

Maghreb future is tied to resolving Western Sahara conflict

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The World Economic Forum (WEF) slammed the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) for failing to ensure the free movement of goods in a free trade area that would span the wide North African region that includes Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

"It is crazy that goods need to transit between these neighbours via the French port of Marseilles when they could simply cross over by land," wrote Wadia Ait Hamza, head of Social Engagement – The Americas, in a paper posted on the World Economic Forum website.

Founded in 1989, the AMU is a pact seeking to establish economic and political integration between member countries.

■ The political crisis in Libya is also hampering its ties with neighbouring countries.

The last planned summit originally scheduled for May 26, 2005, was postponed indefinitely because of Morocco's refusal to take part in it due to Algeria's vocal support for Sahrawi independence. Analysts said that longstanding political disagreements between Morocco and Algeria regarding the Western Sahara conflict besides the political crisis in war-torn Libya were hampering the union's economic progress.

Morocco annexed Western Sahara in 1975 and maintains it is an integral part of the kingdom. Algerian-backed Polisario Front separatists began an armed conflict with Morocco for an independent state that lasted until the United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991.

Rabat has proposed a form of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty for the territory. The proposal

was rejected by the Polisario Front, which insists on the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination in a UN-monitored vote.

Algeria denies involvement in the Western Sahara issue although its leaders are suspected of playing a key role in it.

In February, Moroccan King Mohammed VI warned that the AMU would crumble if its incapacity to live up to the ambitions of the 1989 agreement continued.

"Today, we regret to see that the Arab Maghreb Union is the least integrated region in the African continent, if not in the whole world. Intra-regional trade has reached 10% between ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] countries and 19% between SADC [Southern African Development Community] countries, while it is still stagnating at less than 3% between Maghreb countries," King Mohammed VI said.

Trade within the AMU is the lowest of any region in the world, averaging \$200 million per year between the five countries. This accounts for 3% of the bloc's total trade. The European Union accounts for more than 60% of the bloc's total trade.

Mohamed Amine Mansouri Idrissi, the general manager of Afrique Strategie in Morocco, said it is "heartbreaking" that two neighbouring countries trade through a third party.

"Why do we have to make someone else, who doesn't create any added value, benefit from trade between Morocco and Algeria?" asked Idrissi, adding that the third party could make much higher profits than Moroccan exporters, a policy that harms Algerian consumers.

Ali Bahajjoub, director of the Centre for Euro-Mediterranean and African Studies, said that the AMU crisis was mainly due to the political stalemate between Morocco and Algeria over Western Sahara.

"As long as the army rules in Algeria, the crisis between the two countries will not be resolved," Bahajjoub said.

"There is a political vacuum in Algeria that is jeopardising the future of the region.

"It is better for Morocco to trade with other economic zones rather than wait for Algeria to open its borders, which have been closed since 1994," he added.

Algeria closed its land border with Morocco in 1994 after Rabat instituted visa regulations on Algerian tourists following a terrorist attack on the Atlas Asni Hotel in Marrakech that killed two Spanish tourists. Morocco accused Algeria of being involved in the attack.

The political crisis in Libya is also hampering its ties with neighbouring countries. Huwaida Elfayesh, a professor at Tripoli University's School of Law, said "recent events in the Arab countries, represented by the 'Arab spring' revolutions, contributed to widening the gap between the union countries, especially in terms of security."

"Each country tries to secure its borders from the infiltration of 'extremist fighters' as well as the absence of a government in Libya. All these things have brought the union back to the scratch," said Elfayesh.

"The problem of the Moroccan Sahara is still between Algeria and Morocco. Moreover, the collapse of the state in Libya and its civil war directly affects the countries of the union given that common borders with Tunisia and Algeria and the geographical location of Libya in the heart of the union, where Morocco has hosted the negotiations of the Libyan parties in the so-called 'Skhirat' under the auspices of the United Nations, but the peace process is still long, which is reflected negatively on any attempt to revive the Union."

The WEF called for the opening of borders between AMU members to ensure the free movement of goods and people.

Economic analyst Atman Dkhissi said the WEF's statement about the AMU is not something new.

"AMU members need to put aside



Paralysis. Foreign Ministers from the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) attend the 34th Council of the organisation in Tunis, in May last year. (AFP)

their political problems to enhance trade between them that would boost employment in the region," said Dkhissi, echoing Bahajjoub's remark that the AMU's future is tied to resolving the Western Sahara issue.

"Before the border closure, eastern Morocco's economy greatly depended on Algerian tourists' spending," said Dkhissi.

Ali Hamza highlighted the Maghreb countries' complementary economic conditions. While Tunisia and Morocco specialise in services and agriculture, Libya and Algeria have significant natural resources.

AMU Secretary-General Taieb Baccouche told Jeune Afrique magazine on the sidelines of the African Union summit in Addis Ababa "the fact that I have not yet had discussions with these two heads of state (Moroccan and Algerian leaders) since taking up my duties does not refer to any official position with regard to the AMU or with regard to myself."

