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Reimagining the Maghreb: Navigating an Autonomous Region in Motion

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The Maghreb has been shaped and influenced by external powers and forces in most phases of its recent history. As a vibrant space in motion, this world region is only at the beginning of a long process of carving out its own future autonomous role.

- Historically, the Maghreb has faced internal tensions in straddling acute disparities as well as complex external interlinkages with surrounding regions. These tensions are crucial for understanding contemporary transformation processes and future dynamics.
- While the countries of the Maghreb have distinct historical particularities, commonalities such as language, religion, and historical experiences abound. Since the Arab Uprisings of 2010–2011, Maghrebi societies have encountered common challenges such as transitioning from rentier economies and authoritarianism, justice and equality issues, and managing identity crises.
- The dynamics in the Maghreb region – and particularly in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia – subsequent to the Arab Uprisings follow key trajectories: social and political transformations, economic challenges and a “New Deal,” visions of unity and mobility, geopolitical challenges, and regional foreign policy outlooks.
- These changes are reflected in academics now adopting a more critical approach. Contemporary scholarship seeks to enrich dialogue by incorporating diverse perspectives and challenging Western-centric paradigms, while also promoting epistemic justice.

CONTEXT

Based on its guiding theme “Imagining Futures – Dealing with Disparity,” MECAM, the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb in Tunis, aims to play a notable role in advancing both current and future knowledge production in the Humanities and Social Sciences within, from, and about the Maghreb.



THE AUTONOMOUS MAGHREB

The Maghreb, the so-called Land of the Setting Sun in Arabic, represents a region of exchange and hybridity between various cultural, economic, geographic, political, and religious spaces at the intersection of Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.¹ According to most contemporary definitions, it consists of Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. While this position is advantageous from a geostrategic point of view, the Maghreb is often considered to be a multiple periphery – existing as a zone of external power projection until today (e.g. Galissot 2000). This prevailing understanding largely ignores, however, the autonomous dynamics taking place within the Maghreb itself, including the transregional effects that arise from it (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 35).

Throughout history, the Maghreb's remarkable nature has been a product of the deep tensions existing between its cultural, linguistic, economic, and political internal disparities on the one hand and its extensive interlinkages and interdependencies with surrounding regions on the other. Any rigorous analysis either from the Humanities or Social Sciences must consider these sources of friction. They constitute the structural starting points of contemporary transformation processes, and thus entail important prerequisites for future dynamics (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 35).

While the countries of the Maghreb can markedly be differentiated in regards to their historical particularities and to the prevailing complexities of their political systems, they all the same share a common heritage which includes language, religion, an Arab–Berber cultural identity, a geoclimatic environment, and comparable historical experiences. At least since the beginning of the Arab Uprisings of 2010–2011, Maghrebi societies have increasingly faced a number of shared challenges: “[...] shift from a rentier to a productive economy; democratic transition and the issues of justice equality; the management of multiple identity crises” (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 35) and re-authoritarianism. Nevertheless, the classification of the Maghreb as a region that has its own specificities should always be treated with caution. As Laroui (2012: 23) points out: “All of these historical [regional] units are the result of history. Now, historians and analysts come much later and try to prove at any cost that this classification is not contingently created but that it is necessary, even unavoidable”.²

REIMAGINING THE MAGHREB

From an Area Studies³ perspective, the inquiry into an autonomous Maghreb brings forth a crucial question regarding its precise conception. One, specifically, that alludes to an ongoing tension in the discussion surrounding the topic on hand: Is the Maghreb to be considered a region, a subregion, or an inter-region? Addressing this entails focusing on two fundamental elements: first, a careful examination of the distinct historical, economic, cultural, and geopolitical identifications associated with the region, and second, the adoption of a broader theoretical lens to gain more comprehensive insights. The various terminologies employed, such as “Maghreb,” “Muslim West,” “North Africa,” or “Southern Mediterranean,” highlight the intricate nature of the subject under consideration, while also shining a light on the complex dynamics of political power that are involved in its

1 A significant proportion of the substantive elaborations contained in this present MECAM Paper originate from the introductory chapter titled “Le Maghreb en mouvement” authored by Karima Dirèche and Rachid Ouaisa as part of the anthology *Entanglements of the Maghreb: Cultural and Political Aspects of a Region in Motion* (Dihstehoff et al. 2021).

