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Morocco. The legacy of the Green March and its regional ambitions in the 21st Century



المغرب

MOROCCO

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***Morocco. The legacy of the Green March and its regional ambitions
in the 21st Century***

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Cover: Al-Maghrib in Arabic, Morocco's official name



Map of Morocco (Source: [Mapsland](#), modified with AI)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Morocco occupies a singular position in the geopolitical landscape of the early twenty-first century. Situated at the intersection of the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, Africa, and Europe, the kingdom consistently exercises influence disproportionate to its material weight. With roughly 37 million inhabitants and a middle-income economy, Rabat has leveraged monarchical continuity, strategic geography, and adroit diplomacy to position itself as an indispensable partner for competing global powers. This report traces the interlocking dynamics that define Moroccan statecraft across four concentric layers: domestic foundations, territorial disputes and EU relations, the Maghreb and Middle East, and continental ambitions.

Domestically, Mohammed VI combines religious, executive, legislative, and military authority within a hybrid regime that has absorbed both the 2011 Arab Spring and the more recent GenZ 212 protests through selective concession and narrative management. This institutional resilience enables Morocco's economic repositioning: a 7-billion-dollar port investment programme centred on Tanger Med, the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline, renewable energy targets of 52% installed capacity by 2030, and continental-scale rail expansion collectively underpin its bid to serve as a logistics and clean-energy hub between Africa and Europe. An infrastructure investment gap exceeding 37 billion dollars, uncertain hydrogen markets, and modest Mediterranean traffic growth nonetheless condition the pace of this transformation.

The Western Sahara conflict remains the gravitational centre of Moroccan foreign policy. UN Security Council Resolution 2797 (October 2025), endorsing genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as the most realistic settlement basis, represents the most significant diplomatic advance since the 1975 Green March, effectively removing the independence referendum from the active horizon. Morocco's relationship with Spain and the EU exemplifies its broader approach of calculated coercion within structural interdependence: the instrumentalization of migration flows and customs restrictions extracted Spain's formal endorsement of the autonomy plan in 2022, while Brussels has progressively shifted toward pragmatism—aligning with Resolution 2797 in January 2026—even as the Court of Justice restricts trade agreements that incorporate Western Saharan resources without Sahrawi consent.

Regionally, the Morocco–Algeria rivalry constitutes the primary driver of Maghrebi instability. The 2021 diplomatic rupture, a sustained arms race—Algeria's defence budget reaching 25

billion dollars in 2025—and divergent alignments (Morocco toward the United States and Israel; Algeria toward Russia and China) have paralyzed regional integration. The most probable 2026–2031 trajectory combines high international recognition of Morocco's position with a maintained diplomatic rupture. Mauritania functions as a conditional but manageable partner, granting Morocco controlled access to the Sahel without full alignment. Morocco's normalization with Israel under the 2020 Abraham Accords has deepened military and intelligence cooperation, formalized in a joint work plan in January 2026, though the role of broader Arab normalization broker is increasingly assumed by the UAE.

At the continental level, Morocco's 2017 return to the African Union—combined with its position as the second-largest African investor on the continent, the OCP Group's fertilizer operations, and the Atlantic Initiative—reinforces both its economic footprint and its Western Sahara objectives. Sahelian instability poses structural but manageable spillover risks, addressed through proactive counterterrorism, religious diplomacy, and development programming. The portrait that emerges is of a kingdom that has maximized its institutional and geographic resources to exercise outsized influence, yet whose continental-scale ambitions—hub status, territorial consolidation, trade nexus—remain contingent on sustained financing, demand-side alignment, and the durability of Western diplomatic support. Morocco's trajectory is therefore one of managed ascent, shaped as much by the real constraints upon its ambitions as by the ambitions themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of "Greater Morocco" once envisioned a state stretching beyond its current borders to include Western Sahara, Mauritania, and parts of western Algeria. Advocated by nationalist figures in the late 1950s, it challenged the colonial boundaries inherited by the Moroccan state and framed them as artificial divisions imposed upon a historically unified political space. Although the project was never fully realized, the claims it articulated laid the groundwork for Morocco's contemporary ambition to assert sovereignty over Western Sahara. That ambition, rooted in historical memory and sustained by decades of strategic investment, remains today the most consequential single variable in Morocco's foreign and domestic policy. More broadly, it points to a kingdom that has consistently approached its geopolitical environment not as a passive recipient of external pressures but as an active architect of its own regional role.

Morocco's strategic location in North Africa gives it a singular geopolitical relevance. Situated at the intersection of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, it serves as a natural bridge between Africa and Europe, a function that successive monarchs have sought to translate into enduring political and economic capital. Its more than 3,500 kilometres of coastline underpins both defensive depth and maritime projection, while the Atlas Mountain range separates the kingdom's densely populated western plains from the Saharan hinterland. To the south, Western Sahara and, beyond it, Mauritania connect Morocco to the vast Sahelian belt, a region of growing strategic significance. Morocco's location at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East has allowed it to cultivate a role as an indispensable partner for powers whose interests span more than one of those regions.

The kingdom that occupies this position is, by conventional measures, a middle power. Its population of roughly 37 million, its middle-income economy, and its relatively modest armed forces would not, in isolation, mark it out as a state of exceptional strategic weight. Yet Morocco has consistently punched above its weight, and understanding why requires looking beyond material capabilities to the institutional and symbolic resources that underpin Moroccan statecraft. Chief among these is the monarchy itself. Since independence in 1956, the Alaoui dynasty has constructed a political system in which the King stands at the intersection of

religious authority, executive power, and national identity. Mohammed VI, who has reigned since 1999, combines the title of Commander of the Faithful with decisive control over government appointments, legislative priorities, judicial governance, and the armed forces. This concentration of authority in a single institution has given Moroccan foreign policy a coherence and continuity that few comparable states can match.

That institutional coherence has been tested repeatedly by internal pressures. The Arab Spring of 2011 brought the February 20 movement into the streets, demanding political reform and accountability. The monarchy responded with a constitutional revision that expanded formal references to rights and the separation of powers while leaving intact its own prerogatives, successfully recasting the Crown as an agent of controlled modernization. More recently, youth-led protests under the banner of "GenZ 212" have again exposed the socioeconomic frustrations of a generation that feels excluded from the prosperity Morocco's macroeconomic indicators suggest. High youth unemployment, perceived misallocation of public resources, and anger at the costs of hosting the 2030 FIFA World Cup have driven mobilizations that echo the protests of fourteen years earlier.

The monarchy has again demonstrated its capacity to absorb discontent through targeted concessions and narrative management, channelling anger toward elected governments while preserving the Crown's symbolic legitimacy. Morocco is formally classified as a hybrid regime, and that classification is apt: democratic institutions and competitive elections coexist with a political architecture in which real decision-making authority remains concentrated in the palace and the broader makhzen network of patrimonial ties, administrative power, and religious legitimacy.

Alongside this internal configuration, Morocco has pursued an ambitious strategy of economic repositioning. The kingdom is investing heavily in infrastructure designed to anchor it as a logistics and energy hub between Africa and Europe. The Port of Tanger Med, already the largest in Africa and a major transshipment node on the East-West shipping route, is being complemented by Nador West Med on the Mediterranean coast and the Dakhla Atlantic port in the disputed Western Sahara region, intended as a gateway for trade corridors into the Sahel. The Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline, if completed, would traverse more than a dozen West African countries to connect Nigerian gas reserves to Moroccan and potentially European markets.

The energy transition is equally central to this strategy: Morocco has set a target of generating more than half of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, with flagship projects such as the Noor Ouarzazate solar complex already establishing its credentials as a potential clean-energy supplier for Europe.

The Western Sahara conflict remains the gravitational centre around which much of Morocco's external policy orbits. Since Spain's withdrawal in 1975 and King Hassan II's Green March, which mobilized 350,000 civilians in a symbolic act of territorial reclamation, Morocco has administered the majority of the territory while facing sustained challenge from the Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, and from a United Nations framework that nominally preserved the option of a referendum on self-determination.

That stalemate has been shifting markedly in recent years. The United States' recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in 2020, secured as part of the Abraham Accords framework, ended decades of official American neutrality. France followed suit in 2024, explicitly endorsing Moroccan sovereignty as the framework for resolving the conflict, while Spain had earlier declared its support for the autonomy plan. Most decisively, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2797 in October 2025, which for the first time described autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as the most realistic basis for a lasting settlement, represents a structural change in the diplomatic landscape.

The relationship with Algeria defines the other pole of Morocco's regional environment. The two neighbours have not maintained diplomatic relations since 2021, the culmination of a rivalry continuously inflamed by their opposing positions on Western Sahara. The result is a Maghreb in which the Arab Maghreb Union has been paralyzed for decades, land borders have been closed since 1994, and the two largest states in North Africa are engaged in a sustained arms race. This rivalry spills over into their respective relationships with Mauritania, their competition for influence in the Sahel, and their divergent international alignments, with Morocco oriented toward the United States and Israel and Algeria maintaining closer ties with Russia and China.

Morocco's external horizon extends well beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The normalization of relations with Israel under the 2020 Abraham Accords opened new channels of military, intelligence, and economic cooperation. Relations with the European Union combine dense cooperation on migration, counterterrorism, and the energy transition with

recurring legal tensions over Western Sahara. Relations with Spain oscillate between partnership and coercive pressure, with Morocco having demonstrated a willingness to instrumentalize migration flows and customs restrictions as tools of diplomatic leverage. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, Morocco has pursued an expanding footprint through investments in banking, telecommunications, and agriculture, the OCP Group's fertilizer operations, and the African Union, which Morocco rejoined in 2017.

Few states of comparable size have attempted to simultaneously manage so many intersecting strategic challenges. Morocco faces an internal political system whose stability depends on managed liberalization, an infrastructure of continental scale, a territorial dispute that implicates international law and great-power interests, a bilateral rivalry that forecloses regional integration, and an outward economic expansion that stretches from the Sahel to the Gulf. Morocco's ability to navigate all of these simultaneously, with the coherence afforded by monarchical continuity and the diplomatic agility that comes from positioning itself as an indispensable partner to multiple competing powers, is what makes it one of the most strategically interesting states in the developing world. Whether the ambitions it has set for itself in the coming decades can be realized will depend on decisions and contingencies that remain, for now, unresolved.

To make sense of these intersecting dynamics, this report adopts a concentric analytical framework, moving outward from Morocco's domestic foundations toward its immediate neighbourhood, its broader regional environment, and finally its continental ambitions. Chapter One examines the internal political architecture and economic repositioning that underpin the kingdom's external projection. Chapter Two moves outward to Morocco's most contested external environment, analysing the Western Sahara conflict, the bilateral relationship with Spain, and the broader EU–Morocco partnership. Chapter Three expands the lens to the Maghreb and the Middle East, assessing the rivalry with Algeria, Morocco's relationship with Mauritania, and the strategic implications of the Abraham Accords. Chapter Four reaches the outermost layer, examining the security challenges emanating from the Sahel, Morocco's growing role as a continental trade hub, and its strategic engagement with the African Union. Together, these four chapters build a cumulative picture of a kingdom whose ambitions are as wide as the constraints upon them are real.

1. STRATEGIC AMBITIONS AMID INTERNAL CHALLENGES

Any assessment of Morocco's external strategy must begin at home. This chapter examines the domestic foundations upon which the kingdom's regional and continental ambitions are built, arguing that internal stability is not merely a background condition but an active instrument of foreign policy. It first analyses the political architecture centred on Mohammed VI, the hybrid nature of the regime, and the recurring social pressures that have tested but ultimately reinforced monarchical legitimacy. It then turns to the infrastructure and energy strategy through which Rabat seeks to anchor Morocco as a logistics and clean energy hub between Africa and Europe. Finally, it assesses the hard and soft power tools the kingdom deploys to translate domestic resilience into external influence, including military modernisation, diplomatic lobbying, and security cooperation with Western partners.

1.1. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

In recent years, hybrid political systems, which blend democratic institutions with strong centralized powers, have become increasingly common, particularly in developing countries navigating modernization and social transformation. Morocco exemplifies such a system, where democratic elements coexist with a monarchy that retains significant authority. This was shown by the 2024 Democracy Index carried out by The Economist Intelligence Unit, where Morocco scored 4.97 out of 10, thus classifying as a hybrid regime and highlighting the coexistence of formal democratic structures with significant authoritarian elements.¹

The political architecture is constructed with Mohammed VI at its center, retaining decisive authority across religious, legislative, executive, and military domains. As *Commander of the Faithful* and president of the Superior Council of the Ulema,² he holds sacred legitimacy as the supreme spiritual leader of a country whose population is approximately 99% Muslim.³ As Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Royal Armed Forces, he controls the executive, while his presidency of the Council of Ministers grants him decisive influence over legislation and the national budget. Judicial governance is equally concentrated in the Crown: the monarch

¹ Economist Intelligence Unit, [Democracy Index 2024](#) (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024), 80.

² J. N. C. Hill, "[Morocco](#)," in *Democratisation in the Maghreb* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 167.

³ U.S. Department of State, [2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Morocco](#) (Washington, DC: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023).

presides over the Superior Council of the Judiciary, appoints all judges by royal decree, and directly designates six of the twelve members of the Constitutional Court, including its president.⁴ This configuration resembles a veneer of pluralism, as although the constitutional framework formally recognizes the division of powers, in practice these spheres remain structurally interconnected through a common nexus: Mohammed VI. Democratic institutions such as parliament and government operate within boundaries established by the palace, producing weak horizontal accountability and limiting any effective separation of powers. Beyond formal institutions, this concentration is further sustained through the *makhzen*, a patrimonial network combining administrative authority, religious legitimacy, and clientelist ties that embeds monarchical dominance across both state structures and society.⁵

In this context, Islam plays a central role in legitimizing Mohammed VI, producing a “sacralization” of the public sphere in which political actors must recognize the King’s religious pre-eminence to operate within the system.⁶ However, political Islam in Morocco remains fragmented, encompassing the PJD, the semi-legal Justice and Charity movement, Salafist groups, and Sufi brotherhoods aligned with the monarchy. The PJD, historically linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, has acted as a “loyal opposition” since 1996, accepting monarchical primacy and prioritizing institutional reform over protest.⁷ Its dramatic loss of 113 seats in the 2021 elections resulted from electoral reforms reducing large-party representation, declining public support after a decade of governance, and diminished ideological credibility following the 2020 normalization with Israel.⁸ This weakening, combined with the King’s religious authority and the fragmentation of Islamist actors, renders the emergence of an Islamist regime highly unlikely.

This institutional design of Morocco produces a context in which civil rights exist textually but remain conditioned to the political system. Criticism of the monarchy, Islam as a state religion, or territorial integrity (mainly related to the Western Sahara) can trigger persecution, showing how constitutional protections such as fundamental rights like freedom of speech are

⁴ Hill, “[Morocco](#),” 167.

⁵ Mohamed Daadaoui, “[The Makhzen and State Formation in Morocco](#),” in *Moroccan Monarchy and the Islamist Challenge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 41–51.

⁶ Ibrahim Yilmaz and Shukri Shukri, “[Islamist PJD and the Monarchy in Morocco](#),” in *Islamist Parties and Power in Democratic Nation-States* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 176.

⁷ Emanuela Dalmaso and Francesco Cavatorta, “[Political Islam in Morocco: Negotiating the Kingdom’s Liberal Space](#),” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 4, no. 4 (2011): 490–492

⁸ Yilmaz and Shukri, “[Islamist PJD and the Monarchy in Morocco](#),” 182, 190, 202, 203.

circumscribed by political red lines.⁹ According to multiple human rights sources, coercive practices like torture have been used as tools of governance in order to extract confessions to legitimize the mentioned prosecutions against political opponents and to instill deterrence within the civil society.^{10 11} Indeed, some scholars describe it as a dual structure where the formal political organization co-exists with an informal apparatus that operates with limited transparency. The latter instrument would be in charge of the secret detention centers, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial practices alleged by the different testimonies.¹²

Under this human rights context, 2011 marked a turning point across the region, with pro-democratic uprisings—commonly known as the Arab Spring—affecting countries such as Tunisia and Libya. Morocco experienced similar pressures through the February 20 (20F) movement, which led to social unrest and prompted constitutional reforms.¹³ However, some scholars interpret these reforms as a “soft power” strategy aimed at containing mobilization and mitigating discontent through targeted social policies and delegitimizing narratives.¹⁴ While the adoption of the 2011 Constitution helped stabilize the situation, it also enabled the monarchy to reinforce its legitimacy by claiming ownership of the reform process.¹⁵ Mohammed VI thus positioned himself as an agent of modernization, depoliticizing the 20F movement’s demands and placing the monarchy above political contestation.

