

A Renewed Maghreb Union Can Counter North Africa's Imminent Threats

by [Mohammed Issam Laaroussi \(/experts/mohammed-issam-laaroussi/\)](/experts/mohammed-issam-laaroussi/)

Apr 3, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/athad-mgharby-mtjdd-qadr-ly-mwajht-althdydat-almhdqt-bshmal-afryqya/\)](/ar/policy-analysis/athad-mgharby-mtjdd-qadr-ly-mwajht-althdydat-almhdqt-bshmal-afryqya/)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohammed Issam Laaroussi \(/experts/mohammed-issam-laaroussi/\)](/experts/mohammed-issam-laaroussi/)

Dr. Mohammed Issam Laaroussi is a professor of international relations and is a senior international relations researcher at TRENDS Research & Advisory in Abu Dhabi.



Brief Analysis

On the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union, one cannot help but wonder about the lessons learned from the failure of this project of Maghreb integration. The union was a coherent, fully-fledged geographic and regional block that included more than a hundred million people from the countries in the Maghreb. Consequently, its failure has had important historical, political, economic, social, and cultural impacts on North Africa.

The intention of establishing the union had been to promote economic integration, improve military and security cooperation, and to develop a Maghreb society. The higher ideals of justice and equality were also a concern, and the union intended to open borders to citizens of Maghreb countries and promote the liberalization of trade for services, commodities, and products. These objectives had five-year implementation goals: a 1995 customs union agreement, a common Maghreb market by 2000, and the eventual implementation of a shared system for security and border control.

In spite of these intentions, the North African region remains among the most fragmented regions in Africa today. In contrast, other African organizations and associations have **expanded in both breadth and depth** (<https://moroccoonthemove.com/2018/02/28/finger-pointing-rather-problem-solving-algerias-point-view-david-s-bloom/>) during this period, and have even attracted countries from the Arab Maghreb to join their associations, including the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS).

In contrast, the stagnation and eventual failure of Maghreb cooperation in different productive sectors has resulted in losses for Maghreb countries that exceed 7.5 billion dollars annually, especially regarding intra-regional trade among Maghreb countries, which currently makes up less than 0.5% of the total imports and exports for these countries.

A number of challenges led to collapse of an attempted union for countries in the Arab Maghreb. These challenges included the absence of political will, internal political conflicts between Arab Maghreb countries, and an increase in security concerns in the Arab Maghreb countries due to the upsurge in terrorist activity and extremism following the

revolutions of the Arab Spring.

Moreover, Maghreb countries have since demonstrated a preference for external alliances with major international powers. The contradictory agendas adopted by these regimes shattered the dream of unity and established the principle of divergent politics for the Maghreb countries, which have conflicting ambitions on many different fronts. Some regional powers have also exploited these divisions for their own benefit. For instance, the European Union signed a number of partnership agreements with individual countries in the Arab Maghreb—including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania—taking advantage of the deep divides and structural imbalances in the Maghreb region in order to impose their own political and economic conditions and preferential terms. These terms have generally been at odds with the interests of Maghreb countries while the formation of the arrangements with the presence of united institutions could have achieved balanced and equitable agreements for the countries of the region.

In regards to a lack of political will, the **Moroccan-Algerian political conflict (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/07/27/morocco-and-algeria-keep-building-more-barriers>)** over the Western Sahara has directly contributed to reducing the opportunity for the integration of Arab Maghreb countries and has put the final nail in the coffin of the Arab Maghreb Union. Algeria and Morocco have not overcome their political conflicts and continue to exchange accusations that obstruct Maghreb unity. In 2018, Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelkader Messahel leveled sharp criticism at Morocco by claiming that Morocco was responsible for obstructing efforts towards regional unity. Meanwhile, the King of Morocco, Mohamed VI, made a speech during an African Union event in which he alluded to the death of the Arab Maghreb Union and subsequently extended an invitation to Algeria to establish a common mechanism for dialogue through which unresolved issues between the two countries could be discussed, with the goal of restoring cooperation within the Maghreb Union. However, these overtures failed to elicit a response from Algerian officials.

The increased security challenges and weak security coordination among the Arab Maghreb countries are also key reasons for the unions' failure. More than six years after the revolutions of the Arab Spring, armed groups have exploited the fragility of the Libyan border, with activity escalating throughout the North African region. Libya's border regions have become a sort of incubator for terrorists from the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who have since spread their operations to Algeria, Mali, and Tunisia.

Thus, the fear of chaos and regional terrorism has prompted the five members of the Arab Maghreb Union to increase security and military surveillance of shared borders, which has further exacerbated isolation between states. Tunisia announced a project in 2016 to build a wall along the border with Libya, which allowed the country to control and monitor the militants, illegal migrants, weapons, and drugs that are smuggled across the border into Tunisia. Similarly in 2017, Algeria and Morocco allocated huge resources towards monitoring their borders, installing barbed wire, fences, and security cameras among other monitoring methods. And in 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that it intended to fund the installation of **20 million dollars' worth of high-tech security cameras (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/07/27/morocco-and-algeria-keep-building-more-barriers>)** along the Tunisian border, building on existing German surveillance systems. Shortly after, Algeria announced its intentions to build sand walls on its borders with Libya and Tunisia.

The political and social protests in Algeria that broke out on February 22 of this year have also produced further insecurity and uncertainty in the region. The countries bordering Algeria are concerned by the weak response of the regime to the popular protests, which could contribute to undermining the pillars of regional stability as a result of a real mistake on the part of ruling elite. The Algerian elite have long had the opportunity to plan for Bouteflika's successor, but instead chose to push the seriously ill president into a fifth term, a move which has been met with significant opposition from all sectors of Algerian society, including the Army. The Algerian regime is in the midst of

the most serious political dilemma it has faced since the end of the Black Decade, a situation that does not bode well for future efforts at integration.

In the absence of any current form of Maghreb integration, and in light of the growing needs and concerns of the populations in the region regarding security, stability, and the opportunity to live a life with dignity, the question of reviving the Arab Maghreb Union will always remain an imperative issue. If a revival was accomplished, this process would force political regimes to cooperate, first in order to achieve stability and security, and secondly, to keep pace with changes in societal values that require reform and which are rejecting ready-made, top-down policies currently supplied by governments. This process must begin by bridging the gap between Algeria and Morocco, seizing the moment of opportunity to strengthen cooperation instead of deepening conflict. Subsequently, the broader region should work to manage the political movement in Algeria in a prudent and balanced manner. Furthermore, work must be done to find a political compromise in Libya in order to bring the country back under a centralized government after years of instability and civil war.

This process will naturally require concerted efforts on the part of all countries involved to develop unified and coordinated governmental strategies to confront terrorism and extremism and to avoid inward-looking policies and isolationism, which do not effectively promote the kind of collective security system that the Arab Maghreb Union had attempted to strengthen. If the political will is present, the Arab Maghreb Union can provide comprehensive and community-based security instead of the current state-based models. Moreover, the union could work towards supporting economic and social policies by offering job opportunities to youth, expanding horizons for investment, and revitalizing trade within the Economic Community of the Common Maghreb Market. These issues must be addressed across the Maghreb, and the Union model, if supported, can provide more effective solutions than any individual government alone. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)