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Security Dimension of Regional Integration in the Maghreb: A Critical Analysis

La dimension sécuritaire de l'intégration régionale au Maghreb : analyse critique

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Abstract:

Despite facing transnational and evolving security threats emanating from the inner states and neighboring regions, the Maghreb countries tend to prefer national security policies and alliances with extra-regional powers and organizations. However, many scholars assume that long-term peace and security maintenance relies on the role of regional organizations to which threatened states may adhere to foster cooperation and adopt joint security strategies. By discussing the existing link between regional organizations and security from a theoretical perspective, this paper aims to explain what deprives Maghreb countries of creating an effective regional organization.

Keywords: regional organizations, transnational security threats, regional security Maghreb.

Résumé :

Bien qu'ils soient confrontés à des menaces transnationales et évolutives émanant des États intérieurs et des régions voisines, les pays du Maghreb ont tendance à privilégier les politiques de sécurité nationale et les alliances avec des puissances et des organisations extrarégionales. Toutefois, de nombreux chercheurs estiment que le maintien de la paix et de la sécurité à long terme repose sur le rôle des organisations régionales auxquelles les États menacés peuvent adhérer pour favoriser la coopération et adopter des stratégies de sécurité communes. En examinant le lien existant entre les organisations régionales et la sécurité d'un point de vue théorique, ce document vise à expliquer ce qui empêche les pays du Maghreb de créer une organisation régionale efficace.

Mots clés : organisations régionales, menaces transnationales pour la sécurité, sécurité régionale au Maghreb.

Introduction:

The security situation in the Maghreb is a cause for concern, as various transnational threats pose risks at both internal and regional levels. These threats are rapidly evolving and can have a contagious effect, making developing effective strategies to maintain regional security over the long-term imperative. Many scholars argue that the lack of consensus between Maghreb countries, specifically between Morocco and Algeria, hinders the region's future (Dworkin, A. (2022, p.4); El Houdaigui, R. (2021, p.2); Zoubir, YH. (2021, p.179) ; Hernando de Larramendi, M. (2018, p.5) ; Lounnas, D. & Messari, N. (2018, p.3). The ongoing dispute over the Moroccan Sahara and Algeria's continuous backing of the Polisario constitutes a persistent challenge to any regional perspective.

From a security perspective, the lack of cooperation and existing political rivalry between Maghreb countries render regional security architecture vulnerable, which creates an opportunity for transnational criminal and terrorist networks to exploit the situation (Hanlon, Q. & Herbert, MH. (2015, p.6). Indeed, regional security architectures refer to a “system of norms, practices, relationships, alliances and institutions constructed or developed by nations to address, enhance or ensure international and/or regional security” (Snedde, C. (2016, p. 7). These architectures foster dialogue, coordination, and cooperation among regional states to manage various security issues, such as conflicts, terrorism, arms proliferation, and other emerging and non-traditional security threats.

The regional security architecture in the Maghreb, or broadly in North Africa, presents opportunities and challenges. Concerning institutions, many have been created by regional states in order to address mutual security concerns. However, these institutions must be raised to the right level for a homogeneous regional security approach to create a spillover effect. Note that the local regional organizations such as the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) had no involvement in addressing crises, such as the Libyan and Malian conflicts, which highlights their incapacity to intervene or manage regional security challenges effectively. Also, the North African Regional Capacity (a regional standby force created by the African Union), which has been planned since the

creation of the African Union in 2002, still needs an operational existence. Indeed, these organizations are still trapped in leadership rivalry between their member states or are interconnected and interdependent, making it challenging to achieve their objectives. Given this fact, local regional organizations cannot be considered in the Maghreb's security analysis. What we observe, in contrast, is that interventions by international actors have more impact on Maghreb's regional security, whether these roles are portrayed as positive or negative. For instance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) intervention in Libya is subject to different assessments given the negative regional security impact of the Gadhafi regime's fall on the Sahel Saharan strip. Note that, in addition to NATO, the 5+5 initiative is becoming increasingly influential in the Maghreb's security architecture. This initiative has evolved from an informal mechanism for dialogue and cooperation between Western Mediterranean countries to a framework that aims at addressing security challenges in the region through multidimensional cooperation and consultative approach that consists namely of the establishment of joint military exercises and regular ministerial meetings (Cardoso Reis, B. & Carriço, A. (2014, p. 3); García, J-I. (2015, p. 286); Benantar, A. (2015, p. 146).