The constitutional reform did not imply a real democratic change according to several scholars like Aisha Kadaoui, who even termed it a “missed opportunity for democratization.”¹⁶ While the constitution included references to the separation of powers and human rights, it maintained the King’s original powers, such as his control over the legislative and executive branches and his position as Commander of the Faithful, thereby retaining authority across the different dimensions of the state.¹⁷ This illustrates the complexities that regime change entails in Morocco. The monarchy has been able to manage crises while maintaining stability and

⁹ Hill, “[Morocco](#),” 164.

¹⁰ Osire Glacier, *Universal Rights, Systemic Violations, and Cultural Relativism in Morocco* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Morocco* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2024), 13.

¹² Glacier, *Universal Rights, Systemic Violations, and Cultural Relativism in Morocco*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 99–105.

¹⁴ Aisha Kadaoui, “[A Resurgence of Authoritarianism in Morocco, or Preservation of the Status Quo](#),” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2023, 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11–12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

simultaneously creating a “politics of consensus,” in which domination and the monarchy’s overriding control are not subjects of debate among political parties, which are also manipulated to prevent any threats to the status quo.¹⁸ In this way, the Moroccan monarchy has demonstrated remarkable adaptability, neutralizing opposition and reaffirming its authority in the face of challenges, an adaptability that secures the continuity of the monarchy into the future.

Notwithstanding the monarchy's enduring resilience, Morocco has recently witnessed significant civic unrest driven by a Generation Z movement designated "GenZ 212," part of a broader global pattern of youth mobilization in developing nations. Formally triggered by the deaths of eight women due to deficient medical infrastructure in Agadir — a *casus belli* crystallizing deeper structural grievances — the protests centered on perceived misallocation of public funds, elevated youth unemployment, and contestation over expenditure on FIFA 2030 World Cup infrastructure.¹⁹ Analytically significant is the directional targeting of discontent toward the executive government rather than the Crown,²⁰ reinforcing the distinction between the monarchy as a stable legitimating institution and the government as a fluid, politically contingent apparatus. In response, authorities introduced reforms aimed at expanding political participation and improving social services.²¹

This unrest must nonetheless be situated within a broader context of ideological contestation. Faced with the domestic proliferation of international human rights norms, the Moroccan state has systematically instrumentalized cultural relativism as a delegitimizing framework, construing human rights as a Western or neo-imperialist construct incompatible with non-Western sociocultural configurations.²² Stripped of its theoretical justification, relativist reasoning operates as a state-deployed strategy aimed at neutralizing the binding force of supranational norms prohibiting torture and inhumane treatment, laying bare the structural friction between sovereign prerogative and the universalist ambitions embedded in the international human rights order.²³

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 15–16.

¹⁹ Alec Barcenilla Van Der Maesen, text translated into English by EISMENA, “[“Gen Z 212”: Morocco’s Social Discontent and a Post–Arab Spring Generational Reconfiguration](#),” *EISMENA* 4, no. 4 (2025), 46–48.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

²¹ Le Monde and AFP, “[Morocco Unveils Reforms to Boost Youth Participation and Address Social Unrest](#),” *Le Monde*, October 20, 2025.

²² Glacier, [Universal Rights, Systemic Violations, and Cultural Relativism in Morocco](#), 42–44.

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

Both the 2011 and 2025 experiences demonstrate that Morocco has consistently managed to deflect reform pressures and co-opt political actors, preventing social unrest from escalating into a revolutionary challenge. While future protests may trigger socioeconomic adjustments or government reshuffles, they are unlikely to fundamentally alter the political system. The monarchy's institutional, religious, and symbolic legitimacy makes its continuation highly probable, and the emergence of an Islamist alternative remains unlikely given the fragmentation of Islamist actors and the King's consolidated religious authority.

1.2. PATHWAYS TO HUB STATUS: ENERGY AND LOGISTICS

The Moroccan monarchy has sought to reinforce its political resilience through large-scale economic development initiatives, most prominently the effort to position Morocco as a key energy and logistics hub between Africa and Europe. A central pillar of this strategy is the Port Strategy 2030, under which Morocco has committed approximately \$7 billion to port infrastructure.²⁴

The Port of Tanger Med is the flagship project: the largest port in Africa and one of the most advanced in the Mediterranean, strategically located on the East–West shipping route for transshipment between Europe, Africa, and the Far East. Recent figures show throughput of approximately 128.7 million tonnes of cargo and 10.3 million TEUs, representing annual growth of 14.4% and 7.9% respectively.²⁵ In this regard, Tanger Med has progressively challenged the traditional dominance of the Port of Algeciras in southern Spain, which for decades served as the Mediterranean's principal transshipment hub.²⁶ The port also serves as the core of Africa's first industrial free trade zone, attracting substantial foreign direct investment (FDI).²⁷

Alongside Tanger Med, Morocco has developed the Nador West Med port complex, expected to begin operations in 2026. It targets the Central Mediterranean and Southern European markets with an initial capacity of 3.5 million TEU annually, expandable to 5.5 million.²⁸ A key component of the project is its integrated LNG terminal, designed to handle around 5 billion cubic meters annually, addressing Morocco's energy dependence following the

²⁴ Alexander Felipe, "[Morocco's Strategic Port Developments: Paving the Way to Global Maritime Leadership](#)," *Financial Ports*, April 13, 2025.

²⁵ Firdaous Naim, "[Moroccan Ports Record 8.9% Growth in 2025 Traffic](#)," *Morocco World News*, February 6, 2026.

²⁶ Felipe, "[Morocco's Strategic Port Developments](#)."

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Alberto Rodríguez, "[Marruecos Busca Puerto Nador West Med y Tanger Med en el Estrecho](#)," *Europa Sur*, July 13, 2025.

shutdown of the Algerian gas pipeline in 2021. Nevertheless, uncertainties remain: the LNG terminal component has been postponed,²⁹ maritime traffic through the Strait of Gibraltar has grown only modestly over the past decade, and questions persist about whether demand will match the new capacity being developed.³⁰

Further south on the Atlantic coast, the Dakhla Atlantic project, part of Mohammed VI's Atlantic Initiative, extends Morocco's port strategy into the disputed Western Sahara region, serving as a gateway to emerging trade corridors across the Sahel, with construction planned for completion in 2028 and will include dedicated quays for green hydrogen exports, supporting Morocco's renewable energy strategy and positioning the country as a regional hub for sustainable energy exports. Initial operational plans foresee handling approximately 2.2 million TEU.³¹

The effectiveness of Morocco's port infrastructure also depends critically on its integration with inland transport networks, particularly rail. The Al Boraq high-speed rail line, inaugurated in 2018 as Africa's first HSR system, connects Tangier, Kenitra, Rabat, and Casablanca, reinforcing links between the country's main economic centers and the Tanger Med port complex. Extensions toward Marrakech and Agadir are planned partly in preparation for the 2030 FIFA World Cup. More broadly, Morocco aims to expand its national rail network to approximately 3,800 km serving 43 cities, against a current 23, and reaching 87% of the population, supported by roughly \$14 billion in investment offers, which would significantly enhance national connectivity and bolster its logistics ambitions.³²

The Nigeria–Morocco gas pipeline represents the most ambitious and uncertain element of the hub strategy. The pipeline, which is expected to extend for more than 6,000 kilometers, would transport gas from the fields of the Gulf of Guinea to Morocco's Mediterranean coast, crossing up to thirteen West African countries' waters along its route. With an estimated capacity of around 30 billion cubic meters per year and a projected cost exceeding 20 billion dollars, the project could supply energy to a market of roughly 400 million people while constituting a

²⁹ Reuters, "Morocco's Energy Ministry Puts Gas Pipeline Project on Hold," February 2, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/moroccos-energy-ministry-puts-gas-pipeline-project-hold-2026-02-02/>.

³⁰ Solomon Obi, "[The Strategy Behind Morocco's New Nador West Med Port](#)," *African Leadership Magazine*, January 29, 2026.

³¹ Adil Faouzi, "[Morocco to Open Major Deepwater Ports: Nador West Med in 2026, Dakhla Atlantique in 2028](#)," *Morocco World News*, December 9, 2025.

³² Zineb Kamri, "[Morocco's Strategic Bet on Rail Infrastructure](#)," *The Arab Weekly*, September 23, 2025.

major energy corridor linking West Africa with North Africa and potentially European markets.³³

The project also reflects broader geopolitical competition over energy routes in North Africa, particularly in relation to the Algerian-backed Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline, which aims to transport Nigerian gas through Niger to Algeria and onward to Europe. Although there is no fixed completion deadline for the Morocco–Nigeria pipeline, current projections suggest that the project could become operational around the mid-2040s, with some estimates pointing to a possible completion around 2046. However, Europe has so far shown limited interest in participating in the project, despite its potential contribution to energy diversification.³⁴ Financing efforts have instead involved actors such as the OPEC Fund for International Development, Saudi Arabia through the Islamic Development Bank, ECOWAS, and bilateral partners including the United States and the UAE.³⁵

Parallel to these ambitions, Morocco is pursuing an accelerated renewable energy transition driven by structural dependence on imported fossil fuels and the goal of becoming a regional energy hub. Since the 2009 National Energy Strategy, the Kingdom has steadily expanded its renewable capacity, reaching approximately 37% of electricity generation by 2020, slightly below the initial 42% target. Morocco has since raised its ambitions, targeting 52% of installed capacity from renewables by 2030, with a diversified mix of solar, wind, and hydroelectric power, alongside a gradual phase-out of coal by 2040.³⁶ Projections indicate that renewable energy could account for over 60% of total electricity generation by 2030 and potentially reach 80% by 2050.³⁷

Morocco's energy transition is exemplified by several flagship projects that demonstrate both scale and strategic vision. The Noor Ouarzazate solar complex, with a total capacity of 580 MW,³⁸ is among the world's largest concentrated solar power plants and benefits from thermal storage that enables electricity generation beyond daylight hours.³⁹ In wind energy, the

³³ Margarita Arrendodas, "[Africa Atlantic Gas Pipeline: Mega Project for the Energy Security and Development of the Continent](#)," *Atalayar*, March 11, 2025.

³⁴ Jamal Machrouh, *Europe's Strategic Interest in Completing the Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline*, Policy Brief No. 56/22 (Rabat: Policy Center for the New South, October 2022), 4–5.

³⁵ The Arab Weekly, "[UAE to Contribute Financing to Nigeria-Morocco Strategic Gas Pipeline Project](#)," May 8, 2025.

³⁶ Reuters, "[Morocco Plans Coal Power Phase-Out by 2040](#)," October 23, 2025.

³⁷ V. Zemlickienė, B. Amraoui, and N. El Amrani El Idrissi, "[Analysis of Morocco's Renewable Energy Production and Transmission Potential](#)," *Insights into Regional Development* 6, no. 2 (2024): 65–66.

³⁸ Issam Nakach, Ouadia Mouhat, Rabee Shamass, and Fatima El Mennaoui, "[Review of Strategies for Sustainable Energy in Morocco](#)," *Polityka Energetyczna – Energy Policy Journal* 26, no. 2 (2023): 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Kingdom aims for 10,000 MW of installed capacity by 2030, with projects such as Boujdour, Jbel Lahdid, and Tiskrad located in high-wind coastal areas.⁴⁰ In addition, Morocco is investing in green hydrogen through “Power-to-X” initiatives, converting surplus renewable energy into clean fuels for export.⁴¹ Collectively, these projects enhance domestic energy security and position Morocco as a potential low-carbon energy supplier to European markets, though their long-term success depends on sustained investment, grid stability, and stable external demand, particularly for hydrogen.

Overall, Morocco’s ambition to position itself as a major energy and logistics hub appears credible, but remains conditional on financial sustainability and demand alignment. The country faces an infrastructure investment gap of approximately \$37–38 billion over the next two decades,⁴² with the broader transition toward a low-carbon economy requiring around \$78 billion by the 2050s, underscoring the scale of the financial effort involved.⁴³ However, this gap should be interpreted cautiously, as Morocco has demonstrated a strong capacity to mobilize external financing and is expected to meet up to 85% of its infrastructure investment needs by 2040, a higher proportion than many comparable emerging economies.⁴⁴

The principal challenge lies less in absolute financing constraints than in the efficient allocation of resources and the alignment of infrastructure expansion with actual demand, given persistent uncertainties around maritime traffic growth, LNG terminal delays, pipeline viability, and hydrogen markets. Morocco is therefore likely to consolidate its position as a regional logistics and energy node, though its emergence as a fully integrated intercontinental hub will remain contingent on sustained investment flows, external demand, and the broader geopolitical environment.

1.3. SOFT POWER AND HARD POWER: SUSTAINABILITY AND RISKS

Morocco’s ambition to become a regional hub combines economic expansion with a strategy to enhance its political and strategic influence. By strengthening diplomatic ties and modernizing its armed forces, Rabat leverages both soft and hard power to assert its interests and position itself as a key actor in North Africa. Within this framework, soft power constitutes

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴² U.S. Department of Commerce, [Morocco – Infrastructure](#), International Trade Administration, July 31, 2025.

⁴³ World Bank, [Morocco Country Climate and Development Report](#), (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023).

⁴⁴ Barclay Ballard, “[Morocco’s Infrastructural Investment Gap Is Hitting Rural Areas Hardest](#),” *World Finance*, January 31, 2020.

a key component of Morocco's external strategy, exercised through economic, cultural, and political diplomacy, including lobbying, trade promotion, and security cooperation.⁴⁵ Moroccan diplomacy has therefore focused on portraying the country as a stable and reliable partner for Western actors in areas such as counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and the management of sensitive regional issues.⁴⁶ By doing so, Rabat seeks to obtain international support for the promotion of its Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara of 2007.

In this context, the 2018 records of the United States Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) illustrate how Morocco developed a lobbying network in Washington, D.C., focused on public relations and trade promotion, thereby reinforcing its diplomatic influence.⁴⁷ A key outcome of these efforts was the United States' recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020.⁴⁸ While this move was rooted in contemporary geopolitical considerations, it also echoed the long-standing historical ties between the two countries, as Morocco is considered the first state to recognize the United States after its independence.⁴⁹ Through this step, Morocco was able to consolidate the legitimacy of its de facto control over the territory, gradually transforming it into a form of internationally supported recognition backed by a major global power.

Similarly, the European Union remains Morocco's primary trading partner⁵⁰ and a key political actor in the consolidation of the country's regional position. In recent years, different European states have adopted positions closer to Rabat regarding the Western Sahara dispute. The most notable example occurred in 2022, when Spain officially expressed its support for the Moroccan autonomy plan.⁵¹ These developments illustrate the effectiveness of Moroccan diplomacy in consolidating transatlantic support.

⁴⁵ Youssef Zizi, "[Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power: The Cases of China and Morocco](#)," *Research Africa Reviews* 9, n.º 1 (April 2025): 38–45.

⁴⁶ Assia Bensalah Alaoui, "[Morocco's Security Strategy: Preventing Terrorism and Countering Extremism](#)," *European View* 16, no. 1 (2017): 113.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, [Exhibit B to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended: JPC Strategies, LLC \(Reg. No. 6505\)](#) (Washington, DC: National Security Division, January 11, 2018).

⁴⁸ American Society of International Law, "[United States Recognizes Morocco's Sovereignty Over Western Sahara](#)," *American Journal of International Law* 115, no. 2 (2021): 318–323.

⁴⁹ U.S. Congress, "[Recognizing the Longstanding Friendship between the Kingdom of Morocco and the United States of America](#)," H. Res. 251, 119th Cong. (2025).

⁵⁰ European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, [European Union, Trade in Goods with Morocco: Statistical Report](#), May 8, 2025.

⁵¹ Fatima Zahra Znoui, "[The Inevitable Legitimacy of the Moroccan Sovereignty over the Western \(Moroccan\) Sahara](#)," *MAS Journal of Applied Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2022): 480–486.

Nevertheless, Morocco's lobbying strategy has also faced increasing scrutiny. In particular, the 2022 "Moroccogate" scandal raised allegations that Moroccan actors bribed several Members of the European Parliament to influence political decisions related to Western Sahara.⁵² Such controversies illustrate the inherent limitations of diplomatic influence based on attraction and legitimacy. When a state's actions are perceived as overly assertive, its soft power may weaken.⁵³ In this context, Morocco's soft power strategy ultimately depends on maintaining a delicate balance between securing international legitimacy and avoiding the emergence of regional or diplomatic backlash.

