

# THE MAGHREB'S OUTLOOK TOWARDS THE SAHEL

An analysis of Morocco, Algeria,  
and Mauritania standpoints

—

Noamane Cherkaoui  
Youssef Tobi

PP-19-21

# About Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of the Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising «new South» that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

As such, the PCNS brings together researchers, publishes their work and capitalizes on a network of renowned partners, representative of different regions of the world. The PCNS hosts a series of gatherings of different formats and scales throughout the year, the most important being the annual international conferences «The Atlantic Dialogues» and «African Peace and Security Annual Conference» (APSACO).

Finally, the think tank is developing a community of young leaders through the Atlantic Dialogues Emerging Leaders program (ADEL) a space for cooperation and networking between a new generation of decision-makers and entrepreneurs from the government, business and social sectors. Through this initiative, which already counts more than 300 members, the Policy Center for the New South contributes to intergenerational dialogue and the emergence of tomorrow's leaders.

## Policy Center for the New South

Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street, Hay Riad, Rabat, Morocco.

Email : [contact@policycenter.ma](mailto:contact@policycenter.ma)

Phone : +212 5 37 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 5 37 71 31 54

Website : [www.policycenter.ma](http://www.policycenter.ma)

©2021 Policy Center for the New South. All rights reserved

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not reflect those of their institutions.



THINK • STIMULATE • BRIDGE

# **THE MAGHREB'S OUTLOOK TOWARDS THE SAHEL**

## **An analysis of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania standpoints**

Noamane Cherkaoui  
Youssef Tobi

## About the Authors,

### Noamane Cherkaoui

Noamane Cherkaoui researches North Africa geopolitics and security in the Strategic Monitoring and Analysis Unit at the Policy Center for the New South. He graduated from the University of Otago in New Zealand with the Dean's Award. He is also a postgraduate in International Relations at the University of Leicester, with his dissertation being on Libya's internationalized conflict from a security perspective.

### Youssef Tobi

Youssef Tobi joined the Policy Center for the New South in 2017. He is currently working on politics and governance in the Maghreb Region; his areas of expertise are geopolitics, political risk, and nation building. Youssef Tobi obtained a Master's degree at Sciences Po Lyon where he wrote two theses on "The role of Moroccan Bank in Africa, a non-state actor in service of the Diplomacy" and the "Chasm between the mediatic and associative representation of refugees: a case study." Prior to working at the PCNS, he participated in a Social Entrepreneurship Project in Beirut, Lebanon and conducted an internship at an NGO based in Marseille where he assisted refugees and helped raise funds.

## Summary

The Sahel has become more prominent in policymaking circles because of its strategic importance and the urgent nature of the dangers that have become rife in the region. Unfortunately, countries in the Maghreb have been relatively sidelined in recent years despite their potential sizable role in stabilizing the region and spurring economic development. Therefore, the focus of this brief is to analyze the Maghreb's outlook towards the Sahel, namely from the perspective of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania.

Morocco has strong geopolitical interests in the region which are becoming an international gateway for business in Africa, increasing support for its stance on its southern provinces, counterbalancing its neighbor Algeria, and countering terrorism through multilateral security collaboration with West African countries and other partners. For Algeria, the Sahel will remain an important focus point. President Tebboune's February 2020 speech at the African Union (AU) and Lamamra's appointment as Foreign Minister indicated a strategic shift based on a refocusing on Africa. The Algerian establishment has diverging interests which include limiting Morocco's regional sway, protecting its borders and perceived sphere of influence (Libya, Mali, Niger), and attempting to remain an influential actor in the region. Lastly, Mauritania is a key actor in terms of the Maghreb's outlook towards the Sahel. The pervasive issues the region faces will need multilateral efforts, and Mauritania is well-positioned to be both involved in security frameworks and international development strategies. Indeed, in the words of its President Ould Ghazouani, "*the situation of the region requires larger cooperation.*"

Overall, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania all have enduring historical, political, and economic ties with the Sahel. As the region has become subject to strong foreign influences, Maghreb countries also have, as presented in this policy paper, their own respective agendas and strategies.



# THE MAGHREB'S OUTLOOK TOWARDS THE SAHEL

## An analysis of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania standpoints

### I. Introduction

The Sahel has become more prominent in policymaking circles because of its strategic importance and the urgent nature of the dangers that have become rife in the region. These include transnational migration flows and the rise of violent extremism that represent a significant risk potential, particularly for countries in the region. Its importance for the international community is predicated on its destabilizing aspects moving outwards—considering the porous borders—to West and North Africa, and even beyond. Unfortunately, countries in the Maghreb have been relatively sidelined in recent years despite their potential sizable role in stabilizing the region and spurring economic development. A volatile security environment and concomitant governance vacuum in the Sahel are ongoing dynamics that require multilateral efforts as a political solution, not a security one, will ultimately be key to long-term stability in the region.

The Sahel currently suffers from a crisis that is systemic in nature, with aspects like separatist groups, an incessant arms flow, food insecurity, and vulnerable economies merging to produce a complex amalgam for policymakers to address. Indeed, a paradox exists at the heart of the Sahelian crisis, which is that in terms of natural resources it is one of the richest regions in the world, but in terms of governance it is one of the poorest. To illustrate this paradox and the complexity of the crisis at hand, Mali, the fourth-largest gold producer in Africa, is a country central to the geopolitics of the Sahel. The situation in the latter worsened dramatically after the fall of Libya's then-leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Members of the Tuareg ethnic group, which are mostly located in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, joined pro-Gaddafi forces in Libya, combining with existing Tuaregs who had been historically incorporated into Gaddafi's military. After the 2011 coup, the experienced Tuareg fighters took their acquired arms—Gaddafi also had immense stockpiles of weapons in the south of Libya—and travelled back to northern Mali, where a rebellion led to severe fighting between insurgent groups and the government. Libya's coup exacerbated existing tensions in Mali, as Tuaregs in the north had felt marginalized, not politically represented, and impoverished for decades. Tensions have existed since the inception of the post-colonial Mali state, with previous uprisings attempted in 1962-64, 1990-1995, and 2007-2009. The upgraded arms stockpiles post-Libya coup provided them with an additional dynamic in their efforts against the Mali government in 2012. The superior weaponry heightened the confidence of the Tuareg rebels, which, when combined with Gaddafi no longer being in a position to co-opt insurgencies for personal benefit, acted as a catalyst for the rebellion. The rebellion was led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), an organization created in late 2011 with the aim of creating an independent state—Azawad—and seizing three regions from the Mali government's control. In another sign of national disunity, President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted in a coup d'état in early 2012 by elements of the Malian military that claimed Touré had mismanaged the government response to the rebellion. From that point, terrorism and various types of trafficking by armed groups accelerated in the region, which has had an effect on the policies of regional actors in the Maghreb.

The interest of this brief is to analyze the Maghreb's outlook towards the Sahel, namely from the perspective of Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania. It will delve into the respective geopolitical characteristics of their standpoints, and the implications of their foreign policies for the region. Accordingly, all three countries have differing strategies that emphasize particular nuances in their approach to the Sahelian crisis. Regional voices will ultimately be important for holistic, long-term solutions, and they can have a role to play in matters like migration, security, development, and south-south coordination. By analyzing the outlook of key Maghreb states towards the Sahel, this brief aims to contribute to the literature in this field and provide policymakers and a general audience alike with a useful outline of their strategic projection capabilities.

