



PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON'S SECOND TERM MAGHREB POLICY CHALLENGES

ABENNOUR TOUMI

INTRODUCTION

President Emmanuel Macron's second term foreign policy is already rife with uncertainties. He has many challenges ahead in his next five-year second term in office, one of them is the Russia-Ukraine war's security and economic implications on the domestic and region-

al fronts. He tried tirelessly to stop Russia's invasion and position himself as a relevant facilitator in the ongoing war. Nonetheless, foreign policy is still not really a domain that is directly related to his persona.

In his first term, he did not speak much about it during his campaign, despite his constructive position on the E.U., aggressive

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one on Syria and preemptive on Mali; he did make a visit to the troops stationed in North Mali on his first day in office in May 2017.

France's foreign policy has been known for its pragmatism and steadfastness under all the presidents of the Fifth Republic. However, President Macron inherited an unusual foreign policy paradigm from his predecessor, former President Francois Hollande, who orchestrated a prudent foreign policy that matched his character.

As a result, his foreign policy in general and his MENA foreign policy were described by France's foreign policy analysts: a fiasco because of his incoherent paradigm that was set with then his foreign affairs minister, Jean Yves Le Drian, which caused too much trouble for Paris; for instance, it damaged Paris's international political credibility with strategic allies such as the US¹. Adding to this the French military operations in the African Sahel that led to the withdrawal of Paris from Mali, leaving a power vacuum filled out by Russia².

ECONOMIC PARAMETERS

Does this time, President Macron have a Maghreb foreign policy? According to history, geography, and demography, France should. In a time of international and regional mutations provoked by the Russia-Ukraine war, President Macron is heading for his first state visit to a non-European country, Algeria. Lately, relations between Algiers and Paris have not been that rosy. On the contrary, they have been locked since the election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in December 2019. Algeria's new authorities are trying to progressively distance themselves from Paris in the aftermath of Algiers' new foreign policy doctrine with regional and international powers based on partner diversification.

The recent diplomatic mobility of Algiers towards European pivotal states and MENA rising states are making Paris nervous. Algeria has shifted its Euro-Mediterranean vision towards Italy³, the excellent relations between Rome and Algiers have pushed the French

¹ Roger Cohen, "In Submarine Deal With Australia, U.S. Counters China but Enrages France", *The New York Times*, 9 November 2021 .

² Richard Atwood and Naz Modirzadeh, "France's Troop Withdrawal from Mali", *International Crisis Group*, 16 March 2022.

³ " Italy's Prime Minister signs deal for more gas from Algeria in bid to reduce reliance on Russia", *Africa News* , 12 April 2022.

leadership to react to the new Algiers-Rome axis and to the strategic rapprochement between Algiers and Ankara.

Paris measures the strategic position of Algiers in the region and its impacts on the region's geopolitics. Paris, however, this time feels cornered by the war in Ukraine, and its economic implications on the French economy, notably the gas factor that is impacting French citizens' purchasing power.

Unlike his first in 2017⁴, President Macron does not have much leverage to kneel down Algiers because of all the reasons mentioned above.

THE RHETORIC OF THE MAGHREB COUNTRIES' INTEGRAL PROCESS

President Macron would continue to have his normal relations with Morocco as they are set on the bilateral level between Rabat and Paris, the relations are based on economic and intelligence cooperation, despite the reticence of Paris on the latter in the aftermath of last summer spy scandal, the so-called Pegasus Gate⁵

aroused tensions between Paris and Rabat; less or never about socio-political or societal change, and by far, Paris won't get directly involved in Rabat's diplomatic tensions with Algiers. Paris prefers the narrative mode of these permanent tensions between Algiers-Rabat to continue.

An obstruction dynamic that Paris favors to stop any integral process in the Maghreb countries is a sub-regional entity that people in the region have been dreaming of for decades⁶. Paris prefers to deal with the Maghreb countries on a bilateral level instead.

During President Hollande's first year in office in 2012, he attempted to push through a project to create a large trade-space in the region and a geo-political pole in light of the African Sahel and Libyan turmoil, a still-born project because of the political heterogeneity of the countries in the region.

Yet, the national security question caught him in the middle of his term, so he re-oriented his focus and launched a "war on terror" à la George W.

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⁴ Abdenour Toumi, "How Algeria-Turkey Ambitious Strategic Rapprochement Will Affect France's Sahel Policy?", *Insight Turkey*, Volume 23 Number 4, Fall 2021, p. 41.