As explained by Joseph S. Nye Jr., soft power is complemented by hard power, which relies on coercion and inducement through instruments such as military force, economic sanctions, and financial incentives.⁵⁴ In this regard, Morocco has undertaken a significant modernization of its Royal Armed Forces with the aim of strengthening its regional position. This trend is further reflected in data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which reports a 12% increase in Moroccan arms imports between the periods 2016–2020 and 2021–2025.⁵⁵

According to the same report, Morocco ranks 28th among the largest importers of major arms, with the United States as its primary supplier (60% of total imports), followed by Israel (24%) and France (10%).⁵⁶ However, Morocco's military cooperation with Western partners extends beyond arms trade, and the United States remains its principal military partner, which considers Morocco a key strategic ally outside NATO. This relationship has facilitated regular joint training initiatives and exercises such as *African Lion*, an annual multinational exercise hosted in Morocco.⁵⁷ Such operations fall within the Area of Responsibility of United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM), one of the eleven unified combatant commands of the United States, established in 2008 and headquartered in Germany.⁵⁸

⁵² Irene Fernández-Molina y Anna Khakee, "[The 'Moroccogate' scandal and European Parliament decision-making on Western Sahara](#)," *Mediterranean Politics* 30, n.º 3 (2025): 661–663.

⁵³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 10–14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5–10.

⁵⁵ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), [Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2025](#), SIPRI Fact Sheet (Stockholm: SIPRI, March 2026), 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Alexis Arieff, "[Morocco: Background and U.S. Relations](#)," in *Encyclopedia of Africa*, ed. Arthur Barnett (United States: Nova Science Publishers, 2020), 2099–2112.

⁵⁸ Karl P. Mueller et al., [Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War](#) (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016): 109.

Despite the effectiveness of its activities, questions have emerged regarding the location of the command's headquarters. Within this debate, Morocco has occasionally been identified as a potential host, largely due to its close military cooperation with the United States. Nevertheless, the possibility of relocation has been repeatedly dismissed. As early as 2013, the U.S. Department of Defense concluded that maintaining the headquarters in Germany was more operationally efficient, particularly due to resource-sharing with U.S. European Command, while relocation to Africa would entail high financial costs and political sensitivities.⁵⁹ More recently, General Michael Langley reaffirmed this position, emphasizing that the strategic benefits of relocation do not outweigh its economic implications.⁶⁰

Similarly, discussions have arisen regarding the potential relocation of U.S. military assets currently based in Spain to Morocco. These debates have been partly fueled by Spain's refusal in early 2026 to authorize the use of its jointly operated military bases for U.S. operations against Iran.⁶¹ However, the renewal of the bilateral defense cooperation agreement between Spain and the United States in 2023⁶²—alongside the ongoing infrastructure investments⁶³—demonstrates the continuity of a strong strategic partnership. This suggests that, despite occasional political frictions, Spain continues to be regarded as a key location for U.S. military infrastructure, making any large-scale relocation to Morocco unlikely in the short term.

In conclusion, Morocco has effectively combined soft and hard power to consolidate its regional and international position, relying on diplomatic alignment with key partners such as the United States and sustained military modernization. However, as emphasized by Joseph S. Nye Jr., the effectiveness of soft power ultimately depends on perceived legitimacy; consequently, a more assertive or expansionist strategy could generate resistance and undermine Morocco's diplomatic gains. At the same time, despite its growing strategic relevance, the relocation of USAFRICOM or U.S. military assets from Spain to Morocco remains unlikely, given the persistence of established infrastructures and the continued reinforcement of U.S.–Spanish defense cooperation.

⁵⁹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Defense Headquarters: DOD Needs to Reassess Options for Permanent Location of U.S. Africa Command*, GAO-13-646 (Washington, DC: GAO, 2013) 4–10.

⁶⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, *Full Committee Hearing: U.S. Military Posture and National Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East and Africa*, video, June 10, 2025, 31:50.

⁶¹ Reuters, “U.S. aircraft leave Spain after government says bases cannot be used for Iran attacks,” March 2, 2026.

⁶² U.S. Department of State, *Defense: Bases: Agreement Between the United States of America and Spain* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2023).

⁶³ U.S. Navy, “*NAVSTA Rota Unaccompanied Housing Undergoes Renovations*,” January 30, 2026.

2. TERRITORIAL DISPUTES AND EU RELATIONS

This chapter examines Morocco's most immediate external layer: its contested territorial claims and relationship with the European Union. It traces the Western Sahara conflict from Spain's 1975 withdrawal to Resolution 2797, assessing its likely trajectory through scenario analysis. It then explores the Spain-Morocco relationship, where economic interdependence coexists with coercive pressure via migration and maritime disputes, before turning to the broader EU-Morocco partnership, defined by mutual dependence in trade, migration, and energy, yet repeatedly strained by Western Sahara and the Pegasus and Moroccogate scandals.

2.1. THE WESTERN SAHARA ISSUE

The conflict in Western Sahara dates back to 1975, when Spain withdrew as a colonial power amid its transition from Franco's dictatorship to democracy, under pressure from the Polisario Front, an armed nationalist movement founded in 1973 to challenge Spanish colonial control.⁶⁴ Morocco claimed that Western Sahara formed part of its precolonial kingdom, a claim rejected by the International Court of Justice. Shortly thereafter, King Hassan II organized the Green March, mobilizing approximately 350,000 civilians in a symbolic act of reclamation. Joined by Mauritania, which laid claim to the southern portion of the region, Morocco established a permanent military presence, formalized through the Madrid Accords.⁶⁵ These developments led to the displacement of a significant portion of the Sahrawi population into Algeria, accompanied by allegations of serious human rights violations.⁶⁶

Following Mauritania's withdrawal in 1979,⁶⁷ Morocco consolidated its control through the construction of a 2,700-kilometre defensive barrier, dividing the territory into a Moroccan-administered western zone and a Polisario-controlled eastern one. By 1987, Morocco controlled roughly 80% of the territory, with a significant share of the Sahrawi population

⁶⁴ Benita Sampedro Vizcaya, "[Transiting Western Sahara](#)," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 20, nos. 1–2 (2019): 18.

⁶⁵ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, "[Western Sahara, 1975–1991: Case Outcome: COIN Win \(Mixed, Favoring COIN\)](#)," in *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 395.

⁶⁶ Luz Marina Mateo, "[La Marcha Verde y Los Acuerdos de Madrid](#)," in *Decires Nómadas* (Madrid: Prometeo Editorial, 2022), 47.

⁶⁷ Sampedro Vizcaya, "[Transiting Western Sahara](#)," 18–19.

living in refugee camps in Algeria under Polisario administration, pending a resolution of the conflict.⁶⁸

In 1991, MINURSO was established under the UN Security Council Resolution 690, tasked with monitoring the ceasefire and organizing a referendum on self-determination. The process stalled almost immediately over voter eligibility disputes: Morocco advocated for the inclusion of populations settled during its administration, a position rejected by the Polisario Front on the grounds that it would predetermine the outcome. The two parties have since maintained fundamentally incompatible positions, with Morocco refusing any referendum, including the independence option, and the Polisario rejecting any arrangement that excludes it.⁶⁹ Subsequent UN mediation efforts, including the Baker Plans, failed to reconcile these positions.⁷⁰ Throughout this period, the international community's limited willingness to exert meaningful pressure allowed Morocco to consolidate its position with relatively modest diplomatic costs, while the Polisario Front relied primarily on Algerian and Libyan backing.⁷¹

In 2007, Morocco advanced an autonomy proposal supported by France and the United States,⁷² envisaging devolved governance under Moroccan sovereignty while retaining control over core functions such as defence and foreign affairs. The proposal included provisions for institutional reform and a referendum framed as approval of the autonomy arrangement rather than offering independence.⁷³ The Polisario Front rejected the initiative because it excluded the option of full independence.⁷⁴

The relative stability of the 1991 ceasefire was disrupted in 2020, when Morocco intervened in the Guerguerat buffer zone, prompting the Polisario Front to declare the truce over.⁷⁵ That same year, Morocco's diplomatic position was further strengthened when U.S. President Donald Trump recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as part of the Abraham Accords

⁶⁸ Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Dunigan, *Western Sahara, 1975–1991*, 397–398.

⁶⁹ Jérôme Larosch, “[The UN in Western Sahara](#),” in *Caught in the Middle: UN Involvement in the Western Sahara Conflict* (Clingendael Institute, 2007), 17.

⁷⁰ Mohammed Loulichki, *Towards Autonomy for the Sahara: A Dynamic Underway* (Rabat: Policy Center for the New South, April 2025), 5.

⁷¹ Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Dunigan, *Western Sahara, 1975–1991*, 400.

⁷² International Crisis Group, *A Window for Diplomacy in Western Sahara*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing No. 96 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, October 20, 2025), 4.

⁷³ United Nations, *Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region*, April 11, 2007.

⁷⁴ International Crisis Group, *A Window for Diplomacy in Western Sahara*, 4.

⁷⁵ Sharif Paget and Mitchell McCluskey, “[Western Sahara Independence Leader Declares the End of a 29-Year-Old Ceasefire with Morocco](#),” *CNN*, November 15, 2020.

framework, ending decades of official American neutrality,⁷⁶ followed by growing support from France⁷⁷ and Spain⁷⁸ for the autonomy framework. Nevertheless, Western Sahara remains listed by the United Nations as a non-self-governing territory, reflecting its unresolved legal status.⁷⁹

On October 31, 2025, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2797, extending MINURSO's mandate until the end of October 2026 and, more importantly, signalling a decisive shift in the Council's position. For the first time, the Security Council stated that "genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty" could be considered the most realistic basis for resolving the conflict, explicitly calling on the parties to engage in negotiations premised on Morocco's 2007 autonomy plan.⁸⁰ Crucially, the resolution makes no reference to a referendum on independence, effectively removing from the diplomatic agenda an option that had nominally remained open since 1991.⁸¹ As a consequence, the options available to the Sahrawi population have narrowed considerably: acceptance of Moroccan sovereignty, exile, or continued armed resistance.⁸²

The drafting of Resolution 2797 was largely driven by the United States, with active support from France and the United Kingdom.⁸³ In contrast, Algeria's traditional allies—China, Russia, and Pakistan—abstained from the vote, prioritizing their global strategic interests and avoiding direct opposition to the United States. This outcome illustrated Morocco's growing diplomatic momentum and Algeria's relative isolation,⁸⁴ further underscored by subsequent expressions of support from Russia⁸⁵ and the Gulf Cooperation Council.⁸⁶ In addition, more than 30 states, primarily from Africa and the Arab world, have opened diplomatic missions in Moroccan-

⁷⁶ The White House, "[Proclamation Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over Western Sahara](#)," December 11, 2020.

⁷⁷ Frédéric Bobin, Alexandre Aublanc, and Philippe Ricard, "[Paris Shifts Position and Recognizes Morocco's Sovereignty over Western Sahara](#)," *Le Monde*, July 30, 2024.

⁷⁸ Safaa Kasraoui, "[Spain Officially Endorses Morocco's Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara](#)," *Morocco World News*, March 18, 2022.

⁷⁹ United Nations, *The United Nations and Decolonization: Non-Self-Governing Territories*.

⁸⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2797 (2025)*, S/RES/2797 (October 31, 2025).

⁸¹ Steven Höfner, *UN-Resolution 2797 – Ein Historischer Schritt im Sahara-Konflikt* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2025), 1.

⁸² Salvador Sánchez Tapia, "[Resolución 2797. Un futuro sombrío para el Sáhara Occidental](#)," *Nuestro Tiempo*, Universidad de Navarra, November 7, 2025.

⁸³ Höfner, *UN-Resolution 2797*, 1–2.

⁸⁴ D. Abu Alkheir, H. Ali, A. Bank, A. Ö. Gedikli, H. Al Malla, D. Mirzaei, ... E. Woertz, *Ten Things to Watch in the Middle East and North Africa in 2026*, GIGA Focus Nahost 1 (Hamburg: German Institute for Global and Area Studies [GIGA] – Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien, Institut für Nahost-Studien, 2026), 5.

⁸⁵ The Arab Weekly, "[Russian Shift Strengthens Morocco's Position on Western Sahara](#)," October 14, 2025.

⁸⁶ Asmae Daoudi, "[Gulf Cooperation Council Reaffirms Support for Morocco's Sovereignty over Western Sahara](#)," *Morocco World News*, June 12, 2025.

controlled areas of Western Sahara, a development widely seen as tacit recognition of Morocco's sovereignty.⁸⁷

Notwithstanding these diplomatic advances, the precise content of Morocco's autonomy plan has remained unclear. Despite sustained international pressure, Rabat had declined to elaborate on the original four-page document released in 2007.⁸⁸ Following the adoption of Resolution 2797, renewed diplomatic engagement led to talks in Madrid in February 2026 involving Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and the Polisario Front. At Washington's request, Morocco produced an expanded forty-page version of its proposal.⁸⁹ Reporting by Atalayar suggests that this version provides additional institutional and implementation details, though it remains unofficial and should be treated with caution.⁹⁰

Morocco's capacity to maintain its position is reinforced by Western Sahara's considerable natural wealth. The territory's phosphate reserves, Atlantic fisheries, and potential offshore hydrocarbon deposits provide an important economic base,⁹¹ which Morocco has employed to sustain infrastructure development and the settlement of its nationals in the region.⁹² Resource exploitation has also served as a tool of external engagement: cooperation agreements with foreign companies and states contribute to the normalization of Moroccan administration and reduce international criticism. Disputes over resource sovereignty and the question of Sahrawi consent nonetheless persist, with the Polisario Front contesting the legality of such arrangements.⁹³

Taken together, the evolution of the conflict reveals a structural asymmetry: Morocco has progressively consolidated territorial control and international support, while the Polisario Front retains legal legitimacy but faces growing diplomatic marginalization. The future trajectory will therefore depend less on the formal UN framework and more on the interaction between external recognition, Algerian support, and the Polisario's strategic choices.

⁸⁷ Safaa Kasraoui, "[UN Rights Council: 40 Countries Reaffirm Support for Morocco's Sovereignty over Western Sahara](#)," *Morocco World News*, March 2, 2026.

⁸⁸ Mohammed Jaabouk, "[Sahara: Mistura Asks Morocco for Detail on Its Autonomy Plan](#)," *Yabiladi*, April 16, 2025.

⁸⁹ Alex MacDonald, "[US Holds Meeting Between Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania over Western Sahara](#)," *Middle East Eye*, January 31, 2026, citing Ignacio Cembrero, *El Confidencial*, February 9, 2026.

⁹⁰ Javier Fernández Arribas, "[Full Details of Morocco's Autonomy Plan for the Sahara](#)," *Atalayar*, February 12, 2026.

⁹¹ Jeffrey J. Smith, "[The Taking of the Sahara: The Role of Natural Resources in the Continuing Occupation of Western Sahara](#)," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 27, no. 2 (2015), 2.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6, 11.

Scenario construction: Prospects for the Western Sahara conflict (2026–2041)

The conflict in Western Sahara is shaped by a complex interaction of historical claims, military realities, and evolving international positions. Given the persistent diplomatic deadlock and the recent UN shift, a scenario-building approach is particularly well-suited to exploring the conflict's potential evolution over the short to medium term (5–15 years), a period in which growing international support for Morocco and the relative marginalization of the Polisario Front are likely to produce significant strategic effects.

The analytical framework begins with a stakeholder map (Figure 2) identifying principal actors by interest and impact. Morocco, the Polisario Front, and Algeria form the high-impact core, alongside external actors including the UN, the United States, France, Spain, the EU, the African Union, and Mauritania. The map captures relations ranging from direct conflict to formal alliances, revealing a structurally asymmetric configuration centred on the Morocco–Algeria rivalry, with the Polisario largely dependent on Algerian backing and most external actors in secondary diplomatic roles.

An influence diagram (Figure 3) maps interactions among political, military, and economic factors shaping the conflict. Two findings emerge. First, the system is structured around two competing clusters: a consolidation dynamic centred on Morocco, where international recognition and economic integration reinforce control; and a countervailing dynamic centred on Algeria and the Polisario, sustaining resistance. Second, increasing international support for Morocco may simultaneously reduce the Polisario's diplomatic relevance and heighten its incentives for military activity, suggesting that external backing for Morocco may perpetuate instability rather than resolve the conflict.