## II. Morocco

Morocco has a historical presence in the Sahel region, with centuries-old relations built by its sultans in areas ranging from trade to religion. More recently, Morocco has seen its influence rise among Sahelian states. After the ascension of King Mohammed VI, Morocco has orchestrated a thoughtful shift towards Africa, with countless bilateral agreements being signed and a focus being placed on strategic partnerships. This approach has reaped fruit, and its pragmatic policymaking saw it re-join the African Union in 2017, an organization that it has emphasized and which has since benefitted from its technical expertise. It is notable that Morocco's increased engagement has been mainly from its soft power thus far. Although having an economy affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and a complicated relationship with bordering countries, particularly Algeria, Morocco is poised to be a valuable regional actor in Sahel efforts. Its Africa policy, as articulated by its King, HM King Mohammed VI, is based on *"the promotion of human development and the strengthening of economic cooperation"*<sup>1</sup>.

### 2.1 Morocco: Constructive Engagement

Morocco's strategy of constructive engagement is based on its cultural and economic relations with other countries in Africa. Culturally, its brand of religion, the Sunni Maliki Ash'arite School, is a moderate alternative for countering violent extremism (CVE) that has gained a foothold in the region and is a core part of its religious diplomacy. One of the most visited holy sites of the Tijaniyya Sufi order, which is followed by millions in West Africa, is based in Fez. Morocco's networks of influence have been carefully built, including through *"financing the construction of mosques, restoration projects of religious edifices, and [the] provision of copies of the holy Quran in many countries"*<sup>2</sup>. The Mohammed VI Institute for training Imams and the Foundation for African Ulema also exhibit how Morocco has a strategic role to play concerning Islam in the region. For instance, more than 93% of international students enrolled in the Institute in 2019 were from ECOWAS countries and Chad. Additionally, in 2013, Morocco signed an agreement to provide two-year training to 500 Malian imams to promote its moderate strain of religion. Indeed, fieldwork in Senegal has discovered that Morocco's outreach is considered legitimate due to religious proximity and the Moroccan king's title of Amir al-Mu'minin<sup>3</sup>. Moving forward, this is a valuable resource that can be tapped into and developed vis-à-vis local contexts, particularly since extremist groups are not monolithic. There are also questions about the link between radicalization

---

1. HM King Mohammed VI's Throne Speech, 2014: <https://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-de-sm-le-roi-la-nation-loccasion-de-la-fete-du-trone>

2. Morocco's efforts – Carnegie, 2019: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Reassessing\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_regional\\_security\\_providers\\_the\\_case\\_of\\_Algeria\\_and\\_Morocco.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Reassessing_the_power_of_regional_security_providers_the_case_of_Algeria_and_Morocco.pdf)

3. Fieldwork in Senegal – Brookings, 2019: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/08/morocco-commander-of-the-african-faithful/>



and religion, with other underlying causes potentially being disenfranchisement or marginalization.

Economically, Morocco has the fifth highest GDP in Africa at \$120 billion<sup>4</sup> and benefits from the dynamism of its businesses. Morocco is the number one African investor in West Africa, with its Tanger-Med Airport having weekly links to around 40 ports in the region, and the African Development Bank estimates around 85% of Morocco's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is spent in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>5</sup>. The Moroccan International Cooperation Agency (AMCI) has also been effective and is involved in many regional projects. Morocco has numerous economic and investment deals "*in banking, insurance, telecommunications, mining, renewable energy, agricultural sustainability, fishing, and infrastructure*" with other African countries<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, businesses such as the OCP, Maroc Telecom, Royal Air Maroc, real-estate developer Addoha Group, Attijariwafa Bank, and the BMCE have also increased their reach in the region, alongside media groups like Medi 1 radio, Hit Radio, and Eco Medi. Morocco has used these resources to become a regional financial platform and thereby consolidate its bilateral relationships. Furthermore, it has invested in projects "*that range from the pharmaceutical industry in Ivory Coast and Rwanda to the construction of trucks in Senegal, the agri-food industry in Guinea, Benin, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Mauritania and Tanzania, cement—in some ten countries—and construction of fertilizer plants*."<sup>7</sup> These efforts have been deliberate on Morocco's part, with the result being increased alignment with Francophone Africa and the ability to project its soft power.

Furthermore, it was announced during the G5 Sahel group's December 2018 meeting that Morocco would support the Priority Investment Program, thereby helping bring electricity to an underpowered Sahel. Morocco's disposition towards a holistic solution is also demonstrated in regard to agricultural sustainability. As Sahelian communities suffer from food insecurity (Figure 1) and seasonal droughts, it remains an important component of the long-term solution. For example, the OCP Group, a Moroccan-based firm that is the world's number one exporter of phosphates, has proposed a set of initiatives that aim to support African farmers and lead to the transformation of agricultural practices towards sustainability. It is accepted that climate change can aggravate conflict, and Morocco will likely continue cooperating with the international community to improve regional natural resources management. This can be through the UN-backed South-South Cooperation program, which is indicative of how Morocco's soft power is boosted by its regional engagement. Finally, it should be noted that the extremism in the Sahel is multidimensional. Therefore, preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts should also address the pressing governance challenges that played a role in its upsurge and acknowledge the agency of Sahelian extremist groups as political actors when appropriate.

---

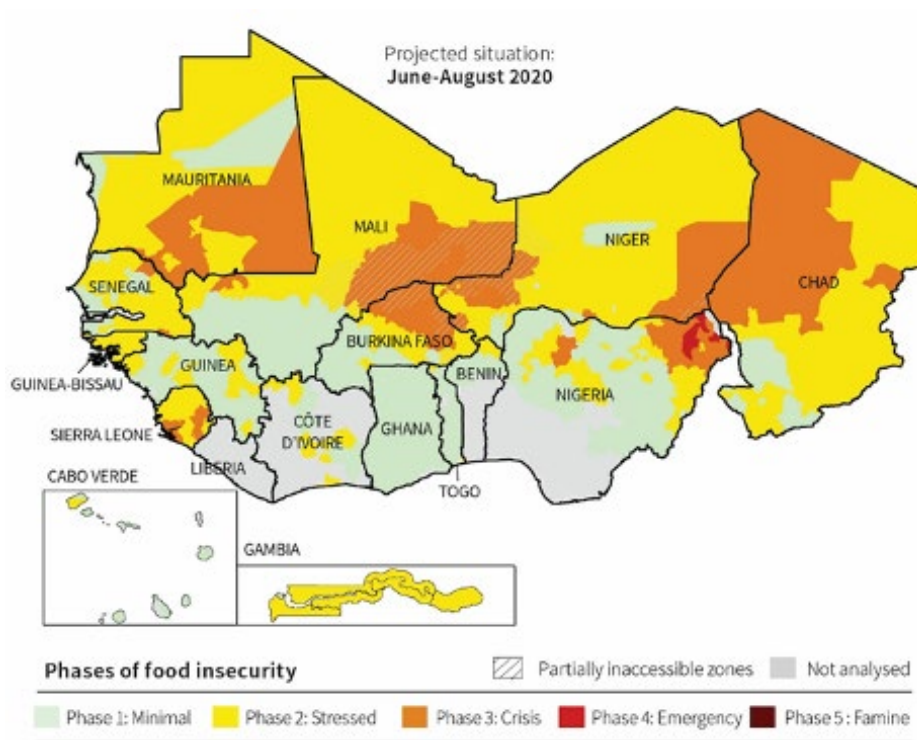
4. Morocco's GDP – World Bank, 2019: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/MA>