Another critical aspect to consider in analyzing regional security in the Maghreb is the predominance of national security strategies. This aspect can have either a positive or a negative impact. On the positive side, in the context of inter-Maghreb misunderstanding, the preference for national security policies reflects a pragmatic vision that prioritizes protecting each country's interests and sovereignty. This approach allows for developing independent defense capabilities and establishing robust security institutions at the national level. Furthermore, national security strategies enable governments to respond promptly to internal threats and maintain internal stability. As showcased by Morocco's prominent diplomatic role in managing the Libyan crisis, national endeavors toward mediation in regional conflicts are also crucial. However, these national preferences also challenge regional cooperation and collective security in the Maghreb. In regional summits and high meetings, some countries are

either absent or excluded¹, undermining the potential for constructive dialogue and collaboration. Regional organizations can only effectively work in a continuous dialogue that creates mutual trust among states (Deutsch, K. (1957, p. 36); Buzan, B. & Waever, O. (2003, p. 160); Serbín Pont, A. (2018, pp. 4-7); Gebrehiwot Berhe, (M. 2014, p.127).

Furthermore, states cannot solely rely on their national capacities in an international community dominated by anarchy and power rivalries. Thus, alliances are a critical element in maintaining national security. In the context of the Maghreb, alliances take on an opposed nature. Partnerships with the United States, Russia, and, more recently, Israel and Iran shape the regional security landscape in the Maghreb. However, while Maghreb states have chosen a national perspective as an alternative to the failure of regional cooperation, their alliances with external major and regional powers that hold opposing interests further obstruct any possibility of rapprochement (Henneberg, S. & Ghouli, A. (2023, p.3); LechaAfrica, E.S (2022).

This comprehensive analysis of regional dynamics in the Maghreb from a security perspective leads us to focus our inquiry on the conditions conducive to establishing a robust regional organization among Maghreb countries. Specifically, we seek to understand under what conditions such an organization could effectively mitigate political rivalry and address enduring security challenges.

This study's main objective is to explore regional organizations' role in promoting security and cooperation in the Maghreb. More specifically, it aims to examine the factors and dynamics that hinder the creation of effective regional organizations in this region despite transnational and evolving security threats. By analyzing the link between regional organizations and security from a theoretical perspective, this study seeks to understand why Maghreb countries prioritize national security policies and alliances with external powers over regional cooperation.

¹ Algeria and Tunisia boycotted the 5+5 defense summit held in Rabat in 2022. Similarly, Algeria excluded Tunisia and Mauritania from a NARC military meeting in May 2023.

The research uses a qualitative approach, relying on secondary analysis of data extracted from studies reports produced by official international and national institutions and think tanks. The study also draws on existing literature and theoretical frameworks on regional organizations and security to analyze the specific dynamics in the Maghreb. In addition, it incorporates empirical evidence and case studies to support the conclusions and provide a context for the analysis.

Our research outline unfolds in the following manner. Firstly, we delve into a comprehensive literature review on the role of regional organizations in fostering security and cooperation, along with an exploration of various theoretical perspectives and concepts associated with regional security architectures. Subsequently, we focus on the issue of insecurity in the Maghreb region. We discuss the transnational threat of terrorism in the Maghreb and its repercussions on regional security, including the cascading effects of political instability within the region and its impact on cooperation and security measures. Additionally, we analyze the specific challenges and vulnerabilities faced by Maghreb countries in addressing these security concerns. Lastly, we shift our attention to the institutional aspect of regional dynamics in the Maghreb, evaluating the capabilities and limitations of these organizations in effectively tackling security challenges. Furthermore, we examine the factors that hinder the establishment of efficient regional organizations within the Maghreb.

1. Regional organizations and security: literature review

Analysis of security on a regional scale in international relations has emerged since the 1980s, although the first regional groupings, whether economic or security-related, are older. The first theories of regionalism focused on the European project, which began in the early 1950s in the context of the Cold War. Similarly, developing countries have witnessed the reinforcement of regional groupings since the early 1980s. Whether in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, these organizations were mainly inspired by or a reaction to the European integration project. Although these theories focused on the mean to achieve integration from an economic perspective, the security aspect of the integration was omnipresent. Indeed,



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security organizations have preceded the emergence of regional economic integration processes. The United Nations, which scope is more general, has as its first aim (as mentioned in the first line of the preamble of its charter) “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind” (United Nations Charter, 1945). Under the lead of the United States of America, the Western World set up the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, to which the Soviets reacted six years later with the Warsaw Pact. We can state that the economic organization that followed has served as a means to fulfill the security preoccupation of states, given that the main preoccupations at the time were the refusal to enter into another global conflict in a rivalry between the western and Eastern world.