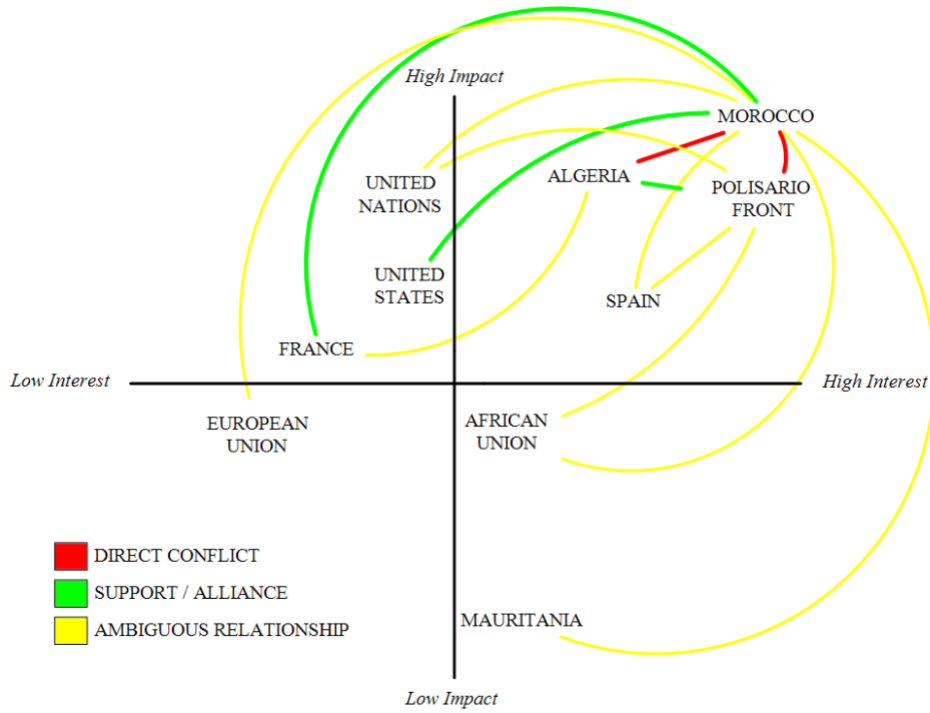


Figure 2. Prospects for the Western Sahara conflict. Stakeholder map (own elaboration).

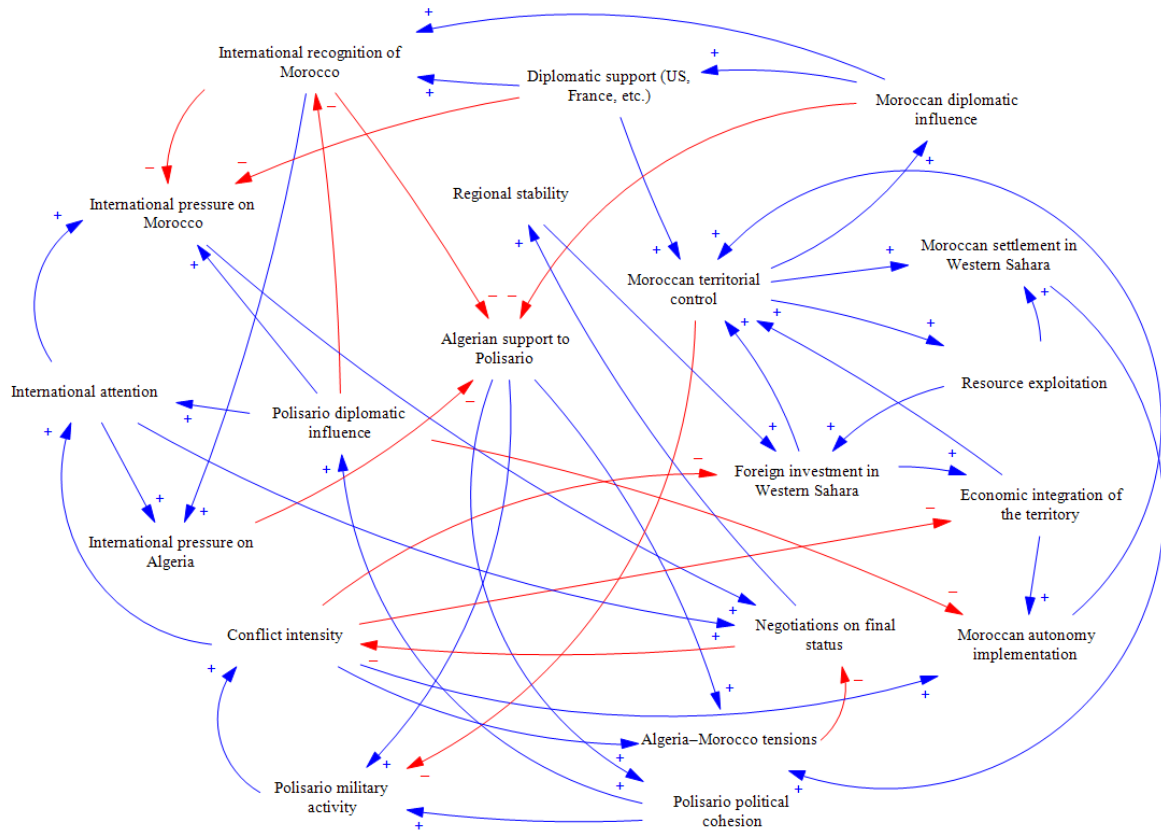


Figure 3. Prospects for the Western Sahara Conflict. Influence diagram (own elaboration).

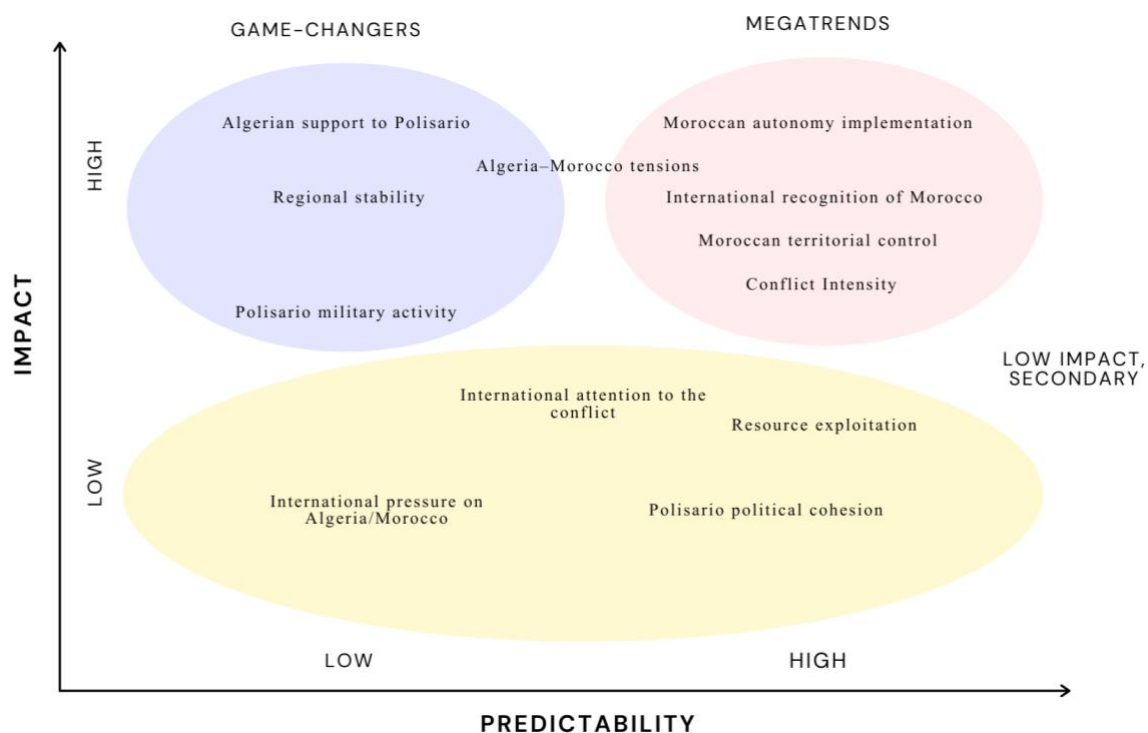


Figure 4. Prospects for Western Sahara conflict. Impact chart (own elaboration).

Once the key variables shaping the conflict were identified, those likely to exert decisive influence became clear. Chief among them are international recognition of Morocco's sovereignty, Algeria's support for the Polisario Front, and the consolidation of Moroccan territorial and institutional control. Complementary factors such as resource exploitation, major-power alignment, and UN framework effectiveness shape incentives for armed struggle and negotiation, reflecting the structural forces likely to guide the conflict in the short to medium term.

Drawing from the influence mapping, two variables were identified as having the greatest potential to reshape the conflict's architecture: the level of Algerian strategic backing for the Polisario Front and the degree of international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty. Their interaction is explored through a 2×2 scenario matrix (Figure 5), which generates four internally coherent futures. The Maghreb Trench describes a situation in which strong Algerian support sustains confrontation despite Morocco's diplomatic gains. Strategic Stalemate reflects a prolonged deadlock driven by divided international recognition and continued backing for the Polisario. The Moroccan Reality captures the consolidation of Moroccan control under favourable international conditions and weakened opposition. Finally, the Sahelisation of the

Sahara depicts a fragmented and unstable environment emerging from limited Algerian support and unresolved recognition dynamics.

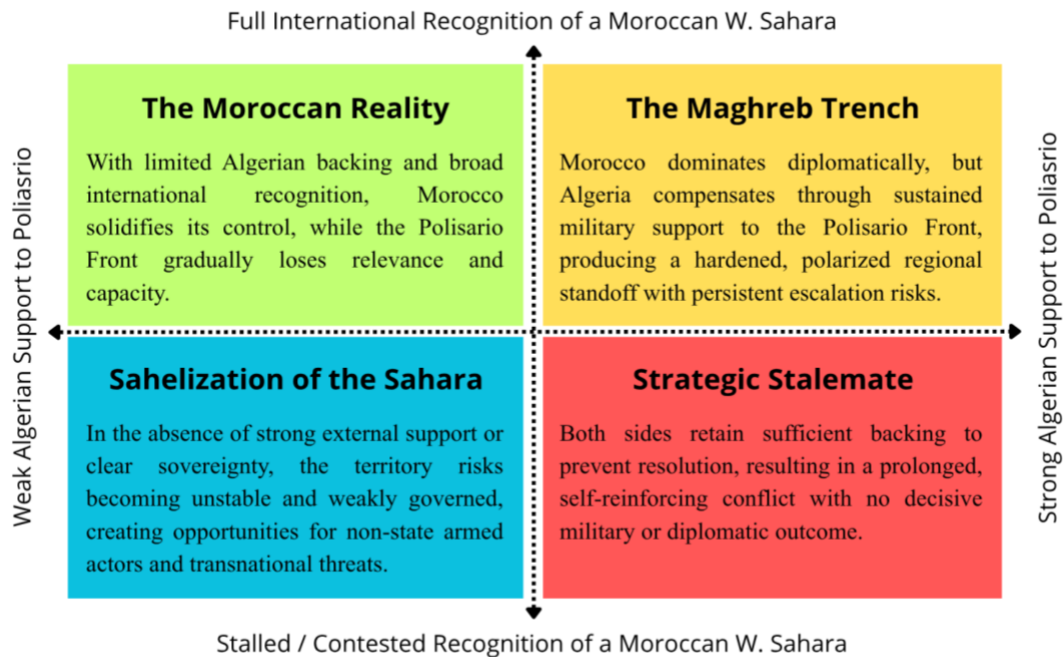


Figure 5. Prospects for Western Sahara conflict. Simple Scenario Construction (own elaboration).

The first scenario, *The Maghreb Trench*, describes a continuation and intensification of the conflict despite Morocco’s growing diplomatic gains. Sustained Algerian backing enables the Polisario Front to remain a viable political, financial, and military actor. Although international recognition increasingly favors Morocco, echoing trends accelerated after Resolution 2797, this does not translate into conflict resolution. Facing diplomatic marginalization reminiscent of the post-1991 stalemate, the Polisario reverts to asymmetric warfare; some states may begin to designate it as a terrorist organization, further polarizing the conflict. The outcome resembles a hardened version of the historical deadlock: entrenched Moroccan territorial control, persistent Polisario resistance, and a chronic risk of regional escalation.

The second scenario, *Strategic Stalemate*, reflects a prolonged strategic stalemate rooted in the same structural incompatibilities that have defined the conflict since the failure of the 1991 referendum process. International recognition remains divided, preventing any decisive shift in the legal or political status of the territory. Algeria continues to underwrite the Polisario's survival, while Morocco maintains control over most of the territory, as it has since the 1980s. Successive diplomatic initiatives, including those inspired by the autonomy plan, repeatedly

fail, echoing earlier unsuccessful efforts such as the Baker Plans. The conflict remains in a “frozen” state, punctuated by low-intensity tensions and periodic escalations, with the Sahrawi population facing the same limited options identified since 1991: autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, prolonged displacement, or uncertain prospects for self-determination.

The third scenario, *The Moroccan Reality*, captures a decisive shift toward the consolidation of Moroccan sovereignty, reflecting the cumulative effects of decades of diplomatic, military, and economic strategy. Following the logic embedded in Resolution 2797, an increasing number of states formally recognize Western Sahara as part of Morocco, arguing that Rabat has exhausted all reasonable avenues for compromise through its autonomy proposals. The absence of any obligation under international law to negotiate indefinitely becomes politically salient, allowing states to justify recognition without evident legal contradiction. Algerian support for the Polisario weakens, reducing its operational capacity and international relevance. The autonomy plan is progressively implemented on the ground, integrating the territory economically and politically into Morocco, and effectively closing the chapter on independence as a viable political option.

The fourth scenario, *Sahelisation of the Sahara*, which is the least likely, envisages a fragmentation of authority and escalating instability, driven by weak Algerian support and the absence of clear international recognition. Deprived of consistent backing, the Polisario fragments into smaller factions, some of which may adopt criminal or extremist strategies, echoing broader patterns observed in the Sahel. The unresolved status of the territory, combined with competition over natural resources and limited institutional clarity, creates opportunities for illicit networks and external actors. This scenario represents a breakdown of the relatively stable, if unresolved, status quo that has persisted since the 1991 ceasefire, transforming Western Sahara from a contained territorial dispute into a more diffuse and unpredictable security challenge.

In conclusion, the scenario construction for the period 2026–2041 suggests that the third scenario, *The Moroccan Reality*, constitutes the most likely trajectory for the Western Sahara conflict. This assessment reflects the cumulative historical pattern identified throughout the section: since 1975, Morocco has steadily translated military control into political and economic consolidation, while the Polisario Front, despite retaining a degree of legal legitimacy, has faced increasing diplomatic marginalization. The paradigm shift embodied in Resolution 2797 reinforces this trend by redefining autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as

the primary framework for negotiations, while the long-standing option of a referendum on independence is now effectively absent from the diplomatic horizon.

2.2 MOROCCO-SPAIN: TERRITORIAL AND MARITIME PRESSURE

Building on its efforts to secure international support for Western Sahara, one of the most significant relationships that Morocco maintains with Western actors is with Spain.⁹⁴ Both countries share a strategic partnership grounded in strong economic interdependence, with Spain serving as Morocco's principal trading partner. However, this cooperation coexists with persistent tensions stemming from Morocco's territorial and maritime claims. Morocco considers Ceuta and Melilla, along with Vélez de la Gomera, Alhucemas, and the Chafarinas Islands—uninhabited islets along its northern coast—as occupied territories that should be reintegrated into its sovereignty. In contrast, Spain and the broader international community regard these enclaves as integral parts of Spanish territory and as external borders of the European Union.⁹⁵ Despite this international recognition, their geographic proximity to Morocco provides Rabat with strategic leverage. Morocco exploits this position to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly concerning Western Sahara, through the instrumentalization of migration flows and the imposition of customs restrictions.

The term “weaponization of migration” is a recent expression used to describe a new form of hybrid threat based on the deliberate use of mass migration from a state as an instrument to destabilize, coerce, or obtain political advantages over another state, without resorting to direct military actions.⁹⁶ Scholars describe Morocco as an actor that makes use of coercive engineered migration in Ceuta in order to obtain political and economic benefits from the EU and Spain.⁹⁷ This was seen in 2021, after the Polisario Front leader, Brahim Ghali, recovered from COVID-19 in a Spanish hospital. This event was followed by the crossing of a mass influx of immigrants to Ceuta after the Moroccan authorities eased border controls, generating a migration crisis that put Spain into a complex situation, both from a political and migratory perspective,⁹⁸ portraying Rabat's coercive force over the European bloc. Moreover, the

⁹⁴ World Bank, *World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS): Morocco Trade Profile, 2023*.

