

Security Paradigms and Foreign Policy:
How Morocco and Algeria's Military and
Civilian Institutions Shape Their Conflict

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Morocco and Algeria's contrasting approaches to security sector reform and civil-military relations have contributed to the persistence of their bilateral conflict. Drawing on rational choice theory and path dependence, the study argues that both states have institutionalized distinct security paradigms rooted in their post-independence trajectories. In Morocco's case, through royal centralization, and in Algeria's case, through entrenched military power. Despite reform efforts, both regimes prioritize regime survival over democratization, resulting in security sectors that are unclear, hard to hold accountable, and difficult for outsiders to examine. Civil society remains largely excluded from decision-making, and dissent is often securitized, particularly around sensitive issues such as national sovereignty and foreign influence. These internal logics are projected externally: Morocco adopts an assertive, diplomatically visible foreign policy focused on regional leadership and international recognition, while Algeria maintains a defensive posture centered on non-interference and military self-reliance. The Western Sahara conflict serves as a key arena in which these paradigms clash. By reframing the Algeria-Morocco rivalry through the lens of domestic security governance, the thesis demonstrates that authoritarian-leaning institutionalism, rather than historical grievances, best explains the conflict's resilience and the failure of regional cooperation.

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Introduction

In general, neighboring countries with shared cultural traits and comparable political and diplomatic influence are often inclined toward rivalry. In some cases it is a healthy rivalry, and in other cases it is a toxic one. Two neighboring countries that, in theory, should be brotherly states are Algeria and Morocco. The two nations share origins, language, culture, and religion. Despite these elements that should unite them, the brothers have become fierce enemies. With their first military altercation as independent states occurring in 1963, the countries have already celebrated a somber anniversary together; the 50th anniversary of their bilateral conflict. Judging by the current state of the relationship between the countries, more anniversaries are yet to come.

The long history of the conflict has had lasting effects on the states, shaping national identities and political cultures, with entire generations growing up with their neighbouring country being framed as a constantly present threat. The surrounding countries in the Sahel and Maghreb regions have also felt the consequences of the Algeria-Moroccan conflict, with it contributing to reinforced insecurity in already unstable surroundings. The strategic location of the two North African states, bordering Mediterranean Europe, also means that the aftermath of the dispute easily spills over onto European countries as well. The ripple effects have influenced European border security, energy cooperation, and migration management, to name a few. With this in mind, it is safe to say that a seemingly isolated bilateral conflict may result in larger consequences than presumed at first glance. Understanding the conflict between Algeria and Morocco thus offers more than just historical insight. It provides a lens through which it is possible to analyze how deeply embedded security paradigms and institutional legacies can obstruct regional cooperation and sustain conflict. Despite its persistence and wider implications, the conflict remains fairly underexamined from the perspective of domestic security governance and civil-military relations. This thesis therefore addresses a critical gap in the literature by analyzing how the internal logics of security sector governance in both states, shaped by historical trajectories and elite interests, have contributed to the endurance of this bilateral dispute.

Literary Review

The conflict between Algeria and Morocco has long been studied through the lenses of regional geopolitics, colonial legacies, and ideological divergence, with much of the scholarship focusing on the Western Sahara conflict as the defining element in their hostility. Scholars such as Lagdaf and Flici (2019) and Jacob Mundy (2006), but also research institutes such as the Strategic Studies Institute (2013), have explored how conflicting claims over Western Sahara have driven diplomatic tensions, fueled arms races, and shaped international alliances. These studies have particularly concerned Algeria's support for the Polisario Front and Morocco's efforts to internationally seek legitimacy for its sovereignty claims. Studies like these typically situate the conflict in a postcolonial framework, emphasizing the territorial and ideological legacies of French and Spanish colonialism, as well as the divergent trajectories the two countries took in the aftermath of independence. The historical-ideological divergence between the states is also highlighted by scholars like Micheal Willis (2014) and Lise Storm (2007). Their studies, together with researchers like Isabelle Werenfels (2007) and Yahia Zoubir (1990), argues that Algeria's revolutionary ethos, centered on *Le front libération national's* legitimacy as a liberation movement, stands in contrast to Morocco's monarchical continuity and historical legitimacy. This ideological divide is frequently portrayed as an underlying factor sustaining mistrust, fostering mutually exclusive claims to regional influence and political legitimacy. However, such interpretations often reduce foreign policy decisions to mere reflections of ideology or territorial competition without adequately examining the domestic institutional structures that, in reality, shape and perpetuate these orientations in policy. This arguably represents a major conceptual limitation in existing approaches.

However, it is worth to highlight that this focus on ideology and history has been contested by other scholars who argue that the conflict is increasingly shaped by domestic instability and regime interests, rather than deep-rooted ideological differences. For instance, George Joffe (2010) argues that the conflict is better understood through the lens of geo-strategic rivalry. He highlights how both Algeria and Morocco have sought to assert regional leadership in North Africa and the Sahel, and often compete for European economic partnerships, control over migration routes, and playing a part in Western military cooperation. In Joffe's view, the Western Sahara conflict functions more as a strategic instrument than as a symbolic or ideological rift. In

other words, from this perspective is regional disputes or rivalry driven less by regime identity and more by the pursuit of influence and leverage. Likewise, Luis Martinez (2000) downplays ideological explanations and highlights domestic regime fragility as a central factor in, specifically, Algeria's foreign policy behaviour instead. Martinez argues that Algeria's assertive stance toward Morocco is primarily a mechanism to project strength outward in order to mask internal tensions and political stagnation. According to him, Algeria's foreign policy is shaped by cycles of elite competition and institutional volatility. The country's support for Polisario is then, in this perspective, both an expression of de-colonial solidarity and a rational strategy to reinforce regime legitimacy through anti-imperialist narratives and threat framing.

Moreover, Laurence Thieux (2016) provides a broader historical perspective that further complicates the ideological narrative. According to her, Algeria's foreign policy stance toward Morocco is driven by ideological commitment to decolonization and shaped by internal regime dynamics. Thieux argues that Algeria's position on Western Sahara is closely tied to concerns about domestic legitimacy, regime cohesion, and national security. The conflict serves as a stabilizing tool that allows the Algerian leadership to frame its foreign policy within a narrative of anti-colonial solidarity, while simultaneously reinforcing internal authority. In this sense, the rivalry with Morocco functions as an external confrontation and as a useful extension of Algeria's internal struggle to manage dissent, maintain elite consensus, and define its postcolonial identity. Taken together, these alternative perspectives highlight the multi-dimensional nature of the conflict, bringing forward that ideology may not be the primary source of agitation.

From another perspective, domestic political structures, particularly the role of the security sector, have increasingly gained attention in the research field. For instance, scholars such as Frédéric Volpi (2013) and Ibrahim Fraihat and Taha Yaseen (2020) have highlighted how authoritarian regimes in the region use security institutions to both manage internal dissent and to structure their external postures. In the works, the securitization of governance is pointed out as a mechanism used for the elites to maintain control. These contributions have indeed provided valuable insights into how elite strategies of consolidation or regime survival shape threat perception and international alignment. Yet, few comparative studies have directly connected

these logics to the case of the Algerian-Moroccan conflict. Regarding the studies of the role of the security sector, the relationship between security sector reform and civil-military relations have gotten growing attention. The concept of security sector reform has evolved in past years, and the importance of it for not fully democratized states have been increasingly highlighted (MacColman, 2016; Saidy, 2020).¹

At the same time, the broader literature on authoritarian resilience and civil-military relations has demonstrated that the structure and accountability of security institutions have deep implications for regime survival, external threat framing, and the use of diplomacy as a tool for regime legitimacy (Born & Schnabel, 2011). However, there remains a significant gap in comparative, conflict-centered analyses. More precisely, the currently existing studies in the area have not yet awarded attention to the exploration of how divergent models of domestic security governance contribute to the persistence of a regional conflict, like in the case of Algeria and Morocco. Most existing works treat the dispute as a diplomatic or territorial issue, without situating it within the institutional logics of each regime's approach to fundamental aspects of states with strong, centralized states, such as power consolidation, threat perception, and regional positioning.

With this backdrop, this thesis will contribute to fill these voids by adopting a framework that situates foreign policy as a strategic extension of domestic regime survival. By comparing the evolution of civil-military relations and security sector reforms in Algeria and Morocco since independence, the study may shed light to why the bilateral conflict has persisted, and in many ways also intensified, despite international mediation efforts and shifting regional dynamics. The academic significance of this study lies in its capacity to reframe a historically entrenched bilateral conflict through the lens of security governance and authoritarian institutionalism, offering a new explanatory model that goes beyond conventional diplomatic or postcolonial interpretations. While the Algerian-Moroccan rivalry has been widely discussed in literature, it is seldom analyzed as a structurally produced outcome of internally conflicting security paradigms. This thesis thus contributes to highlighting the interaction between centralization of governance, the concept of security sector reform, and regional conflict studies. Furthermore, the relevance of this study is heightened by the current global geopolitical climate with several ongoing bilateral

¹ See chapter 2 for further discussion.

conflicts disrupting regional stability. By clarifying the domestic drivers of conflict endurance, this study contributes to both the literature in the Maghreb and Sahel politics, as offering insights applicable to other contexts marked by authoritarian durability and regional rivalry as well.

Aim of Analysis and Research Question

The aim of this research is to highlight how domestic security paradigms affect states' behaviours in pressured foreign policy situations, such as those during either violent or non-violent conflicts. The cases of Algeria and Morocco will therefore serve as research subjects where their security sector reforms and their effort to democratize their security institutions is examined, in ambition to detect possible patterns in their approaches. Put simply, the intention with this study is to examine if there is a correlation to be found between the states' different approaches to security governance and their strategic actions in the conflict.

This aim will be achieved by answering the following research question:

How have Morocco and Algeria's different approaches to security sector reform and civil-military relations, since independence, contributed to the persistence of their bilateral conflict?

In extension, the following sub-question will also be answered:

What does this reveal about the role of domestic security paradigms in shaping regional rivalries?

The initial hypothesis is that, because Morocco and Algeria have developed different self-images after independence, they would take different approaches to security sector reform. In turn, these differences in how and why reforms were carried out likely influence how each country sees itself and relates to external actors. The different approaches, shaped by each country's self-image, are expected to clash and make it more difficult to reach a peaceful solution. In this sense, the hypothesis is that these aspects taken together will contribute to the persistence of the conflict.

Limitations and Scope of Analysis

As stated above, this thesis aims to provide a comparative analysis of the domestic security paradigms in Algeria and Morocco. However, several limitations must be acknowledged in terms of depth, access, and empirical scope.

First, the availability of reliable and detailed information about Algeria's internal security apparatus is significantly limited. As a fairly restrained state apparatus and with a tightly controlled political discourse, Algeria remains relatively closed to external scrutiny, especially in relation to national defense, intelligence, and elite decision-making. Literature in English on Algeria's military structures, internal security doctrine, or institutional evolution has shown to be relatively sparse. This lack of transparency, reinforced by official secrecy and restricted access to primary sources, poses a clear challenge to conducting a balanced, credible in-depth empirical analysis. In contrast, Morocco has received more sustained attention in Western media and academic research, particularly since the early 2000s. This is most likely due to its role in counterterrorism cooperation, economic liberalization, and its attempt to position itself as a progressive actor in the region. Nonetheless, this relative openness should not be overstated. Research into Morocco's security sector still remains somewhat constrained. Much of the relevant information comes either from state-aligned sources or media outlets operating in a restricted press environment. As El Aljaoui (2016) notes, security remains a legally restricted domain under Moroccan law, with very limited independent oversight or public scrutiny. This affects both the quantity and the credibility of information available, making it necessary to approach official documents, statistics, and media coverage with a critical lens.

Moreover, the very nature of the subject, national security, adds to the complexity and limiting ability to studies such as this one. Both countries' regimes deliberately restrict access to data on investments in defense, and institutional decision-making and hierarchies. Consequently, the analysis must rely heavily on triangulated secondary sources, comparative interpretations of the available policy documents, and reading and analysis of regime behavior, rather than official accounts. This thesis does not aim to provide complete institutional exposure of either country's security sector. Rather its scope is to identify and interpret key patterns in how the governance of areas relevant to a state's security reflects broader regime logics, using available scholarship and policy analysis. By focusing on structural tendencies, legal frameworks, and observable political

behavior, the study draws conclusions within the limitations imposed by restricted access to empirical data. These noted challenges do not weaken the relevance of the analysis, rather, they underscore the importance of studying security governance in closed regimes and authoritarian contexts, where secrecy itself becomes a tool of power. This thesis thus approaches the subject with both analytical caution and critical awareness of the political conditions in Algeria and Morocco.

