

RUSSIAN REINVESTMENT IN THE MAGHREB INTERSECTING ISSUES AND PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

As throughout the rest of the Arab world, Russia has reinvested in the countries of the Maghreb, with partially new objectives as compared to the past. If Algeria and Libya – favored partners during the Cold War era – remain the primary anchor points for Russian policy in this sub-region, Moscow is now taking care to further extend relations to Morocco and Tunisia. The Maghreb does not, however, represent a fundamental interest for Russia, but rather a source of economic and political opportunities. The security sector remains an important area of cooperation, notably with Algeria, where armament deliveries and officer training predominate. This redeployment is also facilitated by similarity between the views of current authorities and Vladimir Putin's Russia concerning major regional politico-security issues, which nevertheless does not preclude a certain caution on the part of Maghreb partners regarding defense coordination. Beyond these objectives, Russian reinvestment could have eventual repercussions for sub-Saharan Africa, for which the Maghreb represents the gateway in Moscow's eyes.

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INTRODUCTION

Russian reinvestment in its influence and presence in the Arab world, beginning in the mid-2000s and born out during the following decade with the Syrian crisis, also applies to the Maghreb region. An initial observation: Russian authorities, as in the past, seem to consider the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a single entity, of which the Maghreb (here encompassing Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) would not be conceptualized as a distinct sub-regional group. Yet while Moscow does not approach this region as a complete unknown – a solid partnership having in fact been developed during the Soviet era with Algeria following its independence in 1962¹ – this redeployment is being carried out with a partially new vision and objectives. This new approach, however, has its limits. In contrast to Western European countries, but following the approach of the United States, Russia does not in fact see major strategic stakes for its vital interests in this region. It prefers to consider North Africa not as a site of direct military intervention, but rather as a zone of soft power deployment, where the economic and commercial dimensions predominate over even security priorities.

A notable change in comparison to the Cold War era is that the new Russian policy in the Maghreb no longer relies solely on the historical partnership with Algeria, but has been deployed towards countries, namely Morocco and Tunisia, that were previously neglected due to their political and historical ties to the West. Libya constitutes a special case.

Russia's renewed interest in the Maghreb rests on a certain number of factors which have largely been already well identified. First and foremost is the development of economic partnerships, whether pertaining to armaments, energy, infrastructure or agriculture. Next, in order of priority, are security concerns, central to which is the fight against terrorism and jihadism, but also more generally the effects induced by the Libyan crisis, even if Russian investment concerning this issue reveals itself as less developed and partisan than at first glance. The emphasis on the political and diplomatic component, solidified since the Arab uprisings and particularly since the overthrow of the Libyan regime following the 2011 NATO intervention, constitutes the newest factor in Russian reinvestment. As in the rest of the Arab world, Moscow defends the status quo, or, rather, a "conservation principle," defined by its support of existing regimes, non-interference in internal state affairs, and opposition to regime change via foreign military interventions.

If the outlooks and modes of action favored by Russia in the Maghreb appear fairly well identified, the perceptions and expectations, as well as eventual reservations, on the Maghreb side are more rarely expressed by these countries' governing circles, and little studied at the academic level. When it comes to current authorities, this should perhaps be seen as a concern for discretion – particularly true for Algeria – regarding sensitive aspects of this facet of foreign policy, a subject on which they generally communicate very little; and for academic research circles in North Africa, a lack of knowledge of contemporary Russian history, geography and culture.

1. Irina Gridan, Gaëlle Le Boulanger, "Les relations militaires entre l'Algérie et la Russie, de l'indépendance aux années 1970," *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire*, 334-335, 2007, 37-61.

While there undoubtedly exists across the Maghreb, although with important nuances between countries, an evident interest in developing or deepening the partnership with Moscow, questions remain regarding Russia's aims, particularly in Rabat and Tunis. The general as well as regional orientations of Russian policy are nevertheless generally well perceived in the capitals of the Maghreb, since they correspond to local views without, however, the intrusiveness for which historic European (France, Italy, Spain) and American partners are often criticized.

The Russian approach thereby meets expectations of diversification in terms of partnerships that correspond to an economic rather than strategic obligation.² This relationship appears, perhaps also because of the limits set for it, facilitated by a convergence of views regarding major regional issues and the principles governing international relations. Certain expectations on the Maghreb side might nevertheless be disappointed, especially concerning economic investment, but also by a potential Russian attempt at mediation to facilitate a settlement of the Libyan crisis, keeping in mind that on this issue Moscow sets conditionalities.