2 Authors' own translation, from the French original: “Mais toutes ces unités historiques sont le résultat de l'Histoire: (...) Viennent les historiens et les analystes bien plus tard et ils veulent à tout prix prouver que cette unité n'était pas le fruit du hasard, qu'elle était nécessaire, inéluctable.”

3 The debate on “Area Studies” revolves around issues such as the appropriate balance between regionalism and universalism (i.e. between regional and global approaches), integration of diverse disciplines, postcolonial perspectives, intercultural dynamics, and relevance in light of global changes. It addresses the equilibrium between regional nuances and universal concepts, discipline boundaries, avoiding Eurocentric views, emphasising transnational connections, and the question of how Area Studies can maintain relevance amidst limited resources and shifting geopolitical priorities. In this context, the recent work of Bank and Busse (2021) can be perceived as contemporary advocacy for considering these aspects within the realm of Area Studies, particularly concerning the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

constitutive discourse – as, for example, reflected in El Guabli’s 2021 article entitled “Where is the Maghreb? Theorizing a Liminal Space”:

- The (Arabic) term “Maghreb” indicates inclusion in the Arab world. It stands as the counterpart to “Mashreq,” the place where the sun rises (Wehr 1968: 426). First used in the Middle Ages, the term was employed to designate regions west of Egypt. As seen in the works of the geographer Muhammad Ibn Ahmad al-Muqaddasi, born in Jerusalem in 947 AD, during Islamic rule (seventh to fifteenth century), the Maghreb encompassed not only territories in North Africa but also Sicily, the Iberian Peninsula, as well as the Balearic and Canary Islands (Lafi 2016: 4). It is important to note that a certain geographical, Arabo-centric perspective is already included in the respective designations. Although Arabs represent a sizable part of the Maghrebi population, they are just one of many sociocultural groups.
- Using “Muslim West” underlines the region’s belonging to the Muslim world. However, this term somehow neglects the long history of the Maghreb as a shared Jewish, Islamic, and Christian space. Before the early Islamic conquests, most of the Amazigh people belonged to the Christian or Jewish faith; even after the Islamisation of the Maghreb, a sizable Jewish population remained. The Jewish community only got noticeably smaller in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to European colonialism in the Maghreb and the establishment of the State of Israel.
- By applying “North Africa,” the region’s history as a former colony is recalled. The name “Africa” originally referred to a Roman province in what is now Tunisia and was later adopted for the entire continent. At the same time, the term underlines the region’s belonging to this continent. As a geographical, historical, and anthropological construct, the Maghreb found itself isolated by the theorists of French colonialism, both in Africa and the Middle East. It is crucial to acknowledge, as Hannoum (2021) aptly reminds us, that the positioning of the Maghreb as a distinct region was essentially a colonial and French invention. Both the Romans and Arabs, in their respective classifications, distinguished Egypt from Africa/*Ifriqia*. However, neither side explicitly articulated the idea of a “White” Africa in contrast to a “Black” Africa – a notion that emerged much later, as pioneered by geographer Emile-Félix Gautier and later embraced by historian Charles-André Julien. Especially within the context of the decolonial struggle, one could assert that the Maghreb represents a concept intricately tied to decolonisation. Maghrebi solidarity emerged against the wishes of the colonial power during the Algerian War. It is against this historical backdrop that we must consider the Maghreb not merely as a geographical entity but also as a dynamic and evolving construct with profound implications for the decolonial discourse.