⁹⁵ Jamie Trinidad, “[An Evaluation of Morocco's Claims to Spain's Remaining Territories in Africa](#),” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2012), 961–966.

⁹⁶ Piotr Łubiński, “[Hybrid Warfare or Hybrid Threat – The Weaponization of Migration as an Example of the Use of Lawfare – Case Study of Poland](#),” *Polish Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2022), 43–55.

⁹⁷ Miholjčić, “[Migration as an Instrument of Modern Political Warfare](#),” 5–7.

⁹⁸ European Parliament, “[Joint Motion for a Resolution on the Breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Use of Minors by the Moroccan Authorities in the Migratory Crisis in Ceuta](#)” (2021/2747(RSP), RC-B9-0349/2021, June 9, 2021).

hospitalization of Brahim Ghali was also followed by the *Pegasus* incident, which involved the hacking of hundreds of Spanish smartphones, including that of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. Morocco was widely suspected of being behind the attacks, as many of the targeted individuals were considered persons of interest to the kingdom.⁹⁹

Similarly, Morocco combines this instrumentalization of migration with customs restrictions in order to pressure Spain. This strategy started in 2018, with the unilateral closure of the customs located in Melilla, with the aim of suffocating the city of Melilla economically and thus enhancing the Moroccan port of Bensi Ensar. This situation worsened with the total closure of the territorial, aerial, and maritime connections, with the argument of preventing COVID-19 spread. Nevertheless, Morocco allowed the entrance of ships from France and Italy. Rabat justified its actions, stating that Ceuta and Melilla are sources of economic insecurity due to the product smuggling that competes with local products, which also promotes dehumanization, mainly mentioning the smugglers' reliance on “mule” women, who carry large bags on their backs and cross borders.¹⁰⁰

In the end, the Moroccan strategy ended up being effective, as in 2022, the Spanish government changed its historical position and officially recognized the autonomy plan of Morocco for Western Sahara.¹⁰¹ These events led to the reopening of the border for travelers in 2022, but trade was still blocked until 2025. Nevertheless, the reopening is often seen as something symbolic, as the customs in Melilla allow the crossing of just one track per day, maintaining its economic pressure.¹⁰²

This logic of strategic leverage extends into the maritime domain, where tensions have intensified following Morocco's adoption of Laws No. 37-17 and 38-17 in 2020, extending its territorial sea, establishing a 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and expanding its continental shelf claims up to 350 nautical miles, including waters adjacent to Western Sahara.¹⁰³ These measures overlap with Spain's claimed EEZ around the Canary Islands, prompting Madrid to reaffirm the primacy of international law and the need to resolve

⁹⁹ Stephanie Kirchgaessner and Sam Jones, “[Over 200 Spanish Mobile Numbers ‘Possible Targets of Pegasus Spyware’](#),” *The Guardian*, May 3, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ El Bernoussi and Delkáder-Palacios, “[State Strikes Back](#),” 1–10.

¹⁰¹ Gobierno de España y Reino de Marruecos, “[Nueva etapa del partenariado entre España y Marruecos: Declaración conjunta](#),” 2022.

¹⁰² El Bernoussi and Delkáder-Palacios, “[State Strikes Back](#),” 5–8.

¹⁰³ Aitana Constans Belda, “[Evolución reciente de la posición de Marruecos sobre el Sahara Occidental y sus implicaciones](#)” in *Cuadernos de la Escuela Diplomática* n.º 69: Selección de memorias del Máster de Diplomacia y Relaciones Internacionales 2019-2020 (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2021), 181–183.

competing claims through mutual agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), while promoting a bilateral working group whose effectiveness remains limited amid broader tensions.¹⁰⁴

Beyond the legal dimension, the dispute underscores the strategic importance of natural resources in the contested area, notably the seabed formation known as Tropic Mountain, estimated to contain nearly 10% of the world's tellurium reserves, a key component in solar panels and batteries.¹⁰⁵ Fisheries further complicate the situation: although the European Union and Morocco concluded an agreement granting EU vessels access to Moroccan waters, it was suspended in 2024 for including Western Saharan waters without the consent of the Sahrawi people,¹⁰⁶ leaving a context of fragmented sovereignty in which Spanish vessels await new EU arrangements while Morocco exercises de facto control over the EEZ off Western Sahara.

In this context, the potential use of hybrid threats—such as migration pressure, customs restrictions, and coercive diplomacy—remains significant. Morocco is likely to continue employing these tools selectively and reversibly to maximize political and strategic gains while avoiding a full rupture in bilateral relations. In turn, Spain is expected to further securitize and militarize migration management and border control in response to such tactics.¹⁰⁷ Despite these tensions, the risk of conventional military escalation is low. The 2002 Perejil Island crisis, in which Moroccan forces briefly occupied the islet and were swiftly removed by Spain without armed resistance, demonstrates Morocco's preference for limited, controlled actions that stop short of open conflict.¹⁰⁸ Scholars often interpret this incident as a strategic probing to gauge Spanish and international reactions. At the same time, Spain's membership in NATO and the EU, along with sustained bilateral cooperation, functions as a strong deterrent, limiting escalation and encouraging both parties to manage tensions within a pragmatic framework.

In conclusion, the relationship between Spain and Morocco is marked by a balance between cooperation and persistent tensions. While strong economic ties underpin their partnership, disputes over territories such as Ceuta and Melilla, as well as maritime claims near the Canary

¹⁰⁴ Francisco Helenio Hoyos Medina and Celeste Santaella García, "[Conflict Over the Delimitation of Waters Between Spain and Morocco](#)," *Journal of Maritime Research* 22, no. 1 (2025), 449–50.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Court of Justice of the European Union, [Judgment of 4 October 2024, Council of the European Union and European Commission v Front Polisario, Joined Cases C 779/21 P and C 799/21 P](#), ECLI:EU:C:2024:833.

¹⁰⁷ Lorenzo Gabrielli and Blanca Garcés Mascareñas, "[The Framing of Migration as a Hybrid Military Threat: Insights from the Ceuta's 2021 'Crisis'](#)," *Migration Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 2025): Article mnaf007.

¹⁰⁸ Trinidad, "[Evaluation of Morocco's Claims](#)," 961–966.

Islands, continue to generate friction. Morocco's use of hybrid pressure tools, including migration and trade restrictions, contrasts with Spain's cautious diplomatic approach. As a result, tensions are likely to persist but remain contained, with military escalation highly unlikely.

2.3. EU-MOROCCO: COLLABORATION AND CHALLENGES

As outlined in the preceding section, the relationship between the European Union and Morocco significantly shapes Spain's bilateral engagement with Rabat. More broadly, EU–Morocco relations are characterized by mutual interdependence: Morocco depends on access to European markets and on the legitimization of its autonomy plan, while the EU relies on Morocco for cooperation in security matters and as a strategic partner in the energy transition. In trading terms, the EU constitutes Morocco's principal trading partner.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, Morocco possesses considerable potential in clean energy—especially in solar and wind power, as well as green hydrogen production¹¹⁰—making it a key partner in advancing the EU's energy transition. This has led to the establishment of the Green Partnership in 2022, a non-binding framework designed to promote climate action, clean energy transition, environmental protection, and sustainable economic development through coordinated policies, investment, and technical cooperation.¹¹¹

Beyond economic considerations, the EU's interests in Morocco are also strongly shaped by security concerns, particularly in relation to migration management and intelligence sharing. Morocco's geographic position has enabled cooperation in migration control, effectively making it a gatekeeper for the EU, as argued by Alexandre Veuthey. In exchange, the Moroccan monarchy benefits from various funding mechanisms tied to policy adaptation. In the field of counterterrorism, several European states—notably Spain, Germany, and France—maintain close intelligence cooperation with Morocco. As emphasized by Federica Mogherini in 2015, the EU arguably requires Morocco more than Morocco requires the EU in security matters, highlighting the extent of Moroccan influence within this framework.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ European Commission, *European Union, Trade with Morocco* (Brussels: Directorate-General for Trade, 2025).

¹¹⁰ Hamza El Hafdaoui et al., “Renewable Energies in Morocco: A Comprehensive Review and Analysis of Current Status, Policy Framework, and Prospective Potential,” *Energy Conversion and Management: X* 26 (2025): 11.

¹¹¹ European Commission, *Commission Implementing Decision of 17 October 2022 on the EU-Morocco Green Partnership*, C(2022) 7308 final (Brussels, October 17, 2022).

¹¹² Alexandre Veuthey, *EU Foreign Policy via Sectoral Cooperation: The EU Joined-up Approach Towards Switzerland, Israel and Morocco* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), 232.

Another key dimension shaping EU–Morocco relations is the issue of Western Sahara. Following Spain’s withdrawal in 1975, the EU has consistently supported United Nations resolutions, rejecting Moroccan sovereignty over the territory and classifying it as a non-autonomous territory entitled to a process of decolonization. This position has had significant implications for the EU–Morocco Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2000 as a foundational framework for political dialogue, economic integration, and progressive trade liberalization.¹¹³ In fact, the agreement served as a legal base from which subsequent sector-specific agreements were built.

However, a set of the mentioned complementary agreements incorporated Western Sahara as part of Moroccan territory, thereby including resources from the region. These agreements were challenged before the Court of Justice of the European Union, which, since 2016, has developed a consistent body of case law. The Court ruled that Western Sahara holds a “separate and distinct status” under international law and therefore cannot be included in EU–Morocco agreements without the explicit consent of its people.¹¹⁴ Subsequent rulings progressively restricted the scope of such agreements, annulling their application to the territory and reinforcing the principle of self-determination as a fundamental legal constraint.¹¹⁵ The most recent judgment, issued in 2024, reaffirmed that Western Sahara is distinct from Morocco and mandated that products originating there must be labeled as coming from Western Sahara.¹¹⁶ In response, the Council of the EU adopted a new trade agreement in 2025, allowing agricultural products from Western Sahara to be included, provided they are labeled as “Dakhla Oued Ed-Dahab” and “Laâyoune-Sakia El Hamra”.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, in January 2026, the EU—consistent with its traditional support for UN frameworks and taking into account UN Resolution 2797—officially identified Morocco’s 2007 autonomy plan as the most feasible solution.¹¹⁸ These developments suggest a gradual shift in Brussels toward a more pragmatic

¹¹³ European Union, *Euro-Mediterranean Agreement establishing an Association with Morocco*, OJ L 70 (March 18, 2000).

¹¹⁴ Court of Justice of the European Union (Grand Chamber), *Judgment of 21 December 2016, Case C-104/16 P, Council of the European Union v. Front Polisario*.

¹¹⁵ Jed Odermatt, “[International Law as Challenge to EU Acts: Front Polisario II](#),” *Common Market Law Review* 60, no. 1 (February 2023): 224–226.

¹¹⁶ Court of Justice of the European Union (Grand Chamber), *Judgment of 4 October 2024, Joined Cases C-779/21 P and C-799/21 P, European Commission and Council of the European Union v. Front Populaire pour la Libération de la Saguia el Hamra et du Rio de Oro (Front Polisario)*, ECLI:EU:C:2024:835.

¹¹⁷ Council of the European Union, *Council Decision (EU) 2025/2023 of 2 October 2025 on the EU Position within the Association Council with Morocco*, OJ L 2025/2023 (3 Oct. 2025).

¹¹⁸ Council of the European Union, *Note from the General Secretariat of the Council to Delegations: Position of the European Union with a View to the 15th Session of the EU–Morocco Association Council* (Brussels, January 29, 2026), ST 5724 2026 INIT.

approach, balancing adherence to international law with strategic interests such as migration control and renewable energy cooperation.

Despite efforts to strengthen trade and cooperation, EU–Morocco relations have faced significant challenges, notably due to the Pegasus and Qatargate scandals. The Pegasus spyware controversy had notable repercussions for Morocco’s relations with several EU Member States, particularly France and Spain. These allegations extended further, with claims that Morocco may have used Pegasus to spy on prominent political leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Pedro Sánchez in 2021, following their inclusion on a list of persons of interest in 2019.¹¹⁹ Tensions reached their peak in 2022 with the *Moroccogate* (also known as Qatargate) scandal, a corruption case involving Members of the European Parliament. The investigation, initiated by Belgian authorities, also uncovered related bribery schemes linked to Qatar and Mauritania. Evidence suggested that certain MEPs received gifts and paid trips to Morocco in exchange for influencing key policy decisions.¹²⁰

The primary aim of these efforts was to advance Moroccan interests in Western Sahara, particularly by ensuring the territory’s inclusion in EU–Morocco trade agreements.¹²¹ Despite the seriousness of the allegations, the EU avoided directly implicating Morocco to prevent diplomatic friction. While the scandal raised concerns about the integrity of prior agreements, no formal investigation was launched into potential corruption influencing EU decision-making.¹²² In this context, the scandal had a limited medium-term impact on EU–Morocco relations, as the effects focused on internal European Parliament reforms rather than retaliation against Morocco. As Keohane and Nye note, political scandals may generate trust deficits or negotiation delays, but such effects are often constrained by structural interdependence. In the Euro-Moroccan case, dense bilateral ties acted as a stabilizing mechanism, subordinating reputational crises to the preservation of strategic imperatives.¹²³

In conclusion, EU–Morocco relations reflect a balance between legal constraints, international commitments, and strategic pragmatism, with Morocco as a central actor. The EU continues to align with United Nations resolutions and international law regarding Western Sahara, including UN Resolution 2797, while showing a more flexible approach in practice. This

¹¹⁹ Kirchgaessner and Jones, “[Over 200 Spanish Mobile Numbers.](#)”

¹²⁰ Fernández-Molina and Khakee, “[The ‘Moroccogate’ Scandal.](#)” 663–665.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., p. 670–672.

¹²³ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2012), 9–12.

dynamic allows Morocco to leverage its strategic importance in areas such as migration and energy. Although scandals such as Pegasus and Qatargate have raised concerns, their impact has largely remained confined to internal EU reforms. Ultimately, strong interdependence continues to sustain cooperation despite legal sensitivities.

3. MOROCCO IN THE MAGHREB AND MIDDLE EAST

Morocco's strategic environment extends beyond its immediate territorial disputes into the wider Maghreb and Middle East. This chapter examines three relationships that shape its regional position. It begins with Algeria, whose rivalry with Morocco has paralysed Maghrebi integration and driven an arms race, assessing possible trajectories for 2026–2031. It then turns to Mauritania, whose ambivalence between Rabat and Algiers shapes Morocco's access to the Sahel. Finally, it analyses Morocco's normalisation with Israel under the 2020 Abraham Accords and its regional implications, evaluating whether Rabat can act as a bridge to the Arab world or whether this role is increasingly assumed by the United Arab Emirates.

3.1 BREAKING DOWN THE MOROCCO-ALGERIA CONFLICT

The severing of diplomatic relations between Algeria and Morocco in 2021, which remains in force today, underscores the profoundly strained nature of bilateral ties between the two neighbours. This contemporary breakdown is rooted in a rivalry that dates back to the 1950s, when border discrepancies first surfaced. Although the two states initially cooperated against French colonial rule—with Morocco supporting Algeria's National Liberation Army—Relations deteriorated after independence as Moroccan claims over Tindouf and Béchar led to the 1963 Sand War, later settled by the 1972 border agreement recognizing Algerian sovereignty in exchange for support on Western Sahara.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, rather than easing tensions, Western Sahara soon became the central and enduring point of contention. Following King Hassan II's Green March, Algeria interpreted Moroccan actions as expansionist¹²⁵ and responded by providing the Polisario Front with military, logistical, and diplomatic assistance that continues today. From Rabat's perspective, Algeria's continued support for the Polisario represents a fundamental breach of trust.¹²⁶ This persistent rivalry also helps explain why attempts at regional cooperation like the Arab Maghreb Union have repeatedly failed. This became evident after the 1994 Marrakech terrorist

¹²⁴ Lounnas, Djallil, and Nizar Messari, "[Algeria–Morocco Relations and Their Impact on the Maghrebi Regional System](#)," *Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) Working Paper* no. 20 (October 2018): 6–7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7–8.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13–17.

attack, which Morocco attributed to Algerian intelligence services. In response to these allegations, Algeria decided to close its land borders¹²⁷.

