

US Policy towards the Maghreb: An Arduous Combination of Strategic Interests and Economic Stakes*

Belkacem Iratni¹

Abstract

The relations of the United States of America (USA) with the Maghreb States are ancient, though intermittent and not very substantial. Globally, the Maghreb does not constitute a vital region for US strategic concerns. It is included broadly in what the American policy makers depict as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) configuration and thus does not represent a specific or a peculiar zone for American involvement or responsibility.

However, the Maghreb presents a relative importance in the US designs whether in terms of strategic concerns or economic assets, particularly with the worldwide emergence of terrorism. This care remains only provisory. Strategic alignments (Morocco and Tunisia) and energy resources (Algeria and Libya) have relatively attracted US attention to the Maghreb, but security matters, linked to the widespread of terrorism, have strengthened the relations between the two parties, without, however, upgrading their partnership to the level of vitally crucial dynamics, interdependent needs, and promising prospects.

Keywords: Economic Cooperation; Maghreb; Radical Islam; Terrorism; USA

*DOI: 10.21747/21846251/joural

¹ University of Algiers 3

Introduction

The relations of America with the Maghreb States date back to the end of the 18th century, when this country was engaged with other European powers in naval clashes with the Moroccan kingdom and what were labeled then as the Ottoman Regencies of Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli or “the Barbary or piracy” coast.

To ensure the safety of their merchant vessels, naval crews, and travelers, the US signed treaties of peace and friendship with the Kingdom of Morocco as well as with the Ottoman Regencies of Algiers Tunis and Tripoli by late 18th century. Morocco was the first country in the world to recognize the independence of the USA, followed shortly after by other North African Regencies. The first American public property acquired outside of the United States was a Moorish building located in the Medina of Tangiers in Northern Morocco which hosted the American General Legation and Consulate from 1821 to 1961.

Despite these ancient links, the independence-driven ideals of the founding fathers of America, and the fervent plea for the right of people for self-determination made by President Woodrow Wilson in January 1918, the United States did not seriously challenge French domination of the Maghreb. The reasons were, probably, linked to Christian-based Western solidarity and capitalist-oriented common interests.

During the Cold War era, the US entertained a close working relationship with Morocco and Tunisia, regarded as friendly countries which favoured liberalism and moderate policies in world affairs. Conversely, it regarded with suspicion Algeria and Libya under the rule of Colonel Gadhafi, because of their revolutionary stance and close alliance with the Soviet bloc, even though Washington enjoyed a good economic partnership with Algiers and Tripoli, especially in the hydrocarbons sector.

The following era which was marked by the increasing threats of terrorism, the United States came to cultivate close links with the Maghreb States to ensure security and stability by avoiding the rise to power of radical Islamists perceived as dangerous to American security, especially after the 9/11 tragic events.

This paper argues that the Maghreb has never been a major focus of American foreign policy as the vital interests of the US rest elsewhere. It contends, as well, that the main concerns of the US about the Maghreb States are strongly vested in the stability of this region, despite democracy deficiency of their regimes. This ambivalence explains the difficulty the US faced in trying to conciliate its primary interests related to power politics with the ideals of liberalism, democracy, and the defense of human rights which it has, zealously, proclaimed in its political discourse and foreign policy orientations.

The Maghreb may attract greater attention of the US, only if it came to witness drastic changes or tragic events that may affect the stability of the Middle East, and hence, jeopardize American strategic and economic interests in this region which seem highly vital to US grand designs.

1. The Historical Background: Ancient but Distant Relations

1.1. Reassessing “Old” Friendship Links

To ensure the security of its vessels crossing the Mediterranean Sea, the US, which has obtained its independence in 1776 after bitter wars with the British empire, has combined diplomatic means and military pressures on the Ottoman Regencies of Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis as well as the Kingdom of Morocco which succeeded in keeping aloof from the suzerainty of the Ottoman empire.

While it prepared for violent naval incursions against what it perceived as “piracy coast” the US felt nevertheless, bound to sign treaties of friendship with the North African countries. Indeed, two years after the U.S. Declaration of Independence, John Adams, the second American president,

declared that: "there are other nations with which it is more urgent to conclude treaties ... By this, I mean Morocco and the Regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli" (US Embassy Archive).² Therefore, friendship treaties were signed first with Morocco (June 1786)³ and then with the Regencies of Algiers (September 1795), Tripoli (November 1795), and Tunis in August 1797. All these treaties are still in force.

These signs of a lenient policy towards the North African countries came with the Kingdom of Morocco being the first State in the world to recognize the independence of the US in 1777. The Regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli followed suit, shortly after.

Through the terms of the treaty signed with Morocco, the ships of the United States crossing the Mediterranean Sea were granted protection from "pirates" acts and trade between the two counties was promoted. Though it primarily governed maritime trade, the Treaty document included several stipulations relating to security and military relations, among them: "If either of the parties shall be at war with any Nation whatever the other party shall not take a commission from the enemy nor fight under their colors" (Morocco on the move: 2014).⁴

The importance of Morocco to the US became evident as Washington opened a consulate in Tangier in 1821 under the form of a General Legacy.

Historic links with Algeria were also ancient as Santa Monica, the first European settlement established in Florida in 1563 was named after the

² US Embassy Archive Website, U.S.-Tunisian Relations Over 200 Years of Friendship, <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/>.

³ This document, ratified by the Confederation Congress in 1787 and renegotiated in 1836, is still in force and considered the longest unbroken relationship in U.S. history.

⁴ Morocco on the move, <https://moroccoonthe move/wpcontent/uploads/2014>.

mother of the Numidian Roman Catholic Bishop St Augustine (AD 354-430) and a small city in Ohio was given the name of El Kader, in honor of Emir Abdelkader, the Algerian national hero who fought the French colonial troops during 17 years (1830-1947). It is worth to mention that this town was the only city in the US ever to bear the name of a personality of Arab origin. When Emir Abdelkader, while in exile in Damascus, saved thousands of Christians including the staff of the American consulate from massacres in Syria in 1860, President Abraham Lincoln decided to honour the Emir as "a great humanist" for this outstanding gesture.

The links between the US and the North African countries, marked by a high symbolic value were, too often, recalled during the encounters held between Americans and officials of the Maghreb States, well after these countries got rid of French domination in 1956 (Morocco and Tunisia), Algeria (1962) and Libya where the British-led allied mandate ceased in 1951.

After the signature of the peace treaty with the Regency of Algiers in September 1795, the US agreed to pay a ransom estimated at \$10 million for 12 years in return for the promise of the Dey's navy to refrain from aggressing American vessels.

Despite the signature of friendship treaties, the US became entangled in wars with the North African Regencies. Having not received presents from the US as did the Dey of Algiers and the Bey of Tunis, the Regent of Tripoli declared war on the US on May 14, 1801. A few days later, President Thomas Jefferson sent a four-ship navy squadron to the Mediterranean Sea. Combats with the fleet of the Bey of Tripoli took place resulting in the defeat of the *Tripoli's* vessel by the *USS Enterprise* (US-Libyan relations 2008).⁵

⁵ U.S- Libyan Relations, 1786-2008: A Chronology, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/ci/ly/109174.htm>.

The US Congress voted a law on February 6, 1802, related to the “the Protection of American commerce and Seamen against the Tripolitan Cruisers”. In April 1805, a multi-national force led by the US navy captured the Libyan town of Derna, forcing the Bey of Tripoli to accept a treaty of peace which was signed in June, the same year.⁶

As acts of “piracy” against the American merchant ships did not cease in the Mediterranean Sea, the US attacked the naval forces of the Regency of Algiers in 1815 and forced the Dey to sign a new treaty through which he agreed to put an end to the slavery of Western Christians.

