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REPORT OF THE FOCUS GROUP WITH MAGHREB-BASED STAKEHOLDERS

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the MENARA project, Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI) organized a focus group in Rabat (Morocco) on 11 July 2018 with various scholars and experts from the Maghreb and those working in the region. The discussions were linked to the general aims of the MENARA project (to characterize the regional order, define scenarios and discuss the policy options for the EU) and was structured in four parts:

1. Peculiarities and commonalities of the Maghreb in relation to the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region
2. State–society dynamics
3. Regional conflicts
4. The role of the EU and other external actors

PART I. PECULIARITIES AND COMMONALITIES OF THE MAGHREB IN RELATION TO THE BROADER MENA REGION

CHARACTERISTICS SPECIFIC TO THE MAGHREB

IDENTITY, HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Regardless of their internal diversity, the Maghreb states share a similar identity, a Judeo-Arab-Berber culture and the heritage of the French colonies. The region was previously referred to as French North Africa (*l'Afrique Française du Nord*).

Participants claimed that the historical process leading to the creation of nation-states in the region is a source of both differences and similarities. It explains both the shared characteristics among the different states and their distinctive features. In fact, to understand each country's particular political and economic trajectory, there is a need to go back to the history behind the creation of each nation-state.

The Maghreb states share porous borders and are not separated by natural boundaries, which creates a certain continuity across the region. Such territorial configuration was embraced as a unifying factor within the North African societies, favouring solidarity especially during the movements of independence against France. As an example, one participant referred to Mohammed V claiming that Morocco will never be fully independent if Algeria is not free.

Some participants noted that because of the lack of integration within the Maghreb, its states do not share as many similarities today as they did in the past. Nowadays, their differences are more

acute and visible.

In the past, the Maghreb states embraced common ideologies, from anti-imperialism to pan-Arabism. However, nowadays there is not a dominant ideology linking together all states and societies. Another participant disagreed and mentioned the rise of new ideologies across the region that can be sources of destabilization. They are referred to as “ideologies of criminal economy”, in which the states participate as active actors. The case of Libya exemplifies this argument in the light of the widespread use of weapons by non-state actors to compete with weak state institutions. The term also refers to actors using different trafficking networks (arms, drugs, human, etc.).

DIVERSIFIED RELATIONS

Because of the failure of regional integration in the Maghreb, various countries have intensified their links with Europe but more recently have rediscovered their African roots. A reinforced African identity has become a major political and economic tool.

AFFINITY AND SOLIDARITY

Regardless of the political disagreements, a certain friendship will always remain among Maghreb societies. Some participants amusingly recalled the fact that all Maghreb states (unlike other Arab countries, particularly those in the Gulf) backed Morocco’s bid to host the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Participants asserted that solidarity is extended to other sectors, especially when it comes to intelligence and security matters. They emphasized the fact that political crises between Maghreb states have not been severe enough to impede this bilateral cooperation and have not meant that citizens from one country have started to perceive their neighbours as enemies. This is not the case in the Middle East, as seen, for instance, with the Gulf crisis, in which a political crisis spilled over into a social one with significant repercussions for people-to-people intraregional relations.

SIMILAR INTERNAL AND COMMON EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

When compared with the Middle East, Maghreb states and institutions seem more solid and better equipped to resist internal and external shocks. For different reasons, citizens from the region seem convinced that the states will not collapse or disintegrate. Moreover, institutions have proven able to work despite the prolonged absence of top leaders. An “alliance” will be maintained between Maghreb states and the EU to ensure the stability and security of those institutions.

Currently, the most immediate threats to the stability of states and institutions come from external dynamics, especially from instability in the Middle East and the Sahel region.

POLITICAL STAGNATION AND CRISIS OF VALUES

Maghreb states did not experience a *renewal* of the decision-making bodies and there are significant and shared challenges (such as rule of law, arbitrariness, lack of trust in the political actors). The politicians, both the people and the profiles of those people, have largely remained the same across time. New generations do not recognize themselves within those political bodies. Yet

there is no ideology mobilizing and unifying societies to reverse the situation, and this could lead to identity crises.