Given the challenges of limited access to internal security documentation in both Algeria and Morocco, the scope of this study has been limited to focus on specific institutional and relations domains that can offer meaningful insight into the underlying domestic security paradigms of each state. Three key dimensions have therefore been chosen to be emphasized: security sector reform, civil society, and foreign relations. These domains were selected because they are conceptually central to the aim of the research, but also because of their capacity to indirectly reflect the internal governance logic, despite constraints on data transparency. Together, these three elements therefore enable a triangulated approach to analyzing how domestic security paradigms function and endure. The focus on security sector reform stems from its potential to reveal how power is structured, exercised, and contested within diverse political systems. While the security sector itself is shielded from public scrutiny, security sector reform, understood broadly as the processes and approach to governance, accountability and effectiveness of institutions (Born & Schnabel, 2011), provides an entry point into the state's internal architecture. By analyzing directions of reform, legal frameworks, institutional roles, and the presence or absence of civilian oversight, this thesis interprets how each regime seeks to preserve authority, manage perceived threats, and institutionalize elite control.

Second, civil society has been included as a complementary field of analysis to shed light on how each state relates to its own population. Patterns of engagement, cooperation with, or repression of civil society actors help to reveal how dissent is managed, legitimacy is constructed, and narratives are controlled. The relationship between state and civil society may signal the boundaries of political tolerance and the mechanisms by which internal opposition against the rule is shut down. Analyzing civil society therefore offers indirect insight into the intersection between politics and security, revealing how regime stability and citizen agency

confront and shape one another. Lastly, foreign relations have been incorporated to demonstrate how domestic security paradigms influence, and are reflected in, external diplomatic behavior. Although foreign policy may traditionally be treated as a separate analytical domain, it will in this thesis be viewed as an extension of internal regime logic. The way in which Algeria and Morocco engage with other states, internal organizations, and regional bodies, offers insight into how they project their identity abroad. This comes from the assumption that this kind of projection is not neutral, rather it is formed by how regimes want to be perceived by what they prioritize domestically. Thus, foreign policy is treated as a mirror of internal order.

Theory and Methodology

For this research, two theoretical frameworks will be applied; *rational choice theory* and *path dependency*.

Rooted in classical economics, the core premise of rational choice theory is that actors possess preferences and select courses of action that they believe will maximize their utility based on those preferences (Levin & Milgrom, 2004). Utility, in this context, is a subjective measure of benefit, which may be material (wealth and power), symbolic (legitimacy and prestige), or strategic (regime stability and survival). The rational actor is therefore seen as reactive or ideologically driven, but also as a self-aware agent balancing institutional, social, and structural constraints with the goal of optimizing outcomes (Levin & Milgrom, 2004; Petracca, 1991). Furthermore, at its foundation, the rational choice theory assumes that actors 1) have preferences that are stable and transitive, 2) have access to some information about the available choices and their likely outcomes, and 3) choose the option that they believe will yield the greatest utility according to their preferences and perceived constraints (Levin & Milgrom, 2004). The approach is often characterized by models of utility maximization, in which actors weigh costs and benefits, assess risks, and select the strategy that offers the most favourable trade-off. In political science, rational choice theory provides a framework for analyzing how governments and elites craft strategies to maintain authority, mitigate threats, and interact with both domestic and international actors (Petracca, 1991). Especially the logic of optimization has proven to be influential in explaining elite political behaviour, especially in authoritarian contexts where survival, not satisfaction among the citizens, is the key concern (Ibid.).

The relevance of rational choice theory to this research lies in its capacity to bridge the internal and external dimensions of state behavior together. The conflict between Algeria and Morocco, while often interpreted through geopolitical or ideological lenses, is here understood as a product of strategic decision-making by political elites embedded in distinct domestic security paradigms. The theory offers a framework for analyzing how these regimes make calculated decisions about, for instance, civil-military relations and foreign policy engagement. Arguably, these decisions are not random or purely ideological. Rather, they reflect rational adaptations to perceived threats, institutional constraints, and opportunities for consolidating power. Therefore, by viewing the states' actions in the light of rational choice, the research puts focus on elite intentionality and the logic of regime survival. This has been deemed suitable since this helps explain why decisions that appear riskful or unnecessary can still be rational when viewed as strategies to protect the regime, manage threats, and maintain control over key institutions. Also, the rational choice framework can arguably be applied to the interpretation of foreign policy, seeing it as instrumental behavior shaped by the same utility-maximizing logic that governs internal decisions.

One frequent criticism of the rational choice framework is that it assumes perfect information and unlimited cognitive capacity, conditions rarely seen in real-world decision-making. In practice, decision-makers often operate under bounded rationality, meaning that they face time constraints, asymmetric information, and institutional path dependencies that limit their options and reduce the accuracy of their assessments (Walsh, 2024; Howson, 2021). To reduce these concerns, this thesis has adopted a pragmatic version of rational choice theory that does not assume hyper-rational actors but rather keeps in mind that decision-makers mostly optimize their results within constraints. This more flexible viewpoint allows the theory to remain applicable while avoiding overly rigid or unrealistic assumptions about human and state behavior.

Complementary to the rational choice framework, the path dependence theory offers a historically grounded explanation of how past institutional choices create constraints that shape future options, making certain outcomes increasingly difficult to avoid or reverse. While rational choice theory focuses on how political actors pursue utility-maximizing strategies within a given

set of options, path dependence explains how current options are limited by past decisions, institutional resistance to change, and the growing benefits of staying on the same path (Mahoney, 2020). In this way, the two theories together provide a more complete framework where rational choice explains how elites act strategically within current constraints, while path dependence explains why those constraints exist and persist.

Mahoney (2020) highlights that some scholars distinguish between two types of sequences; self-reinforcing and reactive sequences. In self-reinforcing sequences, institutions become increasingly difficult to change over time due to mechanisms such as increasing returns, lowered costs, and growing acceptance of the institutions. In other words, these sequences demonstrate that initial choices generate positive feedback loops that reinforce the same institutional pattern, even when other alternatives might later appear more efficient or appropriate (Mahoney, 2020). In contrast, reactive sequences consist of chains of causally connected events, where each event is in part a response to a preceding one. The order and timing of events are critical, as an event that occurs early in a sequence may have decisive consequences, whereas the same event occurring later would not, and this is what makes these sequences path dependent, rather than just historical (Ibid.). Moreover, path-dependent processes are rigid, meaning that once they start, they usually keep going in the same direction, even if the original reasons no longer matter. The self-reinforcing sequences display this occurrence through institutional reproduction, while reactive sequences exhibit it through mechanism of reaction and counteraction (Ibid.). This may help explain the persistence of governance structures and the reproduction of policy stances, even when strategic or diplomatic alternatives may be available.

Early and contingent events are central features of the theory. As Mahoney (2020) and Wilsford (1994) argue, initial decisions in institutional development are often contingent, i.e not fully determined by prior conditions, and therefore not predictable in advance. Once a particular path is selected, however, future developments are shaped and constrained by that choice. In other terms, this means that path-dependent systems display locked effects, that with each step by a chosen path, the cost of reversal increases, and the likelihood of continuing along that path becomes greater (Wilsford, 1994). David (2007) reinforces this by defining path dependence as a *non-ergodic process*. In ergodic systems, the past becomes irrelevant over time, and all outcomes

remain possible. In non-ergodic systems, on the other hand, historical events bring a permanent influence, and the system cannot return to its original state or explore all alternatives freely. Thus, the framework aids in the understanding of why certain practices, such as elite control over armed forces, persist despite changing domestic and international pressures. Moreover, the reasoning of David (2007) helps contextualize how institutional resistance to change is not simply functional or ideological but structurally embedded. In path-dependent systems, reform is often limited not because of a lack of will or capacity, but because the institutional architecture itself is the product of a historical sequence that restricts the regime's perceived and actual room for action.

In this way, path dependence theory strengthens the analytical depth of this study by clarifying the historical mechanism through which Algeria and Morocco's divergent security paradigms became entrenched. While rational choice theory provides a lens for interpreting the strategic calculations of contemporary elites, path dependence explains why the scope of those calculations is constrained, and why certain institutional patterns, despite being inefficient or conflict-sustaining, continue to exist. The interplay of these two theories enables a more comprehensive understanding of the persistence of the bilateral conflict. It shows that the conflict is rooted in historically contingent, self-reinforcing institutional logics, rather than ideology or reactive diplomacy, that shape both domestic governance and foreign policy.

Methodology

The method used in this thesis is a qualitative, comparative case study grounded in a historical-institutionalist approach. The study is structured as a comparison between two states that share multiple structural similarities, such as colonial legacies and geographic proximity, but that have developed distinct institutional trajectories in the governance of their security sectors. This allowed for a *most similar systems design*, where the aim was to identify and explain differing outcomes in otherwise comparable contexts (Steinmetz, 2019; Anchor, 2006). The focus laid on how legal reforms, institutional arrangements, and political power structures have shaped the internal security paradigms of the two states, and how these in turn influence their external behavior. The empirical material consisted of primarily secondary sources, including scholarly literature, policy documents, reports from think tanks, and official statements. The

sources have been in both English and French.

The methodology allows for a dual analytical focus. On one hand, it seeks to explain elite strategies and regime behavior through the logic of utility maximization, as suggested by the rational choice theory. On the other, it highlights how these strategies are shaped and constrained by institutional legacies, historical decisions, and structural standstills. Together, these perspectives provide the analytical depth needed to understand both how rigidly centralized security paradigms are formed, and why they are so often resistant to change.

One of the strengths of this methodological approach lies in its ability to reveal how long-term historical processes shape contemporary behavior. This allows the research to go beyond surface-level explanations and explore how regime strategies are both products of rational calculation and structurally conditioned by past institutional choices (Steinmetz, 2019). At the same time, the method presents certain limitations. Due to the restricted access to official data and in-depth analysis in the wider research field, the analysis has largely been based on secondary sources. This poses challenges in terms of source reliability and verification. To mitigate these limitations, sources have been cross-referenced, critically assessed, and analyzed with an awareness of their origins, purposes, and potential biases. Despite these challenges, the chosen method is deemed to be well aligned with the purpose of the study.

Outline of the Dissertation

This thesis begins with a historical background of Algeria and Morocco's state formation and early security structures. Then, in the second chapter, it analyzes how each country has engaged with security sector reform, focusing on legal frameworks, institutional changes, and the extent of implementation. The third chapter examines the states' relationships with their own societies through civil society, and their external strategies through foreign relations. Finally, in the fourth chapter, the thesis applies these findings to the Algeria-Morocco conflict, and explores the implications of them. Following the final chapter, a conclusion of the study is presented.

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Chapter 1: Historical Background and Evolution of Security Structures in Algeria and Morocco

The colonial legacies and tumultuous first years of independence have deeply shaped the Algerian and Moroccan security landscapes. Despite both countries being granted independence from France through vastly different paths to sovereignty, their approaches to security governance and military organization reflected their historical experiences. Morocco secured its independence through negotiation and preserved the monarchy's political power, whereas Algeria's violent war for liberation institutionalized the military in state affairs (Chalk, 2007; Entelis, 1980). The outcomes of the liberations would come to influence the domestic political dimensions, but they also fueled tensions that impacted the relationship between the two states as well. Therefore, to comprehend the evolution and current state of Algeria's and Morocco's outset in security governance, it is crucial to understand their path to independence and its aftermath.

In this chapter, the paths to independence in the case of Algeria and Morocco will first be described. Thereafter, the security frameworks that emerged in the newly redefined states will be discussed. Lastly, the events of the Sand War will be explored, showcasing the beginning of the long lasting conflict of the two countries.

1.1 The Transitions to Independence

The Case of Algeria

During 130 years, Algeria was under French rule. In 1954, a war for independence broke out that would mark the ending of the colonial period. However, the forces leading up to this started to take form in the 1940s. After years of failed efforts to influence the political scene, and instances like the 1945 riots in Sétif which resulted in approximately 15,000 deaths, the nationalistic groups were eventually convinced that the only viable path to achieving independence was through violence (Entelis, 1980). This environment eventually gave rise to *Le Comité révolutionnaire d'unité et d'action* (CRUA). It was composed of dissidents from the revolutionary movement *Mouvement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques* (MTLD),

former French soldiers with combat experience from Indochina, and various individuals who not just accepted, but actively embraced, violence and high-risk actions (ibid.). The nine chiefs who founded the CRUA in early 1954 shared four key experiences: they were radical militants from peasant and working-class backgrounds, they had served in the French army, they were former members of the *Organisation Speciale* (OS), and they had all been imprisoned by French authorities (Entelis, 1980). During 1954 CRUA evolved into the *Le front libération national* (FLN) and its armed wing, *L'Armée de libération nationale* (ALN) and Algeria was divided into six *wilayas* (districts). Interestingly, the FLN intentionally refrained from appointing a single central leader to head its organization. Instead, they adopted a strictly collective leadership structure. This approach was highly effective in maintaining unity and focusing efforts on achieving independence, and it would eventually set a precedent for collective governance over individual rule. This model would remain a defining feature of post-independence Algeria (Willis, 2014).