Despite this entrenched rivalry, bilateral relations underwent a temporary period of relative stabilization at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Paloma González has observed, this phase constituted a “protective détente,” shaped by the regional upheavals of the Arab uprisings.¹²⁸ Domestic stability thus became the overriding concern. However, this fragile equilibrium began to erode in 2019 with the emergence of Algeria’s Hirak movement.¹²⁹ Although Morocco steadily expanded its regional influence during this period, open tensions remained subdued until 2020, when relations deteriorated sharply and culminated in the 2021 diplomatic rupture.

Several interconnected developments contributed to this escalation. One of the most significant was the incident in Guerguerat. Located within a demilitarized zone of Western Sahara, the village became the focus of renewed tensions in 2020 when Moroccan forces entered the area using military force. The Polisario Front considered this a violation of the 1991 ceasefire and resumed hostilities.¹³⁰ Algeria interpreted these developments as part of a broader strategy aimed at consolidating Moroccan control over the territory.¹³¹

At the same time, broader geopolitical developments further intensified mutual mistrust. The pivotal factor was the United States’ decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco’s normalization of relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. For Algerian eyes, this move consolidated Morocco’s territorial claims. Moreover, it also deepened an existing divergence on the Israeli–Palestinian issue: while Morocco—home to Africa’s largest Jewish community—shifted away from the traditional Arab stance through expanding cooperation with Israel,¹³² Algeria has consistently refused diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Consequently, Algiers perceived the rapprochement not only as a diplomatic

¹²⁷ Lounnas and Messari, “[Algeria–Morocco Relations](#),” 8–15.

¹²⁸ Paloma Gonzalez del Miño, “[The Rivalry between Algeria and Morocco: An Analysis of the Effects of the Breakdown of Diplomatic Relations in 2021](#),” *Paix et Sécurité Internationales - Journal of International Law and International Relations* 12 (2024): 7.

¹²⁹ A. Berrahmoun, “[Inside the Hirak: The Dynamics of a Mass Movement for Social Justice and Human Rights](#),” *International Journal of Human Rights Education* 7, no. 1 (2023): 2–5.

¹³⁰ CNN, “[Western Sahara Independence Leader Declares the End of a 29-Year-Old Ceasefire](#).”

¹³¹ González del Miño, “[The Rivalry between Algeria and Morocco](#),” 7.

¹³² Alissa Pavia, Karim Mezran, Roberto Menotti, Alessia Melcangi, and Emadeddin Badi, “[Crisis in the Maghreb](#),” in *North Africa’s Transatlantic Relations amid Change and Continuity* (Atlantic Council, 2022), 31–32.

realignment but also as a direct security threat, given the prospect of enhanced Moroccan military and intelligence capabilities through Israeli partnership.¹³³

In parallel with these geopolitical shifts, accusations of espionage and internal destabilization further aggravated tensions. In the 2020 Pegasus affair (see section 2.2), Morocco was accused of spying on Algerian officials.¹³⁴ Algeria additionally charged Morocco and Israel with supporting the Kabylie separatist group MAK, which it blamed for the 2021 wildfires.¹³⁵ These claims reinforced Algiers' perception of direct Moroccan interference in its internal affairs. Indeed, the perception was underscored at the July 2021 Non-Aligned Movement session, when Morocco countered Algeria's support for Sahrawi self-determination by asserting Kabylie's right to self-determination¹³⁶—a position reaffirmed in 2024.¹³⁷

The diplomatic rupture of 2021 marked the culmination of a long-term escalation. On 24 August 2021, Algeria's Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra announced the severance of diplomatic relations with Morocco, imposing a total ban on Moroccan aircraft in its airspace and terminating the contract for the Maghreb–Europe Gas Pipeline, affecting third parties such as Spain and Portugal.¹³⁸ Since then, bilateral relations have evolved into overt strategic competition for primacy in the Maghreb, especially in military and diplomatic domains. This dynamic is best understood through the lens of Offensive Realism, whereby states in an anarchic system seek to maximise relative power for survival.¹³⁹ Both countries are pursuing sustained military modernisation and elevated defence spending as central instruments to enhance their relative capabilities and consolidate regional influence.

The arms race between both countries—combined with regional dynamics and internal considerations—has consequently made them two of the largest defence investors in Africa. In 2025, Algeria allocated approximately \$25.4 billion to military capabilities—equivalent to

¹³³ González del Miño, "[The Rivalry between Algeria and Morocco](#)," 9–10.

¹³⁴ Dana Priest, Craig Timberg y Souad Mekhennet, "[On the list: Ten prime ministers, three presidents and a king](#)," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2021.

¹³⁵ Al Jazeera, "[Algeria blames groups it links to Morocco, Israel for wildfires](#)," August 19, 2021.

¹³⁶ Morocco, Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations, [Letter dated 19 July 2021 addressed to the President of the Security Council](#), U.N. Doc. S/2021/666 (July 22, 2021).

¹³⁷ Morocco, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, [Letter dated 13 August 2024 to the President of the Security Council](#), U.N. Doc. S/2024/614 (Aug. 14, 2024).

¹³⁸ International Crisis Group, [Managing Tensions between Algeria and Morocco](#), Middle East & North Africa Report No. 247, November 29, 2024, 10–11.

¹³⁹ González del Miño, "[The Rivalry between Algeria and Morocco](#)," 4–6.

8.8% of GDP¹⁴⁰—and intends to sustain comparable levels in 2026,¹⁴¹ representing a 175% increase since 2021.¹⁴² Morocco, for its part, allocated approximately \$13.4 billion to defence in 2025,¹⁴³ equivalent to 4.2% of GDP,¹⁴⁴ while its 2026 defence budget rises to approximately \$17.1 billion, reflecting more modest yet sustained growth over the same period.¹⁴⁵ This disparity underscores divergent strategic approaches: Morocco prioritises efficiency through advanced technologies and strategic partnerships, whereas Algeria emphasises sheer force size and conventional capabilities to secure regional predominance.

These developments are further shaped by the distinct ideological orientations that have historically defined both states and their international alignments. From the outset, Algeria positioned itself as a revolutionary socialist republic centred on anti-colonial struggle, whereas Morocco remained a conservative monarchy grounded in liberal economics and the narrative of a “Greater Morocco.” These divergences were evident during the Cold War, when Algeria aligned with the Soviet Union and Morocco with the Western bloc, particularly the United States and France.¹⁴⁶ This pattern endures in contemporary external relations: both countries rely heavily on foreign arms suppliers, with Morocco sourcing 60% from the United States and 24% from Israel¹⁴⁷—thereby accelerating the arms race through non-conventional technologies such as drones—while Algeria procures 39% from Russia and 27% from China.¹⁴⁸ These partnerships lead Algiers to maintain neutrality on issues such as the war in Ukraine¹⁴⁹ and integrate itself as a key player in the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁵⁰

Within this broader geopolitical context, external actors have also attempted to mediate the conflict. Despite maintaining robust trade relations with Morocco, the United States has

¹⁴⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), “[Defence Spending and Procurement Trends](#),” in *The Military Balance 2026* (London: IISS, 2026).

¹⁴¹ République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire, [Projet de Loi de Finances pour 2026](#), Livre I–II (Alger: Assemblée Populaire Nationale, 2025), 7.

¹⁴² Macrotrends, “Algeria Military Spending/Defense Budget,” accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/dza/algeria/military-spending-defense-budget>.

¹⁴³ Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances, [Loi de Finances n° 60-24 pour l’Année Budgétaire 2025, Bulletin Officiel n° 7362](#) (Rabat: Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances, 2024), Article 39.

¹⁴⁴ Mahamed Alaoui, “[Morocco Increases Defence Budget, Boosting Domestic Arms Industry in Response to Regional Threats](#),” *The Arab Weekly*, 22 October 2025

¹⁴⁵ Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances, [Projet de Loi de Finances pour l’Année Budgétaire 2026](#), (Rabat: Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances, 2025), Article 35.

¹⁴⁶ Lounnas and Messari, “[Algeria–Morocco Relations](#),” 6–7.

¹⁴⁷ SIPRI, [Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2025](#), 6.

¹⁴⁸ González del Miño, “[The Rivalry between Algeria and Morocco](#),” 20, accessed via HeinOnline.

¹⁴⁹ Pavia, “[Crisis in the Maghreb](#),” 33.

¹⁵⁰ Y. H. Zoubir, “[Algeria and China: Shifts in Political and Military Relations](#),” *Global Policy* 14, no. Suppl. 1 (2023): 58–68.

assumed a mediating role in the Western Sahara dispute since the deterioration of Algerian–Moroccan relations in 2021. In this role, the Biden administration intensified contacts with all parties involved in the Western Sahara conflict, which remains at the center of the Algerian–Moroccan dispute.¹⁵¹ Most recently, the mediation effort was reflected in recent talks organized by the United States in Madrid, where representatives from the Polisario Front, Morocco, Algeria, the United States, and the United Nations participated in discussions addressing the United Nations Resolution 2797.¹⁵² Furthermore, the recent shift in the European Union’s stance regarding this resolution places Algeria in a precarious position, both because of its extensive energy agreements with the EU and due to the risk of diplomatic isolation in relation to its position on the Western Sahara conflict.

In conclusion, the breakdown of diplomatic relations between Algeria and Morocco in 2021 should be understood not as an isolated event but as the culmination of a long-standing rivalry rooted in historical disputes, competing regional ambitions, and divergent international alignments. While the conflict over Western Sahara remains the central driver of tensions, recent developments—including geopolitical realignments, mutual accusations of interference, and an ongoing arms race—have further deepened mistrust between both states. As a result, relations between Algeria and Morocco continue to evolve within a framework of strategic competition, where military capabilities, external partnerships, and regional influence play a decisive role in shaping the balance of power in the Maghreb.

Scenario construction: *Prospects for Morocco-Algeria relations (2026-2031)*

This section employs scenario construction as an analytical tool to examine potential trajectories in Algerian–Moroccan relations. Two key drivers are identified for their decisive influence on outcomes: the level of international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara (high vs. low), and the degree of bilateral diplomatic engagement between Algeria and Morocco (normalization vs. rupture). The selected time frame (2026–2031) enables the observation of structural geopolitical dynamics while limiting the uncertainty inherent in long-term projections.

1) First, and what we understand as the least likely scenario, envisages high international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, coupled with the gradual

¹⁵¹ International Crisis Group, [Managing Tensions between Algeria and Morocco](#), 24–25.

¹⁵² MSN, [“US Convenes Foes Morocco, Algeria for Western Sahara Talks,”](#) March 2, 2026

normalization of diplomatic relations between Algeria and Morocco. Such an outcome could arise within a broader regional realignment, including Arab–Israeli normalization, which would act as a catalyst by generating incentives for both North African states to de-escalate tensions. Then, sustained support from the United States, key European actors, and, increasingly, certain African states would consolidate Morocco’s position and marginalise the Polisario Front diplomatically. At the same time, economic incentives, concerns over regional stability, and external pressure—particularly from the European Union—could facilitate the restoration of ties. Nevertheless, underlying structural rivalry would persist, constraining genuine cooperation and precluding a comprehensive resolution of the conflict.

2) Second, if international recognition remains limited while diplomatic engagement increases, a scenario of conditional dialogue may emerge. Major international actors, particularly within the European Union and multilateral frameworks, would likely continue to support a solution based on self-determination, thereby preserving Algeria’s diplomatic position. Bilateral relations could resume on pragmatic grounds, including economic and security considerations, enabling limited cooperation. Nevertheless, mutual distrust and the unresolved status of Western Sahara would constrain progress, making any normalization fragile and easily reversible.

3) Third, and what we understand as the most likely of the scenarios, a scenario in which Morocco achieves a high level of international recognition while diplomatic relations with Algeria remain broken would likely intensify rivalry. Morocco’s strengthened position—supported by the United States and parts of the European bloc—would increase its regional influence, prompting a more assertive response from Algeria. In this context, Algeria would maintain its support for the Polisario Front and further develop its military capabilities, particularly through cooperation with Russia and China. The absence of diplomatic engagement would heighten the risk of indirect confrontation, with external actors playing a key role in containing escalation.

4) Finally, if both international recognition remains low and diplomatic engagement continues to be absent, a scenario of persistent confrontation would emerge. The Western Sahara dispute would remain unresolved, with no significant shifts among key international actors. Algeria and Morocco would maintain their diplomatic rupture, characterized by minimal communication and continued accusations of interference. In this context, the security dilemma would deepen, reflected in sustained military expenditure and reliance on external partners.

While direct conflict would remain unlikely, the absence of dialogue would increase the risk of miscalculation and prolong regional instability.

In conclusion, an analysis of the four scenarios reveals that they all rest on the same core factors: the enduring Western Sahara conflict, the deep-seated bilateral rivalry, the significant influence of external actors, and the risk of prolonged regional instability despite the low probability of direct conflict. These shared elements recur across all trajectories and account for the considerable uncertainty surrounding the future of Algerian–Moroccan relations. Consequently, structural geopolitical forces shape every possible outcome, rendering the scenario of high recognition combined with diplomatic rupture the most likely path while making full normalization the least probable one in the 2026–2031 period.

In light of the above, in the medium and long term, Algerian–Moroccan relations are more likely to remain marked by persistent dissension than to move toward genuine reconciliation or open war. The Western Sahara dispute, mutual strategic distrust, and regional rivalry will probably continue to block full normalization, while external actors may help prevent direct military escalation. As a result, the most likely outcome is a prolonged state of tension, diplomatic rupture, or fragile dialogue, and indirect competition rather than a clear horizon of armed confrontation.

3.2. MAURITANIA: BUFFER OR GATEWAY TO THE SAHEL

Morocco's relationship with Mauritania has historically been volatile, shaped by bilateral tensions, regional rivalry with Algeria, and the unresolved status of Western Sahara. Morocco did not recognize Mauritania until 1969, nine years after its independence, reflecting King Hassan II's early claims over what he considered Morocco's historical territory.¹⁵³ These territorial and ideological tensions have repeatedly influenced political developments in Nouakchott. Mauritania's alignment with Morocco during the Western Sahara conflict antagonized Algeria and contributed to political instability, including the ousting of President Mokhtar Ould Daddah in 1978. Subsequent leadership changes, including the 1984 coup

¹⁵³ Said Saddiki, "[Border Walls in a Regional Context: The Case of Morocco and Algeria](#)," in [Borders and Border Walls: In-Security, Symbolism, Vulnerabilities](#) (London: Routledge, 2020), 111.

against President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla, often reflected attempts to balance ties with Morocco and Algeria amid internal fragility.¹⁵⁴

Historically, Mauritania's position as a small, resource-limited state has made it vulnerable to external pressures. Both Morocco and Algeria have at times exploited Mauritania's geographic and economic limitations to advance their own agendas, exacerbating domestic political fragility.¹⁵⁵ Mauritania's oscillating alliances, including support for the Frente Polisario or alignment with Morocco, often translated into economic isolation or political upheaval.¹⁵⁶ Nonetheless, recent administrations, particularly under Presidents Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, have pursued a more balanced foreign policy aimed at defusing regional rivalries and securing national stability.¹⁵⁷ Mauritania has leveraged "shelter diplomacy," particularly with France, to maintain strategic autonomy, avoiding submission to the influence of either Morocco or Algeria.¹⁵⁸

Security considerations also extend to economic assets and broader political alignments. Mauritania's iron hub at Zouerate and areas affected by Western Sahara tensions, including cross-border resource activity, have often been used as leverage by regional powers. Since the Polisario ceasefire collapsed in 2020, Moroccan drone incidents targeting Mauritanian gold seekers have exposed fragile security cooperation and the risk of low-profile diplomatic crises.¹⁵⁹

Mauritania's ambivalent stance toward Morocco reflects fears of retaliation from SADR-affiliated groups, internal divisions, and tribal sympathies toward the Sahrawi cause.¹⁶⁰ Mauritania's official recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic complicates the possibility of a clear-cut alignment with Morocco, making any transparent agreement contingent on both the future status of the SADR and the broader Morocco–Algeria

¹⁵⁴ Abdelhadi Baiche, "[The Effects of Strategic Rivalries on Non-Rival Neighboring Small States: Mauritania's Political Stability: Shelter Diplomacy to Manage the Algeria–Morocco Strategic Rivalry](#)," *Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies* 4, no. 2 (2024): 147.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁵⁶ Baiche, "[The Effects of Strategic Rivalries on Non-Rival Neighboring Small States](#)," 148, citing A. Pazzanita, "[Mauritania's Foreign Policy: The Search for Protection](#)," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 1992): 281–300.

