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The Reconfiguration of North Africa: National Disruptions and Transregional Dynamics

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Since 2011, North Africa has experienced a period of profound disruption. The uprisings that swept the region unleashed divergent national trajectories: Tunisia's democratic gains have unraveled, Libya has plunged into fragmentation and armed conflict, while Algeria and Morocco have seen only partial institutional shifts. Yet beneath these differences lies a deeper regional pattern—one shaped by the erosion of state authority, growing foreign influence, and the entrenchment of transnational threats. This is not simply a mosaic of isolated crises, but a broader strategic realignment in which domestic upheaval, geopolitical rivalry, and international intervention increasingly intersect.

North Africa today stands as a zone of accelerated change, where national breakdowns both reflect and reinforce shifting global power dynamics. Rival states within the region pursue conflicting agendas, while external actors—from Russia and China to Turkey, the Gulf states, and Western powers—compete for strategic footholds. The region has thus become a stage for overlapping tensions, marked by securitization, migration diplomacy, and ideological polarization.

These transformations rest along three main axes: internal political fragmentation, escalating interstate rivalries, and structural vulnerabilities that now link North Africa more tightly to broader regional and global fault lines.

I. Internal Fragmentation and State Reversals

Tunisia began the post-2011 era with optimism. A new constitution, competitive elections, and emerging democratic institutions earned it a reputation as a model for regional transition. But this image has steadily deteriorated. Economic stagnation, social discontent, and institutional dysfunction undermined the democratic project, fueling disillusionment among citizens and weakening the political middle. Since 2021, President Kaïs Saïed has dismantled the democratic architecture through a series of authoritarian maneuvers: dissolving parliament, consolidating executive power, and adopting a new constitution that entrenches presidential rule. Framing his agenda in nationalist and anti-elitist terms, Saïed has positioned himself as a break from the perceived failures of the post-revolution elite¹.

¹ Gobe, E. (2022) *Kaïs Saïed ou la mise en crise du parlementarisme tunisien : entre populisme, légalisme et autoritarisme*. HAL-SHS



His regime has deployed increasingly repressive tactics, targeting journalists, opposition figures, NGOs, and sub-Saharan migrants, who have become scapegoats in a securitized and xenophobic political discourse. Tunisia now occupies a contradictory position—no longer a beacon of democratic transition, yet courted by international actors, including the EU and Gulf states, as a partner on migration control and regional stability.

In Algeria, hopes for transformation were similarly sparked by the Hirak movement, which in 2019 forced the resignation of long-time president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Yet the regime's response has largely preserved authoritarian continuity. Abdelmadjid Tebboune's presidency, portrayed as a reset, failed to deliver substantive reform or popular legitimacy. Electoral processes remain hollow, dissent is criminalized, and civil society is increasingly constrained. Nonetheless, the regime has stabilized institutionally while pursuing an assertive foreign policy and promising economic reform. Algeria maintains a strong security posture, particularly along its Libyan, Moroccan, and Sahelian borders, reflecting its wariness of Western intervention and preference for sovereign autonomy. Economically, it remains reliant on hydrocarbons, with diversification efforts largely unfulfilled. Relations with France are shaped by mutual suspicion, historical grievances, and political posturing, particularly in the run-up to key electoral cycles. Algeria thus operates in a delicate balance—caught between popular demands for change, entrenched authoritarian practices, and mounting regional pressures.

Libya represents the region's most extreme case of state collapse. Since the 2011 fall of Muammar Gaddafi, the country has splintered into competing zones of control, with rival administrations in the east and west supported by a patchwork of militias, tribes, and external actors. Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army dominates much of the east, bolstered by Russian, Emirati, and Egyptian support. In the west, the UN-recognized Government of National Unity (GNU) relies on Turkish military backing and fragile local coalitions. These divisions, underpinned by patronage networks and parallel institutions, have deepened the risk of a permanent partition. Turkey backs the GNU militarily, deploying drones and Syrian fighters. Russia supports Haftar through the Wagner Group, asserting strategic influence on the ground. Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia side with Haftar for anti-Islamist reasons, while Qatar supports the GNU in line with its broader Islamist alignments. These international alignments transform Libya into a proxy battlefield, reinforcing local fragmentation and reducing the prospects for durable reconciliation.



Libya's porous southern borders further destabilize the region, serving as conduits for arms, jihadist fighters, and trafficking networks that link the Maghreb to the Sahel. The country has become a proxy battlefield, with international actors pursuing divergent agendas that make reconciliation increasingly remote. The illusion of eventual dominance, sustained by foreign support, prevents compromise and perpetuates the state's fragmentation.

