

Africa in the Wider World

Editor

Richard Downie

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11 | The Maghreb Looks South

Haim Malka

The Maghreb is looking south to secure its future. Though ties between sub-Saharan and North Africa are deep and go back centuries, after independence in the 1950s and 1960s, Maghreb countries primarily viewed sub-Saharan Africa as an arena for competition among themselves. Europe was Maghreb states' primary strategic economic and diplomatic partner, and their relations with sub-Saharan Africa were seldom a priority. Now, changing regional and global dynamics make sub-Saharan Africa a vital region for every country in the Maghreb.

Africa's strategic importance to the Maghreb rests on the pillars of economics and security. Economically, sub-Saharan Africa provides growing markets of over 870 million people for trade and investment at a time when Maghreb governments need to diversify their economic base and trading partners. On the security side, regional unrest triggered by the Arab uprisings in 2011 and expanding ungoverned spaces in Libya, Mali, and other countries creates urgency to strengthen security cooperation with partners in the Sahel and West Africa. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and even Libya have renewed their outreach to sub-Saharan Africa and are defining new priorities for their respective Africa strategies. Each of these countries sees sub-Saharan Africa playing a vital role in enhancing its own economic and security interests in the coming years.

Morocco's Africa strategy has been the most comprehensive and strategic. King Mohammed VI has personally led the initiative, touring African capitals on several high-profile visits and signing numerous bilateral trade and investment agreements. Morocco is also collaborating with several African countries to expand and improve agricultural production in an effort to increase food security on the continent. It also launched a high-profile effort to train religious scholars and imams from other countries to help combat religious extremism. Tunisia sees important economic opportunities to the south as well, and its president has commented that turning toward Africa is key to Tunisia's post-revolution strategy.¹ In June 2014 Tunis hosted over 350 African senior officials and business leaders for an economic forum, and Tunisia's government is working with the African Development Bank—which is moving back to Abidjan from its temporary headquarters in Tunis—to help facilitate trade and investment in Africa. Algeria also quietly supports aid and development projects with African partners, while its private sector seeks new investment opportunities to the south. Even Libya, which is enmeshed in internal conflict, is reassessing its Africa policy and looking for opportunities to invest funds from its \$5 billion Africa-focused sovereign wealth fund.

Sub-Saharan Africa provides an attractive and growing market for North African states seeking to expand manufacturing. Between 2009 and 2012, the Maghreb's total exports to sub-Saharan Africa nearly doubled, going from approximately \$1 billion to nearly \$2

¹ See Tunis Afrique Presse, "President Marzouki Calls for Enhanced Political and Security Cooperation with Niger," allAfrica, June 22, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201406231055.html>; and Gideon Rose, "A Conversation with Moncef Marzouki," Council on Foreign Relations, September 28, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/tunisia/conversation-moncef-marzouki/p29196>.

billion.² While the growth is significant for the Maghreb, overall trade remains low. The Maghreb states combined exported less than half of what Turkey exported to sub-Saharan Africa and a third of what Brazil did in 2012.

Beyond exports, Morocco and Tunisia in particular both see themselves as hubs for U.S. and European firms entering and operating in Africa. They share a common language with Francophone Africa, have a better understanding of the business culture, have longstanding networks, and are geographically well positioned. The challenge ahead will be for Maghreb governments to expand their manufacturing base sufficiently to increase exports to sub-Saharan Africa. They will also have to find a comparative advantage in niche markets in order to remain competitive against bigger exporting countries.

Security is another driving force in Maghreb interaction with its southern neighbors. Ungoverned spaces in the Sahel combined with a security vacuum in Libya have created new threats from violent extremist groups and criminal gangs operating along the borders of every country in the region. Greater security cooperation with Sahelian states will be crucial to help stop militant operations, movements, extremist recruiting, smuggling, and financing. Weak governments and poorly trained security forces in many neighboring sub-Saharan states deepen the Sahel's security crisis and undermine Maghreb security.

While some Maghreb states have assisted their southern neighbors, the challenges of building durable institutions in the Sahel remain monumental, and they are likely beyond the capacity of any single state to resolve. Algeria has sought a role coordinating security operations with its southern neighbors to address cross-border threats. It also helped stabilize Mali after French military operations in 2013. Morocco has assisted in training military officers in neighboring African countries, and it has expanded cooperation on counterpiracy, narcotics trafficking, and disarmament. All of these projects are important, but because they lack coordination and institutional capacity-building mechanisms, their impact will likely remain limited.

More than at any point in the last half-century, sub-Saharan Africa today is crucial to the Maghreb's future economic prosperity and security. Growing economic ties and shifting security challenges create an opportunity for Maghreb states to reinforce their soft power strategies in the region. Growing consumer markets provide an important and unique opportunity for Maghreb economies to expand their manufacturing base, create local jobs, and boost economic growth. A risk for the Maghreb, though, is that Africa may not accord as much importance to its northern neighbors. The crucial challenge for Maghreb states is to remain relevant for Africa at a time when the continent has multiple suitors vying for markets, investment, and cooperation. This will require not only expanding current trade partnerships but building new ones, and developing competitive products and services. If they work together rather than compete the nations of the Maghreb can build on their historic links with the south to help forge a more integrated and prosperous African continent.

² Based on statistics provided by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "International trade in goods and services," February 14, 2012, http://unctadstat.unctad.org/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx?sRF_ActivePath=p,15912&sRF_Expanded=p,15912.