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The changing interactions between Libya and the Maghreb: bilateral versus multilateral engagement

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Abstract

The starting point of this article relates to one of the prevailing arguments in the relevant literature, according to which tensions across the Arab world, in general, and the Maghreb, in particular, are largely due to increasing Islamic fundamentalism and levels of democratisation. Conversely, the following historical account reveals the multiple strategies pursued by countries at the interface of bilateral and multilateral initiatives. In order to understand trends in inter-state relations across the Maghreb until 2010, a nuanced discussion on the changing modes of interaction is warranted. Against this context, the article addresses two questions: First, to what extent are bilateral relations being superseded by multilateral arrangements? and Second, what explains either these possible changes or the persistence of bilateral arrangements? The article argues that, in the face of the rising prominence of multilateral forums, substantive political and economic arrangements have been settled mainly at the bilateral level. On the one hand, the large bulk of cooperative arrangements are dealt with on a state-to-state basis. On the other hand, the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements in the Arab world has facilitated the improvement of coordination in the Maghreb, specifically in domestic security matters.

The Changing Interactions between Libya and the Maghreb: Bilateral versus Multilateral Engagement

Ahmed A. AL-ATRASH

1. Introduction

The process of inter-state cooperation across the Arab world has long been tortuous and highly ideological. Controversies have occurred between nationalists (or statists) and pan-Arabists (or unionists) - and sometimes between Arab transnationalists themselves (e.g. Nasserism versus Baathism), and even within a single group (e.g. the disagreement between the Baathists in Syria and Iraq). Economic inequalities within and between countries have further contributed to such tensions.¹ International relations across the Arab world are clear evidence of this.² While these countries have a common history and cultural heritage, profound political tensions have long soured their relations. Notably, Cold-War politics deepened the divisions between them.³ On the one side, Libya and Algeria were classified - mostly by the West - as 'revolutionary and anti-West'. On the other, Morocco and Tunisia acted, and were perceived, as moderate and pro-Western'.

Hence it comes as no surprise that super-power rivalry has significantly influenced inter-state relations at the regional level.⁴ For instance, the Algerian-Moroccan controversy over territorial boundaries reflects and reproduces long-standing ideological divisions.⁵ Accordingly, with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the concurrent regional dynamics, relationships between countries in the Maghreb have changed in important respects. These events eliminated old contentious issues and new dynamics began to shape regional relations. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rising political and economic power of Gulf countries are some of the factors that have the greatest influence on relations between Maghreb countries. This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion on the changing political interactions between Libya and countries in the Maghreb in the post-Cold War era, and it focuses on the gradual intertwining of bilateral and multilateral relations. In particular, it addresses two key questions. First, to what extent are bilateral relations being superseded by multilateral

1 Al-Atrash, Ahmed, *Inter-Arab Management of Regional Conflicts: The League of Arab States and Algeria-Morocco Case, 1963-1996* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing (LAP), 2010) and Farah, T.E. (1987) *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987).

2 Maghreb (west in Arabic) is the western part of the Arab world. It includes Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

3 Pearsons, Frederic, Baumann Robert, Bardos, Gordon "Arms transfers: effects on African Interstate Wars and Interventions" in *Conflict quarterly*, Winter 1989, pp. 36 - 62.

4 Cavatorta, Francesco "Geopolitical challenges to the success of democracy in North Africa: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco" in *Democratization*, Vol. 8, No. 4.

5 Zartman, William, "The Politics of Boundaries in North and West Africa" in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, (1965), 3; pp. 155-173

arrangements? Second, what explains either these possible changes or the persistence of bilateral arrangements?

The starting-point of this paper relates to one of the prevailing arguments in the relevant literature, according to which tensions across the Arab world in general and the Maghreb in particular are largely due to increasing Islamic fundamentalism and levels of democratisation. For example, on the one hand as Shehadi observes, "the most pronounced ideological conflicts today are between the radical Islamists and the more moderate Islamists (e.g. Sudan versus Egypt) and between authoritarian regimes and liberalizing ones."⁶ Democratization and political securitisation, on the other hand are among the foremost factors framing the study of contemporary Maghreb politics.⁷ Viewed in these terms, regional politics is to be understood as a struggle of authoritarian and anti-Western countries versus more liberally-minded ones alongside the intraregional struggle between moderate and extremist political Islam.