Additionally, a participant noted that each state is trying to find a *compatibility* between international norms and national practices to position the Maghreb within a social development.

In fact, Maghreb societies are seeing changes in terms of their lifestyle. For example, the status of women is improving across the region. However, Maghreb states are also going through a crisis of values, which could impact their development negatively.

Additionally, some participants mentioned the existence of *political violence* in which the state confronts the mobilization of civil society through the use of security mechanisms. It also refers to the use of violence by civil society to achieve certain objectives or to confront state institutions.

ELEMENTS BRINGING TOGETHER THE MAGHREB WITH THE BROADER REGION

IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY AND HISTORY

The Maghreb shares with the Middle East linguistic, religious and cultural ties. Religion has been a primordial factor shaping the region, and societies in the region have also shared ideological developments (nationalism, anti-imperialism, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, etc.).

The idea of pan-Arabism was a unifying factor against a common enemy – Israel. However, today such ideology is in decline. Instead, the Middle East is marked by the rise of pan-Islamism (in the form of Wahhabism), which does not have the same appeal in the Maghreb. In fact, Maghreb states and societies would prefer to shield themselves from the spread of this ideology from the Middle East.

One participant stressed the existence of transnational spiritual schools across the MENA region. While the Middle East exports Wahhabism, from the Maghreb we witness a reinvigoration of Sufism. There, the Maghreb is in a leading position, and this vision of Islam could expand to the Sahel and also to parts of the Middle East.

MENA VS EMA

Most participants agreed that politics is a factor unifying the Maghreb and differentiating it from the Middle East. One of the participants claimed that the definition of the Maghreb would be amputated without the vision of an Arab world. It makes more sense to situate the region as part of a whole, since it will always share similar languages, history, religions, costumes and so forth.

On the other hand, many participants agreed that the term “MENA” already suggests a split between the Maghreb and the Middle East. Nowadays, the term “EMA”, referring to the Europe–Mediterranean–Africa region, is becoming more popular, and it puts the Maghreb in a central position.

PART II. STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS: LET'S TAKE STOCK OF WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE 2011. ARE REGIMES AND STATES STRONGER OR WEAKER?

SIMILAR PROTESTS, DIFFERENT POLITICAL OUTCOMES

Some participants argued that Algeria and Morocco did not collapse because the regimes found ways to *domesticate society*. They did not use severe means of repression or violence compared with Tunisia and Libya. A participant mentioned the establishment of “*mécanisme de reproduction autoritaire*”, which refers to the creation of a co-opted opposition, civil society and media outlets loyal to the regime. Moroccan and Algerian authorities have allowed for the presence of an opposition, but they ensure it remains minimal.

A participant argued that all Maghreb countries suffered from the repercussions of 2011. However, Morocco avoided large-scale destabilization by undertaking progressive reforms targeting multiple sectors (governance, human development, etc.). These reforms served as a *shock absorber* when the Maghreb witnessed the rise of revolutionary movements and allowed Morocco to avoid a fatal destabilization. The participant stressed the need for other Maghreb states to undertake similar reforms and update the relationship between the state and the society.

Another participant elaborated on this assessment of Morocco by highlighting the specificity of the Makhzen and its *survival mechanisms*. The latter were strengthened after the 2003 Casablanca attacks. The authorities do not prevent society from responding to certain major events (e.g. the death of a fisherman, the harsh conviction of Rif protest leaders) with protests or emulation. However, the Makhzen always has strategies to maintain its power regardless of these events.

CHANGING THE NATURE OF SEMI-AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

A participant noted the need for Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia to establish a new pact with their civil societies that favours participation instead of repression.

Other participants argued that semi-authoritarian regimes could undertake a process of democratization, because societies in the Maghreb want to ensure the survival of the state and won't challenge the entities representing the state. This is associated with the perception of the modernization of the elites and of the authoritarian nature of the regimes in the Maghreb. One participant gave the example of Tunisia, where even if the society mobilizes it does not challenge the states' structures anymore since it gained constitutional legitimacy.