On 1 November 1954, FLN called upon Algerians to take up arms in the fight for independence (Entelis, 1980). During the upcoming eight years, Algeria found itself in a civil war. FLN's offensive approach laid the ground for modern guerilla warfare, while also turning to terrorism (Quandt, 1972). The counterinsurgencies from France against the FLN were intense with extensive brutality as well. Chalk (2007) points to institutionalized torture, harsh interrogation methods, and prisoners who refused to talk were either killed or died under torture. Despite the violence, the pacification efforts, according to the French led army, was to weaken the FLN while keeping civilians safe. With the government struggling to maintain order, the military took over several crucial sectors of society like running schools, healthcare, and infrastructure (ibid.). The French efforts to control the nationalistic revolution sparked widespread international controversy. So much so that they increased public sympathy for FLN and the groups of resistance who, despite their violence, were increasingly seen as defenders of the people's rights. Ultimately, the support for the war in France also waned and the French President Charles de Gaulle was forced to acknowledge the possibility of Algerian independence (Chalk, 2007). This shift from de Gaulle's previously pro-French Algerian policy ignited anger among European settlers in Algeria, prompting the formation of the *Organisation de l'Armée Secrète* (OAS) to support military resistance. The militant group aspired to overthrow de Gaulle, ignite a civil war

against the metropolitan government, and instigate an ethnic war against Muslims (ibid.). However, the group failed with its plans.

Afterall, negotiations between the French military and FLN succeeded in 1962, and a ceasefire was established in the Evian Agreements. They also guaranteed civil and political rights for all Algerians, and called for a referendum to determine the future of Algeria (Chalk, 2007). Finally, on 3 July 1962, Algeria officially became an independent nation. The FLN had achieved its goal, but the cost of the war was devastating. Over 1.5 million Algerians were killed or went missing, and a third of the country's economic infrastructure was destroyed. Amongst the 42,000 recorded terrorist attacks carried out during the war, 3000 European civilians were recorded dead (ibid.). Ultimately, the war had elevated military officers to a dominant position within Algeria's political system. Throughout the consolidation of the Algerian governance structure, military leaders maintained control from behind the scenes, exerting significant influence over the country's political direction (King, 2009).

The Case of Morocco

Compared to Algeria, who was subjected to *total colonialism* with the French controlling the entirety of Algerian society, Morocco's case was different. Morocco suffered only a *segmented colonialism* (Entelis, 1980). In other words, the French colonialists' grip on Morocco was not as tight as in Algeria. However, it is crucial to mention that Spain also controlled Moroccan territories in the northern part of the country and Western Sahara during their occupation, i.e. Spanish Sahara (Marks, 1976). Nevertheless, Spain did not have as much military or administrative presence in Morocco as France. The Moroccan nationalistic movement had its origins in various elite groups that began to emerge, mainly in Rabat and Fes, in the 1920s. These groups were neither geographically nor ideologically uniform (Willis, 2014). The groups in the city of Fes were more religiously oriented, traditional, and conservative, whereas those in Rabat had a more European-influenced ideology, shaped by leaders who had studied in France and Europe (ibid.). Despite their ideological differences, these groups collaborated closely, and by 1944 they would constitute the ground for the creation of the *Istiqlal Party* (Independence Party), advocating for Morocco's independence (ibid.).

A, what Entelis (1980) calls, “nationalist crisis” broke out in 1930. It was sparked by the *Berber Dahir*, a decree aimed to establish customary tribunals in Berber-populated regions to handle civil cases. It introduced a penal and criminal justice system based on French law, deliberately excluding these areas from the jurisdiction of the *Makhzen*, the monarchical authority (ibid.). The French authorities justified this measure by claiming it was meant to formally recognize Berber customary law, a set of tribal regulations that complemented Quranic law. However, it was instead widely seen as a colonial tactic designed to divide Arabs and Berbers, weakening national unity while securing French dominance (Entelis, 1980), resulting in growing support for the nationalist movement (Willis, 2014). Violence eventually erupted when the French authorities decided to exile Sultan Mohammed V, who had been at the throne since 1927. The reason for the exile was the Sultan’s growing ties with the *Istiqlal Party* and the fact that he showed reluctance to comply with French demands (Entelis, 1980; Willis, 2014).

The evolving bond between the monarchy and *Istiqlal* strengthened the nationalist movement further and reinforced the conservative sentiments for the party, a partnership that would later play a crucial role in Morocco’s post-independence political landscape (Entelis, 1980; Willis, 2014). Shortly after the outbreak of violent resistance, however, the French authorities opened for a negotiated settlement. Despite the nationalist attacks being relatively small in scale, they did not pose an existential threat to the French rule (Willis, 2014). Yet, France’s decision to withdraw was largely influenced by the simultaneous insurrection in Algeria. Unwilling to engage in three separate conflicts (Tunisia was also opposing its French rulers), France prioritized its efforts on retaining Algeria, which it considered far more important to keep under its control. Unlike Algeria, the Moroccan fight for independence was not as prolonged and violent owing to the fact that Algeria was an officially integrated part of France and Morocco was not (Ibid.). Ultimately, after 44 years as a French protectorate, Morocco finally became independent in 1956.

1.2 Post-Independence Security Frameworks in Algeria and Morocco

The Case of Algeria

In Algeria during the French rule, legislative power was appointed to a governor general selected by France, and each governmental department head was responsible to the French ministry of interior (Entelis, 1980). European settlers gained influence and were in this way able to direct decision making and affect appointment of high officials. Initially, the Algerian Arab tribes were allowed to be self-governed, but the pressure from the *Pieds Noirs* to suppress this freedom intensified (ibid.). They called for the removal of the tribes from military control, to transform their territory into civilian authority, and to place them under officials who would be more easily influenced by the settlers. Entelis (1980) refers to these measures to successively strip the tribes of influence and prosperity for “civilizing” campaigns. Native society was nearly totally destroyed and no political traditions of Algeria survived the French occupation (Joffe, 1988). In essence, the Algerian society had been fractured and the French military had considerable autonomy over the country (Chalk, 2007).

Once Algeria achieved independence in 1962, the internal divisions that had been contained within the victorious *Front de Libération National* were unleashed. Three main factions vied for power: 1) the provisional government (*Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne* or GPRA) which promoted a civilian leadership, 2) the *wilaya* commanders (Algerian military units that had fought against the French in the country), and 3) the external wing of *Armée de Libération Nationale* (the revolutionary force based in Morocco and Tunisia) which together with the *wilaya* commanders represented ambitions of militant governance. However, their conflicts were fueled by disputes over wartime conduct, ideological differences, ethnic and clan affiliations, personal loyalties, and competing visions for Algeria’s post-independence governance (Entelis, 1980). At the heart of it was the question of who would hold ultimate political authority in the country. Years of distrust during the colonial period had ingrained a deep skepticism into Algerian political culture, shaping the post-independence power struggle into a direct confrontation where political survival became the primary goal for various factions. The independence war had effectively split authority among the *wilaya* leaders, the external

ALN led by Houari Boumédiène, and the GPRA, while personal animosities deepened the pre-existing fractures (Ibid.).

What can be concluded is that the war for independence led the military officers to have the dominant role in the Algerian political system. During the colonization, the French had created a polarized society with the vast majority of the population left impoverished. As a result, serving in the French army had become one of the few ways for Algerians to achieve upward mobility (King, 2009). When rebuilding the independent Algeria, the military rulers then used FLN as a tool to achieve their political goals and remained involved behind the scenes (Ibid.). Recurring conflicts among the elite and efforts to form broad alliances initially led to the rise of Ahmed Ben Bella's regime between 1962-1965, backed by ALN's Boumediene. However, when Ben Bella sought to curb the military's influence, he was overthrown and replaced by Boumediene, who was more effective in resisting opposition (King, 2009). As an initial step, Boumediene announced a new government consisting mostly of military figures and wartime leaders (Entelis, 1980). The military government became increasingly dominant during Boumediene's rule, practically reducing politicians to mere subordinates of the armed forces and consolidating both political and military power under himself (Ibid.). The FLN party became a propaganda tool to give his policies a sense of legitimacy. A culture of deference to the military was essentially created where politicians waited for approval from the armed forces before taking any action (Ibid.).

Although presidential elections were officially determined by six-year terms, in reality, the FLN, or rather Boumediene, had constructed such a rigid one party system that their chosen candidate was ultimately legitimized through a referendum. Officials ensured their own re-election without opposition, and the only instance of leadership change occurred when Boumediene died in office in 1978. In this case, the military effectively selected his successor, who was then formally endorsed by the FLN and approved through a referendum (Joffe, 1988). Willis (2014) also points to the central role the military has played in Algerian post-independence politics by highlighting that every one of the presidents appointed since independence, until the date of his research, has been able to succeed because of the backing of the military. Furthermore, the longest serving presidents were senior military officers prior to taking up the post as president. Finally, most of

the presidents since 1962 have also been removed by the military (Willis, 2014).

The Case of Morocco

During the colonial period, substantial elements of its pre-colonial governments were upheld where the French administrators controlled the policy-making process in internal as well as external affairs, including national defence. The administrations, implemented indirectly by French authorities through the authority of the Moroccan Sultan, were identical to the ones of the contemporary French ministries (Entelis, 1980). It was made sure to preserve traditional Moroccan institutions and the traditional elites, but the administrative substructure that was created was fully governed by French officials. However, the Sultan formally signed official laws and decrees, which were issued in his name, positioning him at the heart of public affairs and maintaining his role as the symbolic source of authority in the nation (Ibid.). When the colonial structure later collapsed, this prominent positioning of the monarchy continued. The police, internal security services, and the armed forces remained closely tied to the monarchy, either through the king or through political figures who acted on behalf of the royal family (Joffe, 1988). In a sense, Morocco therefore became a unique example of post-independence transition, with the pre-colonial political institutions that remained and the monarchy who served as a strong force of continuity. However, with the independence, the monarchy solidified itself as the central pillar of power (Ibid.).

Joffe (1988) emphasizes that after all, Moroccan political culture had long been shaped by the idea of a social contract with inherent limitations on royal absolutism. Since before the colonial period the rulers who claimed caliphal authority, like the royal family, were expected to maintain societal and political order and in return expect loyalty from the people. Therefore the monarchy aspired to balance authoritarian control with the need to maintain political and civic order (Ibid.). Moreover, the administration introduced by France, where the sultanate played a central role and was personally involved in mediating and influencing affairs, the post-independence Moroccan administration was centralised, and not as dependent on local tribes as before (Joffe, 1988). In essence, authority was fully consolidated and consistently enforced across the entire nation. As a result, the monarchy inherited a police force and internal security apparatus that operated nationwide under centralized authority (Ibid.). An element of this was the creation of the *Les*

Forces armées royales (FAR) in 1956 (El Houdaigui, 2019).

In the army, the King (who pre-independence held the title of Sultan) positioned himself as the General Chief of Staff, asserting a strict hierarchical decision-making structure with a clear vertical authority. Further, the monarch was also assigned to shape the military's doctrinal framework. Another crucial component of the FAR became its stern political neutrality. It was expected to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the regime, with public political affiliations or viewpoints being banned (El Houdaigui, 2019). Interestingly, the armed forces pledged their loyalty directly to the King, rather than to the nation as a whole. This is most clearly reflected in the naming of the military as the *Royal* Armed Forces instead of the *National* or *Moroccan* Armed Forces. The seal and motto was altered from the order of the national slogan *Allah, al-Watan, al-Malik* (God, the Nation, the King) to *Allah, al-Malik, al-Watan* (God, the King, the Nation) (Wyrzten, 2016). Beyond the army, the newly independent Moroccan state also established a security apparatus that included both military and civilian police forces, such as the National Security in 1956 and Royal Gendarmerie in 1957, both of which remained under the King's direct oversight (Ibid.).

Following independence, the monarch targeted rural and urban elites it deemed to have collaborated with the French. However, the greatest challenge came from the once ally *Istiqlal* which now was its only serious rival for power. In response, the monarchy developed a strategy to counter *Istiqlal* and other political parties (Wyrzten, 2016). The strategy consisted of pluralization, arbitration, and delayed democratization, and it would define its long-term political strategy. Internal conflicts within *Istiqlal* eventually led to its split in 1959, leaving the monarchy as the undisputed center of power by the early 1960s (Ibid.). In July 1963, another adversary appeared. A plot against the state's internal security where the military was implicated was uncovered. In response, both the army and air force leadership underwent restructuring. Following this incident, the King further reinforced the military as a key pillar of his regime, now strictly prohibiting officers from engaging in oppositional political movements (Entelis, 1980).