In examining the gradual overlap of bilateral and multilateral arrangements, this paper will present a critique of the above-mentioned argument, which overlooks sources of contradiction between Arab ruling elites that go beyond simplistic distinctions like "authoritarian" and "liberal". Without questioning the relative moves towards democratization across the Maghreb,⁸ this paper seeks to shed light on dynamics that have not been sufficiently examined, namely, changing patterns of diplomatic engagement between Libya and its Maghreb neighbors. Hence, I will not make a case against the relevance of ideological differences between states. In fact, the almost absolute control of power by elites across the region, and their discursive attachment to entrenched ideological stances, remain unchanged. The following historical account reveals the multiple strategies pursued by countries at the interface of bilateral and multilateral initiatives. In order to understand current trends in inter-state relations across the Maghreb, a more informed discussion on the changing modes of interaction is warranted. In turn, this calls for a re-conceptualization of issues such as democratization and Islamic fundamentalism.

The paper thus argues that, in the face of the rising prominence of multilateral forums, substantive political and economic arrangements are settled mainly at the bilateral level. On the one hand, the analysis shows that the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements in the Arab world has facilitated the improvement of coordination in the Maghreb, specifically in domestic security matters. On the other hand, the large bulk of cooperative arrangements are dealt with on a state-to-state basis. Indeed, relations between countries in the Maghreb have been conducted on a bilateral basis. The latter has proved to be more effective than multilateral mechanisms. In order to unpack the manner in which these have, or have not, changed, an historical review first of

6 Shehadi, K. 'The Poverty of Arab Diplomacy: Conflict Reduction and the Arab League' in Salem, P. (Ed) *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1997), p. 224 and Pargeter A., "The Islamist movement in Morocco" (Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor, 2005).

7 Haddadi, S., "Political securitisation and democratisation in the Maghreb: ambiguous discourses and fine-tuning practices for a security partnership", 23 March 2004, Working paper AY0403-23, Available online at:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8qm646tx;jsessionid=5CBDF7CC1D3621FA8754FBFEF88759F9>

8 Boubekeur, A., Amghar, S., "Islamist parties in the Maghreb and their links with EU: mutual influences and the dynamics of democratisation", *EuroMesco Paper*, October 2006, No. 55, Available online at: http://www.euromesco.net/images/55_eng.pdf

bilateral and then of multilateral coordination between Libya and Maghreb countries is in order. This historical excursus will give special attention to the Western Saharan situation for its political implications at regional level have not been sufficiently explored in the academic literature.⁹ Furthermore, it is largely accepted that the territorial dispute of the Western Sahara and its detrimental effect on relations between Algeria and Morocco is one of the main factors behind the paralysis of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU).¹⁰ In elaborating mainly on secondary academic literature and media sources, this paper seeks to present a concise account of the historical milestones that have shaped the complex overlap between bilateral and multilateral initiatives between Libya and Maghreb countries. While I do not intend to provide a full picture of the multifaceted historical relations, the analysis intends to set the basis of future research to better conceptualise the perceived complexity of changing governance patterns in the Maghreb.

2. Bilateral relations

The deepening of bilateral arrangements between Libya and Maghreb countries can be understood as the result of the perceived failure of Libya's Pan-Arabist ambitions. During the 1970s, Libya's foreign policy was driven by pan-Arabism as defined by Egypt's president, Gamel Abdul Nasser.¹¹ Simply put, the main goals included "Arab unity, elimination of Israel, advancement of Islam, support for Palestinians, elimination of outside – particularly Western – influence in the Middle East and Africa, and support for a range of 'revolutionary' causes".¹² Under the guise of Pan-Arabism, Libya made several unsuccessful attempts to play a central role in the "Arab regional order".¹³ Libya's role notwithstanding, over the years the Arab summit has become one of the principal organs of the Arab League. Libya's failure to galvanize the support of Arab neighbors is epitomized by the decision taken by the Arab League in 1998.

During a meeting of the Arab League in 1998, Arab states decided not to challenge UN sanctions against Libya, an initiative that triggered Colonel Qadhafi's U-turn in his pan-Arabist policies. Shortly after that meeting, he announced that he was abandoning pan-Arab ideas, which had been one of the fundamental tenets of his philosophy.¹⁴ Overall, Libya's lack of support from other Arab states during the embargo, and numerous inter-Arab conflicts, affected Libya's foreign policy strategy

9 Shelly, Toby, *Endgame in the Western Sahara*, (Zed Books: New York, 2004) and Damis, John, *Conflict in Northwest Africa: the Western Sahara Dispute*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).

10 Oxford Analytica, *Middle East: Maghreb integration still has potential*, 12 April 2010, <http://www.oxan.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB159132>

11 Kerr, M.H., *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

12 US Department of State, *Background Note: Libya*, (2010) Available online at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>

13 Matar, J. and Hilal, A., *Al-Nezaam al-Iqlimi al-Arabi: Dirasa fi al-Alaqaat al-Asiyasi'ah al-Arabia* (The Arab Regional Order: A Study in Inter-Arab Political Relations)-(Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1986 – Arabic text).