However, a participant highlighted the inability of civil society to act as a counterbalance. They argued that checks and balances exist within the state entities, whilst underlining the absence of organized actors from outside incumbent regimes that would have the means to influence the state.

POST-ARAB UPRISINGS: NEW WAYS TO PROTEST

Many participants recalled the violence and victims of the Arab uprisings. The latter led to civil wars in Libya and Syria, but also to instability in Tunisia and Egypt. Thus, societies do not want to repeat the same scenarios and are struggling to find new ways to react and challenge the regimes.

Many participants mentioned the boycott in Morocco against the Centrale Danone, the water company Sidi Ali and the Afriquia petrol stations. They stressed that this was an unusual and innovative way to respond to the authorities' passivity. One participant argued that the boycott was a reaction to the relation between politics and the economy since politicians, especially Aziz Akhannouch, make a fortune by being involved in the economy. Thus, a boycott is a passive way to protest against the links existing between the political and the economic arenas that do not necessarily bring benefits for the whole community. However, the same participant noted that it does not question the state itself or have an impact on it since King Mohammed VI has not yet reacted or expressed his point of view. Another participant disagreed, claiming that in the post-Arab uprisings era, people only respond to economic factors and not to politics. They claimed that the boycott is solely due to economic factors and is not concerned with their links to the political sector and actors. All in all, the boycott movement in Morocco also shows the extent to which social activism is influenced by global slogans and frames.

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

Participants underlined that the dysfunction of the Maghreb states is not only due to internal problems, but also results from foreign interference. The case of the intervention and aggression in Libya is the most recent example.

POSSIBILITY OF FUTURE REVOLUTIONS

One of the participants claimed the Maghreb could experience further revolutions in the future regardless of the changing nature of the authoritarian state. The speaker highlighted the nature of the young generation, which is more global-minded and orientated towards an international community. As a result, the revolution may not result from internal problems, but from an international wave, resembling a butterfly effect.

Another participant argued that we should not talk about revolutions in the Maghreb. They asserted that revolutions have an anatomy and a process resulting in real economic, social and political transformation. Since such change didn't occur in the Maghreb, we can only talk of unfinished revolutions. Nowadays, social mobilization and territorial protests, rather than anti-regime protests, are far more common.

Some participants argued that because of the uncontrolled trajectory of revolutions, people would try to avoid them. They believe that since regime change might lead towards a chaotic unknown, nobody wants to take the risk. They stressed the need for the centrality of the state, whilst other participants claimed that currently the revolution is virtual and being carried out on the Internet. For example, in Algeria the hashtag "*let it rust*" went viral to contest the prices of cars. Nowadays,

movements and mobilization are virtual and disorganized.

Additionally, some participants agreed that the next generation would not relate to the Algerian, Libyan and Syrian civil wars. The memories of the latter will not prevent another revolution. Thus, authorities need to find new political discourses to deter revolutionary movements. Threats based on memories of the past will not work.

Recalling the boycott in Morocco, a participant claimed that if there is no clear separation between the economic and political sectors, there is a greater chance for Maghreb states to experience new revolutionary movements. However, the societies must have the courage to demand such separation or it will never occur.

There is an overlap of battles within Maghreb states. Societies have moved from political to social contestations and from real to virtual spaces. However, since there is no profound ideology capable of mobilizing everyone, there cannot be a revolution. One of the participants questioned the capacity of North African societies to build an organization similar to the Spanish political party Podemos or the Greek Syriza.

PART III. THE MAGHREB IS MARKED BY OLD DISPUTES (E.G. RIVALRY BETWEEN MOROCCO AND ALGERIA, THE SAHARA QUESTION) AND NEW CONFLICTS (E.G. LIBYA AND THE SAHEL REGION). AS WE THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE, IS THERE ROOM FOR COOPERATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION?