The period of battles with especially the Regency of Algiers, considered then as the most powerful State in the South-West Mediterranean rim, resulted, in the end, in the withdrawal of the American fleet from this Sea.

1.2. An Ambiguous Stance vis-à-vis French Colonialism in the Maghreb

With the French conquest of Algeria in July 1830, the protectorate exercised over Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania in 1912 as well as the occupation of Libya by Italy in 1911, the US remained away from the Mediterranean politics and balance of power.

The Americans turned down the offer of the possession of any port of their choice in Algeria made by Emir Abdelkader in 1836 through the offices of James Lieb, the American Consul in Tangier, in exchange for the US support to the fight waged by Emir Abdelkader against French invasion. The assessment by the American Consul that “any...encouragement [by the United States] to the Barbary Powers for hostile action against Europeans would be adverse...to the progress of civilization” (Roberts 2015), came as a confirmation of US stance that favoured Western alliance against the

⁶ U.S- Libyan Relations, 1786-2008: A Chronology, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/ci/ly/109174.htm>.

North African countries. The Consul, implicitly, expressed a position that supported the claims that French conquest of North Africa was as a mission intended to civilize the peoples of this region, pejoratively regarded as backward and barbarians.

Being heavily entangled in strengthening its power capabilities as a new and independent nation and expanding its influence in the American continent, the US did not contend French, British, Spanish, or Italian colonial conquest of Africa. However, given the deep historic links and friendship with Morocco, the US sided with the kingdom when it became the scramble of European powers. Thus, it defended Morocco's independence and territorial integrity at the conference held in Madrid in 1880. At the conference convened in Algeciras in 1906, the US president Theodore Roosevelt offered a compromise plan which allowed Morocco to retain a large autonomy and skillfully maneuvered to make this agreement accepted by the European powers.

However, with the strengthening of French colonization of Algeria and Morocco losing its independence and territorial integrity to France and Spain in 1912, the US withdrew from North Africa and turned its back to the right of the peoples for self-determination claimed by President Woodrow and the principles of human dignity preached by President Abraham Lincoln. The inward turn of America dictated by the intermittent policy of isolationism has also largely distanced the US from the colonial oppression endured by the peoples of North Africa.

The outbreak of World War II forced the US to engage heavily on the side of their European allies and moved to land its troops in North Africa to liberate France from German occupation and the regime of Vichy. During this campaign in North Africa, Robert D. Murphy, the US President's Personal Representative came in contact with the Maghreb nationalist leaders, such as Ferhat Abbas (Algeria), Habib Bourguiba (Tunisia) and Allal Al Fassi (Morocco) in a timid approach to evaluate their determination

to get rid of French colonialism. These attempts proved vain as the US policy of alliance with Europe prevailed over economic interests dictated by the search of new markets for American products and the need for raw materials for American growing industry. These natural resources would be available with abundance and at cheap costs, only if the European colonial domination over Africa and Asia were utterly removed.

The US certainly hoped the breakdown of European colonial empires but did not contribute effectively in hastening the decolonization process, being anxious to preserve Western Europe position and credentials in the US-led confrontation with the Soviet bloc which was already looming at that time.

American scholar, Mark Willis asserted that the liberation of Tunisia from the Axis invasion in 1943 “provided the first concrete opportunity for the USA to apply the Atlantic Charter of self-determination,” but the American diplomat Robert D. Murphy, then the political advisor to General Eisenhower “quietly undermined key elements of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s policy towards the French and towards self-determination in North Africa” (Willis 2012). This attitude was not proper to an individual American politician but reflected Washington’s ambivalent views towards the struggle of peoples for self-determination.

Later, the American decision-makers became convinced by the French authorities that the war in Algeria (1954-1962) was not a battle for independence but mere domestic events. When France became a charter member of NATO, the Alliance accepted the demands made by Paris that Algeria should be treated as a part of the mother country (as a department) and not as a colony like Tunisia or a protectorate as Morocco. Thus, the US-led NATO came to back up the French troops engaged against the Algerian freedom fighters, as depicted in independent Algeria historiography.

However, it was the resounding *Algerian speech* made by Senator John Kennedy before the American Senate in support of the Algerian war of

liberation on July 2, 1957(JFK library),⁷ as well as the information campaign launched by the wartime FLN bureau in New York that American public opinion and media became more sensitive to the decolonization issue and human rights of oppressed people.

On May 17, 1956, the US was the first great power to recognize the sovereign State of Tunisia, and the President of this country, Habib Bourguiba visited officially Washington in May 1961.

Vice-President Richard Nixon went to Morocco in March 1957 and President Eisenhower made an express stopover at Rabat two years later when touring the Middle East region. The Moroccan King paid an official visit to Washington in November 1957 and his successor, King Hassan, made his first visit to the United States in 1961.

The United States supported the UN resolution providing for Libyan independence in 1951 and full diplomatic relations were established with the opening of embassies in Washington and Tripoli in 1954. Vice-President, Richard Nixon visited Tripoli in 1957 and a base was offered by the Libyans to the Americans at *Wheelus* which served for tactical fighter training facility in the 1960s.

Washington recognized the independence of Mauritania in November 1960 and diplomatic relations were established in the same year.

With post-colonial Algeria, the US relationship started in a sketchy manner, as the new leader Ahmed Ben Bella met with President Kennedy on the margin of the United Nations conference convened in December 1962. However, on his way back home Ben Bella stopped over in Havana where he,

⁷ Senator John Kennedy poignantly stated that: "the most powerful single force in the world today is neither communism nor capitalism, neither the H-bomb nor the guided missile, it is man's eternal desire to be free and independent." <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/united-states-senate-imperialism-19570702>.

“wholeheartedly,” evoked his country’s solidarity with Fidel Castro’s regime and vehemently vilipended US “imperialism and hegemonic temptations.”

2. Imbalanced Attitudes towards the Maghreb States during the Cold War Era

2.1. Disproportioned Political Relations

The United States has entertained unbalanced relations with the States of the Maghreb. These links were based neither on status and power capabilities of these countries exclusively, nor on ideological and political affinities, only. It tried, with much difficulty, to conciliate ethics with pragmatic interests, particularly in the case of Algeria and Morocco which appear to be the strongest countries in the Maghreb, as shown in the following Figure. Inevitably, both countries emerged as the two contenders for the leadership over the Maghreb.

Table: The Maghreb Countries: General Facts

	Algeria	Morocco	Tunisia	Libya	Mauritania
Population (2020)	43.717.819	36.846.801	11.914.237	6.861.488	4.611.854
Surface (sq./km)	4.611.854	710.85	163.610	1.759.740	1.030.700
GDP (2018:\$billions)	173.8	117.9	39.8	48.3	5.3
GDP per capita (2018:\$ thousands)	4.174.7	3.235.8	3.447.5	7.241.7	1.188.8
Military expenditure (2018:\$b)	10.3	3.7	0.8	6.3 (2014)	0.1 (2017)
Share as of GDP (%)	6	3.1	2.1	11.4	0.4

Source: Diverse Statistics: The World Bank Facts and Trends in World Expenditure, 2019.

Algeria is the largest country in Africa and is slightly more populous than Morocco. With Libya and Tunisia, these two countries boast a valuable geostrategic position, being a bridge to Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East.