¹⁵⁷ Baiche, "[The Effects of Strategic Rivalries on Non-Rival Neighboring Small States](#)," 148.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153–55.

¹⁶⁰ Wolfram Lacher and Isabelle Werenfels, "[Mauritania's Balancing Act amid Intensifying Algerian-Moroccan Rivalry](#)," *Megatrends Spotlight* no. 49 (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 7, 2025).

relationship, which remains at a stalemate.¹⁶¹ These considerations are compounded by the need to safeguard key economic zones, maintain domestic stability, and navigate Morocco's growing regional economic initiatives.

Recent economic and infrastructural initiatives are reshaping regional dynamics, offering significant growth potential alongside emerging strategic tensions. The development of the Dakhla Atlantic Port and new road corridors connecting Western Sahara to Mauritania significantly enhances cross-border connectivity. Beyond trade, the project serves as a security buffer, with both nations aligning to patrol the route and neutralize potential Polisario movement in the borderlands, suggesting that even a full incorporation of Western Sahara into Morocco would not necessarily create additional points of conflict along this border. At the same time, Mauritania remains cautious about the possible diversion of maritime traffic away from its own ports, such as Nouadhibou, which could limit anticipated economic gains.¹⁶² Recent diplomatic gestures, including President Ghazouani's visit to Rabat in December 2024, the first by a Mauritanian head of state in over a decade, reflect a willingness to strengthen ties while balancing national interests.¹⁶³

Despite these pressures, Mauritania has made significant progress in internal stability and regional diplomacy. The peaceful 2019 presidential transition from Ould Abdel Aziz to Ghazouani marked a milestone,¹⁶⁴ and the country is now considered relatively safe by the Global Terrorism Index.¹⁶⁵ Nouakchott has actively engaged in regional diplomacy, hosting summits, mediating conflicts, and participating in Sahel alliances, while reducing coup attempts and maintaining domestic stability.¹⁶⁶ Mauritania acts as a vital corridor and geographical bridge that connects Morocco to the Sahel while simultaneously serving as a strategic pivot for regional stability.¹⁶⁷ The country hosts the G5 Sahel headquarters and participates actively in French-led counterterrorism operations, such as Operations Serval and

¹⁶¹ Youssef Tobi and Youssef El Jai, *Morocco/Mauritania: Common Strategic Interests*, Policy Brief PB-20/03 (Rabat: Policy Center for the New South, January 2020), 2–3.

¹⁶² Rida Lyammouri and Fadoua Ammari, *Policy Center for the New South, Research Paper No. 09-25*, “[The Atlantic Initiative and Morocco-Mauritania Relations: Strategic opportunities and shared challenges](#),” (Rabat: Policy Center for the New South, 2025), 11–13.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 3–4.

¹⁶⁴ Bioforce, “[La Mauritanie face à son instabilité politique et les problèmes régionaux](#),” *Ritmo*, May 20, 2021.

¹⁶⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026), 9.

¹⁶⁶ Baiche, “[The Effects of Strategic Rivalries on Non-Rival Neighboring Small States](#),” 158, citing Adama Boukhars, “[Contre le terrorisme en Mauritanie](#),” *Centre d'Études Stratégiques de l'Afrique, Africenter*, June 25, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Baiche, “[The Effects of Strategic Rivalries on Non-Rival Neighboring Small States](#),” 153.

Barkhane, to prevent instability spillovers from neighboring countries such as Mali.¹⁶⁸ These achievements have strengthened Mauritania's ability to manage external pressures, including its relationship with Morocco.

Mauritania's sparsely populated desert border, combined with the joint security coordination already visible along the Dakhla corridor, suggests that full incorporation of Western Sahara into Morocco would be unlikely to generate significant new friction. The structural conditions, demographic and geographic, favor stability over dispute. The more consequential question is whether Mauritania distances Morocco from or pulls it closer to the Sahel, and the section's evidence points toward a carefully managed proximity. Mauritania's G5 Sahel membership, its counterterrorism cooperation, and its role as a diplomatic hub allow Morocco to benefit from Sahelian connectivity without direct exposure to its volatility. Yet this gateway function has a built-in ceiling. Mauritania's recognition of the SADR, its tribal sympathies toward the Sahrawi cause, and its long-practiced balancing between Rabat and Algiers mean that deeper alignment remains contingent on diplomatic shifts neither side fully controls. Mauritania is, in sum, a reliable but conditional partner. It reduces friction along a largely empty border while granting Morocco controlled access to the Sahel, provided Rabat continues to accommodate rather than pressure Nouakchott's studied ambivalence.

3.3. ABRAHAM ACCORDS: SHAPING GULF DYNAMICS

In September 2020, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords, normalizing relations with Israel under U.S. mediation. Sudan followed shortly thereafter, and in December 2020, Morocco also agreed to re-establish diplomatic ties with Israel. For Rabat, the decision was not merely symbolic; it formed part of a broader strategy where, after decades of diplomatic lobbying, the United States, under President Donald Trump, recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, signaling a recalibration of Morocco's regional alliances.¹⁶⁹

However, Morocco's normalization with Israel in 2020 did not emerge abruptly. The two countries had maintained discreet but substantive ties for decades. The relationship was underpinned by deep social and historical connections: nearly 10% of Israel's population is of Moroccan origin, and Morocco itself was home to one of the largest Jewish communities in the

¹⁶⁸ Baiche, "[The Effects of Strategic Rivalries on Non-Rival Neighboring Small States](#)," 158.

¹⁶⁹ Morr Link, "[The Gaza War and Israel-Morocco Relations: The Common Interests Need Bolstering](#)," Institute for National Security Studies, 2023, 2.

Arab world, numbering around 270,000 on the eve of independence. Beyond these historical and societal links, Moroccan authorities have also engaged with pro-Israel advocacy networks in the United States to strengthen their position in Washington, particularly in support of the autonomy plan for Western Sahara.¹⁷⁰

On the security front, Israel and Morocco have shared a commitment to countering Iranian influence in the MENA region. While recent Israeli attention has focused on Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, Morocco has been wary of Polisario military activity, given Algeria's sustained backing of the movement. Morocco and Israel also found common ground in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Following the 2003 Casablanca attacks carried out by a Moroccan Salafi group linked to Al-Qaeda, Rabat became a key counterterrorism partner for both the United States and the European Union in North Africa.¹⁷¹ This growing convergence was formalized in November 2021, when Morocco and Israel signed a Defense Memorandum of Understanding, establishing a framework for military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and arms procurement.¹⁷²

Their partnership reached a new stage in January 2026, when both countries signed a joint military work plan for the year,¹⁷³ signalling a more institutionalized relationship beyond ad hoc coordination and arms purchases. The agreement marked the first publicly announced arrangement of its kind between Israel and an Arab state. Rabat's willingness to deepen these ties publicly, despite strong domestic identification with the Palestinian cause, underlines the scale of the benefits it judges it is receiving.¹⁷⁴

Similar to other regimes in the region, Morocco seeks to balance relations with Israel against domestic pressure to adopt a firmer stance in support of the Palestinians.¹⁷⁵ Rabat's ambiguous positioning is evident in its opposition to proposals calling for a freeze on all economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Israel and in its refraining from condemning Hamas.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ Irina Tsukerman and Anis El Okbani, "[The Israel-UAE Peace Deal Highlights Morocco's Diplomatic Eclipse](#)," in *The Israel-UAE Peace: A Preliminary Assessment*, ed. Efraim Karsh (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2020), 50–51.

¹⁷¹ Link, "[The Gaza War and Israel-Morocco Relations](#)," 3.

¹⁷² Government of Israel, "[Israel and Morocco Sign Historic Defense MOU](#)," *Government of Israel*, November 24, 2021.

¹⁷³ Kersten Knipp, "[Morocco Boosts Military Ties with Israel Despite Tensions](#)," *DW*, January 10, 2026.

¹⁷⁴ Business Monitor Online, "Morocco Foreign Policy," *Business Monitor Online*, February 4, 2026, accessed via Nexis Uni.

¹⁷⁵ Link, "[The Gaza War and Israel-Morocco Relations](#)," 2–3.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Morocco's behavior reflects a deliberate strategy: maintaining operational cooperation with Israel while limiting political exposure.¹⁷⁷

Prior to the Abraham Accords, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco maintained informal relations with Israel, but refrained from establishing formal diplomatic ties. This position was partly attributable to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative—led by Saudi Arabia and endorsed by all 22 members of the Arab League—which conditioned normalization between Israel and Arab states on progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.¹⁷⁸

In recent years, however, shifting regional dynamics and evolving strategic priorities have prompted Saudi Arabia to reconsider its stance, opening the door to potential normalization with Israel. A normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia is especially valuable for Israel due to the Kingdom's status in the Muslim world, as Israel hopes it would help broaden acceptance and strengthen ties across the region.¹⁷⁹ Saudi Arabia, in turn, has an interest in the strategic dividends such a rapprochement could yield, particularly in its relationship with the United States. In earlier assessments of Saudi strategic interests, protection against Iran was often presented as a central incentive for normalization.¹⁸⁰ However, with Iran's proxy network weakened across the Middle East and new regional security alignments emerging, Riyadh's calculus has shifted. The defence pact signed in September 2025 between nuclear-armed Pakistan and Saudi Arabia,¹⁸¹ concluded shortly after an Israeli strike in Qatar targeting Hamas officials,¹⁸² illustrates Riyadh's growing tendency to diversify its security partnerships. Some analysts interpret this move as a hedge against regional instability and as a reflection of declining confidence in the United States as the Kingdom's primary security guarantor.¹⁸³

While Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman previously indicated that the countries were moving closer to a deal every day, the destruction of Gaza halted the process, forcing Riyadh to adopt more cautious rhetoric to navigate domestic unpopularity and maintain its standing in

¹⁷⁷ Nina Kozłowski, "[Why Morocco Has Chosen Military Cooperation with Israel](#)," *The Africa Report*, January 15, 2026.

¹⁷⁸ J. Singer, "[Introductory Note to the Abraham Accords: Normalization Agreements Signed by Israel with the U.A.E., Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco](#)," *International Legal Materials* 60, no. 3 (2021): 449.

¹⁷⁹ Yoel Guzansky, [Saudi Arabia and Normalization with Israel](#), INSS Insight No. 1396 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, October 29, 2020), 3.

¹⁸⁰ Yoel Guzansky, [The Road to Normalization: Relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia](#) (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, July 23, 2023), 2–3.

¹⁸¹ Usaid Siddiqui and Reuters, "[Saudi Arabia Signs Mutual Defence Pact with Nuclear-Armed Pakistan](#)," *Al Jazeera*, September 17, 2025.

¹⁸² Helen Regan, "[Israel Strikes Hamas Leadership in Qatar in Unprecedented Attack](#)," *CNN*, September 10, 2025.

¹⁸³ Mohammad Salami, "[Pakistan-Saudi Pact Reveals Growing Distrust of US-Led Security Architecture](#)," *Stimson Center*, September 22, 2025.

the Islamic world.¹⁸⁴ As of 2026, in exchange for normalization, the Kingdom is expected to prioritize the resolution of the Palestinian question, based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, as it considers the initiative as a basis for discussion,¹⁸⁵ as well as American assistance to build a civilian nuclear reactor and access to more advanced weaponry.¹⁸⁶

While Saudi Arabia continues to weigh the terms of normalization, the United Arab Emirates took decisive action, becoming the first Arab country to formally sign the Abraham Accords. This development arguably reduced one of the diplomatic advantages that had previously positioned Rabat as a key player capable of bridging the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, limiting its ability to shape peacebuilding with Israel and broader regional diplomatic developments.¹⁸⁷

The UAE has emerged as a key non-aligned actor and mediator in both regional and global affairs, normalizing relations with Iran, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, and Syria.¹⁸⁸ Its leadership perceives the country as a global entrepôt that has earned the right to prosper beyond rigid political blocs. In this context, it has seen no contradiction in sustaining a close partnership with the United States while establishing a broad strategic partnership with China in 2018, welcoming Russian capital after 2022 sanctions, and mediating the exchange of Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war while simultaneously deepening economic ties with both states.¹⁸⁹

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have a history of cooperation, especially in their shared opposition to political Islam and efforts to contain Iranian influence. However, in recent years, bilateral relations have shown signs of strain, partly due to the Emirates increasingly being portrayed as an "Israeli outpost" in the Arab world.¹⁹⁰ Tensions intensified when the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) declared southern Yemeni independence in January 2026, a project that collapsed after roughly five days under strong Saudi political and military pressure.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁴ P. Aarts, "[The Rocky Road of Israeli-Saudi Normalization](#)," in *The Future of the Occupation of the Palestinian Territories after Gaza*, ed. E. van Veen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 164.

¹⁸⁵ Guzansky, *The Road to Normalization*, 7.

¹⁸⁶ Aarts, "[The Rocky Road of Israeli-Saudi Normalization](#)," 171.

¹⁸⁷ Tsukerman and El Okbani, "[The Israel-UAE Peace Deal](#)," 52–53.

¹⁸⁸ Joshua Krasna, "[Big Changes in United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy](#)," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 18, 2023.

¹⁸⁹ Jon B. Alterman, *The United Arab Emirates: From Footnote to Sophisticated Global Partner* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2025), 2.

¹⁹⁰ Constantin Schreiber, "[The new Arab rivalry; The United Arab Emirates \(UAE\) is seen as a bridge builder between Israel and the Arab world. But that doesn't sit well with Saudi Arabia](#)," *Die Welt (English)*, February 18, 2026.

¹⁹¹ David Gritten, "[UAE says it will withdraw from Yemen after Saudi strike on separatist-held port](#)," *BBC News*, December 30, 2025.

Ultimately, further cooperation between Morocco and Israel is likely in the short and medium term, particularly following the recent institutionalization of their partnership in defense matters. At the same time, the Moroccan leadership will likely maintain a cautious approach in order to manage domestic sensitivities related to the Palestinian issue. However, Morocco is unlikely to play a decisive role in fostering broader Arab normalization with Israel. The momentum of rapprochement increasingly points instead to the United Arab Emirates, whose growing role as a global mediator stems from its ability to maintain relations with multiple and often competing actors. In this context, the trajectory of normalization will depend largely on the strategic calculations of Saudi Arabia, as well as on the evolving balance between cooperation and rivalry in Saudi-Emirati relations.

4. RETHINKING THE MAGHREB: MOROCCO'S CONTINENTAL AMBITIONS

Morocco's continental ambitions extend its strategic reach across Africa. This chapter examines how Rabat leverages geography and institutional engagement to build economic, political, and security influence. It first considers security threats from the Sahel—transnational jihadism and organized crime—and Morocco's responses through counterterrorism, religious diplomacy, and development initiatives. It then explores Morocco's emergence as a trade and investment hub, driven by industrial expansion and the Atlantic Initiative. Finally, it evaluates Morocco's 2017 return to the African Union and the use of continental diplomacy to bolster its position on Western Sahara despite persistent opposition.

4.1. THE STABILITY CHALLENGE IN THE SAHEL

Morocco is often regarded as the most stable country in North Africa, with Mauritania acting as a buffer between the kingdom and the Sahel. However, the subregion is increasingly marked by insecurity, exemplified by recurrent coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). which have weakened state control and fostered territorial fragmentation,¹⁹² facilitating the proliferation of non-state armed actors and informal cross-border networks.

Despite Morocco's internal stability, developments in the Sahel generate a second layer of instability that transcends national borders and poses indirect threats to its security. This dimension is characterized by non-traditional forms of transnational violence, particularly the expansion of Islamist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda (via JNIM) and the Islamic State (ISGS/ISSP).¹⁹³ Exploiting weak state control in central Sahelian countries, these groups operate through decentralized and adaptive networks that extend northwards,¹⁹⁴ underscoring the regional nature of jihadist expansion. One of the most immediate risks for Morocco is thus the potential spillover of such activity. In response, Rabat has adopted a preventive strategy centered on proactive vigilance by the Bureau Central d'Investigation Judiciaire (BCIJ), complemented by international cooperation and socioeconomic programs aimed at addressing

¹⁹² Katharina P. W. Döring, "[Combating 'Sahelistan': The Struggle over Military Deployment for Mali](#)," in *African Military Politics in the Sahel: Regional Organizations and International Politics*, African Studies series, 62–86 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 63–71.

¹⁹³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "[Islamists in Central Sahel](#)," May 2021, 1–2.