5. Morocco's FDI, 2019: <https://africanbusinessmagazine.com/region/north-africa/morocco-continues-its-push-into-africa/>

6. Morocco's efforts – Carnegie, 2019: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Reassessing\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_regional\\_security\\_providers\\_the\\_case\\_of\\_Algeria\\_and\\_Morocco.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Reassessing_the_power_of_regional_security_providers_the_case_of_Algeria_and_Morocco.pdf)

7. Ibid.

**Figure 1: Food insecurity in the Sahel and West Africa**



Source: Cadre harmonisé analysis, regional concertation, Niamey, Niger, March 2020  
© Food Crisis Prevention Network (RPCA), map produced by CILSS/AGRHYMET

Morocco has cooperated with the international community on security initiatives, supporting the G5 Sahel Defense College in Nouakchott and dedicating 203 training places each year in Moroccan military establishments<sup>8</sup>. Morocco has a history of training many personnel and commanders of the G5 Sahel, the seventh session of which it attended in N'Djamena in February 2021<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, Morocco has supported its partners in countering counter violent extremism in the Sahel by playing a role in obstructing transnational migration flows—a key funding source for these extremist groups—and through peacekeeping operations. The former dovetails with Morocco's soft power elements, such as Morocco's designation to promote the African Agenda on Migration in the 28th Summit of the African Union in Addis Ababa in 2017. Notably, this was followed by the creation of the African Migration Observatory in Rabat (its HQ was inaugurated in December 2020), another part of Morocco's sophisticated migration and regularization policy. Concerning peacekeeping operations, Morocco has the capability to increase its personnel abroad, with around 1600 troops deployed by Morocco in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa, namely MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and MINUSCA in the Central African Republic<sup>10</sup>.

Morocco's multipronged approach has been supported by key partners, such as the United States, which contributes actively to G5 Sahel efforts and is depended upon by the French military for various vital capabilities. The United States has praised Morocco's comprehensive counterterrorism strategy—the latter one of 17 non-NATO allies for the US—and they have an annual African Lion military exercise, the largest that AFRICOM undertakes. Morocco has also backed the French-led G5 Joint Force (Figure 2)—to the consternation of Algeria. The latter can be a result of Algeria viewing France's efforts with

8. Moroccan FM Bourita's statement, 2020: <https://www.mapnews.ma/en/actualites/politics/morocco-has-been-involved-all-fights-sahel-and-sahel-fm-efforts>

9. G5 Sahel 7th Session – Arab Weekly, 2021: <https://thearabweekly.com/what-military-role-morocco-against-sahel-jihadist-threat>

10. UN peacekeeping numbers, 2020: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>

suspicion, unlike Morocco which is inclined towards collaboration. Morocco offered security support to G5 Sahel countries in 2017, and in 2019 subsequently pledged \$3.3 million to the Priority Investment Program of the Joint Force. Ultimately, it is clear Morocco has a role to play and has been increasingly active in the region, though it may prioritize its borders. While its foreign policy is likely to continue to be grounded on soft aspects, there are some potential constraints on its power projection.

**Figure 2: Extremism in the Sahel**



## 2.2 Constraints

Morocco has high public debt, which reached \$76.8 billion in 2019, 65% of the country's nominal GDP<sup>11</sup>. This means that it owes creditors a substantial sum that may limit Morocco's future room for maneuver. It also has a reliance on some sectors that are not necessarily efficient, such as agriculture and tourism. They are both susceptible to exogenous effects, so Morocco's economy would benefit from increased diversification.

In terms of regional constraints, Algeria has pursued policies that have prevented the spread of Moroccan influence in the Sahel, viewing Morocco as a threat to its traditional role of stabilizing mediator. The zero-sum perspective that characterizes their relationship has remained, with Algeria consistently leaving Morocco out of regional initiatives, including the Tamanrasset-based Joint Military Staff Committee (CEMOC) in 2010 and the Nouakchott Process launched in March 2013. Furthermore, Algiers myopically cut diplomatic ties with Rabat on August 24, 2021, a weighty obstacle to possible cooperation in the Sahel. This conflictive regional relationship is likely to continue as long as Morocco's southern provinces remain the most prominent stumbling block in their relationship, with Algeria backing the Polisario Front while Morocco emphasizes the significance of its territorial integrity. Moreover, Morocco has a fluctuating relationship with its other neighbor and G5 Sahel member, Mauritania. A key difference remains Mauritanian recognition of the Polisario Front-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Accordingly, Mauritania faces a balancing act between Algeria and Morocco, so the former's reticence to a larger Moroccan role in the Sahel is possible.

11. Moroccan economic analysis – MIPA, 2020: <https://mipa.institute/8009>

## 2.3 Perspective

Ultimately, Morocco has strong geopolitical interests in the region. These are namely becoming an international gateway for Africa business, increasing support for its stance on its southern provinces, counterbalancing its neighbor Algeria, and countering terrorism through multilateral security collaboration with West African countries and its partners.

With respect to Morocco's power projection capabilities and whether it is in a position to influence outcomes, its most prominent efforts will likely be led by its religious, cultural, and economic relations with various Sahelian countries. The former mainly revolves around a religious diplomacy that allows it to spread its form of Islam, which is a tolerant counterweight to extremist interpretations. Morocco will likely continue to emphasize its value in this sphere, particularly through its Mohammed VI Institute for training Imams and the Foundation for African Ulema, though it will face some competition, including from Algeria and some Gulf states. Alternatively, an opportunity exists to CVE through further regional cooperation on a religious strategy that is discursively bottom-up instead of top-down.

Culturally, its media has been making in-roads in the region, and Morocco highlights its cultural congruence with Africa. Its migration and regularization policies towards sub-Saharan migrants have also seen it gain plaudits for a coherent strategy—recognized by the AU in its designation of Morocco to promote the African Agenda on Migration. Therefore, Morocco can be expected to consolidate its efforts in this area and advance further legal implementation. Morocco can likewise be an effective partner for the international community, particularly the European Union (EU) and its border agency Frontex, in its attempts to manage transnational migration flows. However, any proposals have to be collaborative, with Morocco already rejecting hosting disembarkation platforms. Moreover, Morocco's strong bilateral relationships have allowed it to increase its economic influence in the region; it has cooperation agreements with Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Chad, among other African states. These can allow it to boost its development efforts, including through projects that address natural resources management. Morocco's ambitions of becoming a regional financial platform are also gradually being realized, with further outreach to Anglophone Africa a likely development.

Finally, Morocco may also face a few constraints on its power projection. These are mostly economic limitations amid the COVID-19 pandemic and its strained relationship with Algeria—tensions between both countries have hindered several regional initiatives. However, while Algeria is expected to attempt to impede Morocco's proposals, particularly vis-à-vis Morocco's southern provinces and Sahelian countries it considers within its sphere of influence, there remains room for progress. Ultimately, Morocco stands to benefit from its longstanding strategic shift towards the Sahel and Africa, and, considering its internal stability and nuanced power projection, will remain a constructive force in the region.

