



# LOOKING AT LIBYA FROM NORTH AFRICA: ALGERIA AND MOROCCO BETWEEN MEDIATION AND COMPETITION

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Within the last decade, the Libyan crisis has often been perceived through the lenses of a so-called proxy war. In this framework, the involvement of foreign actors such as Russia, Turkey, Egypt or the United Arab Emirates (EAU) in Libya has been widely analysed, to the point of even overlooking dynamics on the ground. What has been far less analysed instead are the interests, engagement and initiatives of regional actors such as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Truth to be said, and as we will soon explain, the involvement of countries such as Morocco or Algeria in the Libyan scenario is very far in nature from the one of the above-mentioned actors; nevertheless, it is fundamental to also take it into consideration, namely if we are contextualizing the Libyan situation in the wider (North) African framework. What is more, considering latest developments between Morocco and Algeria, it is certainly interesting to add an analytic layer by looking at their moves and



attempts to mediate the Libyan quagmire under the prism of their competition and regional rivalry.

For the last years, the Libyan crisis has represented an open issue for North African countries' foreign policy for different reasons, from security to economic concerns. This is still true now, after more than a decade, with the country once again divided into two governments - the interim Government of National Unity (GNU) led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah and nominated in February 2021 by the UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), whose mandate should have flowed into elections in December 2021 or else expire in June 2022; and the Government of National Stability (GNS) led by Fathi Bashagha, designated in February 2022 by the House of Representatives based in Tobruk, expressing its refusal to recognize the legitimacy and authority of the GNU. In the last few months, frequent power clashes have gone as far as disrupting Libyan oil production within the current international energy crisis, while in the last few weeks popular protests have been targeting local political elites.

It goes without saying that the Libyan conflict has implied a heightened security risk for North Africa itself as well as for the increasingly precarious Sahel region, which stands as a foreign policy priority for a country like Morocco. For neighbouring Tunisia and Algeria, the Libyan crisis has also represented a direct, major source of instability, also due to the spread and growth of the activities of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) along the porous Libyan borders. Furthermore, a Libya into chaos represents a possible haven for jihadists groups to plan attacks into neighbouring countries. At the same time, the war has vastly limited Libyan economic outreach and cross border trade activities (both legal and illegal ones); needless to be said, this has contributed to feeding the astonishing lack of economic integration in the Maghreb.



In this framework, and differently from other foreign actors which have perpetuated the Libyan conflict to pursue their own priorities, for North African countries the promotion of a true and long-lasting stability in Libya represents the mostly desirable outcome - in other words, the one which also serves *their* own interests. In their perspective, the solution to this crisis should be political and inter-Libyan - "*une solution libo-libyenne*", as often said in French - not only to ensure its feasibility, suitability, and sustainability on the ground, but also to try to avert or at least to limit [foreign interference](#) in the country and in the region. Throughout the latest years, those principles have mainly guided both Moroccan and Algerian attempts at encouraging local actors to undertake a transition towards stability. But, as we will see, there is more to the story.

Moroccan lead on the Libyan file was recognized in 2015, when the agreements for the creation of the UN sponsored Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayez al-Sarraj, were signed in the Moroccan town of Skhirat. That agreement, whose importance for Libyan political transition is constantly reminded by Moroccan authorities, still represents the frame for all Moroccan initiatives on Libya, such as the 2020-2021 rounds of inter-Libyan dialogues held in Bouznika and Tangiers. Morocco is very keen on highlighting its positive and [active neutrality](#) on the Libyan dossier, drawing on the fact that, differently from Algeria, Rabat does not have any border in common with Libya. This allows the Kingdom to adopt a middle position: it is interested and involved enough in the promotion of regional stability to try to mediate the conflict, but it can still maintain a sort of detachment.

On the other hand, the fact that Algiers shares a 1000 km border with Libya makes it directly vulnerable and eager to avoid any further major changes that might lead to additional instability within and outside Libya. Since the start of Tebboune's mandate in 2019, Algiers has [dusted off](#) its regional and African diplomacy and showed its willingness to present itself as a mediator and a



solution-maker in the Libyan crisis, thus building on some attempts of diplomatic dialogue put forward since 2014. Besides aiming at reaching stability in Libya, such engagement can also be framed within the increasing competition with Rabat, whose attempts at mediating the Libyan crisis are part of the Kingdom's strategy of leadership at a regional and at a continental level, and of its willingness to present itself as a [security provider](#) and as a strong and reliable partner to Europe and *à l'international*.

In this context, the fact of being involved in the Berlin process in 2020 – a convening where Moroccan representatives were not invited, to Rabat's great disappointment – created good expectations for Algiers, but it led to no tangible result. More recently, at the end of June 2022, the candidacy of Algerian former Minister of Foreign Affairs Sabri Boukadam to the Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) was rejected by the United Arab Emirates as a non-permanent UN Security Council member representing Arab countries. While an official explanation was not provided, different [sources](#) hint at Arab – and among them Libyan – concerns about the conflict of interests that might arise given Algerian geographical proximity to Libya. Other factors, however, might have come into play, such as the UAE and Algeria's different policies on [regional issues](#) such as the Western Sahara or the normalisation with Israel. What is more, in Libya the UAE are known for their support for General Khalifa Haftar, a position which collides with Algeria's overt antipathy for the General, who has so far endorsed Bashagha's government. By the way, the fact that, in the wake of the establishment of the GNS, Algiers declared support for Dbeibah's GNU as the Libyan legitimate government until holding elections was [criticized](#) by the latter's supporters as an interference with Libyan internal affairs – a comment which might sound especially disappointing for Algiers, which has historically brought forward a foreign policy based on noninterventionism. All in all, the situation on the ground in Libya is extremely complicated and constantly evolving, and while bringing in Algeria and Morocco and their connections does complicate the picture



even more, it is a necessary angle to add to really understand regional dynamics - or at least, to make an informed attempt. In this overall framework, while contributing to Libyan stability has a meaning in terms of international standing and recognition, it could obviously also bear fruits at an economic level: indeed, North African countries, besides many others, are eagerly looking at the opportunities represented by the reconstruction of Libya, especially in the light of the economic difficulties they have been going through due to the combination of the pandemic and the effects of the war in Ukraine, which have built on a situation already characterized by deep inequality and a high poverty ratio. For this reason, being recognized as a friendly actor by the Libyans surely bodes well for the next phase, when Libya will need massive investments in its damaged infrastructures. And, as long as North African actors could live up to the competition with European and regional powers and find a way to overcome their own animosity, this could also be a chance to enhance regional integration in the Maghreb, under different chapters.