The international community recognizes the importance of the regional level as rapid and more adapted to the complexity of today's threats. Chapter VIII of the UN's Charter on Regional Arrangements provides the legal basis for regional organizations' involvement in maintaining peace and security. Following the provisions of Article 52.2, "The Security Council shall encourage the development of the pacific settlement of local disputes through such regional arrangements or by such regional agencies either on the initiative of the states concerned or by reference from the Security Council" (United Nations., 1945). Thus, the regional level can filter local disputes and security threats before they become a concern internationally. In other words, regional organizations are supposed to alleviate pressure on the UN's Security Council. In this vein, the report of the UN's Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) states that an effective way to prevent and manage conflicts is to reinforce regional organizations concerning the following advantages they can offer in the maintenance of peace and security: First, regional organizations are closer to the conflict and have a better understanding of its situation. Second is the share of common historical experiences and culture between Member states of the regional organizations, which allows mutual support to find solutions to regional problems. Third is the lower cost and expenditure of the deployment in case of a threat within the region (Bouayad-Agha, FK. & Krasulin, BP., 1995, pp.6-7).

In his *Agenda for Peace*, the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali exposes a view for peace and security maintenance after the cold war. One of the recommendations of this vision is the promotion of cooperation with regional arrangements and organizations (Boutros-Ghali. B., 1992: 35-38). The report outlines the role of Arab, African, and Asian regional organizations in supporting peace and security processes in their respective regions. Major African and Arab regional organizations, that are the African Union (AU), Arab League, and Organization of Arab Conference, have played a vital role, along with the UN, in resolving the Somali crisis in different years². These organizations continue to participate in other conflicts within the African continent. In 2012, the AU launched, jointly with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a mission in Mali to tackle the conflict that threatened the existence of the Malian State. Despite the limited time of its mandate and its replacement by a UN peace operation, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali conducted by the AU and the ECOWAS was rapidly deployed compared to that of the UN. Note that all the security upheavals in the Sahelo-Saharan strip threaten North Africa and Europe. In the Asian context, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) played a key role from 1979 to 1999 in addressing the Cambodian conflict. Since its inception, ASEAN has had a strategic purpose of limiting the expansion of the USSR. Today this organization is at the heart of the regional security architecture of Asia. Since 2003, ASEAN has followed the same European integration process by creating security, economic and sociocultural communities. As for South-Eastern Asia, the evolution of the regional integration process depends mainly on the economic role of Japan and South Korea (Saurugger, S. 2020, p.31).

² Notable milestones are African Union's involvement in the conflict since 2007 through the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to support peace and stability in Somalia. In 2012, AMISOM along with the Somali Government attacked Al-Shabaab. Moreover, the AU has been instrumental in facilitating political dialogue and reconciliation processes among Somali stakeholders. It has supported initiatives like the Djibouti Peace Process, Garowe Principles, and Mogadishu Declaration, which aimed to foster political stability and governance in Somalia. The Arab League has also provided political support to the Somali government, offering diplomatic channels to address the conflict and advocate for stability in Somalia and offered financial assistance, humanitarian aid, and development projects to help alleviate the humanitarian situation and promote reconstruction in Somalia.

As for the *raison d'être* of a regional organization, specifically its security-related mandate, Barry Buzan observes a web of security interdependence between all states in the international system. However, given that “political and military threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, insecurity is often associated with proximity” (Buzan, B. 2003, pp.11-12). Buzan adds that the geographical diversity of the international system and the nonexistence of uniformity within the latter lead to the interdependence between States within ‘geographical clusters.’ This geographically limited security interdependence is called ‘regional security complex’ which is defined as “a set of units whose major processes of *securitization*, *desecuritization*, or both, are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan et al. 1998, p.201). As Rodrigo Tavaréz illustrates, resolving insecurity in Iraq, for instance, is not conceivable without considering the regional security interests of Turkey and Iran (Tavaréz, R. 2010, p.154). The same logic applies to the Horn of Africa, where the involvement of neighboring states in international and AU-led peace and security operations has been contentious. This intervention shows the underlying direct stakes of neighboring countries in the conflict. It can also occur if neighboring states are concerned about the contagious effects of the conflict.

Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr have empirically studied the 'spread effect' or 'spatial diffusion' of wars and suggested that this diffusion pattern between nations is similar to that of contagious diseases (Most, BA. & Starr, H. 1980, p.932). This situation is most likely to occur among nations that share high interactions, and the simple geographic proximity "seems to constitute a fundamental and at least initially useful basis for identifying those groups of interacting nations" (Most, BA. & Starr, H. 1980, p.934). From a statistical point of view, Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg studied 103 armed conflicts throughout 1989-1997 and concluded that 55% of the studied conflicts were linked to conflicts in neighboring states (Wallensteen, P. & Margareta, S. 1998, p.624).

Regional arrangements, whether informal or treaty-based, allow a better convergence of the visions of the States, which they strive to integrate, insofar as they favor a *supra*



nationalism at a lower level than that of organizations with a universal vocation. Local actors can resolve Specific security matters within the *regional cluster* without foreign intervention. However, for a regional organization to work efficiently, member states must share the same perception regarding security threats and common values and mutual trust. Karl Deutsch argues that practical and durable regional security relies on reaching a *security community*, which refers to “a group of people which has become integrated” in a way that a ‘sense of community’ emerges amongst populations who believe that they must resolve problems peacefully (Deutsch, et al. 1957, p.5). The security community requires solid institutions and practices to create dependable expectations between populations. Deutsch also points out that creating a security community “includes the possibility of developing ‘islands of peace’ and an ‘active peace system’ based on a liberal economy and democratic politics”. In this regard, Allan Collins notes that regional security communities also help escape security dilemmas (Collins, A. 2007, p.205). Drawing on neorealist theory³, he emphasizes that these defensive capabilities may ultimately be used for offensive purposes without any guarantee to prevent such outcomes. Other states, being menaced, will also increase their arms to reduce the first state’s security. This loop may continue until the involved actors reach a power balance or can lead to a direct face-off and conflict. Allan Collins also observes that the “unilateral pursuit of security is, therefore, paradoxical” (Collins, A. 2007, p.205). Given the uncertainty about states’ intentions which is the core issue of the security dilemma, reducing uncertainty is therefore necessary for maintaining international and regional security. However, in the context of a security community, a dependable expectation of peaceful change exists for its members. Removing uncertainty surrounding the intentions behind arms build-ups helps prevent the security dilemma from escalating. In other words, the security community testifies to harmony between states. It creates dependable expectations of peaceful change rather than the possibility of resorting to war to resolve the conflict over various issues.

³ Neorealist theory suggests that the structure of the international system, specifically the lack of a security provider in both the international and regional systems forces states to acquire capabilities for self-protection against regional powers

2. Insecurity in the Maghreb: a common issue

The Maghreb region has long been characterized by political, economic, and social instability, leading to the proliferation of extremist ideologies and terrorism. This instability, combined with its proximity to conflict zones in the Middle East and the Sahel Saharan strip, presents substantial security challenges that transcend national borders. Additionally, the 2011 protests demonstrated that internal political upheavals had become a concern beyond national boundaries. Their evolution increases the likelihood of internationalizing internal conflicts, especially in the context of interventions by external actors.

2.1 The transnational threat of terrorism

Since the 9/11 attacks, the fight against terrorism has been a top priority for Maghreb countries, with governments implementing various counterterrorism measures to protect their citizens and maintain regional stability. Morocco, in particular, has been proactive in countering terrorism and has successfully prevented large-scale attacks on its soil. However, the country has not been immune to the threat of terrorism, with the first significant attack occurring on May 16, 2003, when suicide bombers targeted several locations in Casablanca, killing 45 people and injuring more than 100. Since then, Morocco has faced sporadic terrorist threats, including the 2011 Marrakesh bombing, which resulted in 17 fatalities and 25 injuries. In response to these threats, the Moroccan government has implemented multidimensional and integrated counterterrorism measures, including improving border security, enhancing intelligence sharing with international partners, cracking down on terrorist financing, restructuring the sacred space to fight radicalization, socio-economic readjustments, and human rights respect (Kalpakian, J. (2008, p.457); Alaoui, A.B. (2017, p.105); Hafssaoui, M. (2020, pp.227-232); OHCHR, (n.d, p. 1))