## III. Algeria

Algeria has had a complicated past with the Sahel. Many of its efforts during the Bouteflika era failed to gain significant traction, and his disappearance from the political scene from 2013 onwards had consequential effects on Algeria's regional policy. However, Algeria remains an important actor in the region. Algeria's regional strategy has stood mostly independent from foreign actors and, taking

the example of the 2015 Algiers Agreement<sup>12</sup>, it is clear the level of significance Algeria places on its southern flank with its diplomacy. This has increased with the appointment of Ramtane Lamamra as Foreign Minister in July 2021, who has undertaken multiple visits to African countries and has restructured Algeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs—including seven new special envoys—with an eye on Africa<sup>13</sup>. While facing a difficult economic conjuncture and domestic unrest, the potential of Algeria to influence Sahelian geopolitics remains consequential given its cardinal importance in resolving the longstanding instability in the Sahel corridor.

### 3.1 Algeria: Negative Neutrality

With respect to Algeria's strategy in the Sahel, it should primarily be noted that it has a strong relationship with the Tuareg population, with most of the latter being based in Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya, and Niger. After several African states gained independence in the 1960s, the Tuareg territory was distributed haphazardly among them. Various Tuareg grievances, such as restricted migration and political marginalization, can be traced back to the artificial borders of the colonial period. Algeria has settled many in its southern cities and has successfully integrated them into the political process. As a result, Algeria is in a position to continue to benefit from its relationship with the Tuaregs, which has been observed vis-à-vis Mali in the 1990s, 2006, 2012 (where Algeria refrained from sympathizing with their separatist movement), and the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation signed in 2015 in Algiers. The latter's flaws, including its partial implementation and obstruction by members of Mali's security and political architecture, ultimately culminated in two coup d'états within nine months in 2020 and 2021, led by Malian military officer and current President Assimi Goïta.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, governments in the region have failed to address systemic inequalities afflicting their respective citizenry, and Algeria may have a role to play in that regard via its on-the-ground networks. Algeria has a background in supporting liberation movements, and though it has previously pushed for definitions that differentiate between terrorism and resistance<sup>15</sup>, it must be noted that this has been piecemeal, and room remains for a clearer stance.

In terms of public diplomacy, Algeria has often failed to engage in shrewd policymaking that can highlight its values of cooperation and regional integration. For example, it is notable that Algeria's engagement with Africa, while sustained over decades and particularly prominent in the security affairs of the African Union, is more visible at the AU-level than on a bilateral basis. Its development of bilateral relationships leaves something to be desired, though Algeria's experience with extremism is widely recognized. It has previously engaged in multilateral initiatives in this regard, such as the 2002 Pan-Sahel Initiative, now the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership.

Economically, Algeria is set to play a larger role in the development of the region moving forward with its Algerian international cooperation agency, announced by the Algerian President in February 2020 and ostensibly modelled on Morocco's counterpart. Algeria has also contributed to the economic development of northern Mali, financing projects, advocating for increased trade, and constructing

12. Mali's 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement: [https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML\\_150620\\_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali\\_Issu-du-Processus-d%27Alger.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML_150620_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali_Issu-du-Processus-d%27Alger.pdf)

13. Algeria's new FM – Africa Report, 2021: <https://www.theafricareport.com/126281/algeria-foreign-affairs-minister-lamamra-prioritises-diplomacy/>

14. Mali's Transitional President – Reuters, 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-coup-leader-assimi-goita-sworn-transitional-president-2021-06-07/>

15. Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in Algeria's Foreign Policy – Laeed Zaghلامي, 2016: [https://www.academia.edu/31444935/26\\_public\\_diplomacy\\_and\\_soft\\_power\\_in\\_algerias\\_foreign\\_policy](https://www.academia.edu/31444935/26_public_diplomacy_and_soft_power_in_algerias_foreign_policy)



training centers and hospitals<sup>16</sup>. It also opened its first land border crossing with Mauritania in 2018<sup>17</sup> and is developing its part of the ambitious Trans-Sahara highway<sup>18</sup>, which has 2,500km in Algeria and was first proposed in the 1960's. This highway is meant to ultimately span Algiers to Lagos (with other links) if stability in Niger allows (Figure 3). However, one aspect that needs improvement, if Algeria's reputation is to be bolstered, is its isolationist, security-centric treatment of sub-Saharan migrants, who see Algeria as both a point of transit and destination. It lacks a comprehensive policy or legislative framework in this regard, regularly evicting migrants and causing diplomatic tensions. Therefore, an opportunity exists for Algeria to develop its policies, such as by introducing a coherent regularization process and finalizing an asylum law, and to prevent events like maltreated deportees attacking its embassy in Mali in 2018<sup>19</sup>. However, given dynamics like its expelling of more than 23,000 migrants in 2020<sup>20</sup>, this is presently unlikely.

**Figure 3: Trans-Sahara highway**



Source: OBOReuropa, 2018

Algeria's foreign policy also benefits from being respected by some African actors due to its non-interference principles, which is incidentally a boon for autocrat leaders. If these principles hold, considering the regional challenges, remains to be seen. Ominously, Algerian President Tebboune warned in June 2021 that Algiers would “*never let the northern part of Mali become a sanctuary for terrorists*”<sup>21</sup>. Algeria's relationship to actors in the Sahel is connected to its familiarity with regional extremist networks, though the rise of different armed groups and general instability afflicting the region post-Gaddafi's fall have been adverse developments in that regard.

16. Ibid.

17. Algeria – Mauritania border crossing – North Africa Post, 2018: <https://northafricapost.com/25033-algeria-mauritania-open-border-crossing.html>

18. <https://www.worldhighways.com/wh8/news/algeria-developing-its-sahara-route>

19. Mali recalls its ambassador to Algeria – BBC, 2018: <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-43823786>

20. Algeria expelling migrants – Médecins Sans Frontières, 2021: <https://www.msf.fr/actualites/algerie-niger-des-migrants-violentes-et-expulses-en-plein-milieu-du-desert>

21. Algerian President Tebboune – Africa Report, 2021: <https://www.theafricareport.com/98760/algeria-is-president-tebboune-preparing-to-send-troops-abroad/>

Concerning other approaches to religious extremism in the Sahel, Algeria has also tried to organize regional platforms to encourage more moderate Islamic interpretations in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. For example, the headquarters of the League of Ulema, Preachers, and Imams of the Sahel, created in 2013 to confront religious extremism, is in Algiers. Ultimately, as its neighbor Morocco has a historical foothold in this area, receiving the Tijaniyya's order founder after being expelled by Algeria in the 19th Century, Algeria's religious diplomacy will likely remain a peripheral part of its overall soft power projection. However, a risk of concurrence between the approaches of both countries does exist. For example, Algeria has begun its renovating Sufi sanctuaries to attract West African Islamic tourism and Tijaniyya adherents. While Algeria is attempting to gain influence at the expense of its neighbor Morocco, its comparative lack of legitimacy in this domain is consequential.