Despite these measures, the army's loyalty was severely tested when two attempted coups were

launched in July 1971 and August 1972 by the military and air force, respectively. Once seen as the monarchy's strongest supporters, the armed forces suddenly became its greatest threat since independence (Entelis, 1980). The myth of the army's enduring loyalty was deeply shaken, if not entirely destroyed. In response, King Hassan II quickly restructured the security forces and sought to redirect the military's focus, engaging them in external conflicts such as the Sahara dispute, as a strategy to restore military allegiance to the throne (Ibid.). Still today, alongside the internal security forces, riot police, and intelligence agencies, the FAR plays a crucial role in safeguarding the monarchy's political and physical security.

1.3 The Influence of the Historical Paths

In essence, despite both states emerging from French colonial rule, the nature of their movements for independence and post-colonial transitions resulted in two distinct models of governance: Morocco with its monarchy which remained as the cornerstone of political stability and security, and Algeria where the military entrenched itself as the dominant force in politics.

Algeria's view of security was arguably a direct product of its independence war which institutionalized violence as a mechanism of political power. The *Front de Libération National* deliberately adopted a collective leadership structure to maintain cohesion during the armed fight against the French rule. However, this organizational model did not translate into a stable political structure post-independence. The war itself reinforced the primacy of using force and violence, fostering a political culture where legitimacy was derived not from a democratic processes, but from military strength and the ability to suppress opposition. The military's decisive role in the power struggle ultimately led to the marginalization of civilian leadership, as exemplified by the 1965 coup where Boumediene overthrew President Ben Bella. Further, the FLN's continued existence as a political entity became symbolic, serving as an instrument of legitimacy rather than an autonomous policymaking body. Unlike Morocco, where the monarchy played a central mediating role between different political and security actors, Algeria's political system lacked an obvious authority, resulting in a governance model where the military was both the enforcer and the maker of state policy. The consequence of this structure may be perceived as

a constant instability in civil-military relations, where political authority remains vulnerable to shifts in military allegiance.

Morocco, however, showed a stark contrast to Algeria's case, as its security governance became structured around the monarchy, which even before independence functioned as a political and religious authority. The pre-colonial political system in Morocco was based on a form of social contract in which the sultan was expected to maintain order and protect the population in exchange for loyalty. When Morocco gained independence, the monarchy was restored and also further reinforced, as it had positioned itself as the legitimate representative of national sovereignty throughout the independence movement. This historical continuity allowed the Moroccan monarchy to centralize control over the security sector in a way that Algeria's post-colonial government could not. The military was made sure to remain a loyal instrument of the monarchy rather than an independent political entity. Unlike Algeria's army which had positioned itself as a political arbiter, the Moroccan military was designed to remain politically neutral, with clear prohibitions against officers engaging in political activities.

In other words, the security policies of Algeria and Morocco were shaped by fundamentally different power structures, and ultimately, their approaches to the security domain cannot be understood in isolation from their historical trajectories and foundational governance structures.

1.4 The Sand War and its Ramifications on Regional Relationships

So, how have these early developments of security governance presented themselves in practical terms? A first trial to the two systems was through the Sand War in 1963. The conflict could be argued to have laid the groundwork for the tensions between Morocco and Algeria existing still to this day, and needs to be seen through the lens of the colonization and post-colonialization legacies of the two countries. The fighting was contained to the countries' borders and resulted in captivated prisoners and a high death rate on both sides.

As mentioned above, the newly independent states inherited an array of political problems from

their former colonial ruler, but the most sensitive one of these was the question of borders. Previously, there had been no fixed borders in North Africa, and even though Morocco during the 19th century was a sovereign state, border divisions were seen as a Western concept in the religiously rooted Morocco (Berko Wild, 1966). As a result, when the French were in power in Algeria they drew a number of frontier agreements with the sovereign Moroccan government, ultimately defining the border between the two countries (Ibid.). Consequently, at the time of independence for both countries, no clear border existed between Algeria and Morocco that both countries had independently agreed upon (Weiler, 2011). The border question had not occurred during the French occupation, but even before the colonization, parts of southern and western Algeria had in fact been under Moroccan influence. However, after 1956 the policy of a “Greater Morocco” took root in the nationalistic movement and Morocco claimed a border territory between Morocco and Algeria that France earlier had integrated as a part of Algeria, along with former Spanish territories like Mauritania and Spanish Sahara (now Western Sahara) (Ibid.).

When iron ore and other valuable minerals were found in the disputed area, the conflict heated up further. The findings were made in the Sahara Desert regions, especially around the Algerian city of Tindouf. The territorial claims were seen as an attack on both Algerian independence and territorial integrity by the Moroccan monarchy (Farsoun & Paul, 1976; Weiler, 2011). To strengthen their military position in Algeria and secure the majority of the mineral rich areas, the French officials in Algeria proposed to give Morocco the Tindouf region in exchange for limiting Algerian troops on Moroccan territory (Farsoun & Paul, 1976). However, Moroccan public support for Algeria’s fight for independence was strong at the time which prevented the government from accepting the deal with the colonial authorities. Instead, Morocco stated it would negotiate directly with the liberated Algerian leadership (Ibid.). Under pressure from the *Istiqlal*, the Moroccan King officially claimed Mauritania in 1958. Weiler (2011) points out that this irredentist policy move probably was made by the King, Mohammed V, in an attempt to ease domestic political issues with, among other things, a growing left-wing opposition. The action could serve as a device to blur political differences in Morocco and promote patriotic feelings among the population. The claim had a backside though, the official preoccupation with irredentism by Morocco led to its isolation on the African continent (Ibid.).

With the accession of the new Moroccan King, Hassan II, in 1961, the claim of Algerian territories gained greater emphasis. One of the aims with the territorial assertion was that it would allow the Moroccan authorities to more easily assert control over the nomadic tribes living in the areas of interest, which the kingdom claimed had traditionally been loyal to the Moroccan monarchy and not Algeria (Crisis Group, 2024). Further, the increasing left-wing sentiments in Algeria had spread to Morocco and the monarch believed these claims could weaken the pan-Arabist Moroccan left and diminish the anti-monarchist attitudes held by these groups. Even though the relationship with the African neighbors weakened, the aspiration to suppress the left-wing beliefs strengthened the country's relations with the West and its ongoing Cold War (Ibid.). Certainly, the ideological differences between the states most probably influenced the hostilities. Morocco, with its traditionalist monarchy, adopted policies rooted in economic liberalism, which stood in stark contrast to Algeria's revolutionary socialist regime (Berko Wild, 1966). These foundational economic and political disparities complicated the border conflict for the countries in regards to how to view the status of their inherited territories. By 1963, most of the former Moroccan colonial areas were still owned by foreigners, while the foreign held lands in Algeria had been nationalized. The Algerians were content with having acquired their land, but many Moroccans were not content with their own situation, and aspired to follow Algeria's example in nationalizing the land. This sentiment was to be one of the contributing factors to growing sympathy by the Moroccan left-wing opposition with the Algerian regime (Berko Wild, 1966).

Nonetheless, when Algeria finally gained independence and Ben Bella had come to power, the Moroccan regime had no intent to live out the former agreement for negotiations. In mid-1962, the referendum for Algerian independence was held and it has later been reported that the inhabitants of Tindouf had marked their ballots with a *YES* for Algerian independence but also emphasized that they were still simultaneously Moroccans (Berko Wild, 1966). Moroccan troops tried to occupy the Tindouf area, but quickly withdrew when it was clear that Algeria had firm military control over it (Ibid.). During the summer of 1963, amid political turmoil in both nations, King Hassan II launched a campaign over the border issue. His goal was both to strengthen his hold on power in Morocco and to take advantage of the post-independence instability in Algeria (Farsoun & Paul, 1976). Moroccans were expelled from the Algerian side

of the border, and Algerian merchants were expelled from areas on the Moroccan side. Algerian troops occupied the Moroccan town of Ghifa in the Tarfaya region, which led to Moroccan troops gathering along the frontier. At first, both governments seemed to want to minimize the events with, for instance, the Algerian Ambassador to Morocco referring to the incidents as results of “uncontrolled elements” (Berko Wild, 1966). This position would soon change, however, as President Ben Bella alleged that the Moroccan troops were supporting an uprising by the Berber tribes against his regime. As a reaction the President addressed a public rally where he opposed the accusation of him being a dictator and called for immediate nationalization of the farm lands still in foreign possession (Ibid.). In other words, because of the internal threat posed to him, President Ben Bella had found it necessary to now adopt a rather hostile rhetoric.

In late September 1963, King Hassan II sought to assert control over strategic locations in the Sahara region and ordered the Moroccan troops to take control over Hassi-Beida and Tinjoub. These towns controlled the main highway connecting coastal Algeria to the Spanish Sahara and were therefore seen as crucial to regulate. The move created domestic political divisions in Morocco as the left-opposition criticized the monarchy and called upon the Moroccan soldiers to refuse fighting their “Algerian brothers” (Farsoun & Paul, 1976). Despite these attempts to cool down the hostilities, the conflict escalated. A few days later, Algeria responded by launching a counter offensive, retaking the two cities and killing ten Moroccan soldiers in the process. The Moroccan army replaced their auxiliary forces with regular troops in response, and secured Hassi-Beida and Tinjoub once again (Ibid.). An open war had now broken out. However, an aspect crucial to highlight is that the Algerian army did not yet have the means to fight a regular war. The soldiers had up until then relied immensely on asymmetrical guerilla warfare but had hardly any heavy weaponry. On the other hand, the Moroccan army was professional and well equipped but lacked experience (Weiler, 2011). Put another way, the capabilities and capacities of the two sides in the conflict were asymmetrical and unbalanced.

Moroccan officials accused President Ben Bella of initiating the war to consolidate his dictatorship and spread fascism in Africa. President Ben Bella, on the other hand, accused king Hassan II of violating international charters and attempting to destroy the new socialist Algerian regime (Berko Wild, 1966). Tensions escalated further and a general mobilization of Algeria’s

forces was eventually ordered by the President, including veterans from the ALN to join the fight (Farsoun & Paul, 1976). At this stage, the conflict had gained further international attention. Algeria had gained support and military aid from Egypt and Cuba, while France, Spain, and the United States (U.S) refused Morocco's request for assistance seeking to prevent the conflict from escalating further (Berko Wild, 1966). Diplomatic mediation efforts intensified when neither side seemed willing to back down. President Ben Bella turned to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) arbitration, while Hassan II, on the other hand, appealed to the United Nations Security Council. This move was poorly received by many African and Arab nations. Morocco was isolated further because of Algeria's strong ties with third world countries, hindering it from turning the military victories into a lasting advantage (Farsoun & Paul, 1976). Eventually, Mali's President Keita and an OAU arbitration commission mediated a ceasefire in early November of 1963. To secure the ceasefire, Malian troops were sent to stay at the border. A month later, both sides had withdrawn their forces, leaving a demilitarized zone behind and restoring the status quo ante. By retaining control over the disputed areas during the war, Morocco secured a military victory. However, Algeria appeared as the political victor by effectively neutralizing Morocco's territorial ambitions and preventing it from consolidating its military initiatives through diplomatic maneuvering and third world support (Ibid.).

In February 1964 the ceasefire was codified, and the border was ultimately agreed upon being left unchanged. Along with the surge of patriotism vitalized on both sides, the deepening of nationalist sentiments within their armies, the war helped to solidify the states and their authoritarian leaderships (Crisis Group, 2024). In Morocco, it further secured Hassan II and the monarchy's grip on power. In Algeria, the military's dominance was strengthened within the ruling FLN. The country was vulnerable with a devastated society and economy, with little central authority, after its war for independence. Farson and Paul (1976) highlight that this internal disorder shaped Algeria's response to the war, as its government struggled to balance military defence with economic and political reconstruction. President Ben Bella's regime faced mounting distrust from the military, eventually leading to him being forced from power by the conservative Boumediene (Ibid.). Authoritarian and neo-colonial structures were strengthened in Morocco as well, with the monarch using the conflict to reinforce his rule and suppress his opposition. However, despite the King's anchoring of power, the failure to secure the border

region contributed to disappointment among the military and people, and would later affect the stability of the regime (Ibid.).

Ramifications

It can be argued that the war was an early test of the different security governance models that emerged in post-colonial Morocco and Algeria. It also had a profound effect on the institutionalization of authoritarianism, consolidating the power of the Moroccan monarchy and reinforcing the Algerian military's dominance. The monarchical structure asserted centralized control over the security institutions, like the military, aligning the policies with the King's strategic and political interests. It also ensured the armed forces' loyalty to the monarch and provided stability. However, with the military decision-making being tied with the King's personal ambitions, the system could be seen as vulnerable to political maneuvering. In contrast, Algeria viewed its military as the guardian of national sovereignty as a result of the *Armée de libération nationale*'s central role in state-building after its anti-colonial struggle. Moreover, the outcome of negotiation attempts and the President's inability to manage civil-military relations led to the shift from the civilian leadership with Ben Bella to the military dominated one with Boumediene and his faction stemming from the army. Therefore, the war can be seen to be the official beginning of the Algerian military's role as the ultimate political authority, institutionalizing a model where the governance model promoting civilian leadership remained subordinate to the military elite. With the securing of support from for instance Egypt and Cuba, Algeria turned the conflict into an ideological one rather than only a border dispute. Morocco's irredentist policies were seen as neo-colonial expansionism by its African and Arab counterparts, while Algeria gained support as the struggle was framed as a defence of post-colonial sovereignty. Moreover, Morocco's monarchical conservatism and economic liberalism, attempting to reach out to Western powers, contrasted sharply with Algeria's socialist, revolutionary, pan-African position.