Both Algeria and Libya have sizeable reserves of oil and gas. As of 2016, Algeria held a little more than 12 trillion barrels of proven oil reserves, ranking 16th in the world and accounting for about 0.7% of the world's total oil reserves (World Meters: Algeria)⁸. Libya detained slightly more than 48 trillion barrels of proven oil reserves, ranking 9th in the world and accounting for about 2.9% of the world's total oil reserves in the same year (World Meters: Libya).⁹

Algeria produced 1.2 million barrels per day in 2019, while Libya's oil production abruptly dropped from 1.6 million b/d in 2010 to 200.000 b/d in Jul 2020, because of the civil war it has undergone since the downfall of the Gadhafi's regime in 2011.

Algerian natural gas reserves were evaluated at 159.054.000 million cubic/feet (11th in the world) and its gas production totaled 6.491.745 million cubic feet in 2016 or the 5th rank in the world (worldometers.info/gas/Algeria).¹⁰ Libyan gas reserves were estimated at 53.183.000 million cubic feet (21st in the world) and its gas production was estimated at 591.528 million cubic feet (40th in the world) in the same year (worldometers.info/gas/Libya).¹¹

Morocco has abundant phosphate deposits as it holds 50 billion metric tons of this mineral (including the phosphates of the disputed Western Sahara territory) in 2019, making it the country with the largest reserves in the world (Garside 2020).¹² In 2018, Morocco produced 33 million tons of

⁸ <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/algeriaoil/#:~:text=Oil%20Reserves%20in%20Algeria&text=Algeria%20holds%2012%2C200%2C000%2C0010b>.

⁹ [Algeriahttps://www.worldometers.info/oil/libyaoil/#:~:text=Oil%20Reserves%20in%20Libya&text=Libya%20holds%2048%2C363%2C000%2C000%20](https://www.worldometers.info/oil/libyaoil/#:~:text=Oil%20Reserves%20in%20Libya&text=Libya%20holds%2048%2C363%2C000%2C000%20).

¹⁰ <https://www.worldometers.info/gas/algeria-natural-gas/>.

¹¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/gas/libya-natural-gas/>.

¹² Garside (2020), Global Phosphate rock reserves, <https://www.statista.com/>

phosphates per year, becoming the world's second-largest producer, after China with 140 million tons (Babali 2019).

During the whole period of the cold war, the US entertained disproportionate relations with the Maghreb states in terms of the trust, friendship, and mutual benefits.

It considered Tunisia and Morocco as allies in their confrontation with the Soviet bloc because of the moderate foreign stance followed by these two countries which did not harm US geostrategic interests in North Africa or its corollary, the Middle East. Both Tunis and Rabat favoured a political settlement to the Arab-Palestinian conflict with Israel, though Morocco had sent troops to Egypt during the June 1967 and October 1973 wars. However, the relations with Tunisia were strained when the Tunisian leadership believed that the US may have been involved in the bombing of the headquarters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Tunis in 1985 and the assassination of the Palestinian militant, Abu Jihad in the Tunisian capital in 1988.¹³

With Mauritania, the relations have been cordial ever since the independence of this country in 1960, though Nouakchott broke diplomatic relations with Washington, after the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, but moved to reestablish these relations, two years later.

Morocco provided some logistic facilities to US efforts to crush revolutionary movements in Africa based on a common fight against the communist spread that might threaten conservative regimes in this continent. Both Morocco and Tunisia were engaged in a kind of rivalry with Algeria and Libya, considered as progressive regimes and pro-soviet, to some extent. In

statistics/6781747/phosphate-rock-reserves-by-country.

¹³ US Embassy in Tunisia, History of the U.S.-Tunisia Relationship, <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/>.

1987, US forces reinstalled in the abandoned Ben Guerir base in Morocco to re-use it as a transoceanic abort landing site for NASA's space shuttles during emergencies. The United States also succeeded in obtaining access and transit rights to Moroccan territory for its forces.

Algeria was deeply involved in providing multifarious support to progressive liberation movements operating in Lusophone colonial Africa (Angola, Mozambique, and Cap-Vert) or those opposing *Apartheid* in South Africa and the colonial mandate over Namibia. Therefore, Algiers was called “the Mecca of revolutionaries” as it became the host of various revolutionary and radical movements around the world, including the Black Panthers and their leaders, Stanley Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver.¹⁴

The United States was more annoyed by Algeria's activism in the Middle Eastern affairs which disturbed, somehow, its strategic designs in this region. Indeed, Algeria emerged as a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause by providing financial assistance and diplomatic support to the PLO and other Palestinian leftist factions. Algiers sent troops during the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war and severed its diplomatic relations with Washington (resumed in 1974). It also sent troops to Egypt during the October 1973 war while paying \$200.000 in cash in order to buy arms from the Soviet Union which were dispatched to Egyptian and Syrian armies (Jeune Afrique 2013). It was, also, thanks to Algerian support that the PLO's leader Yasser Arafat was invited to deliver a historic speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations in November 1974.

However, the US tried to gain the support of Algeria to its efforts to resolve the conflict between Arabs and Israel on the basis of concessions from the Arab countries that may include the recognition of the State of Israel. Thus,

¹⁴ It was claimed that Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cap-Verde (PAIGC), was the first to give this denomination to the Algerian capital.

Henry Kissinger, the US State Secretary paid two short visits to Algiers in December 1973 and in April 1974. But the Americans were deeply upset that Algeria and Libya sided with other Arab hardliner countries: Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as well as the PLO in the “Steadfastness and Rejection Front” which was created in 1977. This front opposed Egypt’s rapprochement with Israel which resulted in the visit of President Anwar Sadat to Israel’s Parliament (Knesset) in November 1977 and his signature in September 1978 of the Camp David peace agreement which was negotiated under American auspices.

The US promptly adjusted its policy of distrust and suspicion towards Algeria when this country moved away from the hardline politics of President Boumedienne with the rise to power of Chadli Bendjedid in 1979 and after the US had obtained in January 1981 the release of 52 American hostages which were held for 444 days in Teheran, thanks to Algeria’s subtle good offices and skilled arbitration (The New York Times 1981).¹⁵ Addressing Mohamed Seddick Ben Yahia, the Algerian Foreign minister at the landing of the American hostages in Algiers airport on their way back to the United States, Christopher Warren, US chief negotiator warmly thanked the Algerian diplomacy by stating: “We are deeply indebted to your government’s humanitarian role” (Berhail 2017).

In parallel to easing its relations with Algeria, regarded as the staunchest supporter of the right of the Saharawi people for self-determination over Western Sahara, the United States came to rescue Morocco when this country became entangled in a conflict with the Polisario Front, a movement challenging the occupation of this territory by Morocco since 1975 when Spain failed to hold a referendum as demanded by the resolutions issued

¹⁵ Text of agreement between and Iran and the US to solve the hostage situation, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/01/20/world/text-of-agreement-between-iran-and-the-us-to-resolve-the-hostage-situation.html>.

by the United Nations. Thus, the Carter administration decided to lift the ban on arms sales to Morocco in 1979, but on the condition that progress was to be made by Morocco to accept a solution to the issue of the Western Sahara. It was reported that this decision was made possible through the lobbying of Jewish politicians and businessmen in Washington supported by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President of the National Security Council, despite the opposition of Cyrus Vance, the US State Secretary.

The Reagan administration decided the sale of 108 M tanks to Morocco and the scheduled delivery of six OV-10 reconnaissance planes and 20 F-5E jet fighters which were approved by the previous administration of President Carter.

Between 1975 and 1999, Morocco's acquisition of American arms was possible through funds (\$475 million in low-interest credits and \$200 million in grants) made available by the US in the framework of the Foreign Military Sales Financing Programme (El Morabety 2017).