⁵ "Abdellatif Hammouchi: Morocco's spy chief at the heart of the Pegasus affair", *MediaPart*, 24 July 2021.

⁶ Anouar Boukhars, "Maghreb: Dream of Unity, Reality of Divisions", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 June 2008.

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Bush in 2015⁷. Hence, a herculean project like rebuilding the African Sahel and finding a new paradigm in his African Sahel foreign policy was an “all-bets-off” endeavor for a prudent President like Hollande.

He did, however, focus and re-orient his Maghreb policy to heal Sarkozy's anti-Arab/Muslim and anti-immigration policies and the country's hegemony in the region, which had caused France a lot of damage there.

At that time, the region was fast-changing, and there were new political actors emerging from the Jasmine Revolt in Tunisia, free elections in Morocco, and the Islamists' Spring in Tunisia. The ousting of al-Gadhafi in Libya created a serious and direct national security threat to France.

Despite these dramatic political shifts, Mauritania and Algeria remained much the same in terms of political change and stability. Subsequently, President Macron's last two years of his first term did scramble entirely his views and ways to deal with the main players and the pivotal capitals of the region, Algiers and Rabat. President

Macron, who saw Algiers as his best bet as the favorite horse to win in the early years of his first term in office.

After all, President Macron made a courteous visit to Algiers during his campaign, qualified France's colonial atrocities as crimes against humanity, and called for a “peace treaty” between Algiers and Paris.

He was immediately described as a friend of Algeria by the then Algiers Foreign Minister, Mr. Lamamra, and the late President Abdelaziz Bouteflika system media. A position that sparked harsh criticism towards President Macron from the far-right, the right parties and the Harkis in France.

However, a U-turn policy shift towards Algiers occurred in President Macron's Algeria policy. In his first-term last months, President Macon was seriously concerned about the rise of far-right and the right candidates in France's April 2022 presidential election. He became a radical “centrist” on the immigration issue and his selective history perception towards the Algerian nation⁸.

Rabat, on the other hand,

⁷ “François Hollande's Speech Before a Joint Session of Parliament”, *Mission permanente de la France auprès des Nations unies*, 16 November 2015.

⁸ Hakim el-Karoui and Mahaut de Fougères, “The Politics of Macron's Commemoration of the Algerian War”, *Institut Montaigne*, 18 March 2022.



French soldiers in Mali.

didn't know much about President Macron's first months in office in 2017, and hoped for the *LR* candidate instead to win. Rabat was then keeping relations warm with Paris following a wait-and-see attitude, but unlike Algiers, was worried about President Macron's administration, which is cautiously unclear on the Western Sahara dossier. But as years passed, President Macron did position himself on the thorny issue of the Western-Sahara, showing full support for the Moroccan version of this frozen conflict's political solution⁹.

President Macron still considers Algeria important to France both as a national security concern and a gas provider. On the former, Paris cooperates closely in terms

of intelligence, using the experience of the Algerian intelligence forces in its own war-on-terror launched three decades ago. In his first-term, President Macron appointed a former ambassador in Algiers as head of France's Foreign Intelligence. Nevertheless, the current situation in the African Sahel has drastically changed Paris' policy. Paris did end its military operation to Barkhane and transferred Bakuba headquarters to Niger¹⁰. A decision that has enhanced Algiers' role in the political reconciliation in Mali and Chad¹¹.

WHAT SHOULD PRESIDENT MACRON DO?

A Maghreb diplomacy will have to find a middle route through Tunis and Tripoli to keep Rabat and Algiers semi-satisfied, and it

⁹ Charles Dunbar and Kathleen Malley-Morrison, "The Western Sahara Dispute: A Cautionary Tale for Peacebuilders", *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1, September 2009, pp. 22-34

¹⁰ Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, "The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali", *CSIS*, 2 March 2022.

¹¹ Abdenour Toumi, "Political reconciliation: A game-changer in political stability in the African Sahel", *Mena Affairs*, 27 April 2022.



will be tip-toeing its way. Relations between Algiers and Paris have experienced a period of detente since former President Chirac's terms, when the late President Bouteflika went to Paris in 2000 and spoke before the French General Assembly (Parliament), a first for an Algerian President.

There are some Algerian politicians who want Paris to acknowledge its colonial past, recognize its colonial crimes, and not renegotiate the Franco-Algerian Treaty of 1968. The treaty gives greater rights to Algerians in France compared to other nationals. Algiers wants to be explicitly recognized as a key regional player, a position that none of France's Presidents wishes to take .