### 3.2 Constraints

The Hirak movement is the name given to the popular non-violent mass protests that have occurred in Algeria against the establishment since February 16, 2019. The establishment mainly consists of the military, the security apparatus, and the elites, such as business magnates. The public initially insisted on the resignation of octogenarian Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had ruled for 20 years and had all but conceded control to his brother and inner circle after his stroke in 2013. When the military did prompt his resignation, in early April 2019, the establishment disregarded the rest of the people's demands, such as an end to cronyism. Instead, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the current president, won the widely boycotted December 2019 elections ensuring little change to the status quo. While demonstrators suspended their weekly protests due to COVID-19, the grievances remain, and the government's divide-and-conquer tactics and attempts at appeasement have thus far failed. This has had an effect on the stability of the government and may affect the long-term consistency of its foreign policy. Algeria's power projection in the region remains ultimately reliant on internal legitimacy, and it will need favorable domestic conditions to eschew the hitherto predictability that has restricted its influence in the Sahel. Suffering from a myriad of crises, on matters including electricity, water, purchasing power, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the sustainability of the regime's approach is questionable.

Furthermore, another issue faced by Algeria is its fragile economy, a fact observed in its efforts to delay the 2005-signed free-trade accord with the EU from going into full effect in 2020<sup>22</sup>. The issue mostly stems from its restrictive business environment and reliance on its hydrocarbon sector. Its oil export revenues regularly fell short even before events in early 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the Saudi-Russia oil war that was sparked after talks on production cuts at OPEC collapsed. Notably, this strategic economic sector, based mostly in southern Algeria, encompasses more than 80 per cent of the national territory but less than 10 per cent of the population<sup>23</sup>. Algeria's budget is sensitive to any drop in oil prices; the latter causes significant fiscal imbalance as 60% of government revenue comes from oil and gas, and hydrocarbons provide over 90% of its export earnings. It needs an oil price of around \$170 per barrel to balance its budget<sup>24</sup>, not the current \$75 per barrel range for its Saharan Blend. A response rooted in borrowing is unsustainable with domestic facilities insufficient, while international borrowing has been ruled out with Tebboune stating Algeria would prefer *"to borrow from its own citizens, rather than the International Monetary Fund*

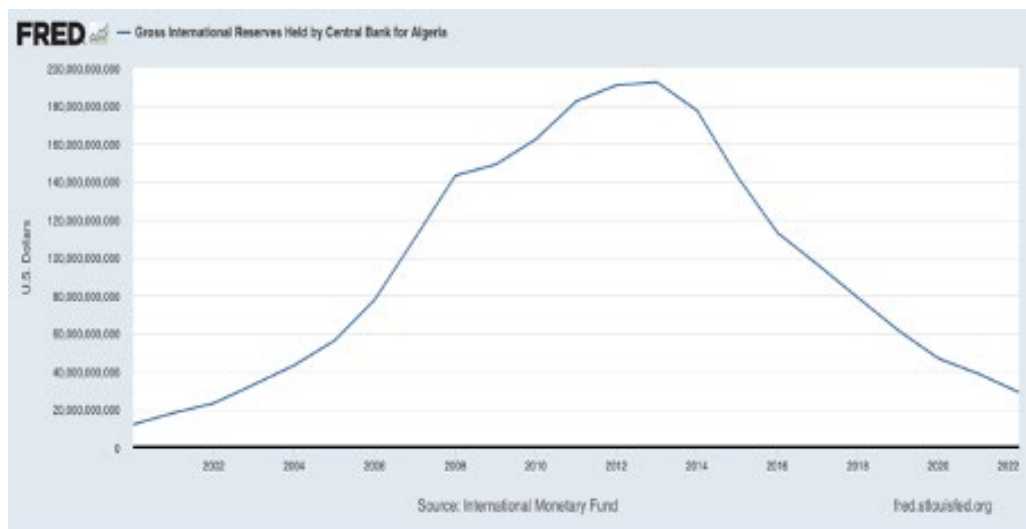
22. Algerians warn EU trade agreement could further decimate economy – Al Monitor, 2020: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/algeria-eu-fta-trade-economy-coronavirus-bouteflika.html>

23. The Maghreb's Fragile Edges – Africa Center, 2018: <https://africacenter.org/publication/maghreb-fragile-edges/>

24. Algeria's economy – FT, 2021: <https://www.ft.com/content/07691fbd-fa6c-414d-9299-ce848073a5d7>

or World Bank<sup>25</sup>,” –though it has recently officially joined the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development<sup>26</sup>. In any case, as detailed by the Economist, “the world’s economies are moving away from fossil fuels...oversupply and the increasing competitiveness of cleaner energy sources mean that oil may stay cheap for the foreseeable future<sup>27</sup>.” What this means is that the world may have entered an era of lower prices, and Algeria’s reliance on its hydrocarbon sector has long been seen as a limitation, a fact made starker by its dwindling gross official reserves (Figure 4). An economic downturn could hinder its influence in the Sahel corridor, as a fragile economy will threaten its cross-border efforts and the sustainability of committing significant resources.

**Figure 4: Algeria’s gross official reserves**



### 3.3 Perspective

Ultimately, the Sahel will remain an important focus point for Algeria. President Tebboune’s February 2020 speech at the AU indicated a strategic shift based on a refocusing on Africa, and the Algerian establishment has divergent interests.<sup>28</sup> These include inhibiting Morocco’s regional sway, protecting its borders and perceived sphere of influence (Libya, Mali, Niger), and ostensibly remaining an influential actor in the region. Lamamra’s appointment as Foreign Minister and his personalized style also signifies a clear direction towards reinvesting in areas where they have had a traditional geopolitical presence.

In terms of Algeria’s power projection, this will involve a mixture of instruments. Its soft power is mostly focused on its unique relationship with the Tuareg ethnic group, an aspect on which it has hitherto capitalized. Moving forward, it will continue to do so while emphasizing the socio-

---

25. Algeria rules out IMF borrowing to ease financial woes – Barrons, 2020: <https://www.barrons.com/news/algeria-rules-out-imf-borrowing-to-ease-financial-woes-01588419903>

26. Algeria and EBRD – Echorouk, 2021: <https://www.echoroukonline.com/abdelmadjid-tebboune-authorizes-algerias-subscription-to-the-ebrds-shares>

27. The Economist’s forecast for the future of hydrocarbons and rentier economies, 2020: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/07/18/the-end-of-the-arab-worlds-oil-age-is-nigh>

28. Algeria’s divergent interests – IRIS, 2019: <https://www.iris-france.org/140130-who-rules-algeria-right-now-an-analysis-on-the-current-state-of-state-power-and-how-it-is-changing-after-the-ousting-of-president-bouteflika/>; MondeAfrique, 2020: <https://mondafrique.com/algerie-le-retour-en-force-des-hommes-de-l-drs/amp/>



economic issues underlying the Sahel crisis. It has strong relationships at the African-Union level, and its influence in the organization's security affairs means it has a mandate to encourage multilateral efforts, such as through the North African Regional Capability Standby Force. This dovetails with its substantial counterterrorism experience gained during the 1990s.

Therefore, it is likely that Algeria's soft power projection will be focused on the dual objective of consolidating its regional networks while emphasizing its capacities in the security sphere. The former is expected to be through public diplomacy, including using its role as chair of the international mediation team for the 2015 Algiers Agreement, and economic development, including via its Africa-focused Algerian International Cooperation Agency. Likewise, some of its security efforts are expected to be through training and its counterterrorism expertise, such as via the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership. However, Algeria's soft power has been previously restricted by its narrowness as illustrated by its limited bilateral rapports and lack of migration policy.