The ambivalent attitude the US has adopted in its relations whether towards Morocco or Algeria was strikingly confirmed when the announcement of selling arms to Morocco was made only two days after the release of the American hostages held in Iran in which the Algerian diplomats played a decisive role. But at the same time, the US decided to sell 14 C13 transport aircraft, including 4 stretch models in 1981-2, the first-ever military equipment dispatched to Algeria. Besides, Gulf Stream concluded a \$51 million contract for the sale of three G-III Executive jets to the Algerian presidential fleet in 1983 (CIA 2011).¹⁶ President Chadli was received in Washington in 1985, the first-ever official visit paid by an Algerian head of State to the United States.

¹⁶ CIA, Algeria Air Force an Intelligence Assessment (2011), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84S00927R000100080003-3.pdf>, released Feb, 18.

The US relationship with Mauritania never reached the level of a strategic alliance as with Morocco and Mauritania was not economically important to the US as it was the case with Algeria. Being one of the poorest countries in the world, Mauritania has little to offer to the US. Besides, this country's external activism was more oriented to Sub-Saharan Africa considered as its strategic depth because of geographic contiguity and because many Mauritians are of Black stock and have close ties with the Wolof community residing in neighboring Senegal.

Relations with Mauritania were strained throughout the 1990s, as the US strongly criticized the reported wide abuses of human rights by the military rulers, and in retaliation, it halted its programs of assistance and military cooperation with this country.¹⁷ In addition, the American administration denounced the practice of slavery in many parts of Mauritania, despite its abolition in 1981 and the denials of its existence by Mauritanian officials.

It was Libya, more than any other country of the Maghreb that gave Washington one of its thorny "quagmires and darkest nightmares." The US entered a violent controversy and even in a confrontation with Libya ever since the raise of Gadhafi to power in September 1969. It started by recalling its Ambassador from Tripoli in 1972 when the Libyan regime took control over the oil industry and expelled US oil companies. Moreover, the US withdrew their diplomatic staff after a mob had attacked and set fire to the American Embassy in Tripoli in December 1979.

The Americans utterly disliked what they regarded as the role of "trouble-maker" Libya played in Sub-Saharan Africa (military intervention in Chad in 1981-7), its total opposition to any negotiations or peace agreement with Israel, assistance to radical movements such as the Irish Revolutionary Army (IRA). The Libyan regime was also accused of being involved in the killing

¹⁷ <https://mr.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/>.

of Yvonne Fletcher, a policewoman near the Libyan Embassy in London in April 1984, and the drowning of Pan Am 103 airplane which occurred over the Scottish small town, Lockerbie in December 1988 causing the death of 243 passengers. Moreover, the US was worried about the nuclear and “huge chemical weapons potential,” Libya was accused of having piled-up over the years.

To counter Libyan’s “subversive policies,” President Ronald Reagan had ordered an air-strike against the “headquarters, terrorist facilities and military assets believed to support Muammar Qadhafi subversive activities” in April 1984 in retaliation for the bombing by presumed Libyan security agents of a West Berlin nightclub that killed three people, including a U.S. serviceman and injuring 229 persons.¹⁸ The Libyan authorities claimed that the raid had targeted Gadhafi whereabouts and killed 15 people and his adoptive young daughter.

President Reagan justified US reaction against Libya, depicted as a “rogue state” and the Tripoli raid in particular, by asserting that “the evidence is now conclusive that the terrorist bombing of La Belle discotheque [in Berlin] was planned and executed under the direct orders of the Libyan regime... Colonel Qadhafi is not only an enemy of the United States. His record of subversion and aggression against the neighboring states in Africa is well documented and well known. He has ordered the murder of fellow Libyans in countless countries. He has sanctioned acts of terror in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, as well as the Western Hemisphere. Today we have done what we had to do. If necessary, we shall do it again. It gives me no pleasure to say that, and I wish it were otherwise”(Frail 2011).

¹⁸ The U.S. shot down two Libyan fighter jets in the Strait of Sirte in 1981 and launched airstrikes on Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986.

To curb down Libya's adventures, the US administration imposed economic sanctions on this country unilaterally and through the UN Security Council. It also imposed the freeze on Libya's financial assets abroad and an air embargo which had severe consequences on the Libyan regime as well as on the living conditions of its people. But strikingly enough, US policies regarded as aggressive, have enhanced the legitimacy of Gadhafi at home and polished his image in the Arab world as being an expiatory victim of "US imperialism."

Through these sanctions, the US expected a reversal of Libya's foreign stance and behaviour, perceived as "provocative." Perhaps, the most decisive fear felt by Qadhafi was the eventuality of ending up like Saddam Hussein after the war waged by the US against Iraq in 2003. This change of course or what Yahia Zoubir calls the transition from a "Rogue State to Good fellow" (Zoubir 2002: 1), did not fail to happen as the Libyan regime inceptioned a gradual political overture and some economic reforms under the impulse of Seif Al Islam Gadhafi, son of the Libyan leader whom the Americans regarded as moderate and an important asset in their bargain with the Libyan leadership. Thus, The Libyans accepted to comply with all UN Security Council resolutions passed after the downing of Pan Am 103 airplane and agreed to abide by international conventions related to nuclear and chemical weapons (Ottaway 2013).

2.2. Prevailing Economic Interests

While cultivating close ties with Morocco and Tunisia for their alignment with the policies of the Western world on world affairs and bearing distrust and suspicion against radical Algeria and Libya, the US privileged a kind of economic pragmatism intended not only to serve its material gains but maintain a good partnership with all the Maghreb States.

The American administration was well aware that its preference to Morocco and Tunisia should, by no means, alienate its relations with Algeria and

Libya, especially as these two countries possessed what America was looking for: maintaining access to viable and secure energy resources. In return, Morocco, Algeria, and their Maghreb neighbours, to a lesser degree, needed to secure American support in their search for economic diversification and resilience to South European countries particularly, France, Spain, and Italy.

The Algerian leadership's willingness to engage in an economic partnership with the US came when Algeria decided to return the ransom paid by the Americans to the Black Panthers after the diversion by Willie Roger Holder, a Black American militant, of a US plane to Algiers airport while being in route to Seattle in June 1972 (New York Times 1986).¹⁹ Militants of the Black Panthers residing in Algiers were also invited to leave the Algerian capital.

Seizing the opportunities offered by the Algerian leaders, American companies such as Bechtel became deeply involved in heavy engineering and construction projects in the oil sector ever since 1969-1970 when Algeria was preparing to lessen its economic dependence on French outlets and gain more control over its gas and oil industries under the impulse of Belaid Abdeslam, the powerful Minister of energy and his assistants working within Sonatrach, the giant State-owned oil company. US engagement continued all over the 1980s despite the cancellation of the important gas contract signed with El Paso in 1969 because of the reverse of Algerian policy which privileged tight political links with France. Furthermore, The Bush administration viewed the economic reforms carried out in Algeria in 1989-91 positively but made no particular effort to support them directly.

During the 1990 decade, the US entertained limited economic cooperation with the Maghreb region. Indeed, Algeria was heavily entangled in fighting the "Islamist" insurgency, Morocco deeply engaged in dismantling terrorist

¹⁹ The hijacker was extradited to the States, 14 years later, New York Times, Ex-Black Panther extradited to the US, July 28, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/27/nyregion/ex-black-panther-extradited-to-us.html>.

cells, and the Gadhafi regime was severely confronted with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Groups (LIFG).