The Sand War laid the ground for security tension in the decades that followed, particularly regarding the conflict of Western Sahara. Algeria's support for the Polisario Front has not just been a direct response to Moroccan expansionism, but an extension of its backing of

anti-colonial resistance movements as well. However, this will be discussed further below in chapter 4.

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Chapter 2: Security Sector Reforms Trajectories and Implications

To facilitate the later analysis, it is fruitful to further define and clarify the concept of security sector reform. The initial part of this chapter will therefore be dedicated to a discussion of what security sector reform entails and its application to the research in this project. Thereafter, the process of reformation in the cases of Algeria and Morocco will be presented. The countries' different approaches will be highlighted, shedding light on their diverging paths for security sector reform since independence. Finally, a comparative analysis of the two cases will be made, discussing the main differences between the states.

2.1 What is Security Sector Reform?

“The normative concept of security sector reform is based on the assumption that societies are better off with a security sector that is an asset, not an obstacle, to peace, security, development and stability” (Born & Schnabel, 2011, p.8)

As demonstrated by Born and Schnabel above, the security sector should function as an element to promote physical security as well as development and stability in a state. Security sector reform (SSR) is a conceptual framework which links the aspects of human and state security, democratic governance, and development. It is primarily applied to countries which are aiming to recover from, for instance, episodes of mass violence and political instability (MacColman, 2016). The significance of security sector reform lies in its recognition that security extends beyond conventional military aspects, encompassing a broader spectrum of national and international institutions and stakeholders (Born & Schnabel, 2011). MacColman (2016) points out that the contemporary view of security sector reform took shape in the mid-2000s. This has in turn impacted the ideas about security, governance, and on post-violence peacebuilding and development. The transformation of the SSR concept reframed international cooperation and marked a shift in focus from national security to human security, emphasizing a normative dedication to democratic governance (Ibid.). Saidy (2020) supports this by emphasizing that

security should not be understood as something being exclusively centered around the state or military threats, but also around issues impacting other states, individuals, and people.

In addition, the OECD DAC (2007) highlights that there are certain actors that are the main focus for reform efforts. These actors are 1) the core security actors like the armed forces, police, and intelligence services; 2) management and oversight bodies like ministries of defence, legislative committees, and customary and traditional authorities; 3) justice and the rule of law, including traditional justice systems and; 4) non-statutory security forces, including guerrilla armies, political party militias, and liberation armies (OECD DAC, 2007). *Reform* refers to an institutional and behavioral transformation into the creation of a legitimate, well-functioning, and well-governed security sector (Born & Schnabel, 2011). A reform is needed if a security sector, or one of its institutions, lacks inclusivity, exhibits bias or corruption, fails to respond effectively to public needs, operates incoherently and ineffectively, or lacks accountability to the public (Ibid.).

Furthermore, good governance is a central aspect of the SSR. Governance refers to how the security institutions meet the interests of both the people and the state (Saidy, 2020). So-called good governance happens when all actors in the security sector, including the armed forces, police, and intelligence services as well as constitutional and political institutions, are involved in and oversee the decision-making process (Ibid.). Born and Schnabel (2011) indicate certain aspects fundamental for good governance. For example, inclusive and effective participation or representation of all citizens, particularly marginalized groups and both men and women, are essential. In addition, rule of law, transparency, and responsiveness are also crucial. Finally, consensus-building, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability are all also presented as essential (Born & Schnabel, 2011). These principles are best achieved if a parallel democratization process is also ongoing with the SSR. This is true because the absence of a democratic political system leads to a near impossibility to implement some, if not all, of the aforementioned good governance elements (Ibid.).

With its comprehensive, system-based, and people-centered approach to security, SSR also shapes the approaches of governments aiming to transform societies. This is done by

restructuring institutions, but also by reshaping local actors' fundamental perceptions of the state-society relationship (MacColman, 2016). The wide-ranging transformations at the institutional, social, and behavioral levels, affect the value systems of both individuals and organizations, which are often deeply rooted in history, tradition, and long-standing practices (Born & Schnabel, 2011). This aspect means that states with a culture inherited from an authoritarian regime have a greater challenge to implement any genuine security sector reform than states without this inherited culture (Saidy, 2020). In these cases, priority should be given to rebuilding and restructuring the military, police, and intelligence agencies. The primary objective should be to establish a professional security sector that operates under democratic oversight with a clear mandate (Ibid.). The security sector is a cornerstone in the democratization process because when this sector functions inadequately, societal trust, essential for long-term stability and well-being, remains fragile (UN, n.d). In such environments, human rights violations become more prevalent, and the risks for cross-border conflicts and civil wars increase.

In addition, in such circumstances, a privileged few benefit from favoritism and repression, while development opportunities are denied to many (UN, n.d). Therefore, SSR is acknowledged as a key component in the consolidating of a democracy, fostering development, preventing conflicts, and ensuring effective post-conflict peacebuilding. This holds true, as the fundamental idea behind SSR is that security institutions should be overseen by democratically elected civilian leaders, uphold accountability, and operate within the framework of rule law (Saidy, 2020). While some countries are quite susceptible to reform, transitional or post-conflict countries are typically not prepared for immediate full-scale reform. As a result, SSR is inherently a long-term demanding process, particularly in settings that are far from ideal (Born & Schnabel, 2011). This may explain why there are such few examples of successful, complete reforms in post-conflict states (Detzner, 2017). Moreover, countries that have pursued a diverse range of large-scale reforms immediately following a political transition were far more likely to achieve lasting improvements in their security sectors than those that implemented only a few types of reforms, regardless of their scale (Detzner, n.d).

2.1.1 Relevance

To understand why Algeria and Morocco have taken divergent paths in their security sector governance, the discussion of security sector reform as a framework linking security governance and development is crucial. The idea that the security sector should promote peace and stability rather than act as a barrier is emphasized by Born and Schnabel (2011). This idea will be used to determine whether the evolution of Morocco and Algeria's security institutions have promoted collaboration or increased their antagonism. Furthermore, the research highlights that SSR is deeply shaped by historical legacies and political governance models. This makes the cases of Algeria and Morocco interesting examples to examine because of their turbulent and colonial history. MacColman (2016) and Saidy (2020) argue that states with authoritarian traditions face significant challenges in implementing SSR, making the two countries even further interesting to scrutinize because of the tendencies that could be seen in their immediate post-independence era.

Drawing from the previous chapter, it is clear that the newly independent states of Algeria and Morocco had systems in great need of reform. So, how have the two countries managed their security sector the last couple of decades, and how have the security sectors evolved?

2.2 The Monarchical Logic of Security in Morocco

The political reforms in Morocco since independence have created a climate of increased openness, allowing greater participation and public expression of grievances with time. However, these reforms have not fundamentally transformed Morocco towards a full-fledged democracy, nor have they significantly shifted the power balance between the state and society. The reforms introduced have still preserved the monarchy's dominance, ensuring that the executive control remains with the King (Kaye et al., 2008). With the monarch being at the heart of the governance model as the *Commander of the Faithful* (Amir al-Mu'minin), he secures a system of a bureaucratic network serving as the monarchy's loyal political elite. Consequently, political liberalization has been more about managing societal demands than enacting substantive

democratic change (Ibid.). The amendments have helped raise the debate on certain societal issues, yet they have not reshaped the balance or separation of powers (Malka, 2016).

2.2.1 The Reforms of Hassan II

After ascending to the throne in 1961, King Hassan II claimed that the army's diverse composition, including soldiers from an array of different social backgrounds, allowed him to have direct ties to all segments of Moroccan society (Willis, 2014). Throughout the 1960s, the military was increasingly visible in state affairs, and the suppression of student riots in Casablanca in the spring of 1965 reinforced the King's reliance on the Forces armées royales (FAR), because of its demonstration of loyalty and effectiveness in maintaining internal order (Gilson Miller, 2013). The King seemed to view the military as his primary connection to the population. Moreover, he described the FAR as the embodiment of democratic principles (Ibid.). This perspective likely led him to regard traditional democratic institutions, such as political parties and the Parliament, as largely unnecessary in the governance process. As a consequence, in 1965, Hassan II decided to suspend the constitution and dissolve the parliament, as he saw the military as a more reliable institution of governance than civilian political structures (Willis, 2014). Eventually, the Royal Military Household was implemented, effectively assuming direct control over military-palace relations in 1968. This shift led to the sidelining of the Ministry of Defence, ensuring that the government ultimately had little to no involvement in military affairs (Ibid.).

These aspirations were further consolidated in the constitution of 1970. In this constitution, clauses that strengthened the King were introduced. For example, it stated that the King held executive, army, and religious authority, but also that he was *the supreme representative of the nation*. This can be interpreted as the monarch essentially exercised supremacy over all institutions, particularly if the Parliament would be dissolved (Hashas, 2013). Furthermore, the constitution stated that the King held the authority to dissolve the Parliament, after consulting the conditional chamber and delivering a speech to the nation. Additionally, a member of Parliament may lose their parliamentary immunity or face imprisonment if they challenged the monarchy, questioned religious principles, or showed disrespect toward the King (Ibid.).

To maintain key alliances to preserve influence, King Hassan II used economic policies and resource distribution. In rural areas, he secured the loyalty of the rural elites by refraining from introducing land redistribution and large-scale agrarian reforms. Instead the land that previously belonged to the European settlers was accessible to both the rural and urban elites (Hashas, 2013). Even though the monarch gained some public approval for his economic principles, the benefits from them remained largely among a small elite. The wealth distribution in the country became highly unequal and it eventually fueled widespread resentment among the people (Gilson Miller, 2013). The growing discontent ultimately culminated in the failed coup attempts in 1971 and 1972, which can be seen as efforts by the middle social levels to challenge the monarchy's control over wealth distribution, the accumulating corruption among officials, and huge bribes from international corporations to individuals within the King's inner circle. Some officers in the armed forces, often from rural backgrounds and newly integrated into the urban middle class, had come to see themselves as guardians of national integrity (Ibid.). According to Gilson Miller (2013), this sense of duty and frustration over the societal inequalities played a crucial role in motivating factions within the armed forces to attempt to overthrow the regime.

The first coup took place in the summer of 1971. Believing it was their duty, the Moroccan officers chose to act during the King's 42nd birthday celebration at the Skhirat palace where the guests, consisting of hundreds of government officials and diplomats, were gathered (Gilson Miller, 2013). Hassan II and his family managed to escape, but still, the coup attempt resulted in a heavy death toll. Over 100 guests were killed, 125 wounded, and among the rebels, 150 were dead and 900 imprisoned. The failure of the coup left Morocco politically unstable, with the monarchy shaken, the army discredited, and political parties in turmoil (Ibid.). Just over a year later another coup attempt occurred. As Hassan II and his brother returned from a visit to France, their airplane was ambushed by four fighter jets. Despite heavy gunfire, the King survived once again. This time, the plotter had been the minister of defence along with two other senior air force officials (Ibid.). When this information reached Hassan II, the minister was summoned to the royal palace, where he later also was found dead. The official account described the minister's death as a suicide. Furthermore, the minister's wife and six children, who had once been part of the palace's inner circle as well, were sent into exile and imprisoned in a remote

desert outpost for fifteen years (Gilson Miller, 2013).

The two coup attempts had exposed the fragility of the monarchy's legitimacy. To assume further control of the forces who had conspired and betrayed him, Hassan II took direct control over national security. He assumed the role of minister of defense and restructured the Royal Armed Forces by increasing its operational units, ensuring that no single faction could garner enough power to challenge him (Gilson Miller, 2013). Moreover, he strengthened the ties with the conservative Islamic establishment, using it as a counterbalance against both the secular-leaning military leadership and the political parties that had previously undermined his authority. This shift solidified the monarch's influence both within the state institutions and in broader society, but arguably it reinforced the role of religion in governance as well (Ibid.). In addition, Hassan II sought to rebuild national unity by turning the public's attention outward. The question about West Sahara became the focal point, and the King leveraged it as a unifying cause (Ibid.).²

Following the failed coup attempts and the shifts to tighter monarchical control, Hassan II also implemented an economic policy known as *Morocconization* in 1973. The new law required 51 percent Moroccan ownership in all major businesses (Willis, 2014). A vast number of businesses, agricultural lands, and industries shifted ownership, rapidly increasing the proportion of Moroccan-owned industrial enterprises from 18 percent to 55 percent. This led to a significant transfer of economic assets from foreign ownership to politically connected figures, like high-ranking military officers and powerful elites (Gilson Miller, 2013). While framed as a nationalistic initiative, the policy primarily served as a tool for the monarch to reward political loyalists and secure further support of key social groups (Willis, 2014). Furthermore, in 1974, international prices for phosphate tripled and subsequently provided the phosphorus-rich Morocco with a sudden surge in revenue. The state used these funds to expand public expenditure, significantly in infrastructure, salaries, and food subsidies. This bolstered support amidst the growing social unrest among the people, but also strengthened the regime's role in the economy (Ibid.).