Tunisia has also recently experienced the emergence of terrorists with an autonomous *modus operandi* and Islamist militants who pledge allegiance to the Daech or Al Qaeda. In 2015, the country experienced two major terrorist attacks by militants linked to the Islamic State (Daech) that targeted tourists. The first attack targeted the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, where 22 people were killed, and the second targeted the Imperial Hotel in Sousse, where 38

people were killed. These attacks led to a significant decline in Tunisia's tourism industry, a vital revenue source for the country's economy. Most importantly, the link between these attacks and ISIS questions Maghreb states' ability to prevent their region from migrating terrorist cells, given that ISIS was active in the Middle East. The country has since improved its security, including increasing police presence and launching a national counterterrorism strategy (Mullin, C. (2023, p.170); Ruth, H.S & Giulia C. (2019, p.137); Aliaga, L. & O'Farrell, K.F (n.d, pp. 4-5))

Concerning Algeria, the country has a long history of terrorism due to the regime's opposition to various Islamist guerrilla groups between 1991 and 2002 in the context of the civil war, when the government canceled the second round of parliamentary elections, which the Islamic Salvation Front was set to win. This decision led to a decade-long civil war between the government and various Islamist groups, which resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people. Despite the government's efforts to quell terrorism, the country still faces security challenges, including attacks on military and police personnel, bombings, and kidnappings. Al Qaeda usually carries out these attacks in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other affiliated groups.

Like many countries in the Maghreb region, Mauritania is grappling with the threat of terrorism from extremist groups. In particular, the country is concerned with the presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), both of which have carried out deadly attacks in Mauritania and neighboring countries. For example, in 2017, a military base in Mauritania was targeted by AQIM, resulting in the deaths of more than a dozen soldiers. In response, the country's security forces have been engaged in counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region, stretching across several West African countries (Baudais, V. & El Arby, M. (2024, p.3); US DoS, (2022))

Libya presents an even more significant threat to the Maghreb region due to the expansion of both Daech (also known as ISIS) and AQIM within its borders. The instability generated by the conflict between different factions in Libya has created a vacuum that has allowed extremist groups to establish a foothold in the country. Both ISIS and AQIM have taken advantage of this situation to recruit members and carry out attacks within Libya and neighboring countries. The situation in Libya has also contributed to the flow of weapons and

fighters across the Maghreb region, exacerbating the already existing security concerns. In addition to terrorism, Libya is also grappling with issues such as human trafficking, smuggling, and armed militias, all of which pose significant challenges to the country's stability and security. To address these challenges, regional and international efforts have been focused on supporting the UN-led peace process and helping Libya establish a stable and functioning government. However, progress has been slow, and the security situation in the country remains fragile (Silvestri, S. (2018), p.152; Molnár, A., et al. (2022, p.123); USAID (2023; p.1-2))

Currently, the terrorist threat concerning the Maghreb countries comes from the Sahel-Saharan strip. In fact, after the collapse of the Libyan regime in 2011, there was arms proliferation in the region, which reinforced dormant terrorist groups and served the emergence of new ones in northern Mali⁴. Considering the fragility of Sahelian states and their incapability to secure their national territories and borders effectively, terrorism becomes a transitional preoccupation for the neighboring regions, specifically for the Maghreb. Indeed, AQIM, which is the leading terrorist group in the region, has a background in the Maghreb, given that its origin is the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC) which was driven out of Algeria after the end of the civil war. Moreover, the SGPC is also an avatar of the Armed Islamic Group (AIG) created during the Algerian civil war right after the Algerian fighters' return from Afghanistan to establish an Islamic state and overthrow the Algerian regime. This explains the origin of AQIM's desire to establish itself in the Maghreb countries and why it is considered a threat to countries of the region, although it is present in the Sahel Celso, A. N. (2008, p.90); Crone, M. (2017, p.70).

2.2 Political Instability: Domino Effect

Political instability is another critical issue that threatens the Maghreb countries from the inside. While protests may be shut down by law enforcement or decision-makers' response to

⁴ From 2011 on, there was the creation namely of Ansar Eddine (2012), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) (2011-2013), Al-Mourabitoun (2013-2017), The Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa (2012), Ansar ul Islam (2016-), Nusrat al-Islam(2017-) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (2015-).