When terrorism started to wither away from the Maghreb, the US moved to enhance bilateral economic relations with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. It proposed, through the announcement of the Eizenstat's initiative, named after the Under-Secretary for Treasury, Stuart Eizenstat in 1999, the adhesion of these countries to the Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFAs). These agreements provided strategic frameworks and principles for dialogue on trade and investment issues. Once TIFA's were in place in all three countries, they would provide "a broad framework to address trade and investment issues that will reap benefits for each country and the entire region," according to the US under-Secretary for Treasury (Eizenstat 2010). The dialogue between the US and their Maghreb partners took the form of the "U.S.-North Africa Economic Partnership, "and had two basic components:

- 1. to enhance the bilateral relationship between the US and the three Maghreb countries; and,**
- 2. to break down the barriers to intra-regional trade and maximize the growth potential that private sector-led development will help to achieve.**

The initiative did not include Libya and Mauritania because of the situation these two countries were facing at that time. Moreover, this initiative did not make much progress, because the Maghreb States were hesitant to resolutely engage in a regional economic integration due to differences in the models of development. These States also proved to be reluctant to coordinate their policies because of mistrust when negotiating economic agreements with either the United States or the European partner, for instance.

Morocco signed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on June 15, 2004, probably because it had the needed potential for exporting goods to the US. The

agreement aimed at improving economic reforms in Morocco, providing commercial opportunities for US exports by reducing and eliminating trade barriers and granting full protection for US investors.

Since the FTA signed with Morocco came into force in January 2006, US exports have increased in value by 328%, while Morocco's exports to the US have increased in value by 167% (US-Moroccan Alliance 2016).²⁰ However, the levels of trade and investments did not live up to the expectations of the two partners (Hufbauer and Brunel 2009).

Furthermore, the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) signed its first compact worth \$697.5 million with Morocco in August 2007 in order to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth, particularly in the sectors of fruit trees, small-scale fisheries, handicrafts as well as in financial services and enterprise support. This compact was completed in 2013 and a \$450 million second compact called "Employability and Land Compact" was also incepted to boost land productivity and the quality of education (US-Morocco Economic Alliance 2016).²¹

Tunisia joined *The Middle East Partnership Initiative* (MEPI), after having received over \$4 million in assistance between 2001 and 2003. US-North African Economic Partnership was incepted to promote American investments in the Maghreb region. In 2004 The US chose Tunis to host the MEPI Regional Office (US Embassy in Tunisia)²² and in October 2002, Tunisia signed the TIFA agreement.

²⁰ US-Morocco Economic Alliance, Morocco-US and Business Partnership (2016), August, FS Morocco US Economic Alliance, August 11, 2016.pdf.

²¹ US-Morocco Economic Alliance, Morocco-US and Business Partnership (2016), FS Morocco US Economic Alliance, August 11, 2016.pdf.

²² US Embassy in Tunisia, History of the US-Tunisian Relationship, <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-us-tunisia-relationship/>.

With Algeria, the US signed a framework agreement on trade and investment in July 2001, intended to increase bilateral trade and acquire a greater share of the Algerian market for American investments, particularly in the energy sector. Two years later, the Partnership Programs were included in the activities of MEPI which provided funds for the political and economic development of Algeria.

The US invested US\$ 4.1 billion in 2001 (Zoubir 2006: 5) and \$5.3 billion in 2006 to promote Algerian oil and gas industries. By that time, Algeria had become the third-largest market for American goods in North Africa and the Middle East, with American exports to Algeria jumping to \$1.2 billion in 2005 and imports from Algeria (mainly oil and Liquefied natural gas) reaching \$10.8 billion in the same year. In 2008, Trade between the partners reached a record of \$22 billion (Zoubir 2009: 982). However, exchanges between the two countries sharply declined throughout the 2010s as Algeria's economic relationship came to be directed more to China (energy, highways, and construction) and Russia for arms and military hardware. In 2019, for instance, the US exported for nearly \$1 billion from Algeria (mainly oil and gas) and exported for about \$2.5 billion to this country (census.gov:7210).²³

By 2019, Morocco has become the US most important economic partner in the Maghreb since the US exported for nearly \$3.5 billion in value and imported for around \$1.5 billion from the Moroccan kingdom (census.gov:7140).²⁴

With Libya, trade exchanges totaled more than \$1.1 billion in 2019 (census.gov:7210),²⁵ and the United States signed a trade and investment framework

²³ <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c7210.html>.

²⁴ <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c7140.html>.

²⁵ <https://www.census.gov/foreigntrade/balance/c7210/html>.

agreement with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa of which Libya was a member.

In contrast, US trade with both Tunisia and Mauritania remains very modest.

3. The Imperative of Security Concerns in the Context of the Global War on Terror

3.1. The Maghreb States as Strategic Partners

The US paid a little attention to the rise of radical Islam that started to emerge in Tunisia in the form of the involvement of the Islamic party *Ennahda* in the upsurge that hit the southern city of *Gafsa* in 1980, the apparition of an armed *Salafi* group in Algeria in the early 1980s and the growing discontent of the movement of *Al Adl Wa Al Ihsan* (Justice and Charity) led by Sheikh Yassin towards the regime of King Hassan.

In contrast, the US rushed to strongly assist the “Islamist” rebels who were violently contesting the communist regime in Kabul and resisting Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that started in December 1979 and ending a decade later.

When the Algerian authorities canceled the parliamentary elections which the Islamist Salvation party (FIS) was poised to win in January 1992, imprisoned its leaders Abassi Madani and Sheikh Ali Benhadj and went out to crush the “Islamist” insurrection led by veterans of the Afghanistan war who created the Algerian Islamic Groups (GIA), the US adopted a policy regarded as, somehow, sympathetic to the Algerian Islamists on the basis that these Islamist opponents were deprived of a victory obtained through “democratic and fair election contest,” as proclaimed by Islamist militants.

The mixed feeling in Washington was that the Algerian regime was succumbing to radical Islamists with the fear that such a possibility may not serve US interests in the Maghreb. Indeed, according to the declarations of Algerian officials, the US administration was not attentive to their arguments

which consisted of accusing the FIS of attempting to turn Algeria into a theocratic state that would undermine not only the stability of Algeria but the security of the whole region.

At the beginning of the “Islamist” insurrection, the US was convinced that the Islamist militants would topple over the regime, regarded as backed up by the military, because of the popular support the FIS was assumed to enjoy in Algeria. This feeling was also encouraged by the weakness of the Algerian rulers which were facing a thorny financial and economic crisis due to the dwindling of revenues generated by oil exports which represented the main source of the country’s foreign earnings. The release of a book by Graham Fuller a security expert at Rand Corporation entitled, *“Algeria the next Fundamentalist State?”* in 1996, was an indication of Washington’s leaning towards the “Islamic” insurgents in Algeria.

There were two opposed policies among politicians in the US decision-making inner circle towards the tragic events happening in Algeria: experts at the National Security Council and the Department of Defense which favoured standing with the Algerian regime in its eradication struggle against the Islamists to maintain stability in the North African country and avoid the spread of the Islamist threat to other Maghreb States and some analysts at the State Department which advocated a dialogue between the Algerian authorities and the Islamists and defended the possibility of tempering down the jihadist *élan* of the radical elements of the FIS, in case this movement took over power. The concern of the US was to avoid an Iranian scenario occurring in Algeria.

Therefore, the US administration came to woo the moderate wing of Algerian Islamists, by opening in 1994, a dialogue with Anwar Haddam, the representative of the FIS parliamentary delegation in exile and a former American University graduate who returned to the US after the cancellation of the second round of the General elections in Algeria. The US also welcomed a political platform which outlined a solution to the Algerian

crisis and which was negotiated under the auspices of the Catholic Sant' Egidio Community in Rome in 1995 between the main Algerian parties, including the FIS and the FLN which has been the ruling party in Algeria until the introduction of multipartism in 1991.