14 US Department of State, *Background Note: Libya*, (2010) Available online at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>

in two important ways. First, pan-Africanism emerged as a paramount goal. Second, Libya sought to consolidate one-to-one relations with countries in the Maghreb. In other words, the putative deterioration of relations with Arab countries as a whole led to increasing diplomatic engagement across North-Africa mainly at bilateral level.

2.1. Libya-Tunisia

During the early years of the Libyan Revolution of 1969, Libya sought to cooperate with Tunisia. For example, during 1972-4 Libya and Tunisia signed some 15 accords, which could have gone half way towards unifying the two countries by 1981. But the haste with which Tunisia disengaged from the abortive declaration of union with Libya as the Arab Islamic Republic in 1974 worsened relations between the two countries for several years.¹⁵ According to some commentators, the failure of such attempts was due to their rejection by President Habib Bourguiba. While in 1972 Bourguiba had believed that the idea was premature, in 1974, nonetheless, he signed the Djerba Declaration with Qaddafi.¹⁶ The two countries committed themselves to becoming a single state, to be named the Arab Islamic Republic. It goes beyond the purposes of this paper to consider the reasons why the AIR failed. What is relevant, however, is that, over the subsequent years, relations between the two countries deteriorated, especially when Tunisia supported the partition of the Western Saharan territory by Morocco and Mauritania.¹⁷

Throughout the 1980s, two other issues further strained relations between the two countries. The first concerns the dispute over maritime borders submitted to the International Court of Justice on December 1978. On February 24, 1982, the Court delivered its final judgment, ruling in Libya's favor for the partition of the oil-rich continental shelf it shared with Tunisia.¹⁸ The second issue concerns the expulsion from Libya of 40,000 Tunisian workers in August 1985, partly as a result of the downturn in the Libyan economy caused by shrinking oil revenues. However, the expulsions were also based on political considerations. Qadhafi considered expulsions as a political weapon to threaten uncooperative governments such as Tunisia. In retaliation, Tunisia expelled 300 Libyans, including 30 diplomats.¹⁹ However these tensions were soon to change.

The adverse effects posed by the international embargo on Libya, and the economic downturn over the mid-1980s, led the two countries to foster bilateral cooperation. To the present day, Libya-Tunisia relations have witnessed remarkable improvements in

15 Aghrout Ahmed, Sutton Keith "Regional Economic Union in the Maghreb" in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28, 1 (1990), pp. 115-139

16 Simons, G. *Libya: The struggle for Survival* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993)

17 Mortimer, Robert "The Arab Maghreb Union: myth and reality" in Yahia Zoubir, North Africa in transition: state, society and economic transformation in the 1990s, (*University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1999*).

18 Feldman, Mark "The Tunisia-Libya continental shelf case: geographic justice or judicial compromise?" in *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Apr., 1983), pp. 219-238.

19 See paper by Paoletti in this special issue.

various spheres. Arguably, as of 2010, Libya and Tunisia enjoy the most extensive level of bilateral collaboration among the Maghreb countries. This can be attributed to their geographic proximity, cultural resemblances (particularly between Tunisia and the western part of Libya), and limited transport costs. In turn, these favorable conditions have incentivized the two countries to reduce restrictions on movement of people and goods between them.²⁰ This is best illustrated if we consider economic exchanges between the two countries since border opening between them in the late 1980s. Tunisia is now one of the key trading partners of Libya, with 2009 exports thereto valued at \$830.8 million and imports at \$559 million.²¹ As further evidence of this, in November 2010 Libya and Tunisia discussed the creation of a free economic zone between Ben Guerdane in Tunisia and Libya's Ras-Jedir border development area.²² The two countries are also collaborating on a joint Libyan-Tunisian effort to build an oil pipeline, a gas pipeline and an oil refinery in the Al-Skira region in Tunisia.²³

Tourism, on which the Tunisian economy relies heavily,²⁴ is also an essential aspect of this expanding relationship. In 2006, the two countries signed an agreement to boost joint initiatives with regard to tourism.²⁵ In fact, the greatest numbers of tourists to Tunisia come from Libya. For instance, in the first half of 2009, the total number of tourists coming from the Maghreb reached about 1.5 million, of which 1.2 million were from Libya.²⁶

2.2. Libya-Algeria

Overall, relations between Libya and Algeria have been more amicable than Libyan-Tunisian relations. Notably, the two countries have shared similar revolutionary Arab ideologies, state-controlled economic systems, and Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil policies. Furthermore both have supported initiatives aimed at fostering collaboration among “Third World” countries.²⁷ It is also noteworthy that Libya has acted as major regional ally of the Algerian-backed

20 It should be noted here that no entry visa is required for the peoples of the Maghreb to travel within the five countries of the AMU.