The complexity of how to define the Maghreb was provocatively summarised by Moroccan thinker Abdellah Laroui. He argues that the Maghreb of the peoples simply does not exist: if the idea of “Maghreb” exists at all, it is only because of a small elite and it does not correspond to social reality (Laroui 2012; Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 36). El Guabli (2021: 36) further explains Laroui’s position:

Laroui is, albeit belatedly, right to allude to the fact that a top-down conceptualization of the Maghreb silenced other groups and erased their views. He thus recognizes, although indirectly, the claim that Imazighen [the Amazigh people, North Africa’s indigenous community] were never given a choice to decide the future of their homeland. Nor was their conception of geography and statehood ever taken into consideration.

Moreover, he emphasises the Maghreb's position as a "space-between-spaces" (El Guabli 2021: 34), namely, between different continents and cultures, therefore encompassing diverse linguistic, ethnic, religious, and aesthetic elements. Historically, the modern idea of the Maghreb originated in the armed struggle for national liberation in the three North African countries under French colonial rule: Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The "Arab Maghreb" was a revolutionary concept created in 1948 by a group of nationalist leaders living in exile, in Cairo. Attempts at Maghreb unity were initially undertaken in the economic sphere. In 1964, the Permanent Maghreb Consultative Committee was established in Tunis, modelled after the European Economic Community, with the aim of harmonising energy, mining, and industrial policies among states in seeking to create a Maghreb common market. However, these endeavours, despite their significant potential, only yielded meagre results. The signing of the Treaty of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) on 17 February 1989 in Marrakech, also by Libya and Mauritania, revived the concept of a common economic space (El Guabli 2021: 35). Still, especially from the Amazigh people, the term "Arab Maghreb" also received a lot of criticism for being an ethnically and linguistically exclusionary concept (Bennis 2009: 2). Since colonisation, the concrete political consequence hereof has been the historical land of the Amazigh people being dissected by state borders. This has massively restricted their freedom of movement (Aherdan 1995).

Reimagining the Maghreb as a region by paying attention to its autonomous dynamics therefore requires studying the diverse entanglements, exchanges, as well as mobilities that characterise it as a space. This means not only focusing on its internal structures but also shedding light on its relations with Africa, the Arab East, and Europe. Despite its geopolitical centrality, a history marked by great empires and prestigious civilisations, as well as cultural and religious crossbreeding, the Maghreb remains persistently trapped and represented as part of a "triple periphery" (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 36).

For one thing, the Maghreb is a space where multiple external competitors seek influence. It is marked by having been subjected to conquest by powerful civilisations and thus regarded as devoid of any endogenous historical identity. In this sense, the Maghreb is condemned to exist as an object rather than as a subject of history (Willis 2012). Then, the Maghreb is also widely marginalised within the European research landscape – with the exception of France – regarding its history, dynamics, and future developments. In Germany, North Africa remained for a long time an object researched exclusively by "Romance Studies," due to colonial penetration and the resulting importance of French as an academic language within the countries of the Maghreb, while well-known classical "Oriental Studies" – when studying Oriental civilisations – were nearly exclusively interested in the Mashreq and the Arabian Peninsula. Similarly, modern/contemporary scholarly work on the MENA is historically dominated by Arab or Islamic Studies. Related to this, German Social Science is only marginally interested in conducting research about the Maghreb; until the 1980s, the region was simply subsumed under studies of the "Third World" – that is, those countries today commonly referred to as the "Global South" (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 37).

THE MAGHREB IN MOTION

The Arab Spring witnessed the toppling of some of the region's longest-ruling dictators and sweeping popular protests of 2010–2011 that started in Tunisia. The so-called Arab Uprisings served to highlight the social disparities existing across all countries of the Maghreb, with a number of changes coming in their wake: political reform, economic turbulence, and an increase in activism as well as protests. This contestation – continuing also more recently in the Algerian *hirāk* that started in 2019 – is in many ways an expression of how bankrupt the grand narratives of a homogeneous society, based on notions like Arab nationalism or Islamism, have become. Such dissent signals the end of collective and educational utopias promising egalitarian, just, and prosperous societies.