SPILLOVER AND INTERFERENCE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE SAHEL REGION

During the discussion, an important issue hindering the stability and security of the Maghreb was emphasized: the spillover of Middle Eastern conflicts to Africa. A participant recalled the Lebanese term “*politique de l'éloignement*” to underline the desire of African countries to avoid the expansion of instability into the African continent, coming mainly from armed conflicts in the Gulf countries.

Participants stressed the growing interference of Middle Eastern and Gulf countries in the Maghreb. For example, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates wield significant influence in the Libyan crisis. Additionally, a participant claimed that these countries have a responsibility for the current problems in the Sahel.

Maghreb countries should agree upon a common agenda, especially when Gulf countries try to interfere in the region. To a certain extent, the Gulf may act as an external federator.

TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP STRATEGIES

Some participants underlined that the current leadership across the Maghreb does not seem interested in overcoming old disputes. It is indeed debatable whether pressure from below can change the situation instead.

One of the participants pointed to an important question: why is civil society waiting for the consent of political actors to find initiatives to end old disputes and initiate regional integration through top-down strategies? The dispute between Morocco and Algeria does not affect their societies. Thus, there is nothing stopping Maghrebi civil societies from working together. One of the participants gave the example of the EU, where integration is popular among the political elites, whereas the population cares mainly about unemployment, security and social cohesion. Thus, integration within the Maghreb should take into account Europe's experience by emphasizing questions and issues that are a priority for the societies in the region. In that case, regional integration would start within civil society and progressively move upwards to the elites, who would also have the task to communicate their policies to the rest of the population.

New generations do not relate to the disputes constraining the Maghreb, since they date back to the Cold War. Participants stressed that there is no hate speech among the Maghreb societies and populations.

There is a need to initiate common projects involving all Maghreb countries. For example, similarly to the USA, Canada and Mexico, Maghreb states could jointly host the FIFA World Cup.

The importance of the media was underlined, as a way to call politicians' attention to the need to overcome the constraints resulting from old regional disputes. Many argued in favour of media outlets putting aside politics and pursuing common projects, such as the co-production of Maghrebi TV channels and programmes.

The bottom-up strategies are more concrete and can be implemented in different sectors such as sports, TV, university exchange programmes and so forth. The participants shared the belief that a bottom-up approach could eventually influence the political attitude of Maghreb states. To that end, it would be important to launch a long-term dialogue to identify the priorities and added value of cooperation and integration.

A participant argued that only when the dispute between Morocco and Algeria is resolved will it be possible to speak of a great Maghreb. However, a resolution does not have to be political from the start. It should begin with the development of more socio-economic relations between Maghreb states' civil societies. Eventually it may be opened up to other countries, particularly in the Sahel. The EU could assist this process indirectly by working in cooperation with the African Union.

On the other hand, a participant claimed that a bottom-up approach is insufficient and unsustainable. In the Maghreb the state remains very important. Civil society must go through the state to be recognized as an actor. The state is the only actor capable of ensuring durable economic integration and strengthening the private sector. The state is the only actor capable of intervening regionally, and ensuring that it is well received by the population. Thus, civil society can only move integration forward by working with the states, not against them.

CHANGING PARADIGM

Some participants shared the idea that for civil society to be capable of pursuing a bottom-up approach, the paradigm must first be changed. This is the duty of intellectuals, think tanks, scholars and professors. Changing paradigms is meant to go beyond cleavages. It should ensure a real internal development, and include cooperation with the EU. It starts with a strategic debate about the future we want and encompasses various sectors that can have an impact (e.g. communication, agriculture). It also involves Morocco and Algeria engaging in pragmatic communication and ensuring a connection across North Africa.

One participant mentioned the competition between the state and *parallel entities*. The latter refers to non-state actors providing goods and services to the population, thus replacing state actors. For example, terrorist organizations sell products cheaper than in the regular market. This competition must be addressed to ensure the success of a bottom-up strategy.