21 US Department of State, *Background note: Tunisia*, (2010) Available online at:

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5439.htm>

22 Libyan online, *Tunisia, Libya agree on joint projects*, 9 November 2010, Available online at:

<http://www.libyaonline.com/news/details.php?id=16104>

23 Tripoli Post, *Libya, Tunisia Take Practical Steps to Improve Economic Relations*, 16 January 2007,

Available online at: <http://www.tripolipost.com/articledetail.asp?c=2&i=535&archive=1>

24 Chokri Ouerfelli “Co-integration analysis of quarterly European tourism demand in Tunisia” in *Tourism Management*, Volume 29, Issue 1, February 2008, Pages 127-137

25 *Libyan investment*, Libya Tunisia Sign Tourism Agreement, 28 February 2006, Available online at:

http://libyaninvestment.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=72999&catid=42:libya-news&Itemid=168

26 Global Arab Network, [Tunisia: Algerian and Libyan visitors boosting tourism revenues](http://www.english.globalarabnetwork.com/200908011995/Travel/tunisia-algerian-and-libyan-visitors-boosting-tourism-revenues.html), 1 August 2009, <http://www.english.globalarabnetwork.com/200908011995/Travel/tunisia-algerian-and-libyan-visitors-boosting-tourism-revenues.html>

27 Library of Congress, *A country study : Algeria*, (1994), <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/dztoc.html>

Polisario²⁸ on the "Western Sahara" issue, against both Morocco and Mauritania. However, the Treaty of Oujda in 1984 between Libya and Morocco temporarily aggravated Algerian-Libyan relations, since it created a political divide between Libya and Morocco on one side and Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania on the other. The Treaty, which established a 'union of states' between the two countries as a first step towards the creation of a Greater Arab Maghreb, was intended to be a response to Algeria's Treaty of Fraternity and Concord with Tunisia signed in March 1983. By signing the treaty with Libya, Morocco succeeded in persuading Libya to end its aid to Polisario.²⁹ The Treaty of Oujda, however, proved to be short-lived. Indeed, in 1988 Libya was invited to participate in the inter-Maghreb commission to set down the bases of the North African Union. The establishment of the AMU in February 1989 marked the first formal political or economic collaboration between the two neighbors.³⁰ In this vein, during recent years, political relations between the two countries have expanded in important ways. Economic collaboration is one example.

Notably, both are oil-exporting countries, and, since the 1960s, the experiences of oil producers in Libya, Algeria, Egypt and Sudan have followed separate paths, which in turn have led them into differing relationships with foreign oil companies.³¹ However, more recently bilateral collaboration on trade and oil issues has been revived.³² These trends reflect growing intra-Maghrebi investments, in particular Libyan and Tunisian investments in Algeria.³³ The growing intertwining of bilateral and multilateral arrangements is emerging as a central feature of current political dynamics at the regional level. Yet, as we shall see in the sections to come, intra-regional trade among Maghreb countries is one of the lowest in the world.³⁴ In fact, most trade is governed by bilateral agreements, and commerce is marginal.³⁵ Yet state-to-state relations can be characterized by profound tensions, as in the case of Libya and Morocco, to which we now turn.

2.3. Libya-Morocco

Libya-Morocco relations have undergone significant changes. Largely because of their profound ideological differences, until 1984 interaction between the two countries had been tense. Rabat continued to deplore Tripoli's attempts at domestic

28 The Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro

29 Fisher, "Libya: physical and social geography" in *The Middle East and North Africa 2003*, (2002 Routledge).

30 Library of Congress, *A country study : Algeria*, (1994), <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/dztoc.html>

31 Fattouch, Hakim and Darbouche Hakim (2009), "North African oil and foreign investment in changing market conditions" in *Energy Policy*, Volume 38, Issue 2, February 2010, Pages 1119-1129

32 Martinez, Luis, *Algeria, the Arab Maghreb Union and Regional Integration*, (2006)

http://www.euromesco.net/images/59_eng.pdf

33 Martinez, Luis, *Algeria, the Arab Maghreb Union and Regional Integration*, (2006)

http://www.euromesco.net/images/59_eng.pdf

34 Huffbauer Clyde and Brunel Claire, *Maghreb regional and global integration: a dream to be fulfilled*, October 2008, Peterson Institute for International Economics,

<http://www.iie.com/publications/briefs/maghreb.pdf>

35 African Development Bank, *Algeria 2000-2002 Country strategy paper*, September 2000,

<http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/ADB-BD-WP-2000-102-EN-ALGERIA-2000-2002-CSP.PDF>

interference such during the 1971 attempted military coup - interference that was mainly due to the fact that Morocco's foreign policy goals had long been at odds with Libya's. One issue at stake was the alleged Moroccan assistance to the government of Zaire when rebels staged an invasion from neighboring Angola.³⁶

From 1976 to 1984, due to Libya's involvement in the Western Sahara case, relations between the two countries worsened still further. In order to better understand the nature of these tensions, a brief historical excursus is in order. Before 1969, Libya did not play a major role with regard to border issues. However, as a result of the Treaty of Hassimessaoud in 1975, Libya supported Algeria and the Polisario Front.³⁷ In 1976, at the beginning of the Western Sahara war, Libya and Algeria issued a joint communiqué in which they stated that "any attack carried out against either of the two revolutions will be considered by the other as an attack against itself".³⁸ In short, Libya's policy towards the "Western Sahara" question can be best understood as the consequence of profound ideological differences between Morocco and Libya, as the latter had been an anti-West regime at the time.