From then on, protests in the Southern Mediterranean have given free rein to a multitude of individual utopias far removed from national holism. The driving forces behind the recent waves of social mobilisation have allowed the emergence of new provisional political and social realities that are the opposite of the internal and external representations of either stagnation or homogeneity. The repertoires of action involved here are part of a long tradition of resistance specific to the Maghreb since colonial times (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 37–38). Overall, the events of 2010 and 2011 have caused an “acceleration” of history and triggered a wave of profound political changes in the region with, admittedly, varying outcomes (Rosiny and Richter 2016).

a) Ongoing Political and Social Transformations

Transformations occurring at the national level have the potential to upset the established social and eventually political balance. Maghreb societies are undergoing a rapid reshuffling that is upsetting entrenched social beliefs, relations, and structures. Access to information and education, in combination with the current hegemony of democracy and human rights as global norms, have profoundly modified people’s social expectations. The aspiration for change in the post–Arab Uprisings era is substantial and contains, at its core, the demand for participation and representation from below. Civil society organisations, which were virtually unheard of until 2011, have now shown their strength and demonstrated their ability to dynamically contribute to the social, environmental, and economic transitions underway (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 38).

The great revolts that shook the Southern Mediterranean countries in 2011 also put the question of the ethnic and linguistic plurality of Maghrebi societies at the centre of their popular demands. Thus, the Amazigh question has resurfaced as part of a legal and political conception of national plurality that honours these people’s ancestral heritage (including their “African” language). In the same way, the issues of religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity are shaking the foundations of political regimes and state entities that have been based on ideas of Arab nationalism ever since independence. By renegotiating heterogeneous, complementary, and competitive identity models, the respective societies are trying to conquer new areas of political action and new rights (Dirèche 2019; Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 42).

The ongoing shifts occurring both at the national and regional levels are rooted in a paradoxical landscape where conservatism, religiosity, and aspirations to individual freedom are intricately interwoven. Islamism, since its emergence in the 1980s, has become a fundamental dimension of local cultural and political reality (Dihstehoff and Lohse 2020). Religiosity and conservatism (mainly fuelled by political Islam practices) have not hindered processes of societal secularisation. The latter is expressed in the growing aspiration for individual human rights and social freedoms, like women’s rights, the prohibition of underage marriage, equality in inheritance, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, freedom of conscience, and the recognition of children born out of wedlock. This development is common to all societies in the Maghreb; it is, however, often expressed through a set of sometimes very violent tensions between religious and patriarchal forces on the one hand and aspirations and demands for greater freedom and rights on the other (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 39; Gobe and Chouikha 2015). Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that also Islamist groups and conservative Muslims claim feminism for themselves (United Nations Development Programme 2020). Therefore, we always need to analyse the ideas underlying different interpretations of feminism. Questions that need to be considered are, for instance: Which form of equality are we talking about in a secular interpretation of the equal distribution of heritage, in contrast to an Islamic interpretation thereof? What are the underlying historical and social backgrounds to key concepts? Moreover, religiosity and the desire for one’s individual freedom need not



be in opposition to one another; rather, they may be entangled approaches, resulting for example in Islamic feminist movements as well as in individual, liberal interpretations of Islamic law. Therefore, as noted, supposedly secular claims can also result from new interpretations and understandings within religious contexts.

Beyond the national level, meanwhile, new geopolitical configurations have emerged. European countries and the United States were the traditional external actors in the region and are now being challenged by new players such as Turkey and some of the Arabian Gulf states. Moreover, various non-state actors, notably transnational Jihadist groups, have entered the political arena, shaking up relations and proposing a new regional geopolitical order. The failure of the Greater Maghreb or UMA project has given way, for at least two decades and counting, to a frantic race instead between the Maghreb countries on concluding new security and economic alliances with the respective regional players (Dirèche and Ouaiassa 2021: 38).