He said he was waiting for the

AMU foreign ministers' summit later this year to present a new strategy before presenting it to various countries' leaders.

As for the political crisis between Morocco and Algeria, Baccouche expressed his optimism about an improvement in the future.

"I think reconciliation will come. We should not give up," he said.

Elfayesh was less than hopeful about the project's future.

"Despite the great ambition of the Maghreb integration project, the reality proved its failure in all respects, as all the economic, political and security indicators show," she said.

"Unfortunately, there are no quick solutions that could push the union ahead, with the many problems that surfaced on a daily basis – including the Libyan crisis – which led to the almost permanent closure of the border between most of its countries after the 'Arab spring' and the anxiety of terrorism has dominated the governments of the region."

Arab Maghreb Union: A big idea that has gone nowhere

Viewpoint



Lamine Ghanmi

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) inspired high hopes at its inception in 1989. The landmark agreement, signed by Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, promised to foster political and economic unity between the Maghreb countries with a combined population of approximately 100 million people.

Leaders, businessmen and regular citizens hoped to benefit from being at the crossroads of the Arab League, which speaks for the interests of 300 million, and of the African Union grouping of more than 1 billion.

It was an optimistic vision, offering growth and empowerment for a region emerging from centuries of colonialism.

Leaders and elites said the AMU would help the Maghreb use its position between the Atlantic and Mediterranean to function as a trade hub. It could help utilise what were thought to be vast potential reserves of oil, gas, uranium and water to jump-start an economic boom.

The experience of the Maghreb might be another example of a big idea struggling to live up to its potential, however.

"This region is one of the

lowest-performing trading blocs in the world," Wadia Ait Hamza, head of Social Engagement, The Americas at the World Economic Forum said in a report.

Hamza pointed out that UN Economic Commission for Africa data indicated that trade between the Maghreb countries represents just 4.8% of their trade volume.

This is a far cry from what Maghreb leaders envisioned. At the outset, they spoke of the union's strategic value in weathering the challenges of globalisation, combating threats, such as radical Islamic violence or climate change and driving economic growth. The World Bank said, successful Maghrebi integration would have allowed each AMU member to achieve at least a 5% rise in its GDP.

Twenty-eight years after its founding, however, the AMU has made little progress towards those ends. Instead, each Maghreb country is struggling with a lack of job opportunities for its young, a problem directly related to slow economic growth.

The origins of the AMU can be traced to 1958, when the Maghreb was emerging from colonialism. In that year, national leaders met in Tangier to discuss collectively rebuilding the region.

Thirty-one years later, leaders from the region's five independent countries met in Marrakech to carve out a stronger framework for the initial expression of a union. The signed accord outlined principles of a text peppered with heartening words such as "fraternity," "progress," "peace" and

"free movement" of goods and people.

In the years following the agreement, however, the Maghreb faced many obstacles that prompted members to shift visions.

Due to internal political dynamics, Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi put more focus on strengthening ties with sub-Saharan Africa, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika advocated more links with the rest of the Arab world and the leaders of Morocco and Tunisia turned their attention to the European Union.

Still, the AMU served as a symbolic point of connection for the Maghreb countries.

Intellectuals from the region, however, said the AMU would only succeed when the masses in each country demanded more rights and a say in governmental policies. They were proven partly right. In 2011, the "Arab spring" swept through the Maghreb and set off a torrent of political transformation.

Libya plunged into chaos in the absence of Qaddafi or a central government; Tunisia was left grasping for a new political order after the overthrow of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Algeria struggled to shelter itself from the fallout.

Mauritania has been on high alert over a perceived threat of regime change backed by some of its neighbours. It joined a France-backed G5 military bloc of West African nations that focuses on the fight against Islamist extrem-

Many of the five North African countries are looking for greener pastures outside the Maghreb.

ism – another telltale mark of the symbolic and physical failings of the AMU.

The region's borders have turned into a wasteland of wires and trenches guarding against terrorism and smuggling.

The "Arab spring" encouraged the political aspirations of Islamist movements, despite their having for decades been a source of upheaval in the region. The concept of a Maghreb union never impressed the Islamists, who were more drawn to pan-Islamic visions than regional ones. A more serious hindrance has been their focus on ideology over economics, with the relative exception of Morocco.

The result has been each country withdrawing within its borders at a level unprecedented since Morocco and Algeria closed their land borders 23 years ago. Many of the North African countries are looking for greener pastures outside the Maghreb.

Morocco and Tunisia turned to Africa across the Sahara to boost trade and investment. Tunisia in November will become a member of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (Comesa), which has a combined population of 625 million and GDPs totalling \$1 trillion.

Algeria is speeding up completion of the African Unity highway to connect Algiers with Lagos in Nigeria by the end of 2017 to foster trade with land-locked countries in the sub-Saharan Sahel.

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