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was not recognized by the Libyan government until 1980.³⁹ Arguably, Libya's late recognition of the Saharan state was due to the strong relationship between Libya and Mauritania before the latter withdrew from "Western Sahara" in 1979. On this matter, it is also worth noting that, in 1978, Libya successfully used its leverage – mainly by virtue of its oil-rich economy - against Mauritania when it hosted secret negotiations between that country and the Polisario Front. These talks eventually paved the way for the Algiers Agreement of 1979. One of the main factors that persuaded Mauritania sign a peace agreement and to pull out from Western Sahara was Libya's offer of financial aid for economic and cultural projects in Mauritania.⁴⁰ This episode needs to be kept in mind, for two main reasons. First, ideological factors have long shaped state-to-state relations across the region. Second, interactions and final outcomes can be partly explained if linked to the broad give-and-take negotiating framework.

Paradoxically, Libya's military support to the Polisario Front, and its unrestrained diplomatic backing to the SADR through regional and international groupings, exceeded the Algerian support towards the Front.⁴¹ Nonetheless as Damis points out, Libya's support "has been a mixed blessing to Algeria". Tripoli has been an enthusiastic and generous ally of Algiers in the Sahara conflict, but, while its support has reduced Algeria's financial burden, Libya's aid to the Polisario has also increased the Front's leeway, which to some extent runs counters to Algeria's desire to control the Front lest it trigger an unwanted conflict between Algeria and Morocco.⁴²

36 Cooley, John K. "The Libyan Menace" in *Foreign Policy*, No. 42 (Spring, 1981), pp. 76

37 Otman, Waniss and Karlberg, Erling, *The Libyan Economy* (Aberdeen: Springer, 2007), pp. 30.

38 Keesing's Contemporary Archives February 1976, p.25579,

http://www.keesings.com/search?kssp_selected_tab=article&kssp_a_id=7n02hun

39 This recognition quickly led Morocco to break its diplomatic relation with Libya.

40 Gupte, Pranay, "War in West Sahara Embroils neighbors" in *The New York Times*, 8 September 1980, <http://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx>

41 Damis, J. "The Role of Third Parties in the Western Sahara Conflict" in *Maghreb Review* vol.7, nos.1-2, 1982, pp.3-4.

42 Ibid., p.4.

Since 1984, the relationship between Libya and Morocco has improved dramatically. Following *Le Traite de fraternite et de concorde* and the subsequent Maghreb summit between Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania in Algiers in May 1983, the Libyan leader proclaimed that “Libya has finished carrying out its duty with respect to Western Sahara. There is no longer any dispute between Libya and Morocco about the region”.⁴³ This marked a significant turning point after 13 years of discord.⁴⁴ The following year, under the terms of the above-mentioned Treaty of Oujda on political and economic cooperation, Libya withdrew its support for the Polisario. This breakthrough notwithstanding, the Treaty was unilaterally abrogated by Morocco in August 1986 in reaction to the Libyan protests against the talks held in July in Morocco between the Israeli former Prime Minister Shimon Peres and King Hassan II.⁴⁵

Despite recurrent setbacks that continue to sour the bilateral collaboration, the two countries are now in the process of consolidating economic and political relations. For example, over recent years, the two countries have signed numerous cooperation agreements in the areas of protection and defense, industrial development and institution-building; and, in 2009, they set up a Moroccan-Libyan business council.⁴⁶ However, taking into account the geographical factor, coupled with the closure of the Algeria-Morocco border since 1995, the extent of trade and economic cooperation remains relatively below expectations. Although Moroccans working in Libya constitute a large share of the country’s foreign labor force (nearly half a million), the level of trade and commercial ties remains low. In 2003, for example, the value of Libyan imports from Morocco was about LYD 39.4 million (34.3 in 2000).⁴⁷ The same applies to the role of Morocco in terms of regional integration, which, overall, suffers from a glaring lack of political will.⁴⁸

2.4. Libya-Mauritania

This trend toward bilateral arrangements applies also to the relations between Libya and Mauritania. As with relations with Morocco, Libya's relations with Mauritania have fluctuated significantly. This inconsistency stems from the prolonged political instability, and recurrent political reshuffling, that have characterized the latter. Since the fall of the first Mauritanian President, Mukhtar Ould Daddah, in July 1978, there have been seven military coups. Between 2005 and 2007, the first transitional government put an end to the 21 years of power enjoyed by Maaouya Ould