b) The Economic Question and a New Deal

In economies dominated by rents, meaning by a surplus of economic-exchange processes that do not require the market-oriented reinvestment of capital, financial resources are not necessarily used productively. In contexts like this, labour is typically detached from productivity in being used for maintaining patronage instead. Despite cautious optimism about some sectors, the economies of the Maghreb continue to be dominated by what Elsenhans (2001) called “structural marginality.” A marginal worker is one who costs more than what they can produce and who is thus operating as part of a pre-capitalist social contract. Marginal workers cannot enforce their own interests by mobilising peers. Should they do so, they can be immediately substituted by a previously unemployed person. Consequently, marginal workers are bound to their principals, who are often leading figures from their family, clan, village, region, and/or religious community. Typically, marginal workers are primarily employed on the basis of *wāsiṭa* (“nepotism”) and *‘aṣabiya* (“clan spirit”). Most of the middle class in the Maghreb belong to this category of employee. Their existence as such is due to the prevailing informal political and economic structures of the respective societies. They are not oriented towards pursuing competition and profit via the market in the Weberian sense but are obliged instead to negotiate permanently with those in power and depend on their goodwill (Henni 1993).

Interrogating the existing economic paradigm in the Maghreb region entails due consideration of the conditions conducive to the emergence of a new middle class, one inherently embodying a democratic spirit. This crystallisation around the importance of the economic question is clearly visible in looking at the Algerian *hirāk*; however, it was also remarkably clear in Morocco during the spring of 2018 when citizens started to boycott three major household brands (Afriquia, Danone, and Sidi Ali) with the stated aim of protecting consumers’ rights and purchasing power from the greed and high profit margins of manufacturers (Wippel 2023: 70). The fight against corruption and the demand for productive economies as a source of autonomy and wealth are at the heart of contemporary political and activist consciousness across the Maghreb. This fact reveals that a transition from a clientelistic towards a meritocratic economy is essential if labour is to be valued as a negotiating force (Dirèche and Ouaiassa 2021: 39–40).

The liberalisation of the economy, which began in the late 1980s, coincided with the rise of Islamists across the Maghreb, both outcomes arising from the failure of state-led development strategies since independence. But, for instance, the liquidation of public enterprises should not be confused with a genuine transformation of economy and society towards the virtues of political liberalism. Privatisation has not dismantled the protectionist and interventionist legal framework established in the postcolonial era, nor has it led to the emergence of truly competitive capitalist structures. While economic

privatisation did not see the emancipation of a capital-owning class from the grip of the ruling regime, the concentration of trade and import licences in private hands has contributed to the emergence of “crony capitalism” (Henry and Springborg 2001; Diwan, Malik, and Atiyas 2019). As a result, a new social contract forged between the state and certain parts of society has emerged giving rise to a new pious middle class (Ouaïssa 2018). Crony capitalism has laid the grounds for an ideological “New Deal” between a nationalist class of businesspeople (as intersecting with the ruling regime) and this new pious middle class. The aim of this social coalition is to form an alliance conservative, nationalist, and neoliberal in nature. Given this overall context, and to streamline the argument somewhat, we limit our focus here to the Maghreb’s three central states, namely Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia:

- In Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika was supported by a heterogeneous alliance of traditionalist and modernist elements between 1999 and 2019. The members of this alliance shared neither a common social project nor a clear economic vision. While the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), a mix of Arab Baathists, inspired nostalgia for the past, the RND (Rassemblement National Démocratique) claimed to represent modern nationalism. Associated with these two parties we find the Islamist party TAJ (Rassemblement de l’Espoir pour l’Algérie) and the secular and modernist party MPA (Mouvement Populaire Algérien).
- In Morocco, the Islamist PJD (Parti pour la Justice et le Développement), in power between 2011 and 2021, governed with various alliances bringing together political parties of different ideological trends, from the Islamist right to the socialist left. Supported by the Makhzen, or the Royal Court apparatus, these alliances have worked together to implement neoliberal economic programmes (Hill 2011; Storm 2018).
- In Tunisia, consensus between political parties with different ideologies on the country’s diverse transformation processes has emerged since the 2011 revolution (Dihstelhoff 2018, 2019, 2023). After the troika government (2012–2014) and the national dialogue (2015), Nidaa Tounes (a heterogeneous alliance that includes former opponents, ministers from the first post-revolution government, and old-regime figures) and the Islamist Nahda party have established a regime where consensus is based on power-sharing and a neoliberal economic orientation.

