates via multi-national and task-driven policy support teams, and a growing network of Mediterranean affiliates, which seek to provide feasible solutions and foster change. Diplomeds maps and monitors relevant diplomatic issues, and develops knowledge-based strategies that correlate with policy goals, institutional capacity, and prospects for success. Diplomeds convenes and facilitates policy dialogues and back-channel talks, and offers consultancy, problem-solving and policy formulation services to governments, regional and multilateral institutions, and non-government organizations.

## Who is Diplomeds?

Diplomeds is composed of value-driven and impact-oriented high-level Mediterranean professionals from the fields of diplomacy, conflict resolution, civil society, and regional cooperation. Diplomeds strives to be inclusive in membership and collaborative in management. It currently includes around 40 affiliated experts from all parts of the Mediterranean region. These experts come from a variety of backgrounds and countries, and are also diverse in terms of age and gender. They have the capacity to make an impact, access stakeholders, deliver fresh and independent recommendations, and advance policy processes.

 **Diplomeds**  
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