THE SOVIET UNION'S ALGERIAN AND LIBYAN ORIENTATION

Given its geographic remove, the Maghreb did not constitute – unlike the Middle East – a major center of strategic interest for the Soviet Union until the era of decolonization in the 1950s. From this turning point onwards, and thanks above all to the Algerian war of independence, Moscow began investing in this sub-region of the Arab world. As in the Mashriq, Soviet positioning was in fact justified on the basis of political and strategic criteria, which explains the choice of partnership with Algeria starting in 1962, followed to a lesser extent by Libya after Colonel Gaddafi's seizure of power in 1969.

It was, however, much more in the name of anti-imperialist struggle than genuine ideological similarity that these alliances were forged. Throughout the Cold War period, the Soviets could not in fact count on local representatives to bolster their influence. Maghreb Communist parties had little of the weight and influence of their Middle East counterparts, for example in Iraq or Iran. They had been, for that matter, promptly removed from power and even repressed after independence, even if certain leaders were then coopted by the regimes in place, especially in Morocco and Algeria. Nevertheless, the revolutionary Third-Worldism taken up by Algiers and Tripoli, even if it claimed little or no adherence to Marxist-Leninist ideology, was perceived by the USSR as in line with its interests and politico-strategic projections.

For all that, the leaders of these two Maghreb "friends," while taking into account the potential benefits of extensive cooperation with Moscow (which also encompassed ties with the satellite states of Eastern Europe, especially with the German Democratic Republic on security issues), were careful to maintain a certain distance, refusing any form of subjugation according to the principles of non-alignment.

2. Erik Burgos and Clément Therme, interview with Vassily Kutsenov, "La politique étrangère de la Russie au Maghreb : entre commerce et sécurité," *Confluences Méditerranée*, 104, janvier 2018, 85-95.

Priority to the Algerian partnership

The case of Algeria epitomized in this respect this prudence and reserve.³ Algeria's goal of forming a substantial and professional defense and intelligence apparatus led its leaders to turn to the Soviets, who had already become involved in this area of cooperation during the second half of the war of independence. The training of National Popular Army (NPA) officers at the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow beginning in 1964, followed in 1966 by massive shipments of military hardware and the dispatching of Soviet technicians to Algeria, contributed significantly to the formation of a defense apparatus in line with Algerian leaders' wishes. Moscow's approach aimed at offering Algeria everything it might desire in terms of materiel, to such an extent that this "saturation policy" would deter them from any other supplier.⁴

The limits of such cooperation were nevertheless fixed by Houari Boumediene after his accession to the head of the Algerian state in 1965, and somewhat curbed Soviet ambitions aimed at placing advisors at the heart of the Algerian defense apparatus. Boumediene's penchant for the political and above all economic model offered by the USSR in no way dented his intransigent nationalism, which led him to distance himself somewhat from a great power in which he did not see a true ally – especially after the Six Day War in June 1967⁵ – and even less so a protector.⁶ Defense cooperation nevertheless resumed with new vigor thanks to the conflict in Western Sahara that began in the mid-1970s, throughout which Moscow made sure to guarantee the Algerian army's tactical superiority against Morocco. The Algerian civil war of the 1990s, during which Russian nationals were assassinated, once again led to a reduction in military cooperation. But starting in 1997, important contracts have been signed in the fields of armaments and hydrocarbons, presaging progressive Russian reinvestment in Algeria.

Relative support to Libya

Colonel Gaddafi's anti-Western orientation, with the expulsion of American and British military bases and the revolutionary discourse displayed after his 1969 seizure of power in Tripoli, were perceived by the Soviet Union as a new opportunity to reinforce their influence on the Mediterranean's southern shore. Here again, Moscow's ambitions were revised downwards to rest principally on cooperation in the armaments domain. The "Third universal theory" based on "Islamic socialism" advocated by Muammar Gaddafi, which claimed itself as an alternative between capitalism and socialism, was indeed hardly likely to win over the Soviet leadership. Nevertheless, the end of military relations between

3. Irina Gridan, Gaëlle Le Boulanger, "Les relations..."

4. Ibid.

5. Moscow announced its support for a ceasefire between Israel and its Arab neighbors, hoping to avoid an unmanageable extension of the conflict. Boumediene, supporting in contrast a maximalist position on the issues, had denounced this positioning as a "desertion" by the USSR of the Arab cause.