II. Escalating Interstate Rivalries

Interstate tensions have intensified alongside internal collapse. Nowhere is this more visible than in the deteriorating relationship between Algeria and Morocco. While their rivalry is long-standing, recent developments have shifted the confrontation into a new strategic phase. Morocco's normalization with Israel in 2020, deepening military cooperation with the United States and Tel Aviv, and public statements regarding Algerian internal affairs triggered a rupture. Algeria, in response, cut diplomatic ties in 2021 and accused Rabat of hostile acts, including involvement in wildfires and political interference in Kabylie². The rivalry has since hardened into a full-spectrum confrontation—diplomatic, military, informational, and symbolic. Morocco has upgraded its arsenal with Israeli drones and surveillance systems, while Algeria has expanded arms imports from Russia and China. The Western Sahara dispute, while not new, now serves as the main axis around which broader strategic antagonisms revolve. These tensions extend beyond North Africa, as both countries seek influence in the Sahel and position themselves as regional leaders, often at the expense of Maghreb unity and African Union cohesion.

Algeria's relations with Mali have also deteriorated, signaling a wider breakdown of regional coordination. The March 2024 destruction of a Malian drone by Algerian forces led to the severing of security ties and diplomatic withdrawals. Mali's pivot toward Burkina Faso and Russia reflects a broader disengagement from Algeria's traditional role as mediator. This realignment by Algeria coincides with a rise in digital propaganda, often state-sponsored, which fuels mutual suspicion and public hostility. The crisis illustrates a deeper regional trend: the erosion of multilateral security frameworks and the emergence of fragmented, sovereigntist alliances that struggle to address transnational threats³.

² International Crisis Group. (2022). *Managing tensions between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

³ International Crisis Group. (2025). *Algérie-Mali : désamorcer une dangereuse escalade*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.



III. Structural Vulnerabilities and Foreign Entanglements

External actors have played a growing role in shaping North Africa's strategic landscape. Morocco has embedded itself within a pro-Western and pro-Israeli axis, positioning itself as a key partner in the regional containment of Iran. In contrast, Algeria has aligned more clearly with powers challenging the Western-led order, deepening ties with Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran while maintaining its longstanding support for the Polisario Front. Tunisia, while less openly aligned, has signaled a quiet drift toward Iran, reflecting a broader turn away from Western dependency and toward sovereigntist rhetoric—especially around Palestine and national autonomy. Turkey continues to balance its involvement, maintaining relations with Algeria and Morocco while asserting its presence in Libya. China's influence, though less visible, is growing through infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy investments under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Migration represents another source of both vulnerability and leverage. The EU's strategy of externalizing border control has transformed North African states into security subcontractors, rewarded with financial aid and diplomatic support. Agreements with Tunisia and Morocco formalize this arrangement, but often at the cost of human rights. Tunisia's rhetoric around demographic threats and its crackdown on sub-Saharan migrants exemplify the dangers of securitized migration policy. Meanwhile, competition for EU funding and recognition undermines regional cooperation, fostering rivalry rather than coordination. Algeria, while officially critical of this model, still enforces strict border controls and engages in mass expulsions. Libya remains a major transit point despite its institutional collapse. While EU-backed coastguards attempt to stem the flow, international organizations continue to document systematic abuse in detention centers.

Security threats—especially jihadist activity—reveal the porousness of borders and the interconnection of local conflicts. Armed groups from Libya to the Sahel exploit ungoverned spaces, using them as corridors for recruitment, arms transfer, and logistical operations. These networks link North Africa to conflicts in the Levant and the Horn of Africa, creating a transregional theater of instability. Criminal economies—smuggling, trafficking, and illicit trade—sustain these movements and undermine state authority. At the same time, declining public services, economic hardship, and social alienation feed radicalization. This is not only religious or ideological; it often emerges at the intersection of protest, identity crisis, and



survival. As states grow more repressive and less responsive, a cycle of insecurity, authoritarianism, and disillusionment deepens across the region.

A Region in Strategic Flux

North Africa is undergoing a fundamental reordering. State fragility, authoritarian retrenchment, and intensifying rivalries have destabilized the region and drawn it deeper into the gravitational pull of global conflicts. The ongoing war between Iran and Israel exemplifies this dynamic. Morocco, firmly embedded in a pro-Western coalition, serves as a strategic partner in surveillance and intelligence. Algeria, aligned with Tehran and Moscow, positions itself as a counterweight. Tunisia, though quieter, appears to be recalibrating its posture in a similar direction. These alignments expose the region to new pressures, from arms proliferation to ideological spillover, making North Africa an extension of broader Middle Eastern and Eurasian contestations.

Ultimately, the region's trajectory is increasingly defined by fragmentation and entanglement. The internal disintegration of states like Libya, the collapse of cooperative security mechanisms, and the use of migration and identity as political tools all contribute to a volatile environment. North Africa is no longer merely adjacent to global power struggles—it is embedded within them. Its future, therefore, will be shaped not just by domestic reforms or regional diplomacy, but by its evolving role in the reconfiguration of the international order.

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