The shift in state priorities, and favoring of the elite, caused widespread frustration that

² For the Western Sahara conflict, see chapter 4.

eventually resulted in the Casablanca riots in 1981. The uprising united the unemployed, industrial workers, public servants, and students (Kaye et al., 2008). In response, King Hassan II deployed the army to restore order, and divided security responsibilities among the military, gendarmerie, and Ministry of the Interior to not risk relying on one single man's loyalty (Gilson Miller, 2013). In addition to mass arrests, the regime also turned to a tightening of press freedom. Major publications of the opposition vanished from distribution and the press diversity diminished. In fear of being closed down, self-censorship increased in the media and among journalists (Henderson, 1982). The scholar Henderson (1982) argued that the Moroccan government and the Palace had during the years leading up to the riots consistently responded to attempts at democratization by reinforcing the centrality of the monarchy and cracking down on dissent. The King's presence in the media had become more pronounced, and government activities scrutinized more closely and publicly. The patterns, according to Henderson (1982), suggested that the regime remained unwilling to loosen its grip on political life, allowing only a highly restricted version of democratic participation.

The riots continued throughout the 1980s as the government implemented austerity measures in the global economic crisis. Every time protests erupted, the authorities responded with repression. On each occasion, the government maintained control by instilling a pervasive sense of fear, reinforcing the monarchy's authority through coercion rather than reform (Gilson Miller, 2013). Recognizing that the dissatisfaction among the people did not ease, King Hassan II initiated a series of liberalization measures. Reforms in the 1990s included constitutional amendments in 1992 and 1996, which sought to expand party participation and create a slightly broader political space for civil society, including religious organizations (Kaye et al., 2008). After the 1997 elections, the regime also introduced alternance inviting opposition figures to form a coalition government in, what Kaye et al. (2008) means, was an effort to project an image of political pluralism. Political opposition, particularly from the left, was also incorporated into government circles aiming to broaden political participation while simultaneously countering the growing influence of Islamist groups, which had become to be perceived as a great threat to the regime's stability (Outahar, 2018).

Ironically, the monarchy itself played a significant role in fostering the very radicalism it later

sought to suppress. Influenced by the Iranian Revolution and the Afghan War, Islamic militancy had gained traction in Morocco during the 1980s. The monarch introduced a strategy to reshape national identity and marginalize secular opposition by Islamizing Moroccan society. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the monarchy infused Salafi teachings into school curricula and framed popular culture through a religious nationalist lens. By associating secularism with colonialism and Western domination, this approach served a political purpose and the regime redirected public frustration away from economic and political grievances and toward an Islamic national identity (Fakir, 2009). Simultaneously, the domestic economic struggles and political repression fueled grassroots support for radical Islamist groups who openly questioned the religious legitimacy of the monarchy (Kaye et al., 2008). In response, Hassan II invited Saudi Arabia to promote Wahhabism, viewing it as a manageable alternative to the more politically disruptive Islamist movements emerging within Morocco. The monarchy believed that aligning with Wahhabi ideology would serve as a counterweight to Islamist groups that challenged the King's status as Commander of the Faithful (Ibid.). However, this strategy backfired. Instead of moderating religious discourse, many Moroccans exposed to Wahhabi teachings through Saudi-funded institutions returned home further radicalized, ultimately fueling rather than suppressing Islamist sentiment (Kaye et al., 2008).

Despite these ideological shifts, the political reforms introduced by Hassan II in the final decade of his reign were largely superficial. They failed to significantly alter the autocratic nature of the state, serving more as a tactical maneuver to maintain control than a genuine attempt at democratization. Rather than moving toward meaningful political transformation, Hassan II's strategy was to introduce limited liberalization without ceding real power, effectively liberalizing in order not to democratize (Biagi, 2015).

In sum, from the early 1960s, Hassan II increasingly saw the military as the primary institution of governance, sidelining political parties and parliament in favor of direct security control. The creation of the Royal Military Household in 1968 effectively removed civilian oversight over the armed forces, consolidating military authority directly under the monarchy. The lack of external accountability mechanisms allowed the security sector to operate with impunity. Moreover, the constitutional reforms further reinforced the King's absolute authority over the armed forces,

leaving no institutional checks on his control. The coup attempts in 1971 and 1972 exposed the fragility of a security sector that lacked inclusivity and institutional coherence. Hassan II responded with a massive restructuring of the military with the aim to make sure that no single faction within the security apparatus could gain enough power to challenge him again. This approach, while successful in ensuring regime survival, can be argued led to a security apparatus that operated in a fragmented and incoherent manner, prioritizing loyalty over operational efficiency.

Effective security governance requires independent oversight mechanisms that can hold security actors accountable and ensure that security institutions serve public interests, rather than private political agendas (Born & Schnabel, 2011). Hassan II, however, systematically weakened or co-opted oversight bodies, ensuring that security institutions remained completely subordinated to the monarchy. For example, the Ministry of Defense, which in most democratic systems is responsible for managing military affairs, was rendered powerless as security matters were transferred to the Royal Military Household in 1968, effectively eliminating civilian influence over security policy. The Moroccan parliament, which could have served as a check on executive overreach, was transformed into a symbolic institution with no real authority over national security matters. Additionally, the King was granted the ability to dissolve the Parliament at will through the constitutional amendments in 1970, which further consolidated his monarchical supremacy. Also, in the new constitution, laws were passed allowing the King to imprison members of parliament who criticized the monarchy, demonstrating how the legal system was used as a tool of repression rather than justice. Furthermore, this restricted the public debate to not question the monarchy or religion, it can be assumed that it effectively led to self-censorship, limiting another cornerstone of national security, the freedom of expression.

In essence, during his rule, Hassan II transformed Morocco's security sector into an extension of monarchical rule, seemingly prioritizing regime survival over public safety, inclusivity, and accountability. His governance model centralized control over security institutions and sidelined civilian oversight. Ultimately, it can be claimed that the result was a security apparatus that lacked transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to public needs. The monarchy's

dominance over security may have ensured its survival, but at the cost of a more inclusive, stable political order.

2.2.2 The New Vision of Mohammed VI

The death of Hassan II in 1999 and the ascension of his son Mohammed VI, would be the turning point for the Moroccan liberalization process. The new King accelerated political and social reforms, and led the country into a new era of governance. In 2002, several electoral reforms were introduced. For the first time in Morocco's history, the proportional representation system was implemented, using the largest remainder method to allocate seats (López García, 2003). The reform addressed previous criticism of the single-member district system, which had favoured local party leaders and facilitated the use of financial influence in politics. However, the low threshold of three percent at the provincial level led to vote dispersion, resulting in the unintended consequence of fragmenting the political landscape, leading to parliaments without a clear majority (Kaye et al., 2008; López García, 2003). This further reinforced the King's political authority as the lack of a dominant party prevented any single political force from challenging the monarch's power (Kaye et al., 2008). Another new addition to the electoral law in 2002 was the introduction of a national list system which reserved 30 seats exclusively for women. In this way, at least 10 percent of parliamentary seats were held by female representatives. This marked a major step toward increasing women's political representation (Adnani, 2025).

In 2004, Mohammed VI implemented a new family code granting extended rights to women, such as giving women the right to divorce their husbands. Furthermore, he launched the *Equity and Reconciliation Commission*, aimed at recognizing the human rights violations that occurred under his father's rule and ensuring that such abuses would not be repeated (Traub, 2012). The Arab Reform Initiative (2009) implies that this was a unique occurrence as it was the only instance where such a truth commission was launched without a regime change. The Commission investigated abuses committed between independence and 1999, concluding that the absence of democratic oversight over security institutions had been a central enabler of those violations (Saidy, 2020). Its final report issued several reform-oriented recommendations,

including the need to develop a national security policy, clarify the legal frameworks governing security forces, and establish internal accountability mechanisms.

A few years later, in response to the 2011 uprisings triggered by the Arab Spring, Mohammed VI introduced a new constitution that slightly restricted his powers. The King framed these reforms as an effort to strengthen the rule of law, judicial independence, and the prime minister's role, suggesting a shift of power from the monarchy to elected officials (Traub, 2012). However, the constitutional drafting process was done top-down and with control. The King, and not the government, appointed an 18-member constitutional commission, consisting of handpicked members by the monarch that promoted incremental reform rather than radical transformation (Ibid.). The new constitution was announced on June 17, 2011, and within two weeks, it was approved in a referendum with 98.5 percent approval rate and 72 percent voter turnout (Traub, 2012). Despite criticism from constitutional experts and Middle East scholars who found the approval rate questionably high, the regime received international praise, particularly from Western governments. The U.S, for instance, applauded Mohammed VI's leadership, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighting Morocco as a model for reform in the region (Ibid.).

One of the reforms decided upon included limiting the power of the monarch to elect the prime minister. Now, instead, the prime minister was required to be chosen from the party with the most votes in the general elections (Abouzzohour, 2020). Prior to these reforms, Morocco's governance structure was highly centralized under the King. The constitution implemented in 1962 by Hassan II, granted the monarch executive and judicial supremacy, along with religious authority and command over the military (Hashas, 2013). The prime minister had functioned as a coordinator of ministerial affairs rather than a head of government. Although Morocco maintained a multiparty system, this was largely symbolic, as the King's influence ensured that parliament had little actual legislative power (Ibid.). However, despite these new adjustments, the King still retained significant executive authority, enabling him to approve all legislation, dissolve parliament, and regulate civil society actors (Kaye et al., 2008). The 2011 Constitution, though framed as a step toward democratization, ultimately allowed a monarch-aligned politician to override an elected prime minister and ruling party leader in the following election

(Benchemsi, 2019). This demonstrates the persistence of royal influence over and that loopholes were left in the reforms.

Another significant reform introduced in 2011 was the principle of gender parity. The reform in 2002 had simply emphasized the equality between men and women in Parliament, whereas the new framework provided a stronger legal foundation for female participation (Adnani, 2025). A constitutional court was also established in 2011, emphasizing the regime's commitment to protect the fundamental principles of the country (Nogueira Pinto, 2024). An additional reform stemming from the Arab Spring was the proposed devolution of state authority to substrate authorities, what the Moroccan policy makers called *advanced regionalism*. The framework consolidated Morocco's previously 16 regions into 12, ultimately integrating the disputed Western Sahara into three of these regions (Feuer, 2015). The Moroccan state presented the decentralization plan as an effort to increase local governance and citizen engagement, though critics viewed it as a strategic move to reinforce Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory, according to Feuer (2015). Either way, it seemed to have eased the intensity of the Arab Spring protests.

Despite these changes seemingly aspiring for further democratization, Mohammed VI's narrative around the reforms avoided direct acknowledgement of the protests in the country. Conclusively, the 2011 constitution was met by some as a significant shift, as it also removed the King's *sacred* status instead labeling him as *inviolable*, a minor but yet seen as a symbolically important distinction (Traub, 2012). Others, however, pointed out that the monarch still retained key elements of power, and also remained as Commander of the Faithful, head of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary, and chair of the National Security Council (Ibid.). Furthermore, the new constitution included articles on liberties and fundamental rights, stipulating that arbitrary detention, among other offences, is a serious crime and emphasizing a guarantee of a wide range of political and social rights (Traub, 2012). In other words, the new reforms in 2011 was a step forward for Morocco in some aspects towards a balance between monarchy and democracy, but below the surface, some of the most rigid and fundamental aspects of power were still laid with the monarch.

During Mohammed VI's reign, the approach to migration governance has evolved as well, trying to balance security concerns with humanitarian commitments. The Moroccan migration framework was shaped by the 2003 law, adopted in response to terrorist attacks in the country in 2001 and 2003. The law primarily framed migration as a security issue linking irregular migration to terrorism. However, this security-focused approach was deemed to restrict fundamental rights by requiring legal residency for access to essential services (Dalouh, 2024). In 2014 a new migration and asylum initiative was adopted aiming to improve migrants' and refugees' access to public services in Morocco (Zaanoun, 2023). This strategy emphasized, among other aspects, human rights, anti-discrimination efforts, and measures against human trafficking (Dalouh, 2024). The initiative was influenced by the securitization of migration policies both internally and externally in the sense of Morocco's partnerships with the European Union (EU) and African countries. Zaanoun (2023) suggests that these diplomatic aspects played a crucial role in the reform as Morocco sought to protect the rights of Moroccans abroad and gain European support for its stance in the Western Sahara issue. Furthermore, in 2016 and 2018, human trafficking and migrant smuggling were outlawed (Dalouh, 2024).