Additionally, Algeria's overall projection capabilities will remain constrained due to domestic unrest and a difficult economic conjuncture. Moving forward, future austerity will cause more Algerians to grow alienated by the establishment, chiefly if crises continue unabated and people's long-term livelihoods are affected—further endangering stability. Stability in Algeria remains critical for a region in search of it, and Algeria's navigation of its domestic landscape will ultimately dictate how much it can project its power in this Tebboune era.

## **IV. Mauritania**

Mauritania, officially called the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, is a G5 Sahel member and an important part of the Maghreb's outlook towards in the Sahel. Mauritania bridges the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa and is divided into three main ethnicities, namely Bidhan, Haratin, and those of West African origins. Islam is the state religion, and its current government is led by Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, who was elected in June 2019 as the successor to former president Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz. This represented a continuation of the influence of the establishment, which is mostly military leaders and business magnates. As a Sahelian country, Mauritania has likewise not been immune to the instability in the region, which has had deep-seated effects on its foreign policy. Ould Ghazouani inherited a country suffering from a range of asymmetric threats, including transnational migration, drug trafficking, socio-political tensions, climate shocks, and potential conflict spillover from its 2,237-km border with Mali. Therefore, its power projection should be examined from this viewpoint with its involvement intrinsic to regional crisis management efforts.

### **4.1 Mauritania: Cautious Pragmatism**

Mauritania's soft power benefits from its historical tribal links to the region. In fact, its tribal links and patronage networks, particularly in the cross-border area near Mali, have been a valuable resource that has allowed Mauritania to leverage its influence, including through its connections to local Hamallist (a strain of Sufism) leaders. This dovetails well with the historical influence of Chinguetti, a city in Mauritania's Adrar region whose Friday Mosque is considered the national emblem of Mauritania. Known widely as a religious epicenter in the region, Chinguetti was for centuries distinguished for its Islamic scholarship and as a meeting place for pilgrims heading to Mecca. Indeed, as a UNESCO World

Heritage Site since 1986, it has been a tourist hotspot—less so recently considering the regional instability—due to its long and celebrated history, including as home to the “*librarians of the desert*.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the schools of Chinguetti traditionally produced Imams that travelled all over the region spreading its form of Maliki tradition, which has advanced Mauritania’s religious legitimacy.

Mauritania’s soft power is also rooted in a long tradition of credible diplomacy. Placing emphasis on its own territorial integrity, it has open communication lines with several states that are prominent in the Sahel, though relations are sometimes tense. It has been a key partner in regional multilateral efforts, initiating the G5 Sahel with Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso in Nouakchott in 2014. The latter was created as a framework to pool resources to counter the manifold threats in the region, including by addressing the security-development nexus. For example, Mauritania was one of the states behind the Priority Investment Program, which has had the aim of looking beyond operating solely through a security paradigm. This is notwithstanding Mauritania having had a record of mainly securitizing the solution, mostly as a reaction to the regular attacks it had been suffering on its own soil from 2005 to 2011, with its strategy becoming more multidimensional thereafter. The Priority Investment Program has aimed to tackle the various governance, economic resilience, and infrastructure needs of the region.

On security, Mauritania hosted a meeting in June 2020 of the leaders of G5 Sahel nations, plus France and Spain, to discuss counterinsurgency efforts, with the humanitarian consequences of the various conflicts in the region still stark. Mauritania remains a key partner in the plethora of regional security initiatives, though more future coordination between G5 Sahel members and external policymakers is needed to address the lack of overarching strategy. Given that France announced a reduction in its troops deployed in the region, it is notable that the G5 intend on undertaking more joint operations and “*hearts and minds’ engagement*”<sup>30</sup>.

Mauritania also benefits from membership of several other regional bodies. This includes ECOWAS, with which it signed an associate-membership agreement in 2017 after withdrawing in 2000; the African Union, last hosting its Summit in 2018; and the Arab League, where it hosted the League’s 27th Summit in 2016. The latter came after several years of inertia, and it revitalized its status as an Arab nation involved in Arab issues. Overall, it has taken a neutral position on polarizing disputes afflicting Arab nations, and its balanced approach has been constructive for its foreign policy aims and encouraging domestic investment. Mauritania is also a member of 5+5 Western Mediterranean Forum and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), an intergovernmental Euro-Mediterranean organization, and has recently bolstered its partnership with NATO<sup>31</sup>. This exhibits Mauritania’s strategic position in the area, and it can use its geographic advantages to continue to be a key partner for different stakeholders in the Sahel, particularly concerning migration with its historical status as a transit country. As it is being realized coordinated multilateralism and a focus on the causes—not symptoms—of instability are indispensable, Mauritania will also have a role to play vis-à-vis contextualized development strategies. Appropriately, it recently hosted the Sahel Alliance in February 2020—which was created in 2017 and signed a partnership protocol with G5 states soon after, regarded as a way to coordinate the different development approaches of international stakeholders.

---

29. Chinguetti’s librarians – Bloomberg, 2016: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/photo-essays/2016-11-15/this-tiny-desert-community-preserves-islam-s-literary-treasures>

30. G5 Sahel – BBC, 2021: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58438905>

31. Mauritania and NATO – NATO, 2021: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185516.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185516.htm)

Mauritania hosts the G5 Sahel Defence College in Nouakchott, which was created in 2016. The College's main aim has been to train the army officers of the G5 states, with the staff of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) being chosen from graduates of the College itself, ensuring cohesion. The Joint Force was established in 2017 as a securitized response to the expansion of extremism and violent armed groups, and is notably the “*the first sub-regional armed force that has committed to implementing an international human rights law compliance framework*”<sup>32</sup>. It was originally conceived to have 5,000 soldiers divided into seven battalions—two battalions each from Mali and Niger, and one each from Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania, though in practice it fluctuates. Inconveniently, the FC-G5S suffers from a lack of full operationalization and the respective national authorities oversee logistical and financial requirements. Overall, Mauritania's involvement and headquartering status are indicative of its prominence, becoming a requisite fixture in regional efforts for counterterrorism. Ultimately, it is important to note that Mauritania also faces some constraints to its power projection that may hinder its foreign policy objectives.

## 4.2 Constraints

Economically, Mauritania's resources are limited, which when combined with its small population of around 4.5 million, has meant that the sustainability of it directing significant resources towards the Sahelian crisis is doubtful. Incidentally, it should be noted that Mauritania will be gaining two ports, the long-term effects of which will be positive—though their economic benefits may be unequally distributed. The first is multifunctional, built by a Chinese company 250 km away from Nouakchott, and due to be completed soon<sup>33</sup>; the second is mainly for fishing, partly financed by China, and 25 km away from Nouakchott<sup>34</sup>. Mauritania's undiversified economy and reliance on agriculture and livestock have meant its role in the region has been steered by its relationships thus far. It is also ranked 161st in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2019 Human Development Index, which means it lacks in key indicators that measure human development, including life expectancy and per capita income. This has added to socio-political tensions within Mauritania, with inequality and discrimination concerns being voiced by some segments of its population.