6. Saphia Arezki, *De l'ALN à l'ANP : la construction de l'armée algérienne, 1954-1991*, Barzakh, Alger, 2018, 243-24.

Egypt and the USSR in 1972 offered the latter an opportunity to develop a compensatory partnership with Libya, although never to the extent of the former relationship with Cairo. As in Algeria, Libyan students and officers were sent for training to the USSR and Soviet aid workers and military personnel found themselves as instructors within the Jamahiriya armed forces.⁷

Although Russia, in a post-Cold War context, voted in 1992 for UN Security Council Resolution 748 imposing an embargo on Libya, it subsequently rallied in favor of the lifting of sanctions and signed a bilateral accord in 1995 with the aim of reestablishing an economic partnership. Relations with the Libyan regime nevertheless maintained a certain distance throughout the 2000s, with Colonel Gaddafi making only one visit to Moscow between 1985 and 2008. The fall of Gaddafi's regime and his elimination in October 2011, following the uprising that developed into a civil war, strongly affected Vladimir Putin, who felt cheated by the West, who he accused of having overstepped the UN mandate authorizing a no-fly zone over the east of the country. These events undoubtedly accelerated Russian reinvestment in the region.

Tunisia and Morocco: Distrust

The USSR's relations with Tunisia and Morocco, due to their situation in the Western camp, remained minimal and marked by distrust throughout the Cold War. This was particularly the case with Morocco, Moscow having provided indirect material support via Algeria to the Polisario Front during the conflict in Western Sahara, as well as discreet diplomatic support at the UN Security Council. Bilateral relations took a more cordial route after the fall of the Soviet Union, particularly on the economic front, notably with Rabat's purchase of Russian military equipment (MI-8 helicopters), although still in limited quantities.

THE NEW CHANNELS AND MOTIVATIONS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE MAGHREB

The Maghreb today is not a fundamental interest for Russia, but rather a source of economic and political opportunities. Russian redeployment in the Maghreb, which began with Vladimir Putin's second term in 2004 and increased over the following decade, relies on new channels, distinct from the former anti-imperialist aura from which the USSR benefited in Algeria and Libya. Three in particular include: investment in the economic domain, increased cooperation in the security realm, and a shared vision of international and regional issues.

7. Suzane M. Birgeron, Alexander Kozhemakin, Roger E. Kanet, "La politique russe en Afrique : désengagement ou coopération ?," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 1996, 145-168.

Economic investment

Russia and the Maghreb countries seek above all to cultivate their economic relations. These relationships encompass various fields, including energy, agricultural products, tourism, the space sector, or, in the case of Algeria, arms sales. For Moscow, this also meets the need to confront the sanctions imposed by the European Union following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, by seeking alternatives to European products, particularly in agriculture and food processing. Russia meets similar will from the Maghreb side, where a desire exists to diversify partnerships until now dominated by EU countries. In 2016, Russia surpassed France to become Algeria's primary grain supplier, a position it has retained ever since. It should be noted that Russian economic projection in the region does not necessarily respond to a Kremlin-directed state strategy, but often satisfies commercial interests seeking new opportunities, although political authorities can nevertheless facilitate contact with various Maghreb economic actors.

Russia first attempted to transform its political proximity with its historic Maghreb partners into economic arrangements, before turning from the 2000s onwards towards new countries, thus highlighting the "issue of depoliticizing its economic agenda."⁸ Although commercial exchanges remain modest and the trade balance still tilts strongly in Moscow's favor, they nevertheless increased throughout recent years, especially with Morocco, rising to 3 billion dollars, 15 times greater than the previous decade. Russia's historical closeness with Algeria and the latter's latent conflict with Morocco on the question of Western Sahara have not impeded Moscow's new relations with Rabat. This rapprochement can be explained by both countries' desire to diversify their economic partnerships, Morocco having historically been more oriented towards Europe. Morocco thereby greatly increased its fruit and vegetable exports to Russia.⁹ This rapprochement between Russia and Morocco was initiated by King Mohammed VI's visit to Moscow in 2002, the first for a Moroccan head of state since that of his father and predecessor Hassan II in 1966, and substantiated in 2016 with the signing of a strategic partnership between the two countries. On the sidelines of the first Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi on October 23-24, 2019, Russia and Morocco are said to have signed an agreement for the construction of a petrochemical complex in the city of Nador worth almost 2 billion euros, thereby revealing a will to diversify relations in the industrial sector. Beyond the symbolic, however, the potential impact of this strategic partnership should be put in perspective. A similar agreement was in fact concluded with Algeria in 2001 but never came to fruition.