43 Quoted in Pazzanita, A.G. & Hodges, T. *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Metuchen, N.J. London: The Scarecrow Press, 1994), p.liii

44 Aghrout Ahmed, Sutton Keith “Regional Economic Union in the Maghreb” in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28, 1 (1990), pp. 115-139

45 Quoted in Pazzanita, A.G. & Hodges, T. *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Metuchen, N.J. London: The Scarecrow Press, 1994), p.liii

46 Morocco Business News, *Morocco, Libya determined to strengthen economic cooperation*, 24 October 2009, <http://www.moroccobusinessnews.com/Content/Article.asp?idr=18&id=1222>

47 Libyan Ministry of Planning, *Economic Development in Libya 1970-2003*, (Arabic Text), p.70. In this report, no available data on Libyan exports to Morocco.

48 African Development Bank, *Kingdom of Morocco, 2007-2011 Country strategy paper*, February 2006, <http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/ADB-BD-WP-2007-17-EN-MOROCCO-2007-11-CSP.PDF>

Sid'Ahmed Taya, and brought about legislative and presidential elections which led to a State Summit. This empowered Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, who, after a year and a half in power, was removed from office in August 2008 by yet another military coup.⁴⁹ Instability has not only consumed the country's resources but has heavily influenced political goals, in so far as survival needs of the regime have taken precedence over long-term social, economic and political considerations.⁵⁰ In turn, Mauritania's foreign policies have changed significantly, as have relations with Libya. As intimated in the previous sections, bilateral relations have been very tense. For our initial purposes, two episodes are worth mentioning.

The first dates from 1999, when the former Mauritanian head of state, Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, formalised relations with Israel, in order to secure American and Israeli backing, after his relations with Senegal, France and the Arab world deteriorated.⁵¹ As a result, Libya's voiced protest against this move and threatened to end its presidency of the AMU because of "numerous violations made by certain members"⁵² However, in 2009, relations were restored, after Mauritania ordered Israel to close its embassy in Nouakchott in protest at Israel's 22-day offensive in the Gaza Strip.⁵³ A few days later, the Libyan leader, acting in his capacity as the chairman of the African Union, made an official visit to Mauritania, the first in 25 years.⁵⁴ The purpose of the visit was to end the political crisis that had paralyzed the country since the military's deposition of President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in August 2008.⁵⁵

The second event relates to the allegations leveled by Mauritania in 2003, according to which Libya was providing financial support to overthrow the regime. In a public speech, Weld al-Taye "accused Libya and Burkina Faso of being involved in the coup attempts against his regime."⁵⁶ It was claimed that the latter had been sheltering two former officers involved in the 2003 and 2004 coup attempts. In return, Libya appealed to the African Union for assistance and to the AMU to investigate allegations. As the inquiry acquitted both Libya and Burkina Faso, the relations between Libya and Mauritania were subsequently normalized.⁵⁷ The full resumption

49 World Bank, *Mauritania: country brief*, 2010

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/MAURITANIAEXTN/0,,menuPK:362350~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:362340,00.html>

50 Issawi, A, *Mauritania at crossroads*, www.weekly.ahram.org, Al-Ahram Weekly On-line, Issue No. 957, 23-29 July 2009.

51 Ibid.

52 Arabic news, *Libya gives up the presidency of the Arab Maghreb federation*, www.arabicnews.com, Libya-Mauritania, Politics, 12/9/2004.

53 BBC, *Israel closes Mauritania embassy*, 6 March 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7928790.stm>

54 Ibid.

55 Top news, *Gaddafi: Mauritanian presidential elections will take place on time*, 13 March 2009, <http://www.topnews.in/gaddafi-mauritanian-presidential-elections-will-take-place-time-2138722>

56 Arabic News, *Al-Taye accuses Libya of a coupe attempt*, www.arabicnews.com, Mauritania-Libya, Politics, 10/18/2004.

57 Crisis group, *Crisis/Watch database*, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/crisiswatch/crisiswatch-database.aspx?EndDate=99991231&StartDate=00010101&CountryIDs=%7bB858B9BE-E354-4716-BE7B-A0E4CFF31CF7%7d>

of bilateral relations is demonstrated by the deepening economic interactions. For example, in February 2010 the two countries signed six cooperation agreements, including on air transport, health, agriculture and the energy sectors.⁵⁸ As in the previous cases, such trade relations tend to be largely at the bilateral level. While Mauritania is a founding member of the AMU, regional integration is limited to *joint ventures* between Mauritanian enterprises and those from neighbouring countries.⁵⁹ As the World Bank observes, “its inclusion into the Maghreb Union, although logical, has not yet translated into increased cooperation with regional benefits”.⁶⁰ Having thus reviewed the bewildering relations between Libya and individual neighbouring countries throughout the Maghreb, we turn our attention to the multilateral arrangements. While it is clear that countries are developing novel supra-national platforms to address common problems, bilateral settings remain the place where key issues are discussed and handled.