The US, then, kept aloof from the Algerian crisis, fueling the claim made by the Algerian leaders that Algeria “was fighting terrorism alone,” particularly when the Americans proved reluctant to sell to this country, military equipment and hardware needed to fight terrorism, such as shotguns, thermic field glasses, night-adapted binoculars, surveillance, and radar device.

However, the US honeymoon with Algerian Islamists did not last long. Indeed, feeling that the Algerian regime was in its way to defeat the “Islamist” insurgents militarily, the US opened a dialogue with President Liamine Zeroual who rose to power in May 1995 through elections regarded as relatively fair by US officials. Thus, the US moved to turn its back to Anwar Haddam,²⁶ being satisfied with the participation of moderate Islamists opposition parties in the 1997 general elections following the US call for dialogue with Islamists that rejected violence, as asserted in the testimony made by Robert Pelletreau, Assistant State Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in May 1995 (U.S. Policy toward Algeria).²⁷

This episode highlights, once again, the ambivalent standpoints of the US administration and its inability to maintain a constant policy that respects the ideals of democracy and the human spirit. This is, yet, another example

²⁶ Anwar Haddam was even jailed in November 1996 and liberated in November 2000, after the judge found no evidence that he posed any threat to the security of the US. Haddam was then declared eligible for asylum in America.

²⁷ “U.S. Policy Toward Algeria,” Statement by Robert H. Pelletreau, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, April 16, 1996.

that reflects, instead, the opportunist game played by Washington in line with its evolving interests and the course of events in the Maghreb region.

Such a pragmatic view was further markedly confirmed when the US was badly hit by terrorist attacks in September 2001. These dramatic events led the US to look at terrorism as the main threat to its domestic security and a serious menace to world peace and stability and came to see friends and enemies only through the prism of those which breed and support terrorism and those which fight it.

The whole security and strategic vision of the US came then to change with the launching of the “Global War on Terror” (GWOT). Incidentally, this war began as Algeria’s conflict has wounded down (Sakthivel 2019).

In the framework of GWOT, the US was able to coordinate with the Maghreb countries in the domain of exchanging information on terrorist groups, since many jihadists fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS) or *Al-Qaeda* in Iraq and Syria were of Maghreb origin. Many Islamist militants implicated in terrorist attacks in some European cities (Paris in November 2015, Brussels in March 2016, Barcelona in August 2017 and the failed attack at the Brussels Central Station in May, the same year) were Belgian youngsters of Moroccan ascendance, while the author of the attack in Nice in July 2016 was a Tunisian-born resident in France. Earlier, US security forces arrested at the US-Canadian border in December 1999 Ahmed Ressam, an Algerian residing illegally in Canada who was transporting in his car boot explosives he intended to use in attacks in Los Angeles, as reported by local media. This incident drew the attention of American officials and public opinion on the eventual existence of a “Maghreb connection” with terrorism threatening the security of the US and Western Europe.

To contribute to fighting terrorism in the Maghreb and the Sahel-Sahara, the US moved to consolidate security cooperation with the Maghreb States on a bilateral basis. It started by receiving in Washington the visits of President Bouteffika in July and November 2002, President Ben Ali in February 2002

and King Mohamed VI in July 2004. All the Maghreb countries received, in various forms, American assistance to support their counterterrorism efforts. All of them engaged also in the dialogue launched by NATO, participated in joint naval exercises with the Atlantic Alliance, such as monitoring the Mediterranean Sea (endeavor operation), and had their military officers trained at NATO's schools in Rome and Oberammergau, Germany.

Morocco's was hailed as "the major non-NATO ally" by President George W. Bush in June 2014, one month before the visit of Mohamed VI to Washington and Tunisia was considered as a good friend by State Secretary Colin Powell when visiting Tunis in the same year. Morocco and the US joined 28 other countries as founding members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). This gathering aimed at "reducing the vulnerability of people everywhere to terrorism by effectively preventing, combating, and prosecuting terrorist attacks and countering incitement and recruitment to terrorism" (Morocco on the Move).²⁸

With Algeria, the US began its first military dialogue session in Washington in May 2005. The Chief of American forces in Europe, successive Commanders of US Africom and Donald Rumsfeld, the State Secretary of Defence visited Algiers in 2005-6. In addition, the US offered a program in 2006 to train Algerian military personnel in the US (APS, 2006).

When remnants of the Algerian Salafi Groups for Combat and Predication (GSPC), renamed *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM), moved to the Sahel-Sahara band to set up jihadist cells and networks specialized in the smuggling of drugs and arms as well as the traffic of human beings, the US began to feel this menace against its geostrategic interests with greater concern, especially as the connection between terrorist groups

²⁸ Morocco on the Move, <https://moroccoonthemove.com/policy/us-morocco-bilateral-relationship/>.

operating in the Sahel-Sahara confines with the Middle East-based terrorist organizations, *Al Qaeda* and ISIS became evident.

Therefore, the US counterterrorism strategy in the Maghreb and Sahel came to focus essentially on helping the armies of these regions through providing training, military expertise, and arms in the framework of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) in which the Maghreb and the Sahel-Saharan States participated actively.

Moreover, Algeria became a “pivotal State” in US counterterrorism in the Sahel confines, but the Americans were disappointed with Algeria’s refusal to accept the installation of Africom bases in its Sahara desert or to send its troops to combat terrorist groups in neighbouring Mali or Niger or Mauritania.

Instead, Algeria was engaged in a common fight against terrorism in the Sahel-Sahara band through the Operational Committee of Joint Chiefs of Staff (CEMO) created in April 2000 with Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso and displayed huge diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis in Mali which was caused by the activism of jihadist groups and the temptation of some Tuareg tribes to set up an independent State called *Azawad* in the Northern swathes of Mali. Thus, the US, pragmatically, refrained from engaging its forces directly, in order to avoid being entangled in another war that may prove long and costly. Thus, the US was, somehow, relieved to let Paris intervene militarily in the Sahel-Sahara, a zone regarded traditionally as France’s “*chasse gardée*.”

3.2. Dubious Responses to Conflicts and Political Issues in the Maghreb Region

3.2.1. The Western Sahara Stalemate

Despite affirming that the United States was neutral over the Western Sahara issue and that it seeks a balanced position between the “friend” (Morocco) and “other friends” (implicitly Algeria, Mauritania and the Saharawis),

the Americans, under the Reagan administration, were tilting towards Morocco's position, without, however, officially recognizing this country's occupation of Western Sahara.

This ambiguity towards the right of the Saharawi people for Self-determination and managing Algeria on the one hand and the support given to Morocco's occupation of the Western Sahara on the other, was asserted in the statement made by Morris Draper, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs before the House of Foreign Affairs in March 1981. On this occasion, he declared, that "I think the present Administration feels strongly that traditional old friends such as Morocco need additional support and consideration" (Gwertzman 1981). However, he also stated that the US "will not make decisions on military equipment sales explicitly conditional on unilateral Moroccan attempts to show progress towards a peaceful negotiated settlement," adding that this position "recognizes the reality that there are players other than Morocco in the Western Saharan conflict with a capacity to influence the outcome" (Gwertzman 1981). These "other players" refer implicitly to the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania.

After the failure of the Baker plan incepted in 2002 and its revised copy presented a year later,²⁹ the unsuccessful series of informal meetings between Morocco and the Polisario Front held at Manhasset in 2007-2008 under US auspices as well as the resignation of Christopher Ross, the special envoy of the UN Secretary-General to Western Sahara in 2017, the successive administrations of Clinton, Obama and Trump moved to accept the Autonomy Plan proposed by Morocco in April 2007. According

²⁹ The Baker plan was based on a period of autonomy for Western Sahara on provisional Moroccan sovereignty, followed by the referendum allowing the Saharawis to opt for either autonomy or independence. The plan was rejected by the Polisario Front and a revised version of this plan was not accepted by Morocco.

to the Moroccan official discourse, this plan allows “a large autonomy to the Saharawis, except for the control over defense and foreign policy matters.”