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the demand of protesters in many cases, the probability of escalating intensity to endanger states' existence is to consider. *Political instability* can be defined as turnover with a high probability of government or regime termination (Carmignani, F. 2003, p.9). In the Arab world, political instability is significant for national and regional security, given the spillover effect that it may produce and its spread effect. The political and social protests in 2011 transformed from low-intensity to internal armed conflicts before they acquired an international aspect after multiple regional and international actors and organizations intervened. Maghreb countries have differently experienced the protests of 2011 that are labeled "Arab Spring." These upheavals started in Tunisia before spreading to neighboring countries, specifically Libya, where protests have led to an ongoing conflict in which NATO has intervened, and Russia's Wagner Group is still present. Since the fall of Gadhafi's regime and foreign intervention, the Libyan state has been mired in instability and the clash between political rivals, resulting in the creation of two governments claiming legitimacy.

In Morocco, protests have led to social reforms and a constitutional change to which most of the population has adhered. The constitution of July 2011 brought fundamental rights and changes in the Moroccan political regime by reinforcing the principle of separation of powers and, more specifically, the enhancement of executive prerogatives. Also, the process through which the Justice and Development Party became a major political player at the helm of the government from 2011 to 2021 is generally portrayed as democratic. Political stability has been a significant concern for Moroccan policymakers and actors who have set aside, in the midst of 2011's events, political disagreements to maintain Morocco's national security (Szmolka, I. (2015, p.668); Daadaoui, M. (2017, p.6); Ellen Lust-Okar, (2009, p.3) .

In Algeria, 2011's protests only resulted in canceling a state of emergency⁵. The constitutional changes happened five years later, in 2016. Despite the constitutional modifications, protests continued as the figure and policies of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika have not changed. From 2019 to 2021, the population organized demonstrations (called Hirak), and

⁵ Which was in force from February 9, 1992 following the outbreak of the Islamist guerrilla war against the government, which had canceled the results of the December 1991 legislative elections that the Islamic Salvation Front was on track to win.

even the army considered this pressure after opposing Bouteflika's proposal to remain in power. The change of political figures in Algeria was necessary to maintain stability and operate as a response to the population's protest. Thus, the current President, Abdelmajid Tebboune, had to present himself as "the candidate of the people" in the 2019's Algerian elections. Responding to people's protest -even rhetorically- seems to be a preoccupation of the Algerian regime, given the impact that political instability may produce and the historical social and political crisis in which Algeria plunged during the 1990-2000 period. Thus, constitutional changes were conducted by Tebboune in 2020 to appease the extended Hirak and preserve national security.

The Tunisian political situation also challenges regional security. While the Tunisian 2011's protests were portrayed as the expression of democracy and described by many international observers as an example to transpose in the Arab world, the fall of the Ben Ali regime and the democratization of Tunisia have not brought economic development and social changes. Moreover, Tunisia is mired in a political crisis since the current President, Kais Saied, decided to freeze the Parliament and end the Prime Minister's mandate. It is argued that the instability of the Tunisian government stems from the divergence between the President of the Republic and the President of the Assembly of the Representatives of People, Rached Ghannouchi, the founder of the Ennahda Party (Alaya, A. (2013, p.135); Gobe, E. (2022, p.1)). Indeed, both the President of the Republic and the leader of the opposition, who resulted from the 2019's elections, claim electoral legitimacy and that they act on behalf of the people.

Nevertheless, what makes this political divergence dangerous for the Tunisian state is the economic context in which it occurs and the divergence it may create between those who support secularism and religion. Moreover, suppose we consider the existing pressure of terrorist groups that portray themselves as the defenders of the Islamic religion. In that case, any crisis resulting from the absence of national discussion between Tunisian political and economic actors may lead to a security crisis with regional dimensions. According to the World Bank, "Tunisia's economic performance decelerated after the 2011 revolution, resulting in a lost decade of growth" (The World Bank, 2022). Moreover, unemployment reached 16.8% of the total labor force in 2021 (The World Bank, 2023). In the same vein, Guenich

Hassan and Chouabi Nejib stress that political instability negatively impacts economic growth and continue that weak growth in Tunisia is due to insecurity which results namely from political assassinations and terrorist attacks (Guenichi, H. & Chouaibi, N. 2022, p.1). Thus, the economic turmoil has led to anti-government protests and fueled political division, creating a vicious cycle from which the Tunisia government strives to escape.