3. Multilateral relations

Efforts towards the establishment of regional inter-governmental organisations date back to the second half of the 20th century. In an early attempt towards regional unity, the Arab League, established in 1945, embodied the vision of regional political and economic cooperation. The League, which, as of 2010, has 22 members, aims to “draw closer the relations between member States and co-ordinate collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries.”⁶¹ In order to further the League's project and consolidate regional collaboration, since the 1960s sub-regional organisations have been established. A further attempt at regional economic integration was made in 1965 by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Other organisations created subsequently include the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab Maghreb Union, both of which are considered to be subsets of the League. In line with our initial purposes, I now turn to a brief review of the second organisation.

On 27-30 April 1958, the Moroccan Istiqlal Party, the Algerian National Liberation Front and the Tunisian Neo-Destour Party held a meeting, known as the “Tangier Conference”, in Morocco.⁶² The objective was to lay the foundations of a sub-regional grouping in the Arab Maghreb area. Between 1958 and 1989 numerous diplomatic

58 Libyan investment, *Mauritania, Libya ink new accords*, 28 February 2010
http://www.libyaninvestment.com/archive/libya_news.php?page=page&pageNo=16&Info=10762

59 African Development Bank, *Mauritania country governance profile*, 2004
<http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/ADF-BD-IF-2005-113-EN-MAURITANIA-GOVERNANCE-PROFILE.PDF>

60 World Bank, Country Assistance Strategy for Mauritania, 14 June 2007
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMAURITANIAINFRENCH/Resources/CAS.pdf>

61 Pact of the League of Arab States, March 22, 1945
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/arableag.asp

62 Martinez, Luis, *Algeria, the Arab Maghreb Union and Regional Integration*, (2006)
http://www.euromesco.net/images/59_eng.pdf

initiatives were pursued by the three countries.⁶³ However, until 1988 the semi-permanent hostile relations between the Maghreb states, illustrated above, hindered substantive collaboration.

However, in 1988 the five Maghreb states, i.e. Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, met for the first Maghreb summit. Algeria, and an Arab Maghreb Commission was set up to work towards the creation of the "Great Arab Maghreb".⁶⁴ This move was made possible by significant improvements in inter-Maghreb relations, notably the Algerian-Moroccan rapprochement. The following year, in February 1989, the treaty establishing the AMU was signed at the end of a two-day meeting held in Marrakech (Morocco). The SADR, although an African Union member-state, was excluded upon Morocco's request and precondition for signing the Treaty and joining the AMU.

Although the Treaty made no mention of specific procedures, and also lacked resources for resolving conflicts between member-states, it emphasised the defence aspect by means of safeguarding sovereignty of each state. Indeed, according to Article 14 of the Treaty, "any aggression to which a member state is subjected will be considered as an aggression against the other member states". Similarly, the Treaty stipulates that member-states are not permitted to carry out "any activity or organisation in their territory, which could harm the security, territorial integrity or political system of any other member state."⁶⁵ Despite the relative progress that the AMU achieved in its early years, especially in economic and social domains, the lack of a joint foreign policy on issues of mutual concern and the re-emergence of political differences among its members has jeopardized its very *raison d'être*. Indeed, since the 1990s the AMU has experienced four major setbacks. The first impasse relates to the pro-Iraq sentiment across the Maghreb region during the Second Gulf War. Unlike other Maghreb countries, Moroccan political elite partly supported US-led invasion to Iraq.⁶⁶ Second, Islamic fundamentalism has taken hold and, at the same time, Algeria has continued to suffer from internal instability. Third, the partial settlement of the Lockerbie legal case and the gradual re-integration of Libya into the international community has led to increased collaboration, albeit mainly at the bilateral level. The fourth factor that has hampered regional integration is Morocco's decision in 1995 to freeze temporarily its activities as part of the AMU. Arguably, this followed the re-deterioration of Algerian-Moroccan relations due to the Western Saharan issue.

In order to re-invigorate AMU activities, the Algerian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, has sought to launch new initiatives to re-dress some of the above-mentioned gaps. Upon re-election in 2004, Bouteflika emphasized that one of his priorities was restoring relations with Morocco, as well as the revival of the AMU. Morocco welcomed this move, especially after the new Algerian government confirmed its desire to contain the "Western Sahara" conflict peacefully and in

63 See, *Keesing's Contemporary Archives* pp.19573 (August 1963); 20507-20508 (January 1965); 23312 (April 1969); *Keesing's Record of World Events* p.36175 (September 1988).