As then-President Hollande had to repair the damage with Tunis, so President Macron looked to Tunis as a bridge for his Maghreb foreign policy to avoid the swing effect in

the entire region, where Sarkozy's administration failed to manage the outcome of the Tunisians' and Libyans' revolts.

Then, former President Sarkozy's Foreign Minister suggested a clear colonial policy in Tunisia: more batons and police leads to abort the revolt. On the Libyan issue, President Sarkozy supported the military intervention to prevent al-Qadhafi from obliterating Ben Ghazi, but he did not seem convinced about the "new Libya."

Later on, President Macron needs Nouakchott, following the withdrawal of Mali from the joint-forces mission, Mauritania today is seen as a military bridge-head in Paris's fight against AQMI (al-Qae'eda in Maghreb Islamic) and ISO in Mali, and other Islamic armed groups like Ansar-Eddine group, a solid state in the African Sahel G5 forces¹².

¹² "Mali's withdrawal from G5 Sahel, Joint Force 'a setback' for the region", *UN News*, 18 May 2022.

Thus, President Macron was taking a policy into consideration regarding security problems in the African Sahel for his soldiers and citizens who work in the region. The Malian turmoil pushed Paris into a quagmire and the countries of the region to get more involved to fight AQMI and ISO elements.

So, his Libya policy is a real debacle because of his surreal politics in Libya, he sided early with the Abu-Dhabi-Riyadh-Cairo axis, showing full military and diplomatic support to Marshal Haftar forces in the East. A situation that has gotten more dire since the annulment of last winter's presidential and legislative elections. There were news reports saying that Paris is seeking to slice Libya into three entities.

According to a source close to the Libyan presidency¹³, A delegation made up of 11 people, representing Fezzan, is currently in France to lead a conference, whose main theme is the proposal for a federation of three entities: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. The conference coordinator is Ali Zidane, who represents the French interests in Libya. He is supported by Mansour Seif a-Nasr, former Libyan ambassador to France.

The citing source stated that the proposition on which the two entities of the GNU (Government of National Unity) in Tripoli and the LNA (Libyan National Army) led by Marshal Haftar in Benghazi have not yet commented on. If the source of this news has any legs, what made Paris hold such a sensitive meeting in private while it is calling for free and fair elections for Libya and Libyans to break through the political impasse and the

security uncertainty that Libya has been going through for eleven years.

Has the French initiative had the backing of the European and American partners? What would be the position of Russia and Turkey towards this French maneuver? Have regional partners (Egypt and Algeria) given their approval?

All these questions need to be answered by Paris's new foreign minister, who is a professional diplomat, unlike her predecessor, she belongs to the Jacques Chirac school of thought on foreign policy. President Macron seems to have re-set French foreign policy on its realism and pragmatism. A paradigm of Paris has been practiced under Dominique de Villepin when he was at the Quai d'Orsay (French Foreign Affairs Ministry) from 2002-2004.

CONCLUSION

President Macron missed a historical opportunity to deal with the Maghreb region in a time where Paris could have taken a pragmatic approach, dealing with all the local and sub-regional political and socio-economic disturbances using a strategy aimed at the stabilization of the countries. Instead, President Macron and then his ideology foreign affairs minister did set a posture of military and law enforcement cooperation in Libya and Tunisia. At the moment it was a real ray of hope for the people in the region, looking for the peaceful transformation of power. Paris on July 25, 2021 did support President Kais Saied's Constitutional Coup and continues to support his amateurish institutional process. Like it did before in Algeria, supporting the obstructionists during

¹³ "La France tentée par une partition de la Libye", *Mondafrique*, 25 May 2022.

the nine months of the 2019 peaceful Algerian Hirak. Paris did capitalize on those obstructionists in the Hirak to destabilize the authorities, who were dealing with the security vacuum in Libya and Mali.

More importantly, Paris did isolate itself further from the region. Today, serious challenges are facing the main Maghreb countries' populations in light of the Russia-Ukraine war, a food supply shortage is on the horizon, and countries like Morocco and Tunisia are on the edge. For the latter, all the ingredients of an eventual famine revolt are there. Tunisia, which went from a Jasmine revolution, it is on the eve of a famine revolution. In Morocco, all the lights don't look good for the 40 million inhabitants of the kingdom, despite the new "progressive" government that replaced the Islamists in September 2021, a dream came true for Paris to get rid of the Islamists like it did in Tunisia.