c) Beyond National Borders: The Vision of Unity and Intra- and Trans-Maghreb Mobility

Despite the manifold failures and repeated relaunches of the UMA as an intergovernmental organisation, nowadays considerable hope still exists that an integrated Maghreb could still take shape – similar to the European Union in being based on people’s ideas and joint projects, but also eventually relying on investment and trade, too. According to this vision, this common economic space could overcome the entrenched structures shaped by rents, in striving to create a productive, prosperous, democratic, and united region able to curb common contemporary ills like youth unemployment, a brain drain, illegal immigration, and corruption. Faced with the pitfalls of failed regional integration institutionally speaking, an intra-Maghreb mobility – largely invisible from the outside – has started to emerge that gives hope (Dirèche, Dusserre, and Znaïen 2023: 387). This “silent” intraregional integration has primarily appeared in the context of flows by “ordinary” actors like students, workers, self-entrepreneurs, small investors, and brainworkers, which, at the same time, often also interlink the Maghreb with the rest of the world. Without being challenged by institutional failure or the rivalry between ruling regimes, this emerging space of “a Maghreb of Maghrebis” reveals the existence of

a universe of exchange, wealth creation, employment, and opening up to especially sub-Saharan African societies (Chena 2019).

If the mutual identity and grand imagination of those determining this space was the basis for a common democratic Maghreb from below coming into existence, this could ultimately form a countermovement to the failures of intergovernmental cooperation and previous economic reforms (Dirèche and Ouaisa 2021: 42). However, despite the region's observed opening to sub-Saharan Africa, the borders between Europe and the Maghreb are simultaneously being reinforced, transforming the latter into a destination rather than a transitory passageway for many migrants (El Guabli 2021: 34). Under pressure from the EU, which has outsourced its border enforcement in part to the Maghreb countries, massive human rights violations are being committed in the Southern Mediterranean. Meanwhile heavy-handed security policies are implemented by the Maghreb states that make the Mediterranean Sea a high-risk encounter for sub-Saharan and Maghrebi migrants who attempt clandestine passage to Europe. The Straits of Gibraltar, the Sicilian Channel, and the area off the Canary Islands have been tragically transformed into watery graves for more than two decades now. The issue of free movement of people and labour within the Maghreb but also further afield is therefore a key challenge for the region's development in the coming decades (Dirèche, Dusserre, and Znaïen 2023: 395).

d) Navigating Geopolitical Challenges in the Maghreb

The Mediterranean region, and especially the Maghreb, has recently become an arena of geopolitical contestation, one marked by various strategic, power, and interest-driven challenges. These include combatting terrorist groups, addressing arms and drug trafficking, and managing migration routes. The presence of unstable and partly failed state structures in countries such as Libya and in the Sahel region only exacerbates these challenges. As a result, and in addition to the Maghrebi countries' advantageous position as a link between three world regions, their foreign policy preferences are diverse, being influenced by numerous historical, structural, and global factors (Ouaisa 2023; Dirèche, Dusserre, and Znaïen 2023: 5).

One critical geopolitical dimension is energy security and renewables. The Russia–Ukraine conflict has underscored the Maghreb's importance for Europe's energy security. Algeria, with its abundant gas resources, is involved in crucial pipeline projects to Europe. Morocco and Tunisia both have a key role to play regarding renewable energy. The region – including Western Sahara – is rich in mineral resources, making it vital to Europe's security. Another significant factor is the Western Sahara conflict, shaping Algeria's and Morocco's geopolitical orientations. Morocco uses migrants as leverage against European states, while Algeria does the same thing with gas exports. The United States' recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as part of the Abraham Accords in 2020 bolstered the Kingdom's position, while Algeria has garnered even more support from Russia as of late. Additionally, new external geopolitical actors such as China, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates have intensified their diplomatic efforts in the Maghreb, especially since the Arab Uprisings and, more recently, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Political instability, economic crisis, and neocolonial sentiment have undermined old geopolitical alliances and power dynamics, causing the EU and especially France to steadily lose influence in and over the Maghreb. More specifically (Ouaisa 2023):

- Algeria has considerable gas and oil supplies. It is aiming to have regional leadership and increasingly turning towards China and Russia due to internal challenges. It is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, G77, strives to be a member of the group of five major emerging economies Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS),

and has a strong military presence in conflicts such as in Libya, Mali, and other countries in the Sahel region. However, its dependence on oil and gas rents hampers internal political and economic reform.