Mauritania's political situation is also critical, as the country faces numerous challenges, such as socioeconomic upheavals. The country has a history of military coups. In 2019, former General Mohamed Ould Ghazouani won the presidential election, succeeding former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who had been in power since 2008. However, opposition parties have contested the election results, claiming irregularities and flawed votes (News Wires, 2019). Furthermore, the ruling party's dominance in the Parliament has been a source of concern for the opposition, who argue that it undermines democracy and political pluralism. Recently, the opposition coalition of Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques (RFD), Union des Forces de Progrès (UFP) and Union Nationale pour l'Alternance Démocratique (UNAD) have decided to put an end to the state of grace granted to the President of Mauritania (Seck, A. 2022). This decision comes against a multidimensional crisis in the country due to economic, political, and social struggles. According to data published in 2019 by the National Agency for Statistics, Demographic and Economic Analysis (ANASDE), 28,2% of the Mauritanian population is concerned by monetary poverty (ANASDE. 2021 ,p.7). The data is complemented by that of the recent Multidimensional Poverty Index (IPM-M) of March 2023, which indicates that 56.9% of the population is concerned by the range of impoverishment in areas such as education, employment health, and standard of living⁶. Persistent inequalities and lack of access to opportunities can undermine political stability by fueling social unrest, protests, and even political conflicts. In this context, economic instability is also to consider since hardships can lead to the frustration of people who may become susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by extremist groups

⁶ This Index is established by the National Agency for Statistics, Demographic and Economic Analysis (ANASDE), the UNCEF and the Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative (OPHI).



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(Abdel Jelil, M. et al, 2018, p.15; UNDP, 2016, p.17; Devarajan, Shanta et al, 2016, p. 19; Mitra, S. 2008, p.60)

3. Regional dynamics in the Maghreb: an institutional challenge

Since the early 1980s, the leaders of Maghreb countries seem to have understood the strategic importance of regional organizations, such as the Arab-African Union (AAU) and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). The AAU, established in 1984 between two rivals at the time, Libya and Morocco, was seen as a means for both countries to achieve their national interests and prevent regional isolation (Khider, A. 1993, p.30). For Libya, it was a way to escape international sanctions and diplomatic isolation⁷, while for Morocco, it was an essential step towards resolving the problem over the Moroccan Sahara by abolishing Libyan support for the Polisario. The AAU has also played a role in countering the Algerian regional hegemonic aspiration as put into action by forming the regional axis "Alger-Tunisia-Nouakchott" in 1983. The Treaty of Oujda, which founded the AAU, posed the first attempt at a regional collective security regime⁸. However, the AAU was short-lived and failed to achieve its intended objectives.

Nevertheless, the idea of regional integration in North Africa was still ongoing, and in 1989, the AMU was established by Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. Despite being portrayed as a defensive measure *vis-à-vis* the European Economic Community and thus is considered as serving economic purposes (Khider, A. 1993; Balta, P. 1993; Bendhaou, F. 2022) , the founders of the AMU were also preoccupied with the importance of the peace and security behind them. Article 14 of the Treaty of Marrakech, which founded the AMU, takes up the same provision of the AAU Treaty and underlines the regional collective security regime that the Maghreb states intended to establish. The treaty also contains a military

⁷ From 1978, Libya was subject to sanctions imposed by the United States. The US first banned the sale of military equipment to Libya before adding it on the list of state sponsors of terrorism a year later. Between 1981-82 the US banned imports and exports on oil sector in Libya, and invalidated Libyan passports for travel to its territory. These, amongst other sanctions that were imposed later of the Libyan regime, have pushed Colonel Gadhafi to seek support from a country that will help alleviating sanctions through diplomatic channel namely by mediating with other western countries.

⁸ The treaty of the AAU states in its Article 12 that "any aggression against one of the two states would constitute an aggression against the other" (See Official Gazette of the Kingdom of Morocco. (1984) p.353)

provision in Article 15, which outlines the obligations of its member states concerning security and political cooperation. The provision states that member states are required to prevent any activities or organizations on their respective territories that may undermine any other member state's security, territorial integrity, or political system (Arab Maghreb Union., n. d.). This means that member states should not allow any groups or individuals to engage in activities that could threaten the security or stability of other member states or engage in any action that could lead to the disintegration of another member state's territory.