Libya does not look well, where Paris is desperately looking for an energy alternative to Russian gas and oil. Mauritania could stay a neutral state in the dynamic of the sub-regional geopolitics imperatives, Paris could count-on on its "war on terror" in the African Sahel that Paris needs a global strategy as a result of Mali's new leadership. As far as Algeria goes, Algiers is in an enviable position with its neighbors, despite national security concerns because of the political impasse in Tunisia and Libya; its diplomatic tensions with Morocco since the diplomatic rupture last summer; and the political and security instability in the African Sahel.

The repercussions of the war in Ukraine are not having any direct impacts on the food supplies on the domestic front, but socioeconomic challenges are pushing the authorities to act quickly to meet the people's demands. Algeria's "gas diplomacy" seems to be an asset in its tense relations with Paris — the latter cannot afford to lose the former because of its geo-strategic position and as a credible stabilizing force in the Maghreb and the African Sahel.

Therefore, given all the socioeconomic factors that are becoming an imminent threat to the Maghreb countries, Paris should not be exempted from the exodus of illegal immigration (*haraga*). A national security phenomenon that becomes Paris' nightmare, not only with Paris but on the regional level with Brussels as well. A domestic ghost that is continuing to haunt President Macron is also a political selling point used by the far-right and the right parties in France.

Immigration is still poisoning the political "debate" in France. Immigration is linked to the Maghreb because of the massive demography of the Maghreb descent population that represents about 6 per cent of the French global population¹⁴.

President Macron intends to make the granting of long-term residence permits conditional on a French language test and finding work. He said he wants to create a "border force" that would coordinate police, customs and anti-terrorism units. It is a program that President Macron wants to contain the far-right and the right parties.

President Macron did keep his controversial interior minister, Gerald Darmanin, in his

¹⁴ "How many immigrants are there in France?", *INED*, 6 April 2020.

post. Last Spring, Mr. Darmanin signed an order with President Macron to make the issuance of visas conditional on the granting of the consular passes from home countries that guarantee those being forced to leave France can return. He is again using a strategy already introduced in the autumn of 2021 when the government announced a freeze on visas granted to Maghreb countries, which were too reluctant to take back their illegal nationals.

President Macron changed a lot from this pre-campaign in 2017 rhetoric to become an idealist leader, whose foreign policy determinants would not be adaptable to Europe's new security dynamics and the Maghreb region's ideals. Unlike in the first term of President Macron, Maghreb countries were enjoying some breeze of freedom, and the legalist Islamists in Algeria, for instance, the Islamists did get the post of House Speaker, in Tunisia and Morocco, the Islamist had led coalition governments that were timidly welcomed by Paris as long as they were keeping France's national interest and security intact.

Whatever President Macron's Maghreb foreign policy will be this time, it will stay like his first term's policy with an irritating rhetoric on foreign policy as a whole. He is now trying to be seen as a Gaullist; his new foreign affairs minister, Ms. Catherine Colonna, fits into that trajectory.

President Macron is acting like President Sarkozy, his anti-Arab/Muslim and anti-immigration policies are inspired by the Sarkozy doctrine based on national identity, which is causing France a lot of damage in the entire MENA region.

President Macron's second term foreign policy would be all European or nothing because of the Ukraine war. The Maghreb's relations are set on the dynamic of continuity that Rabat and Tunis want to keep. Tripoli needs to re-set its own house. Nouakchott's neutral position continues in this regard; whereas, Algiers' new authorities want real change in their complex relations with the former occupiers, Algeria is strengthening its strategic rapprochement with Rome and Ankara, a geopolitical imperative that would shape the Maghreb's, the Southern-Mediterranean and the African Sahel's geoeconomics and security parameters.

About the Author

Abdennour Toumi

Abdennour Toumi, a journalist and a North African Studies expert at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (ORSAM), received his PhD in Toulouse University Political Science department. His articles are published in the National Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah English. He worked as a lecturer at Portland Community College in the Department of Middle Eastern and North African studies. He was the reporter at Maghreb & France Arab Daily News. Currently, he is the member of Paris France Arab-American Journalists Association and Chicago IL USA. Mr. Toumi focuses on North Africa's socio-political mutation, the role of Turkey in the region, immigration issues and North African diaspora in France.



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Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Address : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA
Phone : +90 850 888 15 20
Email : info@orsam.org.tr
Photo : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)