In large, despite forward-looking reforms, some scholars argue that Mohammed VI's rule has been marked by limited political liberalization and a reluctance to diminish his power. Even though the King dismissed some of the most oppressive aspects of his father's regime, these reforms could be seen as largely symbolic (Denoeux, 2011). Despite claims of democratization, the real power still remains with the monarchy, and political progress has been slow. While there were some improvements in electoral transparency, there have been setbacks in media freedom, judicial independence, and anti-corruption efforts (Ibid.). Furthermore, an argument of critics is that instead of implementing meaningful political reforms, the King has mostly focused on economic growth, infrastructure projects, and social development (Denoeux, 2011). This view is also supported by Traub (2012), claiming that Mohammed VI has ruled as a modernizing autocrat, promoting literacy and healthcare for the people while ensuring that real political power remains in the hands of the monarchy. Furthermore, the reinforcement of religious authority by Mohammed VI, by ensuring that his role as Commander of the faithful remains beyond political debate, is deemed as a way to strengthen his own legitimacy (Malka, 2016).

Altogether, the transition from Hassan II to Mohammed VI was marked by an acceleration of political and social reforms. The 2002 electoral changes and the 2011 constitutional amendments, were promoted as democratization efforts. However, they largely maintained the centralization of power within the monarchy with the core security actors still under the King's control. The 2011 constitutional drafting was a top-down process and with the monarch choosing its drafters, rather than being an inclusive participatory effort. While legislative reforms granted some new powers to elected officials, they did not substantially alter the King's executive authority over the military, national security, and judicial institutions. Furthermore, the King's role as Commander of the Faithful and head of the National Security Council allowed him to keep ultimate decision-making power over security forces, reinforcing an autocratic governance structure. In other words, there still did not seem to be a separation of military and police functions from unchecked executive control. Moreover, Mohammed VI's 2011 conditional reform sought to establish judicial independence and strengthen the rule of law with a constitutional court. Still, the court remained influenced by the monarch, with limited power to check executive decisions. Its ability to provide a meaningful oversight of, among others, the security forces, or prevent bias and corruption in law enforcement thus becomes inadequate. As a consequence, the judiciary still operates with constraint and and arguably not independent, which raises concerns regarding both transparency and impartiality of the country's security governance as a whole.

Moreover, the migration policies that were introduced by Mohammed VI were to balance security concerns with human rights commitments. Irregular migration was linked with national security, and even though the policies were framed as inclusive reforms, external diplomatic pressures seemed to play a key role in shaping these measures. This securitization of migration policy reflects a broader pattern in Moroccan governance. The reforms are framed as, and also actually are, progressive but yet, the change is not foundational. Key institutional structures remained unchanged, and the King retained ultimate influence. While the constitutional changes symbolically recognized political and social rights, they failed to establish the necessary institutional mechanisms to enforce these rights in practice. The reforms, including electoral adjustments and judicial restructuring, created an appearance of democratization while maintaining executive centralization. Born and Schnabel (2011) argue that for good governance

to be achieved, genuine participation, accountability, and efficiency must be ensured. However, in Morocco's case, it can be argued, these principles have been partially applied with loopholes allowing the monarchy to retain overarching control. In essence, economic and social reforms are promoted, but political liberalization remains constrained. Ultimately, despite the progressive improvements, Morocco's governance reforms reflect a sort of hybrid system where political liberalization is selectively implemented to maintain state stability and monarchical dominance, rather than fostering full democratic transformation.

2.2.3 Royal Armed Forces, Intelligence Services, and Counterterrorism Efforts

On May 16th 2003, 12 suicide bombers coordinated terrorist attacks in Casablanca, killing, in addition to themselves, 33 people and wounding another 100 (Human Rights Watch, 2004). This event, by some named the 9/11 equivalent in Morocco, would mark a critical point in Morocco's relationship with security matters (Kaye et al., 2008). Addressing the attacks a few days later, Mohammed VI proclaimed that the time had come to put an end to tolerance toward those who exploit democratic freedoms to undermine state authority, spread extremism and division, or obstruct law enforcement and judicial efforts to maintain public safety (White, 2008). This statement signaled a turning point in Morocco's political trajectory.

Two weeks after the bombings, an anti-terror law (Law No. 03-03) was adopted. The new law allowed plainclothed officers to make arrests without identifying themselves and to keep arrested suspects in detention for a longer period of time than before (Denoeux, 2011). Furthermore, the provision restricted access to legal counsel in suspected terrorism cases. Judicial authorities could limit the right of contact with a lawyer, and thereby delaying contact between detainee and legal counsel for a period of 48 hours, after an extension of the initial 96 hours of pre-arraignment detention. Ultimately, this allowed the judicial authority to deny contact with a judicial counsel for up to six days (Amnesty International, 2007). Most importantly, however, the law introduced a rather broad definition of *terrorism*. Terms like intimidation, terror, and violence, were used in the definition, but were not defined by law. Therefore, the potential for abuse increased, risking arbitrary interpretations (Ibid.). In other words, the new law adopted in response to the 2003 Casablanca bombings created room for excesses for law enforcement

(Denoeux, 2011).

These risks for arbitrary treatment have been shown in the following trials of accused terrorists. Many of the trials were later described as unfair and unconstitutional. The new legislation also opened up for more encompassing restrictions of activity by civil society if law enforcement saw it necessary (Kaye et al., 2008). Moreover, the attacks also initiated a reform of the religious field. The state drastically increased its presence in religious matters in an effort to remove extreme forms of Islamic teachings in the country to prevent radicalization. Mohammed VI created new departments of religious bureaucracy with the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs. Within this Ministry, a Directorate of Religious Education was invented, reinforcing the state's ability to regulate and oversee institutions of Islamic education and its curricula (Bruce, 2019; Salah Tamek, 2014). The King also launched a training program for all the country's imams, and established a monopoly over fatwas with the creation of the Ulama High Council. The Council is the only Moroccan body authorized to deliver fatwas, which in turn makes extremism, radicalism, and other types of fundamentalism illegal (El Aljaouni & El Moussaouti, 2016). The imams, and other religious officials, were also bureaucratized as state employees. These reforms resulted in a centralization of the religious sphere and the state reinforcing spiritual credibility (Salah Tamek, 2014).

Beside the religious initiatives, the strategy to fight radicalization also included reforms focusing on human rights, rule of law, and development (Salah Tamek, 2014). According to Kaye et al. (2008), the terrorist attack in 2003 was an answer to the democratization and development efforts Mohammed VI had commenced in 1999, efforts that some groups in society thought were insufficient. The event demonstrated an example of the potential violence the economically excluded in society was willing to use to voice their discontent (Kaye et al., 2008). As a countermeasure, Mohammed VI launched the Human Development Initiative (INDH), and saw this as a project to define his reign. The initiative promoted increasing powers to the government and further checks on the government as effective ways to tackle underdevelopment (Ibid.). The development was to happen through a bottom-up approach based on participation, local governance, and partnerships. The local level was to be more in the center of the development projects, and accountability and transparency of decision making was highlighted as defining

concepts of the initiative (World Bank, 2012).

Some researchers, however, do not view the inequalities and lack of democratization in Moroccan society as the main contributing factor to the bombing. Kaye et al. (2008) argues that the terrorist attack also might stem from dissatisfaction against Morocco's relationship with the West, especially the U.S. Hence, the event points to the fact that the initiative like INDH only could be a partial solution to the societal instabilities, and that foreign policy shapes domestic politics (Ibid.). Interestingly, bilateral agreements had been made between the EU and the U.S in 2002. 9/11 had a great impact globally concerning how states view terrorism and radicalization, and to pursue international collaboration through international rules was one of them (Arab Reform Initiative, 2009). However, no official authority considered the country's growing collaboration with the West as a cause for the Casablanca bombings, as a result no drastic policy change was made in that domain. The economic factor is nevertheless seen as a risk factor for radicalization, in combination with the corruption and lack of rule of law (Kaye et al., 2008). The strict supervision of media also poses a challenge, and their difficulties in interpreting the scarce amount of official documents regarding the security sector (El Aljaoui & El Moussaoui, 2016). During the past couple of years, however, Morocco seems to have benefited from their stable politics, and its preference for soft power diplomacy, like economic and religious reforms, aimed at reducing radical sentiments (Nogueira Pinto, 2024).

A rather complex domain of Morocco's state apparatus is the intelligence and security departments. Under the Ministry of Interior, key agencies like *Direction générale de la sûreté nationale* (DGSN) and *Direction générale de la surveillance du territoire* (DGST) operate. DGSN functions within the national police force, while DGST serves as the country's counterespionage and anti-terrorism agency (Privacy International, 2016). Meanwhile, two additional agencies under military command, the *Direction générale des études et de la documentation* (DGED) and the *Service de Renseignement de la Gendarmerie Royale Marocaine*, also play central roles in intelligence gathering. These agencies, however, operate with little to no transparency as legal provisions governing their activities remain unclear, and independent oversight mechanisms are either unknown or nonexistent (Ibid.). Officers in the DGST are not considered to be a part of the judicial police, but, despite this, there are reports of

plainclothed officials suspected of being DGST officers making arrests without warrants. It is also alleged that these officers falsify the arrest dates, adding the arrest date to the moment when the suspect was transferred to the official judicial police, rather than when they were initially taken into custody (Amnesty International, 2021).

Moreover, in 2013 with an ambition to professionalize law enforcement, the *Bureau central d'investigation judiciaire* (BCIJ) was formed. Operating under the DGST, the BCIJ has been named as the “Moroccan FBI” in media, as it is the primary agency responsible for counterterrorism in the country (Cogbill, 2019). The institution collaborates with both national and international security agencies in investigations regarding terrorism-related crimes in Morocco. In contrast to the general DGST officers, the members of the BCIJ have the authority to act as a judicial branch and cooperate with the General Attorney of the Rabat Court, which holds exclusive authority over terrorism cases. Furthermore, the agency also monitors online activities, tracks propaganda, and identifies recruitment networks as a part of its preventative efforts (Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The surveillance methods employed are both advanced and traditional ones, as the government has heavily invested in developing digital surveillance technologies. Leaked documents from 2015 have revealed that two Moroccan intelligence agencies had purchased highly invasive spyware in 2009 and 2012 (Privacy International, 2016). Additionally, in 2011, the government reportedly spent 2 million euros on the Eagle surveillance system, which enables internet censorship and mass monitoring. Further evidence of Morocco’s investment in surveillance emerged in 2015 when the Swiss government disclosed a list of countries that had purchased surveillance technology from Swiss companies. Morocco was among the buyers and between 2013 and 2014 had reportedly tested mobile telecommunications interception or jamming equipment (Ibid.).

In addition to surveillance, the King maintains indirect control over the content of broadcast media by appointing the heads of public radio and television stations, or having close ties to the media moguls (Malka, 2016). In this manner, the regime may suppress dissent, raising questions about the restriction of individual rights and freedoms in the light of Morocco's national security approach and strategy (Errazzouki, 2020). Moreover, a significant challenge with the country’s security agencies is their limited analytical capacity. Like the definition of terrorism, the

classification of so-called dangerous groups is overly broad, leading to lack of clarity regarding which groups who pose actual threats (Arab Reform Initiative, 2009).

As mentioned above, following the coup attempts in 1971 and 1972 against Hassan II, the monarch took direct control over the Moroccan armed forces, FAR, by becoming both the chief of staff and minister of defense. This allowed him to closely monitor and manage the military and its operations. Mohammed VI has maintained this centralized position, and the hierarchical system of military, police, and security governance that Hassan II established remains intact (MCIA, 2015). Moreover, Mohammed VI has largely preserved the structure of the FAR, and has not made any large-scale reforms of it. Despite the efforts for broader societal liberalization, the King continues to wield near-absolute authority over the military and foreign policy matters (Cogbill, 2019). The limited reform initiatives have spurred active public discussions about checks and balances in Moroccan governance. Designed to be ongoing, the reforms allow the monarchy to adapt as needed to sustain its authority and maintain the political balance (Malka, 2016). Corruption does also constitute a frequent occurrence in the military. With the military budget not up to parliamentary debate or approval, senior officers have taken advantage of their positions and allegations of illegal practices are systematically denied or suppressed (Denoeux, 2011). Although the FAR is the cornerstone of the Moroccan security apparatus, it is after all seemed to be considered as a last resort option for domestic issues, as the state primarily relies on civilian and paramilitary forces to manage societal unrest and to handle internal threats (MCIA, 2015).