Furthermore, the provision also obligates member states to refrain from joining any military or political alliance or pact directed against other member states' political independence or territorial Unity. This implies that member states should not enter into any agreements or alliances with external powers or organizations that could undermine any other member state's political independence or territorial integrity. This provision aims to promote mutual trust and cooperation among member states and prevent any actions that could lead to regional conflicts or tensions. As the AAU, the AMU faced significant challenges and was practically short-lived. The organization has faced internal tensions and conflicts of interest between its founders. Today, the AMU is reduced to a formal organization in which activities and programs have been significantly limited.

Analysis of cooperation and integration dynamics in the Maghreb helps understand the underlying reasons behind the regional initiatives' failure. As we have stressed, rapprochement between Morocco and Libya in the framework of the AAU was primarily driven by a "political opportunity" that both sides seized to advance their respective objectives within the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Maghreb. By the time, Morocco and Libya's dissatisfaction with the Maghreb and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) played a role in their convergence, as they aimed to establish regional and African leadership. The same logic applies to the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). The context in which this regional organization has been created is marked by the appearance of extra-regional events, such as the European Economic Community (EEC) expansion to Spain and Portugal, which has posed an imminent threat to the Maghreb states. The AAU and the AMU are part of the "strategic opportunity model" of integration developed by Frack Petiteville. According to the author,

strategic opportunity refers to "a situation in which a state sees integration not as a means of regional rapprochement but as an instrument of greater strategic control over its environment" (Petiteville, F. 1997, p.515). By participating in these regional organizations, states can leverage their position to shape regional policies and agendas that align with their strategic interests. This approach reflects a pragmatic view of integration, where states prioritize their strategic objectives over broader regional cooperation.

Understanding the failure of Maghreb's institutional project requires highlighting the context in which it occurred so that the pragmatic approach can be clearly understood. As aforementioned, Morocco and Libya's struggle to control the regional environment and escape isolation resulted in the AAU. These concerns were accentuated by the expansion of the EEC and the uncertainty of how the international system would shift, given the forecast of the eminent implosion of the ex-USSR. This context explains why the rest of the Maghreb states joined the Morocco and Libyan Union project that resulted in the AMU. As the need for strategic control or fear from any external element faded, the regional institutions were no longer considered beneficial. This realistic vision of institutions and cooperation excludes the idealism of Unity and sees regional organizations as an instrument for states to achieve their national interests. In other words, regional integration is only conceivable when it meets the national interests of the Member States. It should be added that States, as rational actors, only seek to seize opportunities likely to strengthen their power and security or ensure their continuity. Anything that contributes to the achievement of these two concerns is. Therefore, a priority and regional integration is one of many choices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research highlights the complex security dynamics that prevail in the Maghreb region and sheds light on the complexities of establishing a robust regional organization to respond to security challenges. We find that the mere presence of common security threats does not necessarily lead to the adoption of a regional approach to security, especially given the historical context and divergent national interests at stake. Our findings also highlight the critical importance of addressing the root causes of divergence among



regional actors as a precondition for meaningful progress in regional integration. This is particularly relevant in the absence of the external factors that have historically facilitated cooperation between Maghreb countries. Moreover, the inherent weaknesses of current regional organizations, which have led Maghreb states to seek strategic alliances with external powers, further complicate the security landscape. The existence of conflicting alliance patterns, particularly between key players such as Morocco and Algeria, is a major obstacle to regional cooperation due to conflicting security agendas.

In addition, our research highlights the predominant reliance of Maghreb states on national security policies that prioritize sovereignty and individual national interests over collective regional approaches. This highlights the difficulty of reconciling national imperatives with the imperative of regional cooperation, especially when the latter is not seen as a priority.

The limited effectiveness of the AMU in addressing regional security issues, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict between Morocco and Algeria over the Moroccan Sahara, highlights the need for alternative approaches to regional integration. In order to promote sustainable regional security in the future, states need to make a firm commitment to cooperation projects that stem from a recognition of the complex nature and interdependence of security threats in the Maghreb. Furthermore, it is imperative to adopt a long-term vision that transcends short-term calculations and prioritizes cooperation to overcome the obstacles to effective regional integration and to address the various security challenges facing the region.

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