RESOLUTION TO THE LIBYAN CRISIS

A participant argued that it was impossible to overcome the Libyan crisis through the use of orthodox security strategies (e.g. use of weapons). The only sustainable alternative is to negotiate with all actors to agree on possible power-sharing mechanisms. Since the Libyan civil wars, new elites have appeared but they are not represented politically. Their legitimacy comes from the weapons they hold. Thus, to solve the conflict, we must find a consensus between the multiple *centres of legitimacy* and including all the *tribal clusters*. This participant illustrated the argument through the case of migration and border management. In fact, two main tribes control migration flows in Libya. Therefore, if they are not included in negotiations by political and foreign actors, it will be impossible to find a solution to the current migration crisis.

There are too many clusters holding power and refusing to relinquish it. Thus, the solution to the Libyan crisis is oriented towards federalism and a redistribution of political and economic control.

DIASPORAS

Participants mentioned the North African diasporas concentrated in Europe as a driver for integration among Maghreb states and societies.

One participant recalled an anecdote from the FIFA World Cup in Russia during which Algerians were cheering for the Moroccan team but not for the Egyptian team. This was meant to exemplify the importance of the diasporic dimension. Abroad, Maghrebi communities get along and live peacefully together.

PART IV. CAN EUROPE, AND OTHER EXTERNAL ACTORS, HAVE A POSITIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE IN THE REGION? (WHAT TO DO AND WHAT NOT TO DO?)

EUROPEAN INTERVENTION AND INTERFERENCE

Direct intervention is harmful, since the use of military instruments has extremely negative consequences. Participants claimed that the EU and the USA have not learned their lessons from previous interventions. One of the participants recalled the Arab and African mediation prior to the intervention in Libya.

In contrast, South–South cooperation and triangular cooperation have a lot of potential. The latter refers to a process by which funds come from the global North, the know-how comes from the Maghreb and the production occurs in sub-Saharan Africa. Such cooperation is highly valuable. However, European countries, such as France, boycott and compete with those processes in order to impose their own know-how.

A participant noted that interference cannot be discussed without referring to European exploitation. Firstly, it occurs through the framework of development aid, created as a form of imperialism. Secondly, exploitation occurs when regional countries cannot find other trading partners (e.g. to buy weapons or materials at a cheaper price). The EU must differentiate itself from this American tradition of meddling, especially that of the feverish Trump administration.

DIFFERENT REALITIES

One participant asserted that European priorities do not match those on the ground. The EU does not discuss real regional threats (lack of development, food insecurity, etc.) but focuses on its own perceptions of threats. For example, the EU wants to protect its borders against flows of irregular migrants, whilst on the ground this is not a priority. The participants stressed that the EU does not understand the problems experienced by regional countries. This means that the EU does not make use of the right instruments that are tailored to addressing the right problems. Eventually the EU may care more, as a result of the rise of political violence, criminality and extremism. However, reflection is needed to understand what is going on and how to address it.

On the other hand, a participant highlighted the danger of the EU overemphasizing the issue of minorities.

Additionally, the EU does not understand the capacity of societies to mobilize in Maghreb states. For example, they did not pay attention to the early warnings prior to the 2011 revolutions.

Participants discussed the role of perception and representation in EU–Maghreb relations. They stressed the European tendency to view the region through security lenses and to focus mainly on issues of terrorism and migration. This is not to deny the scale and severity of these problems, but to underline that the EU is unable to go beyond these domains.

DIVERSIFICATION OF PARTNERS

Most participants agreed that the presence of Chinese, Turkish and Russian investors in the region is positive. Firstly, there is a common “Third-World past” linking the Maghreb with some emerging powers. Secondly, it will allow the Maghreb states to diversify their partners. Thirdly, it may force the EU to rethink its perceptions and strategies of cooperation in the region.

When we look at the last ten years, a lot of mistakes were made in the agreements and treaties signed with the EU. The Maghreb should not be regarded as a preferential space of the EU. The diversification of actors in the region should spur the EU to change the way it handles regional concerns.