¹⁹⁴ Assia Bensalah Alaoui, "[Morocco's Security Strategy: Preventing Terrorism and Extremism](#)," *European View* 16, no. 1 (June 2017), 113.

the root causes of radicalization.¹⁹⁵ This approach has proven effective, notably through the dismantling of numerous terrorist cells and the prevention of attacks,¹⁹⁶ positioning Morocco as a model of proactive counterterrorism cooperation, although structural challenges such as poverty and limited access to quality education persist.¹⁹⁷

In addition to violent extremism, transnational organized crime constitutes another major channel through which Sahelian instability affects Morocco, often regarded as a transit country for illicit flows bound for Europe. As reported by the Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment, criminal activity in the region exploits informal trade routes to traffic high-value goods—particularly cannabis resin and cocaine—from the Sahel into North Africa.¹⁹⁸ Within this context, Morocco occupies a pivotal position: historically a leading producer of cannabis resin, it is also alleged to function as a strategic transit point for South American cocaine moving toward Europe through Saharan routes.¹⁹⁹ This creates a policy dilemma, as Moroccan authorities must balance international cooperation in combating trafficking with the socioeconomic realities of regions such as the Rif, where cannabis cultivation remains a key source of livelihood.²⁰⁰

To address these challenges, Morocco has promoted a multidimensional strategy combining soft power, economic development, and security measures. Morocco leverages its religious influence to counter radicalization at early stages, notably through the training of imams from Sahelian countries. At the same time, it engages in security cooperation with these states through training, funding, and information-sharing initiatives, as well as collaboration on migration management. Finally, Morocco contributes to human development and economic stability in the Sahel through investments in infrastructure and support for food security, including initiatives led by the OCP Group to assist local farmers.²⁰¹

In line with the above, Morocco has reiterated its ambition to connect the Atlantic Ocean with the Sahel through Western Sahara via the Atlantic Initiative, presented by King Mohammed

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 108–114.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 114–115.

¹⁹⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Impact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment — Sahel* (Vienna/New York: UNODC, 2024), 13.

¹⁹⁹ Jihane Ben Yahia, “Understanding Transnational Organised Crime in the Maghreb and Sahel,” in *Transnational Organized Crime and Political Actors in the Maghreb and Sahel*, (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2019), 2.

²⁰⁰ Max Gallien, “Transnational Organised Crime and Distributional Politics” in *Transnational Organized Crime and Political Actors in the Maghreb and Sahel*, (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2019), 3.

²⁰¹ Noamane Cherkaoui and Youssef Tobi, *The Maghreb’s Outlook Towards the Sahel: An Analysis of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania Standpoints* (Policy Center for the New South, Policy Paper 19/21, 2021), 8–12.

VI in 2023.²⁰² The project, which aims to provide Sahelian states with access to the sea through Moroccan infrastructure, serves a dual purpose: enhancing Morocco's regional leadership while simultaneously reinforcing its territorial claims, as argued by Rida Lyammouri and Fadoua Ammari.²⁰³ As noted by the authors, following the suspension of ECOWAS and the withdrawal of Western actors from the Sahel, Rabat has sought to expand its influence in West Africa through pragmatic cooperation—particularly with Mauritania—thereby attempting to gain strategic leverage in its rivalry with Algeria.²⁰⁴

However, the initiative faces significant constraints. As the corridor would cross Western Sahara, its use by Sahelian states could entail indirect recognition of Moroccan sovereignty. At the same time, Mauritania's neutral stance—largely shaped by concerns over potential Algerian retaliation, anticipated economic losses linked to the port of Dakhla, and the risk of internal public opposition among certain segments of its population—limits its willingness to deepen alignment with Morocco.²⁰⁵ Moreover, Algeria's sustained opposition, combined with persistent instability across the Sahel, further complicates the project's implementation.²⁰⁶ Taken together, although the initiative holds the potential to strengthen Morocco's regional standing, prevailing geopolitical dynamics and enduring regional instability represent significant hurdles for the project.

In conclusion, Morocco's relative stability positions it as both a buffer and an active agent in addressing Sahelian instability. While Islamist violence, organized crime, and illicit trafficking pose ongoing risks, Rabat has demonstrated the capacity to mitigate spillover effects through proactive security measures, regional cooperation, and socioeconomic programs. Nevertheless, new initiatives such as the Atlantic corridor face significant political and structural constraints—including Mauritania's neutrality, Algerian opposition, and persistent regional instability—making their full realization uncertain despite their strategic appeal.

4.2. MOROCCO: AFRICA'S TRADE NEXUS

Morocco's continental projection reflects a clear strategic reorientation from a predominantly Euro-Mediterranean focus toward deeper integration with Sub-Saharan Africa. This shift,

²⁰² His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco, "[HM the King Delivers Speech to Nation on Occasion of 48th Anniversary of Green March \(Full Text\)](#)," *Maroc.ma*, November 6, 2023,

²⁰³ Rida Lyammouri and Fadoua Ammari, "[Morocco's Atlantic Initiative: Geopolitical Implications for the Sahel](#)," (Rabat: Policy Center for the New South, 2025), 4–6.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7–10.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6, 13.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8–10, 17–19.

symbolized by its 2017 return to the African Union, is driven both by the search for new markets and growth opportunities and by a desire to strengthen its position on the Western Sahara conflict.²⁰⁷ Sluggish demand in traditional European partners and the persistent weakness of intra-Maghreb trade have reinforced this pivot, encouraging Morocco to position itself as a key economic actor in a continent expected to experience strong demographic and economic expansion.²⁰⁸

This reorientation has translated into a significant rise in Moroccan outward investment across Africa. Large national firms, particularly in banking, telecommunications, insurance, and construction, have expanded their presence well beyond traditional francophone partners such as Senegal or Côte d’Ivoire. Institutions like Attijariwafa Bank and other financial groups have established extensive regional networks, supporting trade and investment flows.²⁰⁹ As a result, Morocco has emerged as one of the leading African investors on the continent, second only to South Africa, with a particularly strong footprint in West Africa.²¹⁰ This expansion has been actively supported at the highest political level, notably through repeated state visits led by Mohammed VI, often accompanied by business delegations and large-scale investment agreements.²¹¹

Industrial development has also strengthened Morocco’s export capacity toward African markets. The country has successfully positioned itself as a major manufacturing hub, particularly in the automotive sector, attracting foreign investment from companies such as Renault Group and Stellantis. This strategy has allowed Morocco to become the leading car producer and exporter in Africa, while increasing the share of medium-technology goods in its exports.²¹² At the same time, the phosphate sector, dominated by OCP Group, has played a central role in expanding Morocco’s economic presence across the continent. Through investments in fertilizer production plants in countries such as Ethiopia and Tanzania, OCP supports agricultural productivity and food security while reinforcing Morocco’s commercial

²⁰⁷ Anthony Dworkin, “[A Return to Africa: Why North African States Are Looking South](#),” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, July 1, 2020, 4.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²¹⁰ Olivier Monnier, “[Morocco’s Southward Investment Push a Win for Africa](#),” *International Finance Corporation*, January 24, 2024.

²¹¹ Dworkin, “[A Return to Africa](#),” 5–6.

²¹² Alexandre Kateb, “[Morocco’s Long Road Toward Economic Transformation](#),” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 20, 2024, citing Margarita Arredondas, “[Morocco Becomes Africa’s Leading Car Producer](#),” *Atalayar*, August 16, 2024.

integration in African value chains.²¹³ The planned Dakhla Atlantic port further illustrates this logic, projecting Morocco's commercial reach toward the Sahel and positioning the country as a potential gateway between Atlantic trade routes and Sub-Saharan markets.²¹⁴

More recently, Morocco has sought to diversify both the geographical and sectoral scope of its engagement. Energy infrastructure, including planned pipeline connectivity to West Africa, extends this logic beyond trade into long-term resource integration. At the same time, new areas of growth are emerging domestically, particularly in digital technologies and innovation. Nascent efforts in digital services and innovation suggest an ambition to move beyond manufacturing and commodities, though these remain early-stage and unlikely to shift Morocco's competitive profile in the short term.²¹⁵

Despite these advances, several constraints limit the speed and scale of Morocco's continental expansion. Trade with Africa, although growing, remains relatively modest compared to exchanges with Europe, highlighting the structural weight of traditional partners.²¹⁶ Moreover, Morocco faces increasing competition from major African economies such as Nigeria, as well as from global actors. Institutional obstacles also persist. Morocco's attempt to join the Economic Community of West African States has stalled amid concerns from member states about competitive imbalances and market access. These tensions illustrate that Morocco's economic dynamism can also generate resistance among potential partners.²¹⁷

Domestically, structural challenges further constrain Morocco's ability to scale up its influence. While industrialization has progressed, the economy remains caught between competition from lower-cost producers and more advanced technological economies. The limited development of high-tech exports, weaknesses in education, and the insufficient expansion of knowledge-intensive employment all point to the risk of a middle-income trap. Addressing these issues, particularly by improving human capital and fostering innovation, will be essential for sustaining long-term growth and supporting outward expansion.²¹⁸

In the medium term, Morocco's investment and export weight in Africa is therefore likely to increase, driven by strong corporate expansion, industrial capacity, and sectoral diversification.

²¹³ NoamCherkaoui and Tobi, *The Maghreb's Outlook Towards the Sahel*, 9.

²¹⁴ Faouzi, "[Morocco to Open Major Deepwater Ports.](#)"

²¹⁵ Rut Font, "[Marruecos quiere ser la puerta de entrada a África para las 'start up'](#)," *Expansión*, February 24, 2026.

²¹⁶ Kateb, "[Morocco's Long Road Toward Economic Transformation.](#)"

²¹⁷ Dworkin, "[A Return to Africa.](#)" 6.

²¹⁸ Kateb, "[Morocco's Long Road Toward Economic Transformation.](#)"

However, this growth will remain gradual and geographically concentrated, reflecting both external competition and internal structural constraints.

4.3. MOROCCO'S STRATEGIC RETURN TO THE AFRICAN UNION

In 1982, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), granting the non-self-governing territory official membership. In response to this decision, Morocco withdrew from the OAU in 1984, protesting the admission of the SADR and signaling its rejection of the body's recognition of Sahrawi sovereignty.²¹⁹ Over the following 30 years, many Moroccan experts and policymakers came to view the withdrawal as a strategic misstep. During this period, Morocco's absence from the pan-African body allowed Algeria and Libya to support the Polisario Front without restraint, bolstering its influence across the continent and shaping a narrative in favor of Sahrawi self-determination.²²⁰

As discussed in Chapter 4.2, Morocco's decision to rejoin the African Union was driven by both economic and political considerations, notably its ambition to position itself as a key economic hub on the continent while advancing its stance on Western Sahara. Although Morocco has not formally demanded the expulsion of the SADR following its readmission, it is widely understood that Rabat has pursued a strategy aimed at consolidating its control over the territory by cultivating diplomatic support among African states.²²¹ To date, over 30 countries, mainly from Africa and the Arab region, have established diplomatic missions in areas of Western Sahara administered by Morocco, a move broadly interpreted as an implicit acknowledgment of Moroccan sovereignty.²²²

Since Morocco's readmission, its diplomatic efforts have gradually reshaped the organization's engagement with the Polisario Front. Since rejoining the African Union in 2017, Morocco's diplomatic efforts have gradually reshaped the organization's engagement with the Polisario Front. Increasingly, AU-affiliated international meetings now limit participation to UN-recognized sovereign states, effectively restricting the Polisario's access and influence. This trend was evident at the TICAD-9 summit in August 2025²²³ and the Italy–Africa Summit in

²¹⁹ Dworkin, "[A Return to Africa](#)," 4.

²²⁰ Carmel Rawhani, *Morocco Joins the AU: Motives and Meanings* (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2018), 24, citing Yasmine Hasnaoui, *Morocco and the African Union: A New Chapter for Western Sahara Resolution?* (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2017), 12.

²²¹ Dworkin, "[A Return to Africa](#)," 5.

²²² Kasraoui, "[UN Rights Council: 40 Countries Reaffirm Support for Morocco's Sovereignty](#)."

²²³ Mohamed Alaoui, "[Tokyo Expels Polisario Delegation, Curtailing Separatists' Political Agenda](#)," *The Arab Weekly*, August 28, 2025.

February 2026,²²⁴ where organizers denied the group access, accreditation, and opportunities for parallel engagement, despite efforts by Algeria to secure its inclusion. These developments reflect a broader movement toward the Polisario's diplomatic marginalization due to its lack of formal UN recognition, even as it retains AU membership. However, resistance within the AU persists, notably from Algeria and South Africa, which have historically opposed Morocco's position on Western Sahara, viewing it as inconsistent with the organization's founding principles and anti-colonial stance.²²⁵

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2797 on October 31, 2025, has provided Morocco with a decisive diplomatic instrument to further its objectives within the African Union. By explicitly endorsing "genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty" as the most realistic basis for a lasting solution,²²⁶ the resolution has effectively removed the 1991 proposal for a referendum on independence from the active diplomatic horizon.²²⁷ Morocco now leverages this international backing to engage AU member states more confidently, emphasizing development partnerships, trade deals, and security cooperation as tools to generate goodwill and diplomatic alignment.²²⁸

While more African states are showing support for Morocco's autonomy plan through gestures like opening consulates,²²⁹ the African Union itself remains noncommittal, and Polisario's membership could stay unresolved as the organization treads carefully to avoid inflaming divisions across the continent.²³⁰ Morocco's re-entry into the AU represents a deliberate strategic shift from an isolated claimant to an engaged continental partner and has led to deeper ties across diverse African regions. Nonetheless, the AU's focus on UN-led processes and its commitment to neutrality constrain how quickly Morocco can convert these diplomatic gains into formal institutional outcomes.

²²⁴ APA News "[Polisario Excluded from Italy-Africa Summit](#)," February 16, 2026.

²²⁵ Rawhani, *Morocco Joins the AU*, 24.

²²⁶ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2797*.

²²⁷ Höfner, *UN-Resolution 2797*, 1.

²²⁸ Khadija Taouil, "[Morocco Reaffirms Its Commitment to Africa by Focusing on the Sahara and the Sahel](#)," *Atalayar*, February 22, 2026.

²²⁹ Safaa Kasraoui, "[Western Sahara: The Growing Map in Support of Morocco's Autonomy Plan](#)," *Morocco World News*, October 27, 2025.

²³⁰ Amal Jabbour, "[Following Resolution 2797 of the Security Council: The Future of the Polisario in the African Union](#)," *Atalayar*, January 23, 2026.

CONCLUSION

This report has examined Morocco's strategic position through a concentric lens, moving outward from the kingdom's internal dynamics toward its regional environment and continental ambitions, a structure that reflects the internal logic of Moroccan statecraft itself. Internally, the monarchy has demonstrated remarkable adaptability, absorbing the pressures of the Arab Spring and the Gen Z 212 mobilizations through selective concessions while preserving the Crown's symbolic legitimacy. This resilience underpins the kingdom's infrastructure and energy strategy, which seeks to convert geographic position into permanent strategic capital through ports, rail, pipeline, and renewable energy investments. However, the model rests on fragile assumptions, with maritime demand growing modestly, hydrogen markets uncertain, and an infrastructure investment gap exceeding 37 billion dollars.

The Western Sahara conflict remains the central focus of Moroccan foreign policy. Resolution 2797 represents the most significant diplomatic advance since the Green March, effectively removing the independence referendum from the diplomatic horizon. Morocco's relationship with Spain and the European Union illustrates its broader approach: calculated coercion that yields results without rupturing structural interdependence. Beyond the Sahara, the rivalry with Algeria constitutes the primary regional driver of instability, with the most likely scenario for 2026–2031 combining high international recognition of Morocco's position with a maintained diplomatic rupture. Mauritania functions as a conditional partner, granting Morocco access to the Sahel without direct exposure to its volatility.

At the continental level, Morocco's return to the African Union, its expanding Sub-Saharan investment footprint, and the Atlantic Initiative reinforce its geopolitical objectives, even as Sahelian instability represents a structural risk that cannot be fully contained from a distance. The portrait that emerges is of a middle power that has maximized its institutional, geographic, and diplomatic resources to exercise influence disproportionate to its material weight. Whether its ambitions can be realized will ultimately depend on its ability to translate continental-scale projections into sustainable realities without losing sight of the internal foundations upon which everything else rests.

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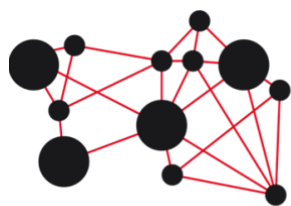
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