State Secretary Hilary Clinton stated on March 23, 2011 that the Moroccan autonomy plan is “serious, realistic, and credible [and] a potential approach to satisfy the aspirations of the people in Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity” (Jowiya). However, the US adherence to the Moroccan autonomy plan was attenuated by the pledge made by President Obama “to continue to support efforts to find a peaceful, sustainable, mutually agreed-upon solution to the Western Sahara question,” (Jowiya) as expressed in the joint statement issued in November 2013 after a meeting with King Mohammed VI while in a visit to Washington.

However, the US responded positively to Morocco’s call to enhance its military capabilities by selling \$3billion worth of military equipment to this country that included 24 F-16 aircrafts, 90 AGM-D Maverick air-to-ground missiles and 200 Abrams M1A1 tanks (Morocco on the move, 2014)³⁰ as well as \$108 million worth of anti-missiles and related support in December 2016 (Rubin 2019). In the eyes of the Moroccan leadership, this appeal to arms provisions from the US was necessary to meet the increasing military buildup, Algeria carried out through arms purchases from Russia.

The Trump administration’s shifting foreign policy positions provoked some apprehensions in Rabat on the eventuality that the US may temper its support to the Moroccan autonomy plan in Western Sahara. Indeed, the Moroccans suspected the National Security Adviser, John Bolton of bearing some affinities with the Polisario Front and were quite anxious that their country may be included in the list of States that may suffer from the cuts

³⁰ https://moroccoonthemove.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/FS_USPolicyWesternSahara16May2017.pdf.

President Trump has threatened to introduce in order to make US allies pay for their share for security costs.

3.2.2. The Libya Crisis

When the popular upsurge occurred in Libya in 2011 amid the so-called “Arab Spring” revolutions, the US took part in the NATO-UN-led military intervention in this country and President Obama launched “operation Odyssey dawn” to assist the rebels hostile to the Gadhafi regime with air-strikes directed against the regular army (Blomdahl 2018).

In the course of events marked by violent confrontation between the Tripoli-based Government National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Marshal Haftar and increasing foreign interferences in Libya, US position fluctuated between openly calling for an UN-sponsored political solution and supporting a policy that oscillates between backing the LNA, though criticizing its alliance with Russia on the one hand, and siding with the GNA, although fearing the spread of the influence of radical Islamists, on the other.

The US found itself trapped between attempting to halt Russia which has turned the Mediterranean into “a militarized hot spot,” (Cinar 2020),³¹ and supporting Turkey’s decisive efforts to rescue the GNA from attacks carried out by Marshall Haftar’s forces at the expense of NATO’s allies, France and Germany which have been anxious about Ankara’s efforts to revive Ottoman empire’s ambitions in the region.

President Donald Trump’s attitude towards the Libyan crisis differed from that of the State Department and its former member Stephanie Williams,

³¹ As stated by Admiral Foggo, the Commander of the US Naval Forces in Europe, in Cinar, Ali (2020), Russian intervention should worry the US, TRT world, July 9, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/Russian-intervention-in-libya-should-worry-the-us->

currently acting as the UN's new special envoy to Libya since it remained clear that Trump's support to the Libyan National Army aimed at avoiding the control of Libya by Turkish-backed Islamist groups such as the *Islamic State* (ISIS) and *Nusra*, accused of attempting to get a hold on the country's oil resources. Thus, the US Embassy in Tripoli issued in July 2020 a statement asserting that "after several days of intense diplomatic activity aimed at allowing the National Oil Corporation [NOC] to resume its vital and apolitical work as a way of defusing military tensions, the US Embassy regrets that foreign-backed efforts against Libya's economic and financial sectors have impeded progress and heightened the risk of confrontation." (Barkat 2020).

In addition, the US was not aided by the Maghreb States' attitudes towards the Libyan crisis: both Algeria and Morocco seemed to compete over masterminding a political solution to the Libyan crisis,³² while the Tunisian leadership was trapped in its "fragile neutrality" towards the Libyan conflict because of divergent positions held by President Kais Essaid and Rashed Ghannouchi, the Tunisian Parliament speaker, believed to be close to radical Islamists in Libya.

The COVID-9 tragic evolution in the US and the entire world and the US Presidential elections scheduled to be convened in November 2020 may have tempered the attempts of the Americans to avoid the "syrianization" of the Libyan crisis and their declared support to a political solution of the Libyan crisis through ending foreign military and illegal shipments of arms to the belligerent parties in Libya which were carried out in violation of UN arms embargo. However, this does not mean that the US would remain utterly passive. Still, as Blanchard rightly put it, "for years, U.S. diplomats and officials have emphasized the importance of a political solution, but

³² Algeria favours a political solution to the Libyan crisis and works to organize in Algiers a meeting to reconcile the Libyan conflicting parties through an inclusive dialogue.

U.S. actions have yet to convince or compel Libyans and their various patrons to disengage from confrontation” (Blanchard 2020).

3.2.3. Democracy and Human Issues in the Maghreb

As already argued, the US has kept a blind eye on the issues of political change and respect of human rights in the Maghreb, being obsessed by maintaining stability that guarantees its interests and strategic concerns in this region.

The United States, lukewarmly, responded to the plea made by progressive forces to support Tunisia’s transition to democracy after the downfall of President Ben Ali in 2011. It did not react to the demands raised by the popular or *hirak* movement that has emerged in Algeria since February 2020. This movement claimed a radical change of the political system that still persists in this country, according to some *hirak* personalities. Many of them believe that the old practices are still anchored, despite the forced resignation of Bouteflika which has put an end to a 20 year-long reign, marked by autocratic rule, oligarchic embezzlement, and endemic corruption. In a visit paid to Algeria in March-April 2020, Clark Cooper, the US Deputy-State Secretary for military and political affairs declared that it was “an honor for me to be today in Algeria, the new Algeria (APS 2020).”

The US also was not critical of the repression measures taken by the Moroccan authorities to crack down on rioters during the events that hit the region of the Rif in 2018, as a result of the local population discontent with poor living conditions and the lack of jobs, as it was reported.

Under pressures from some US Congress to urge the White House to reconsider the relationship with Mauritania amid “evidence of racism, human trafficking, and slavery,” President Trump announced his intent to terminate the eligibility of Mauritania for trade preference benefits allowed under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Curtis J. Mahoney, the US Deputy Trade Representative emphatically declared that “forced or

compulsory labor practices like those inherited from slavery have no place in the 21st century.”³³

President Trump also attempted to slash aid to Morocco and Tunisia, despite US Congress opposition.

The US leniency towards the ruling elites in the Maghreb, despite President Trump’s decisions regarded as hasty and unexpected, did not fail to increase the local popular resentment against the policies pursued by American administrations in the Middle East and North Africa. Thus, protests, though timid, were organized in Casablanca and Algiers in February 2020 by Islamist parties in protest to Trump’s plan concerning Palestine and the decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel’s entity. In Tunisia, recent polls found that only 45 percent of Tunisians agree with the statement that Americans are good people regardless of U.S. foreign policy, an 11 point drop from the previous survey. In addition, three in ten Tunisians think violence against the United States may be justified.³⁴

Conclusion

In its long time links with the Maghreb, the US certainly did not witness only good fortunes and did not consider this region as vital for its global designs. These ties started when the US came to violently confront the naval might of the Moroccan kingdom and the Ottoman Regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli in the late 18th century. However, the US was able to sign with these countries friendship treaties that are still running. Such links, however, were, put in standby because of the colonization of the

³³ Office of the United Nations Trade Representative, President Trump Terminates Trade Preference Program Eligibility for Mauritania, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/2018>.