64 EUR, *The Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003).

65 Arab Maghreb Union, *Treaty of Marrakesh*, <http://www.maghrebarabe.org/en/marrakech.cfm>

66 Paul Silverstein and David Crawford, "Amazigh Activism and the Moroccan State" in *Middle East Report*, No. 233 (Winter, 2004), pp. 44-48

conformity with UN resolutions.⁶⁷ Hence, as Martinez notes, the meeting between President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, in March 2005, was hailed as the premise for a rapprochement. This alleged breakthrough was followed by rumors about the reopening of the Algerian-Moroccan border, a first symbolic gesture marking the renewal of ties between the two countries. Following this event, Libya, at the time holding the chairmanship of the AMU, announced the date of a summit of heads of state to be held in Tripoli on 25-26 May that same year. However, the enthusiasm proved to be short-lived, as Mohammed VI soon backtracked by deciding to not take part to the meeting, which was subsequently cancelled.⁶⁸ In reality, the unresolved quarrel between Algeria and Morocco over the "Western Sahara" remains a major obstacle.

The persistence of formal commitment towards the AMU is also to be found in repeated lofty, but for the most part, vain statements calling for renewed collaboration. For example, during the meeting at the 29th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the AMU, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania agreed that they should intensify exchange of information to enhance the security of the region. The Council also confirmed its commitment to hold what it saw as useful consultations.⁶⁹ However, as previously mentioned, the reality on the ground reveals important discrepancies. As Oxford Analytica puts it, AMU is considered as "moribund" and with "no viable future."⁷⁰

4. Conclusion

Unlike the gradual improvement of Libya's bilateral relations with the Maghreb countries, the collaboration at multilateral level remains weak and largely formal. One of the main challenges hindering future prospects of collaboration has to do with the persistent tensions between Algeria and Morocco over "Western Sahara". More broadly, the emerging centrality of security concerns about the perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism may provide a new impetus towards growing integration. This relates to what might be called the "September 11 effect", by which Arab investors prefer to keep their money in the Arab world rather than risk having it seized in European and American banks on account of its alleged use to support 'terrorism.'⁷¹ The case of security collaboration between Arab governments is a case in point. In order to prevent "extremists" from acquiring greater influence, Arab

67 Zoubir, Yahia and Benabdallah-Gambier, "Western Saharan Deadlock" in *Middle East Report* No. 227 (Summer, 2003), pp. 8-11 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559318>; United Nations, *MINURSO Background*, (no date) <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minurso/background.shtml>

68 Martinez, Luis, *Algeria, the Arab Maghreb Union and Regional Integration*, (2006) http://www.euromesco.net/images/59_eng.pdf

69 Libyanonline, *AMU Moves to Establish Investment Bank, Maghreb Economic Group*, 2 January 2010, <http://www.libyaonline.com/business/details.php?id=11653>

70 Oxford Analytica, *Middle East: Maghreb integration still has potential*, 12 April 2010, <http://www.oxan.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB159132>

71 Oxford Analytica, *Middle East: Arab nationalism continues to link region*, 4 February 2010, <http://www.oxresearch.oxweb.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB157556>

governments have recognized that it is essential to take a collective stand.⁷² The performance of the Arab League Council of Arab Interior Ministers in finding common grounds to address security challenges can be considered a *relatively* successful case of regional cooperation.⁷³ Be that as it may, Maghreb countries continue to pursue their limited economic and political interests bilaterally.⁷⁴

To be sure, outside of the AMU experience, other regional frameworks are gaining in influence. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED), formerly known as Barcelona Process, and other regional instruments provided by the African Union may provide scope for further engagement in multilateral forums. Once again, cooperation remains largely ad hoc and outside multilateral and formalised arrangements. Arguably, a lack of political will is one of the main reasons why this remains so. It remains debatable the extent to which this is sustainable in the future. One of the central questions that may emerge in the years to come has to do with the regional institutional capacity of states and non-state actors to deal with emerging challenges such as resource management, energy and environmental change. The intertwining between bilateral and multilateral negotiating domains may yet change again

72 Joffe, George, "Political dynamics in North Africa" in *International Affairs*; Sep2009, Vol. 85 Issue 5, pp. 931-949.

73 Pinfari, Maro, "Nothing but failure? The Arab league and the Gulf Cooperation council as mediators in Middle Eastern Conflicts" *Working Paper no. 45, Regional and Global Axes of Conflict*, March 2009, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/R4D/PDF/Outputs/CrisisStates/WP45.2.pdf>

74 Oxford Analytica, *AFRICA: Sahel faces insecurity, not terror, challenge*, 1 June 2009 <http://www.oxresearch.oxweb.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB151525>