Participants agreed that external actors should help find concrete solutions to the problems of the region. They gave the example of the Chinese One Belt, One Road Initiative as an alternative to the European and American approach. In fact, China does not just use soft power but comes with a real project for Africa. For example, it replaces the American model based on “the right way of life” with the Chinese “best way of life.” Europe should take inspiration from these different approaches to also find a project for Africa.

Other participants questioned whether the Maghreb’s African dimension could be seen as in competition with Maghreb–EU relations. The Mediterranean region shares a common future and common concerns. South–South integration cannot be an alternative to Europe and is not meant to oppose the EU’s role in the region.

THE EU AS A HELPFUL ACTOR: THE TO-DO LIST

The EU should invest in *advanced regionalization* to handle territorial disparities and local development.

A participant gave the example of the Brazil–Venezuela and South Korea–Japan disputes in advising the EU to work towards ensuring *positive peace* among states. The latter could help convert national objectives into regional ones, thus leading to greater cooperation.

Participants agreed on the necessity of the EU assisting in Maghreb development and cooperation projects. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) has potential but it will require greater financial and human resources to have a real impact on Maghreb countries.

On the other hand, a participant claimed that the EU should not have a too prominent role in the Maghreb. Because it has emasculated local actors, European entities should be more discreet. Maghreb countries should take the time to explore other alternatives in order to renew and re-evaluate the EU’s role. This may cause the EU to rethink whether or not it should take action in the Maghreb. Stressing resilience and co-development would be two useful points of departure instead of trying to implement a rigid normative agenda in the Maghreb.

There is a need to de-dramatize EU–Maghreb relations. It goes without saying that the former needs the latter (for tourism, fishery, workforce, natural gas, brain-gain, etc.), and structures have already been created (e.g. 5+5). Regardless of the failure of many mechanisms (e.g. UfM), it is useless to demonize the EU. The results of its plans are *mixed* and not all negative. However, a partnership with Maghreb countries must be dissociated from the colonial vision.

Additionally, the EU is currently focused on its own internal problems (Brexit, Greece, economic crisis, rise of populism, etc.). Thus, Maghreb states must define their needs and the contribution the EU could provide in terms of concrete and targeted programmes.

A participant underlined the European *integration* within the Maghreb. For example, many political parties have their own personal relations with EU counterparts, but on some occasions this perpetuates a colonialist and imperialist narrative. It is time to change this reality and overcome the colonial logic behind EU–Maghreb relations by establishing win–win partnerships. This should be combined with a diversification of potential partners since the cultural and historical relations with the EU will never change.

On the other hand, one participant did not endorse the assumption that it is in the interest of the Maghreb states to diversify their partners, because there is more transparency with the EU than with Russian or Chinese partners. The EU must differentiate EU–Maghreb relations from the partnerships its member states hold with governments in the region. In this spirit, Maghreb countries must maintain their privileged relationships with Spain and France, for example, but identify new European partners and favour direct partnership (e.g. with NGOs or social movements).

According to many participants, the Barcelona Process is a failure. It resulted from the competition between the EU and the USA, and from the need to avoid American domination in the region. Thus, before talking about the EU’s role, we must identify Brussels’s intention: is it for geopolitical competition or to ensure the development of the region?

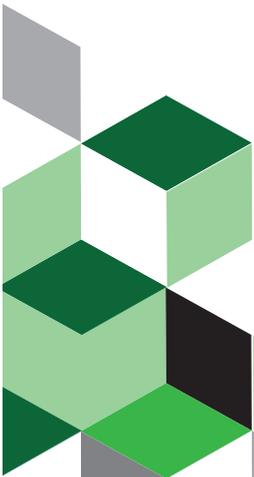
The solution is to move from a weak to a viable Maghreb environment. The EU should stop conferring with Maghreb states separately, but instead have everyone sit at the same table. According to the participants, bilateral agreements no longer make sense. For example, regarding the management of migration, the EU decides upon an approach and exports it to each of the Maghreb states, instead of having the concerned countries join in the decision-making process multilaterally. The EU should adopt a multilateral strategy, as it favours participation and connectivity between all actors.



Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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