Russia is also present in the civilian nuclear power sector. Faced with a significant increase in domestic energy consumption, the Maghreb countries have taken an interest since the end of the previous decade in the option of civilian nuclear power. On the occasion of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Rabat in October 2017, Rosatom

8. Interview with Igor Delanoë, Deputy Director of the *Observatoire franco-russe* in Moscow, September 2019.

9. Arnaud Dubien, "La Russie et l'Afrique : mythes et réalités," Note de l'Observatoire franco-russe, 19, October 2019.

– the Russian State Nuclear Energy Corporation – and the Moroccan Minister of Energy, Mines, and Sustainable Development signed a memorandum of understanding for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, laying the groundwork for future cooperation in civil nuclear power. A similar memorandum was signed in 2016 with Tunisia, defining the legal basis of cooperation between the two countries on nuclear matters, as well as in Libya in 2008. While such cases concern only the preliminary steps of real cooperation, the interest shown by the Maghreb countries for this area of collaboration with Russia is evident. In October 2017, the Algerian commissioner for atomic energy and the Vice President of Rosatom likewise signed a memorandum of understanding for the transfer of nuclear technology. Russia and Algeria are planning the construction of a nuclear power station with a pressurized water reactor by 2025.¹⁰ The Maghreb countries having also initiated a rapprochement in this field with other countries, notably the United States, France, and even China, this cooperation with Russia, primarily transactional and devoid of political considerations, exemplifies above all a desire to take advantage of the various offers on the international market.

In the field of hydrocarbons, Algeria and Russia have numerous partnerships via the Russian companies Transneft and Gazprom (present in Algeria since 2006) and the Algerian Sonatrach. Although Russia has always refused to join the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), they have recently grown closer. By managing to bring both Saudi Arabia and Iran to the table, Russia thus played an essential role in the concluding of accords within the cartel which led to a limitation on oil production in 2018, a fact of which its Algerian partner, who benefitted from the accord's repercussions, is well aware. In addition, hydrocarbons represent the primary Russian export to Morocco.

What's more, as previously mentioned, Russia and Algeria have a long history of security cooperation and exchange in the armaments domain. In March 2006, during his visit to Algiers, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the cancellation of the 4.7- billion-dollar debt contracted by Algeria during the Soviet period, in exchange for a commitment from the Algerians to purchase 7.5 billion dollars of Russian arms. This represented a new model of economic exchange tested by Russia with its long-term partner. It was reiterated with Libya during Vladimir Putin's visit to Tripoli in 2008, with the cancellation of Libyan debt to the tune of 4.6 billion dollars in exchange for an agreement to purchase 3 billion dollars of military equipment.¹¹ In 2008, Algiers sent back 15 defective Mig-29 aircraft purchased from Russia, which were then replaced by improved models. The incident, however, did not lastingly damage the relationship between the two partners.¹²

Concerning war materiel, Algeria today remains Russia's biggest customer in Africa, its third worldwide (after India and China), and Russia its primary supplier.

10. Algeria already manages two reactors dedicated to research and the pharmaceutical industry (set up with China and Argentina), but is strongly interested by the development of genuine civil nuclear power.

11. Arnaud Dubien, "La Russie et l'Afrique : mythes et réalités."

12. Mansouria Mokhefi, "Alger – Moscou : évolution et limites d'une relation privilégiée," *Politique étrangère*, 2015/3 (fall), 57-70.

Recent acquisitions include Su-34 and S-35 aircraft, the Su-57 stealth fighter (for which Algeria is the first client outside Russia), Kilo submarines, S-300 surface-to-air missiles, and surveillance radars. Russian arms, seen as of good quality but less expensive than those of French or American competitors, constitute an advantage for the Algerian air force, which regularly updates its arsenal from Russia.