Additionally, Mauritania has a fluctuating relationship with its neighbor, Morocco. This may constrain Mauritania's power projection as it faces a balancing act between the latter and Algeria, enjoying valuable commercial relationships with both. While a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed in January 2020 between the two countries and a rapprochement is underway under its new president, there remain some unresolved differences. A key difference remains Mauritanian and Algerian recognition of the Polisario front-proclaimed SADR, which the Mauritanian president said in March 2020 “*has not changed and will not change*”<sup>35</sup>. This was followed by an announcement from the Mauritanian parliament of the establishment of a friendship committee with the Polisario Front in July 2020, and Mauritanian President, Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, receiving the minister in charge of political affairs of the Polisario Front in March 2021. Ultimately, Mauritania has its Sahel efforts constrained by this diplomatic dilemma, exemplified by Algeria including Mauritania and not Morocco in regional initiatives, including CEMOC in 2010 and the Nouakchott Process in 2013. More recently, Algeria sent an unprecedented high-level ministerial delegation to Mauritania in June 2020,

32. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report on FC-G5S – ONHCR, 2020: [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/Africa/G5Sahel\\_Report\\_E\\_Final\\_05.08.2020.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/Africa/G5Sahel_Report_E_Final_05.08.2020.pdf)

33. Ndiago port – Construction Review, 2020: <https://constructionreviewonline.com/news/construction-of-the-port-of-ndiago-in-mauritania-nears-completion/>

34. New fishing port – North Africa Post, 2020: <https://northafricapost.com/36791-china-loans-mauritania-87m-for-port-construction.html>

35. Mauritania President comments – 2020: <http://www.zahraa.mr/node/22942>

and the former's Foreign Minister Lamamra revealed in September 2021 that a summit is being planned for the two respective heads of state while on a working visit in the country.

### 4.3 Perspective

Mauritania is a key actor in terms of the Maghreb's outlook towards the Sahel. The pervasive issues the region faces will need multilateral efforts, and Mauritania is well-positioned to be both involved in security frameworks and international development strategies. Indeed, in the words of its President Ould Ghazouani, "*the situation of the region requires larger cooperation*<sup>36</sup>."

Moving forward, Mauritania's power projection may focus more on soft aspects. This will mostly be through its membership to the G5 Sahel, which allows it to have a direct influence on the multilateral organization. It is expected to encourage more integrated development strategies, particularly to address the root causes of extreme impoverishment and to strengthen empowerment at the community level. Mauritania has successfully established towns in its rural areas, such as Termessa and Bouratt, and this may provide a blueprint for its cross-border efforts, though climate change and water scarcity remain a concern. The aim should be to be proactive and develop the region's resilience, with haphazard approaches proving to be unsuccessful in tackling the Sahel's structural fragility. Moreover, Mauritania benefits from historical tribal links to the Sahel, and these relationships will likely continue to be leveraged to advance Mauritania's foreign policy objectives. The latter can also be realized through its memberships to pertinent bodies, including the U.S-led Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership. Conversely, moving away from over-securitization means an opportunity exists for Mauritania to finetune its migration policies, with bilateral agreements with European governments a possibility.

The main constraints include an underperforming economy and its awkward position between two Maghreb neighbors. The former is a lingering issue, and Mauritania's performance in key economic indicators leaves much to be desired. This has also fueled socio-political tensions, with some segments of its population feeling marginalized by the economic status quo. Inter-tribal rivalries and ethnic segregation of Mauritanian society may affect domestic stability—Mauritania has also seen four military coup d'états since its independence in 1960—and consequently Mauritania's power projection. Furthermore, Mauritania walks a tightrope between Algeria and Morocco, which is primarily centered around Morocco's territorial integrity. Its hitherto position of ambiguous neutrality on this issue means it is limited to encouraging dialogue between the two nations, and its Sahel strategy will need to continue to balance the interests of its much larger neighbors. Overall, Mauritania, with its strategic location bridging the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, has developed a multidimensional approach. Moving forward, it will remain an important role player in the stabilization of the Sahel and in tackling the structural challenges faced by the region.

## V. Conclusion

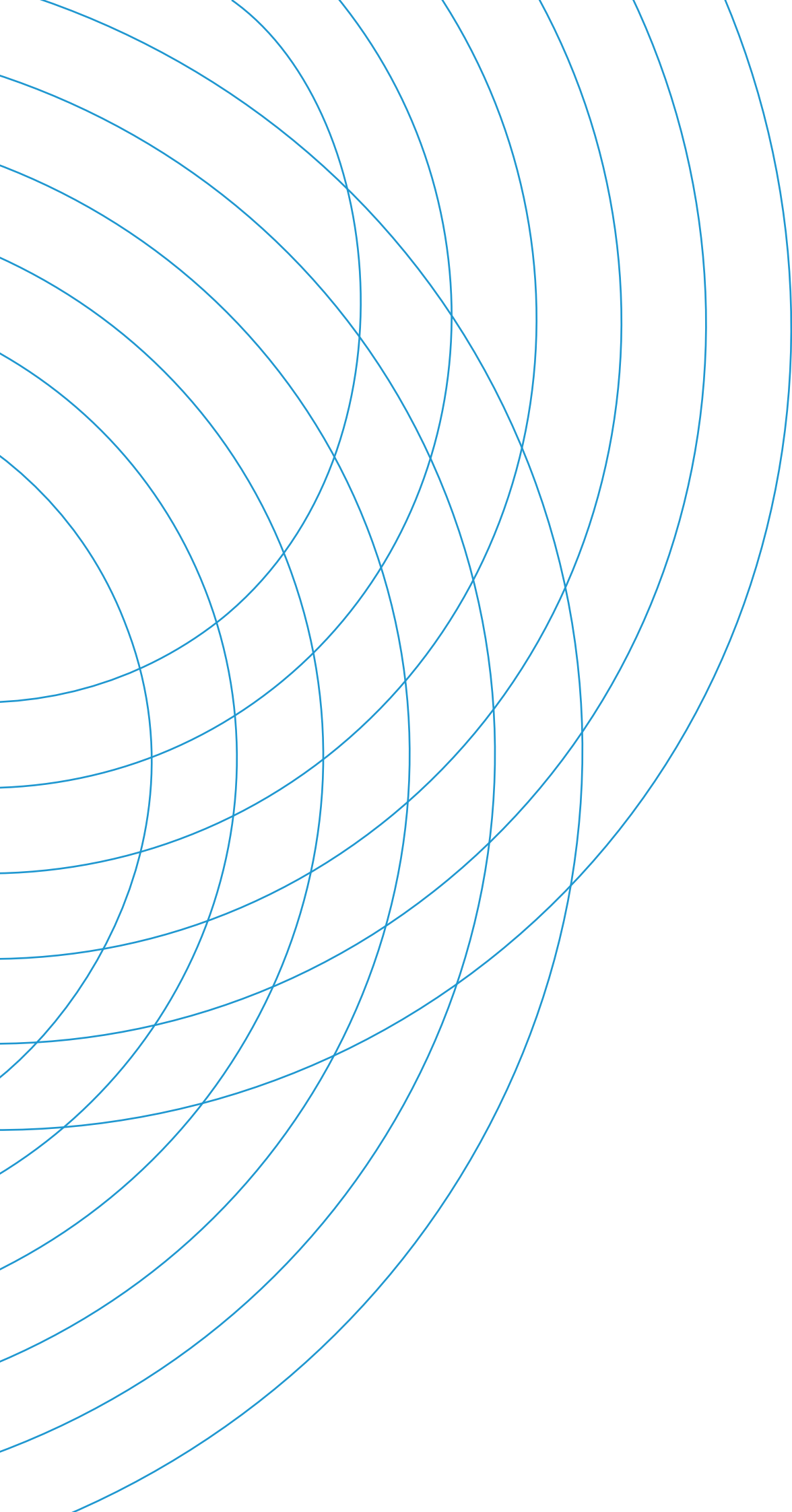
Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania all have enduring historical, political, and economic ties with the Sahel. As the region has become subject to strong foreign influences, Maghreb countries also have, as we have developed in this policy paper, their own agendas and strategies towards the region. While Mauritania currently leads in regional cooperation, fostering its geographical and sociological proximity, both Morocco and Algeria have tried to position themselves as strong economic partners and honest