³⁴ As the US and Tunisian meet, Anti-American is on the rise in Tunisia, The Washington Post, July 14, 2019.

Maghreb by European powers and also because the US did not contribute in hastening the political emancipation in this part of the world, despite ideals of freedom, human dignity, and the right of peoples for self-determination claimed, so zealously, by American leaders.

Such an approach reflected a kind of ambivalence that was to be found again throughout the partnership the US has been entertaining with the Maghreb countries since their independence. Indeed, the US attempted to promote its economic interest and security concerns through a policy that favoured the stability of the Maghreb States, without, however, lending much attention to the aspirations of the peoples of these countries for good governance, economic progress, and democracy.

The inward turn of American foreign policy under the impulse of President Trump did not help the US enhance its image in the eyes of the public opinions throughout the world and the Maghreb, alike. It had possibly weakened the hopes of the Maghreb peoples for more democracy and political emancipation.

It may prove hard to evaluate the future trend of American policy towards the Maghreb as it seems also arduous to predict the evolution of this region in the foreseen future. The incidences of the Covid19 pandemics have already generated some changes in the world balance of power and will probably affect the external alignments of powerful countries.

What seems tangible, however, is that civil societies in the Maghreb are on the move to play a more responsible and a more decisive role in the national decision-making and in shaping the foreign orientations of their respective States.

Such prospects may constitute another serious challenge for US policy towards the Maghreb countries and may test its abilities to cope with the eventual changes that may happen in this region, notably at the security level.

References

- Babali, Babak. "Twist of Phosphate." *The Business Year*, 29 Aug. 2019, <https://www.thebusinessyear.com/morocco-has-worlds-largest-phosphates-resources-critical-for-global-agriculture/focus>.
- Barakat, Mahmoud. "US Regrets Foreign Interference in Libya's Economy." *Anadolu Agency*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-regrets-foreign-interference-in-libyas-economy/1908825>.
- Berhail, Wafa. "The Role of Algeria in the Iran Hostage Crisis, 1979-1981." A Mémoire Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Anglo-American Studies, Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Larbi Ben M'hidi University-Oum El Bouaghi, 2017, <http://bib.univ-oeb.dz:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/3735/1/The%20Role%20of%20Algeria%20in%20the%20Iran%20Hostage%20Crisis%2C%201979-1981.pdf>.
- Blanchard, M. Christopher. "Libya and the US Policy." *Congressional Research Service*, 12 Feb. 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11556>.
- Blomdahl, Mikael. "Interacting Interests: Explaining President Obama's Libyan Decision." *European Journal of American Studies*, 2018, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13224>.
- Cinar, Ali. "Russian Intervention in Libya Should Worry the US." *TRT WORLD*. 9 July 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/russian-intervention-in-libya-should-worry-the-us-37995>.
- EL Morabety, Ahmed. "Evolution of Moroccan Diplomacy." *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 2, 3 Feb. 2017, 241-255, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2017.1279387>.
- Eizenstat, Stuart E. "US Foreign Policy towards the Maghreb: The Need for a New Beginning." *Institut Europeu de la Mediterrània*, 2010, pp. 17-22, https://www.iemed.org/anuari/2010/aarticles/Eizenstat_foreign_policy_en.pdf.
- Frail, T.A. "Ronald Reagan and Moammar Qadhafi." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2 Mar. 2011, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ronald-reagan-and-moammar-qadhafi-422494/>.

- Fuller, Graham. "Algeria, the Next Fundamentalist State?" *Rand Corporation*, 1996, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2006/MR733.pdf.
- "Guerre du Kippour : Quand le Maroc et l'Algérie se Battaient Côte à Côte. " *Jeune Afrique*, 7 Nov. 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/167404/politique/ guerre-du-kippour-quand-le-maroc-et-l-alg-rie-se-battaient-c-te-c-te/>.
- Gwertzman, Bernard. "U.S. Drops Sahara Issue in Arms Sales to Morocco." *The New York Times*, 26 Mar. 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/26/world/ us-drops-sahara-issue-in-arms-sales-to-morocco.html>.
- Hufbauer, Gary Clyde, and Claire Brunel. *Capitalizing on Morocco-American Free Trade Agreement: A road Map for Success*. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009.
- Jowiya, Khurram. "The Special Morocco-US Relationship." Asfar, <https://www.asfar.org.uk/the-special-morocco-us-relationship/>.
- "Les USA Déterminés à œuvrer avec l'Algérie Nouvelle dans le Cadre du Partenariat." *APS*, 2 Mar. 2020, <https://www.aps.dz/algerie/102442-les-usa-determines-a-oeuvrer-avec-l-algerie-nouvelle-dans-le-cadre-du-partenariat>.
- Office of the United States Trade Representative. "Morocco Free Trade Agreement." <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/morocco-fta>.
- Office of the United States Trade Representative. "President Trump Terminates Trade Preference Program Eligibility for Mauritania." 2 Nov. 2018, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2018/november/ president-trump-terminates-trade>.
- Ottaway, Marina. "American policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism is not Enough." *Wilson Center*, No. 42, Oct. 2013, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/american_policy_in_the_maghreb_counterterrorism_is_not_enough.pdf.
- Roberts, Timothy Mason. "The Role of French Algeria in American Expansion during the Early Republic." *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, vol. 43, 2015, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/ws fh/0642292.0043.014/--role-of-french-algeria-in-american-expansion-during?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

- Rubin, Michael. "The US betrayed Morocco long before Trump betrayed the Kurds." *AEI*, 31 Oct. 2019, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/the-us-betrayed-morocco-long-before-trump-betrayed-the-kurds/>.
- Sakthivel, Vish. "Moderate Islam in the Maghreb: How US Foreign Policy shapes Islamist Contention." *Brookings Institution*, 4 Apr. 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/04/moderate-islam-in-the-maghreb-how-u-s-foreign-policy-shapes-islamist-contention/>.
- U.S. Department of State. "U.S- Libyan Relations, 1786-2008: A Chronology." <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/ci/ly/109174.htm>.
- U.S. Embassy in Tunisia. "History of the U.S.-Tunisia Relationship." <https://tn.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/history-of-u-s-tunisia-relationship/>.
- US-Morocco Economic Alliance, Morocco-US and Business Partnership, FS Morocco US Economic Alliance, 11 Aug. 2016, pdf.
- Warren, Christopher. *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis*, New Haven. Yale University Press, 2013.
- Willis, Mark W., "Undermining self-determination: Robert Murphy and the Atlantic Charter in Tunisia, 1943." *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21 May 2012, pp. 595-630.
- Zoubir, H. Yahia. "American Policy in the Maghreb: The Conquest of a New Region?" *Elcano Royal Institute*, Working Paper 13, 24 July 2006. <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/1dbca2804f0187eebe2dfe3170baead1/013-2006-WP.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=1dbca2804f0187eebe2dfe3170baead1>.
- . "The United States and Libya: from Confrontation to Normalization." *Middle East Policy Council*, 26 June 2006, pp. 48-70.
- . "Libya in US Foreign Policy: from rogue State to good fellow." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1 Feb. 2002, pp. 31-53.
- . "The United States and the Maghreb-Sahel security." *International Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 5, North Africa in Transition, Sep. 2009, pp. 977-995.