Libya, with a fragmented state and political situation and still unresolved security crisis, also looks to Moscow as an economic partner. This position, as advocated by certain Libyans, holds that economic stability can precede or even lead to a political resolution to the crisis that has unfolded since the 2011 uprisings. The prospects for arms sales are potentially significant and Russia has already announced its readiness to supply weapons to Libya if the UN embargo is lifted. Moscow has arguments in its favor in this respect, as a former supplier to this country but also given the 3 billion dollar arms contracts signed in 2008 but never honored after the change of regime in Tripoli. The 2011 revolution also interrupted Russian companies' activity in the hydrocarbon sector (Gazprom, present in Libya since 2005, and Tatneft). In its exchanges with the Tripoli government, Russia has expressed its willingness to resume activity provided the security situation in the country improves. In September 2018, the Minister of the Economy and Industry in the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) also announced the relaunch of a railroad construction project linking Benghazi and Sirte, interrupted by the 2011 revolution. While this announcement should be put in perspective, since the GNA does not control the Benghazi area, it nevertheless shows both the Libyan and Russian desire to resume bilateral economic relations as rapidly as possible.

Finally, in the case of Tunisia and to a lesser extent Morocco, Russia represents an opportunity for the tourism sector, vital for these countries' economies. Following the 2015 attack on a Russian airliner linking Sharm el-Sheik in Egypt to Saint Petersburg, tour operators redirected many Russian tourists to Tunisia, representing an alternative clientele to those coming from Western countries.

The security vector

The second channel of Russian projection in the Maghreb is security. According to researcher Vasily Kunetzov,¹³ Russia, like the United States, now plans to present itself as a "security exporter" in this sub-region. This reinforcement of the security component in Moscow's actions in North Africa is aligned with the global "securitization" trend in international relations, but more particularly with the new regional issues following the uprisings of winter 2011 and the ensuing conflicts and crises. As the Maghreb does not represent major security risks or issues for Russia (beyond the global fight against terrorism), Russian presence in this area is once again a question of opportunism.

13. Vasily Kunetzov is the Director of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. These views were shared on the occasion of a conference held in February 2019 at the Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb et le Moyen-Orient (IREMMO).

In addition to arms deliveries, Russia has greatly contributed – and continues to contribute – to Algerian officer training, thus creating a convergence in military cultures which facilitates cooperation between the two countries.¹⁴ Beyond the strictly military domain, Russia is particularly effective in anti-terrorism cooperation, primarily with Algeria, but also with Morocco and Tunisia. Security cooperation between Russia and Morocco took a new turn following the April 2016 visit to Moscow of Abdellatif Hammouchi, currently head of the General Directorate of National Security (GDNS) and head of the General Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (GDTS). This visit, the first of its kind, was followed by that of the head of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrouchev, to Morocco in December of the same year. In Tunisia, cooperation in the security and intelligence fields is significant, despite the weakness of Russian interests in the country. This investment from Russia represents rather a response to the need to counterbalance and monitor the significant presence of other foreign advisors (especially French and American) in Tunisia.

Finally, and significantly, the past several years have seen the growing presence of Russian private military firms in Africa, particularly in Libya. In March 2017, RSB Group, a Russian paramilitary company, announced the withdrawal from Benghazi of some of its contractors following completion of their demining mission. In addition, military advisors from these private military companies are said to be present alongside Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). Rumors attesting to the Libyan presence of the Wagner Group, which belongs to Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch considered close to Vladimir Putin, also surfaced after the January 2019 operation carried out by Haftar in the Fezzan region, followed by his attempted assault on Tripoli starting in April 2019.

A similarity of views on politico-strategic matters

Russian projection in the Maghreb is also based on a similarity of views concerning politico-strategic matters, especially the status-quo principle on which Moscow’s foreign policy rests. This outlook applies to the entirety of the North Africa and Middle East region. Russia regards with suspicion the popular uprisings that shook the region in 2011 and draws a clear line between these events, which it sees as more of an “Islamist spring,” stoked where necessary by Western countries, than true democratic revolutions, and the crisis that arose in the 2000s in Georgia.¹⁵ This new politico-diplomatic component of relations between Russia and the Maghreb countries is part of the aftermath of these uprisings and contrasts markedly with the ensuing reaction in Western countries. Moscow’s abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, adopted on March 17, 2011 and establishing a no-fly zone in eastern Libya, its denunciation of its broad and improper interpretation by NATO to authorize its aerial intervention in Libya, as well as its handling of the Syrian issue, were on the whole positively received by the Maghreb authorities.