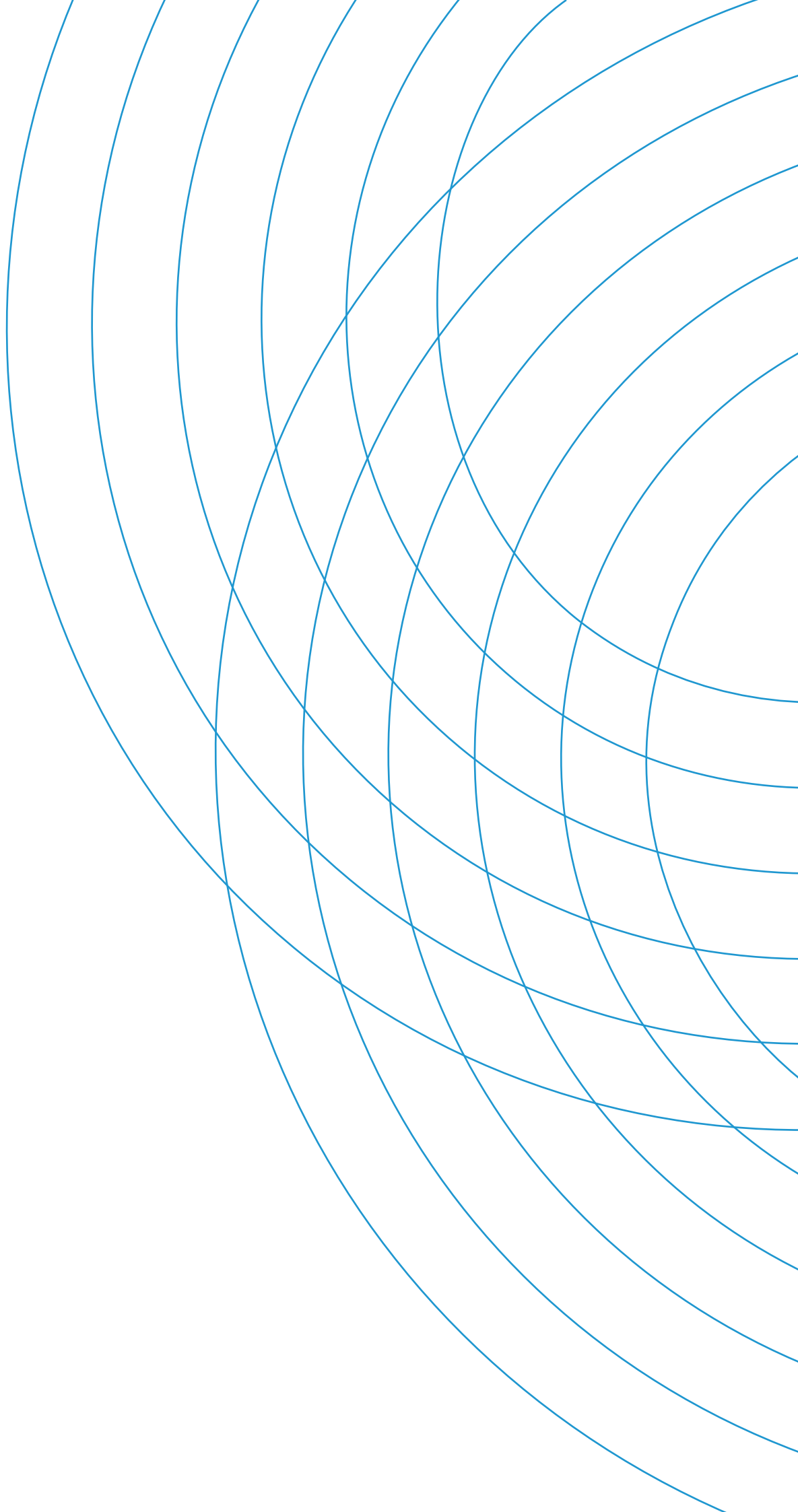
---

36. Mauritania and G5 – Arab Weekly, 2020: <https://thearabweekly.com/mauritania-takes-over-g5-sahel-leadership>

brokers in terms of counterterrorism efforts. Algeria's mediation in the conflict in Mali and Morocco's economic successes in West Africa exhibit the determination of the two biggest Maghreb countries to project power in the region. Accordingly, the EU's longstanding engagement can be enhanced through more multidimensional cooperation with Maghreb countries. This cooperation is already effective in terms of immigration policies and counterterrorism efforts, but cooperation in terms of good governance and economic development is yet to be realized. Capitalizing on the infrastructure development initiatives and economic ties between the Maghreb and the Sahel can be constructive for EU strategies in addressing the root causes of extremism and illegal migration. Likewise, Sahelian countries have regularly called for a strong security-development nexus in international cooperation and aid. In this regard, involving neighboring Maghreb countries in the political and socio-economic proposals for the region could be seen as paramount in achieving the long-awaited stability in the Sahel.

Furthermore, the G5 Sahel was launched as a means to empower Sahelian countries and bolster regional security cooperation. However, this organization has remained subject to European political agendas, which emphasize the security aspects of the organization's prerogatives, while Sahelian partners have consistently insisted on the security-development nexus to be more effectively implemented on-the-ground. Most countries in the Sahel consider the development of infrastructure and efficient public policies as the most viable strategy to countering violent extremism in the long-term. While circumstances in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso have partially required a security response, it remains necessary to implement the Priority Investment Program of the G5 Sahel more robustly. This will help tackle the root causes of insecurity in these countries, which include poor governance, inadequate public policies, impoverishment, and the high rates of illiteracy among the citizenry, thereby addressing the diversity of socio-political contexts in the Sahel. Moreover, it is clear that, to establish a space of prosperity and economic growth in the region, Maghreb countries have a strategic role to play, particularly in spurring economic development. Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania already engage in extensive commerce and trade with most Sahelian countries. However, rivalries and geopolitical dissonances between these three countries have thus far impeded the potential of strong Maghreb-Sahel cooperation becoming the key to regional peace and stability. Nevertheless, with each country's distinct power projection capabilities, they will all be critical for the contextualized solutions the Sahel corridor needs moving forward. Until then, while the international community ponders leveraging this dynamic and others, it is the fast-growing populations of the Sahel who will remain stuck in a vicious cycle.







**Policy Center for the New South**

Complexe Suncity, Immeuble C,  
Angle Boulevard Addolb et rue Albortokal,  
Hay Riad, Rabat - Maroc.

Email : [contact@ocppc.ma](mailto:contact@ocppc.ma)

Phone : +212 5 37 27 08 08

Fax : +212 5 37 71 31 54

Website : [www.policycenter.ma](http://www.policycenter.ma)