- Morocco has recently adopted a new geopolitical approach characterised by revisiting its traditional strategic alliances; it also includes the acceptance of the Abraham Accords with the US and Israel. This has contributed to the country's isolation in the region. The Western Sahara conflict remains a central factor in Morocco's diplomatic orientation. While focusing on economic and political influence in Africa, Morocco has benefitted from the Ukraine War, attracting many international companies. However, internal power dynamics around the royal palace are unstable, and the normalisation policy with Israel lacks broad societal support.
- Tunisia, with limited economic resources and experiencing post-revolution fragility, heavily relies on external funds. Although the country lacks clear foreign policy preferences, it continues to seek closer ties with the EU. Tunisia is attempting to avoid the International Monetary Fund's intervention, a fact which explains why the recent migration deal was concluded to reach a stable partnership with the EU. The country is highly vulnerable due to its heavy reliance on food imports, especially wheat – especially pertinent against the backdrop of the Ukraine War.

MECAM'S CONTRIBUTION TO ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION ON THE MAGHREB

The Maghreb is undergoing swift social and (geo)political transformations. Previous ideals of Arab nationalism and accompanying disillusionment have given way to more open and pressing calls for more pluralistic societies. Economies once reliant on rentier models are struggling to shift focus towards productive labour. Additionally, it is important to perceive the recent geopolitical activities and orientations not only as based on a broad, pan-Maghreb regional concept, but rather in the context of dynamic individual Maghrebi nation-states – ones often heading in their own directions.

These political and societal shifts are also mirrored in academia, where a discernibly more critical approach towards previously used terminologies and perspectives can be observed (e.g. El Guabli 2021; Hannoum 2021; Lafi 2016; Laroui 2012). In this context, the establishment of MECAM in the University of Tunis in April 2020 is a notable development. It serves as the first and only Centre for Advanced Studies existing in and dedicated to the Maghreb, functioning as a platform for research and academic exchange with its headquarters in Tunis. This research structure is characterised by German–Maghrebi partnership on an equal footing, aiming to address existing asymmetries between researchers, particularly between those from the Global South and those from the Global North.

The intended impact of this German–Tunisian research platform is anchored in two fundamental dimensions. First, strategically located within the Global South, it enriches scholarly cooperation through a dialogical and horizontally oriented framework. Second, MECAM assumes a proactive role in harmonising its work with global academic standards, encouraging the internationalisation of research, and fostering interdisciplinary pursuits within the sphere of Maghreb Studies. These guiding principles catalyse MECAM's diverse contributions to the realm of knowledge production. By incorporating distinctive experiential horizons and perspectives, MECAM defies the prevailing paradigms of Western theorems, introducing fresh avenues of inquiry. Concurrently, the project addresses and rectifies unsustainable universalisms, underpinning its commitment to advancing epistemic justice and redressing imbalances within knowledge-production arenas. Additionally, MECAM underscores the academic rewards stemming from transformative shifts in perspective.

Beyond this, MECAM embarks on the significant task of recalibrating scientific methodologies and epistemologies across both the German and Maghrebi academic landscapes. This pioneering spirit culminated in the edited volume *Entanglements of the Maghreb: Cultural and Political Aspects of a Region in Motion* (Dihstelhoff et al. 2021), as a tangible manifestation of MECAM's approach to knowledge production. The volume offers insight into the academic endeavours of the project itself but also encapsulates the evolving dynamics of the region at large.

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