14. See above.

15. Interview with Igor Delanoë, Deputy Director of the *Observatoire franco-russe* in Moscow, September 2019.

The Security Council's handling of the Libyan case also marked a turning point in Russia's MENA policy. During the Security Council's vote on Resolution 1973, Russia abstained despite the desire of Vladimir Putin, then Dmitry Medvedev's Prime Minister, to use Russia's veto power. For Putin, NATO overstepped the resolution's mandate and transformed an ostensibly humanitarian operation into one of regime change that led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. The Libyan episode explains in large part the ensuing position taken by Russia on the Syrian situation and the systematic use of its veto power.¹⁶ Since then, Russia is considered a committed player in the Libyan crisis, appearing as Field Marshal Haftar's primary source of support outside the Arab world. Russian support to Haftar is in fact relative and adjustable, in the sense that Russia is not seeking a decisive military victory by the Libyan National Army, but rather to position itself long-term by prioritizing a relaunch of the political process to attempt to resolve the Libyan crisis.¹⁷ This explains the observed shift in Russian diplomacy over the past two years, leading to a certain rebalancing of its contacts in favor of other actors (Tripoli, Misrata, Southern tribes).¹⁸ Haftar's aura has also waned for the Russians, who foresee his departure from the political scene and consider themselves capable of bringing the two principal actors in the Libyan crisis to accept major concessions, all despite Haftar's refusal to sign the ceasefire proposal put forward in Moscow by the Russian government on January 13, 2020.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS IN THE MAGHREB: PERSPECTIVES AND LIMITS

The principle of non-interference in internal affairs, Russian intransigence regarding respect for the sovereignty of the states in the region, and the repudiation of foreign military interventions as advocated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, find a favorable audience in the Maghreb.¹⁹ Russian policy towards Syria is thus understood and even supported by the Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian authorities. Algeria, who constantly reiterates the importance of preserving the sovereignty of the Syrian state, was one of the few members of the Arab League, along with Iraq, not to close its diplomatic mission in Damascus in November 2011. The Syrian matter also figured high on the agenda of Sergei Lavrov's visit to the Maghreb in January 2019. For Russia, progressive normalization of relations between Bashar al-Assad's Syria and the Arab countries could materialize via the diplomacy of the Maghreb states. In January 2019, Lavrov thus expressed his desire for Tunisia to support Syria's return to the Arab League²⁰ from which it was excluded in November 2011. This approach was clearly well perceived on the Tunisian side, as seen by the positive response from Minister

16. Anne De Tinguy, "La Russie face aux révoltes libyennes et syriennes," in *Les Ondes de choc des révolutions arabes*, Presses de l'IFPO, 2004.

17. Patrick Haimzadeh, "Libye : de l'intervention au désengagement, la double peine," *Cultures Monde*, France Culture, 24 October 2019.

18. Interview with Igor Delanoë, September 2019.

19. Abdallah Saaf, "La Russie et le Maghreb," Research Paper, OCP Policy Center, June 2016.

20. Statement by Sergei Lavrov, Press conference, Tunis, 26 January 2019.

of Foreign Affairs Khemais Jhinaoui, or the commitment from candidate Abdelkrim Zbidi, Minister of Defense, to immediately reestablish relations with Damascus if elected in the October 2019 presidential elections. Finally, it is said in Tunis that the new head of state, Kais Saied, despite his discretion on international matters, would feel much closer to a Russia-Iran axis on Middle East affairs than the position supported by Turkey and Qatar.

Russia is finally perceived as an important power in the context of the end of the unipolar world that emerged following the Cold War. While this discourse was long imperceptible in the Maghreb, it today finds a certain echo thanks to Russian success in highlighting its intervention in Syria.²¹ Russia thus presents itself as an alternative to the West, perceived as intrusive and inconsistent. The Maghreb states, whether Washington's allies or not, particularly appreciate Russian MENA policy's predictability and consistency, which differentiate it from that of the United States. Moscow is also fiercely opposed to political Islamism, seen as a risk for internal security and regional stability, which in part explains its qualified support in the Libyan crisis for Field Marshal Haftar, seen as more capable of combatting jihadism than Tripoli's GNA, which is supported by the Justice and Development Party, the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Such a position is well received in the military-security apparatuses of the three central Maghreb states, but also by the political authorities in Algeria and Morocco, and finally by the modern and secular part of the Tunisian governing class, while Western positioning on the question is often viewed as naïve, ambiguous, and occasionally complacent.

In this context, in March 2019, while the Hirak movement contesting President Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term was in full swing in Algeria, the Algerian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ramtane Lamamra, travelled to Moscow to brief Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the situation in the country. This approach was denounced by the protest movement as a subjugation of the government to Russia and the latter's explicit support of the Algerian high military command. Although Russia has denied any involvement on behalf of the parties in power, and declared its rejection of any foreign interference in Algeria, thus echoing the 2011 events in Libya, its position remains nevertheless seen in Algiers, whether criticized or approved of, as supportive of the existing political system.²²

Despite this convergence of views on numerous major diplomatic issues, the Maghreb states show greater caution in the key area of military-strategic cooperation. In this respect, it is striking to observe that Algeria, while maintaining a privileged partnership with Russia in terms of weapons acquisition, shows evidence of the same precautions already observed in this area in the 1960s. While still confirming a preference for tried- and-tested Russian war materiel adapted to their needs, Algerian military officials, regular visitors to armament trade shows in Russia, seem conscious of

21. Interview with Igor Delanoë, September 2019.

22. Samuel Ramani, "[Russia cautious calculus in Algeria](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 March 2019.

the disadvantages of an overly exclusive relationship in this domain, and would be inclined towards diversifying their partnerships, although this has yet to materialize. More generally, the Algerian state apparatus is a particularly picky and demanding client concerning foreign arms purchases, and Russia bore the consequences during the 2008 defective Mig-29 affair. Another factor potentially leading to diversified cooperation in this realm lies in the extraterritoriality of American sanctions imposed on Russia. In the future, these could have consequences on Algerian imports of Russian armaments, with Algeria thus risking United States sanctions.²³

Much more marked restraint appears in order on the part of Tunisia, which until now has had no area of military cooperation with Russia. Following initial contact with their Russian counterparts, the Tunisian military, while showing a certain interest, appeared unsettled by the lack of transparency from this potential partner, particularly concerning the economy and investments. In addition, Moscow's position regarding the Libyan crisis is likely closely monitored in Tunisia and equally so in Algeria, even if the two capitals, careful not to choose one camp over the other, have not made statements on the subject.

Finally, Russia's stated absence of a partisan approach in relations with the various Maghreb countries is not always sufficient to win the favor of one or the other capitals. The still unresolved dispute between Algeria and Morocco illustrates the difficulty long faced by traditional partners of both countries. As such, as part of the partnership it hopes to develop with Russia, Morocco awaits clarification from Moscow on its position on Western Sahara, with the hope of gaining its support at the UN Security Council, without, it appears, having received a response in return. Furthermore, Rabat, which takes care to avoid an overly marked imbalance with its Algerian rival in terms of military capabilities, little appreciated Russia's cancellation of Algerian debt in the 2000s by allowing the latter to purchase new high-performance materiel. For all that, Morocco, which for several years has led an intense soft-power-based policy towards sub-Saharan Africa, seeks to nevertheless position itself in the eyes of the Russians as their essential gateway to the continent, especially its Western part, a role until now reserved for Algeria.

CONCLUSION

Russia's return to the Maghreb, now expanded to new partners, should not be seen as a profound disruption of the strategic partnerships already in place for several decades. Moscow's positions on regional issues since the 2000s are well received in the Maghreb capitals because they are "conservative," prudent, and predictable. This overall approval of a policy, of which Russia's actions in Syria appear particularly emblematic, does not exclude, however, a certain reserve – cooperation not signifying subjugation – including in the eyes of longtime partner Algeria.

23. Interview with Igor Delanoë, September 2019.

Beyond contingencies both structural (economic interests) and circumstantial (security tensions and challenges in the region) in nature, it's necessary to wonder about this redeployment and its future repercussions. Is it a question of expanding a foothold in order to better control this southern flank of the Euro-Atlantic area and reinforce the Russian navy's Mediterranean presence, as suspected by Western powers? Or does it rather incorporate a new objective based on the premise, long internalized by Russia, by which the Maghreb constitutes the gateway to sub-Saharan Africa, a site of growing economic and strategic concerns? There indeed exists a will, affirmed during the recent - and first - Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019, to develop a strategy towards the continent. On this point, Algeria still appears, in Moscow's eyes, to be the gateway to the African continent. Might Morocco, currently deploying an ambitious soft power strategy towards Africa, challenge this access in the future, leading Russia to further reinforce relations with Rabat? The possibility cannot be ruled out, however, that Moscow might consider handing this role to an eventually pacified and stabilized Libya, which would explain the ongoing Russian diplomatic efforts to relaunch a settlement process for the Libyan crisis.

(Translation by Julia M. Tréhu)

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