However, it seems to be a gradual evolution where boundaries between various security agencies and their responsibilities are being blurred. This is mainly because of a shift in priorities into a broader range of internal and transnational security threats, such as illegal immigration, terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking. The risk of military aggression in Morocco also remains a significant concern for the regime and continues to be a key focus in the country's defense strategy (El Houdaigui, 2019). Since the 1960s, a strategic expansion of the FAR's operational scope has occurred. Initially the focus in international peacekeeping missions under the UN, NATO, or the EU was Africa, but has since expanded to more distant conflict zones like Haiti and Bosnia. This has put the FAR in politically and strategically significant contexts, where

they have engaged in high-level decision-making mechanisms (El Houdaigui, 2019).

The King's undisputed authority in the security and military domain was publicly highlighted when the Ministerial Council approved a new bill on a 12 month compulsory military service in 2018. In this new legislation, the conscription was reintroduced for all citizens between 19 and 25 (Hamoudi, 2019). The mandatory draft had been abolished in 2007 by Mohammed VI because of fears of infiltration by terrorist cells in the FAR. However, the reintroduction was argued to reduce unemployment and disintegrated youths in Moroccan society (Profazio, 2023). This decision sparked debate across a wide array of social groups in the country, where opponents viewed it as a tool for control by the regime. In light of the loud opposing protests, the Moroccan parliament's Committee of Justice, Legislation, and Human Rights proposed referring the bill to the National Council for Human Rights and the Economic, Social and Environmental Council to broaden public discussion. However, the House of Representatives dismissed this move, arguing that the bill had already been approved by the Ministerial Council under the King's leadership, and it could therefore not be questioned. The House emphasized that military and security affairs fall under the exclusive authority of the King (Hamoudi, 2019).

The previously mentioned multi-dimensional approach to combat terrorism also extends to the broader defense policy, particularly through the military's 2030 Modernization Plan. This plan seeks to align Morocco's military capabilities with those of NATO and the U.S by upgrading its army, air force and navy. Substantial defense partnerships are also a part of the modernization effort, particularly with the U.S, but also France, Spain, and more recently, Israel (ITA, 2024). Collaboration and training efforts have also come to extend into advanced areas like cybercrime (Bensalah Alaoui, 2017). At the moment, the U.S is Morocco's primary defense supplier, but a major element of the strategy is the development of a domestic defense industry. The overarching goal is to establish a self-sufficient and modern military across all branches. To support this ambition the country has implemented a legal and economic framework designed to attract investment, encourage training, and facilitate access to land for defense-related enterprises (Ibid.). In addition to the efforts of modernization, Morocco has also initiated measures to maintain air superiority and strategic military balance within the Maghreb region. This, in combination with the defense investments, contribute to a regional arms race which has raised

concerns for amplifying tensions and uncertainties in the Maghreb (El Houdaigui, 2019).

In sum, the 2003 Casablanca bombings seems to have marked a turning point in Morocco's approach to internal security. Although some reform efforts pointed towards modernization, and while they were framed to be in the name of national protection, the results reveal a deeper entrenchment of authoritarian practices under the guise of security. Rather than giving oversight bodies more power or fostering inclusive reform of the core security actors, the legislative and institutional changes instead privileged executive dominance, especially the monarch, and blurred institutional boundaries. The vagueness in the new laws, and seemingly only cosmetic changes, signals a failure to root reform efforts in rule of law principles. While centralization may have been a wise move, like creating a monopoly on fatwas and overlooking religious activities in managing extremist religious narratives, it can also be deemed to have diminished religious autonomy and redefined it as a function of the regime. This development can be argued to suggest that the religious reforms were less about dialogue and soothing societal unrest, and more about securing the ideological dominance of the monarchy.

Furthermore, the hierarchical structure gives the monarch continued control over decision-making, undermining meaningful citizen involvement and influence. Born and Schnabel's (2011) criteria for good governance, particularly inclusivity, participation, responsiveness, and accountability appear to have only been selectively realized when analysing Morocco's reforms. Security actors have remained largely shielded from independent scrutiny, and their actions have often lacked a legal framework that would ensure proportionality and protection of rights. What can be observed is an absence of reforms to strengthen judicial independence or stronger legislative oversight. Instead, the monarchy has retained a power that seems to be immensely difficult to challenge, even if the large public expresses its disagreement like it did during the 2018 military service reintroduction. In this instance, it became clear that the participation of oversight bodies, like the parliament or judiciary, remains marginal or performative.

2.2.4 Patterns in Morocco's Security Governance

From an overarching perspective, the Moroccan security sector is significantly constrained by a combination of systemic corruption, lack of institutional transparency, and the centralized control of the monarchy. According to Saidy (2020), one of the most serious impediments to the country's security sector reform is the corruption within the justice system and local governance. Without genuine progress in addressing this, the application of rule of law to the security sector will remain only superficial. Reform is further hampered by a political system in which the King exercises supreme authority over all security services, retaining sovereign control over decision-making, thereby preventing any democratic redistribution of power. Researchers point out that Morocco maintains a monarchical conception of security, where the primary function of the security apparatus does not seem to be the protection of citizens, but rather the preservation of the monarchy itself (Saidy, 2020). These dynamics are echoed in the findings of the Arab Reform Initiative (2009), which notes that Morocco's security sector is sacralized and opaque, largely exempt from public scrutiny and political accountability. The lack of codification for regulations of civil and military intelligence leaves the boundaries between what should be public versus secret undefined, preventing the establishment of transparency standards or legal accountability mechanisms.

Moreover, the broader securitization of civil life in Morocco can in part be considered a result of the government's failure to address social and political demands through political means. Looking back at the events surpassed since independence, the more political problems have been neglected, the more the security services have been used to manage unrest. Despite public outcry, the security budget remains shielded from public or parliamentary scrutiny. In the absence of meaningful reform, the security sector is not merely the coercive arm of the regime: it has become an autonomous political actor, embedded in a system where repression and control outweigh democratic norms. Furthermore, it seems like reforms have largely been driven by external pressures and the monarchy's desire to calm larger potential unrest and protests among the Moroccan citizens. While the monarchy has employed reformist rhetoric during moments of political pressure, these efforts can be argued to have served as a facade. In essence, the Moroccan security sector reform is deeply tied to the structure of power, the nature of the

political system, and the monarchy's role as both arbiter and beneficiary of tightly controlled stability. As long as parliamentary oversight remains symbolic, civil society lacks influence, and security institutions operate above the law, meaningful reform will most probably remain limited to surface-level adaptations in response to external pressure, rather than rooted in democratic transformation.

2.3 Algeria: Security Governance Under Military Hegemony

The Algerian focus on security is shaped by the pivotal role played by the military in shaping the post-independent state. After Boumediene took power in 1965, a one-party system was introduced with an entrenched military supremacy in the political sphere. The *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) became a political extension of the armed forces, enabling military control over both national and local institutions. The military gained support and legitimacy through its involvement in rural development and economic reconstruction, while also being seen as the guarantor of public order (Saidy, 2020). A framework known as *Algerianisation* was formed through a blend of nationalism and socialism, and this ideology was grounded on principles of popular sovereignty, revolutionary legitimacy, and state unity (Ibid.). Today, Algeria stands as the largest economic and military power in Africa, with one of the region's most experienced and highly trained counter-terrorism forces. Its security sector, shaped by decades of revolutionary struggle, military dominance, and internal conflict, continues to define both its domestic politics and international partnerships (Benantar & Lobo, 2022; Ghanem, 2015).

2.3.1 The Evolution of Algeria's Political Governance Structure

Following independence, Algeria had gradually evolved into a political system in which authority and national decision-making were almost entirely controlled by state employees, especially among high ranked officers, the civilian administrative bureaucracy, and the ruling single party which was subordinate to the military (Aghrout, 2008; Ottaway, 2021). The political structure was deeply shaped by the revolutionary elite, composed mainly of the senior ranks of the FLN, and above all its army. This constellation of power resulted in a presidency that

remained relatively weak, despite symbolically being at the top of the political hierarchy (Roberts, 2007). The FNL was not the outcome of a ideological project, but it was rather established by state decree and functioned primarily as a legitimating instrument of the regime. Evidently, from its inception, the FLN was an extension of the state apparatus rather than an autonomous or ideologically driven political party. It played an important supervisory role over mass organizations, like trade unions, but was not itself a locus of political decision-making (Ibid.).

In 1976, Boumediene could lessen his reliance on a narrow circle of military elites and consolidate power as a formally elected head of state through the reintroduction of constitutional governance. This shift led to the President gaining institutional control over the government, military, and the FNL. Therefore, Boumediene then officially held the titles of Head of state, Head of Government, Commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Head of national defence, and the nominal leader of the FNL. The new constitution signaled, at least on paper, a move toward civilian rule, and Boumediene played an active role in promoting the constitutional reforms and framing the national debate around them (Aghrout, 2008). Following the death of Boumediene in 1978, however, a substantial reduction in presidential authority was attempted. Senior regime figures sought to reform and institutionalize the FLN. In 1979, a party congress was held when approving the candidate for the presidency, and established a Central Committee and a 17 member Political Bureau composed of high-profile political actors. The goals of these reforms was to strengthen the FLN's organizational capacity and institutional authority in order to reduce the informal dominance of military elites, and to shift strategic decision-making to formal political structures (Roberts, 2007). However, these incisions would be proven to have been fairly weak.

When political instability and social unrest erupted in the Kabylia region in 1980, military backed resolutions were pushed through the Central Committee, granting the President, in his role as Secretary General of the FLN, full authority to appoint members of the Political Bureau. This ultimately significantly weakened the internal party accountability, and allowed the President to remove several prominent figures from the Bureau (Roberts, 2007). As a result, he became answerable only to the military leadership rather than to any institutional checks.

Moreover, while military commanders were nominally constrained by the procedural norms of party governance, these constraints were easily overridden. Subsequently, the President dissolved the policy commissions, reduced the Political Bureau's size and influence, established a disciplinary committee to suppress dissent, and cleansed the Central Committee of independent-minded members. This led to a reassertion of military dominance over the civilian political sphere by dismantling the efforts to endow the FLN with meaningful functions (Roberts, 2007). The FLN had come to be designed less to shape national policy than to consolidate political life under elite control and to preclude alternative or oppositional political activity. As such, it failed to fulfill its purported role of providing policy direction to the government and instead served as an instrument of elite domination over the political sphere (Entelis, 1980).

In practice, however, the military barely repositioned itself. Rather than disengaging, the General Staff established new lines of contact with all political actors in the emerging pluralist landscape. A specialized office was created within the military structure to liaise with political parties, while the intelligence services began infiltrating all significant political organizations. This allowed the military leadership to maintain influence over the civilian political class, independent of the formal political institutions, and significantly undermined the presidency's authority (Roberts, 2007). Soon, though, a new wave of political transformation was sparked in response to the October Riots of 1988. The riots, resulting in hundreds of deaths, was sparked by the growing dissatisfaction with the single-party system amidst mounting economic, social and cultural grievances. A new conditional framework that sought to liberalize the political landscape was introduced, and it marked a decisive break from the political norms that had previously been in force (Aghrout, 2008). One of the reforms was to formally separate the state from the FLN, ending the party's monopoly on political life. Furthermore, *associations of a political nature* were legally recognized, and within a year, around 60 political parties had been registered to participate in the following local elections. The political pluralism was introduced without first strengthening civilian institutions which ultimately led to the reform to backfire. Instead of limiting military influence, it weakened the civilian leadership and gave the military more freedom to act without oversight. Allowing parties based on different cultural or ideological identities led to a divided public and a polarized political debate, shifting focus away from actual practical governance (Roberts, 2007)

While the municipal election proceeded without major issues, the 1991 legislative elections were halted after the *Front islamique du salut* (Islamic Salvation Front) appeared set to win. In response, the government cancelled the vote, the President was overthrown, and a temporary ruling body named the High Council of State took over. A state of emergency was declared, and the *Front islamique du salut* was banned because of a military worried about losing its control. This created a political vacuum that led to severe instability and violence (Aghrout, 2008). On the one side were numerous Islamist factions, and on the other a somewhat fractured military establishment. The conflict would take hundreds of thousands of lives, and last until 1998 (Lenze, 2021). In the wake of the coup, the government instituted a state of emergency that remained in effect for 19 years, without any parliamentary endorsement, only being officially lifted in 2011. This extended period of crisis allowed the regime to expand the authority of its security institutions and facilitated the rise of informal, corrupted economic networks which contributed to the formation of a mafia-like *bazaar economy* (Aida Ammour, 2012). For instance, the High Council of State enacted a series of measures like outlawing religious political activity, but new counterterrorism laws were also introduced to broaden the powers of the security services. A key outcome from the conflict is the reassertion of military dominance over politics again (Lenze, 2021)

Some of these transitions happened in 1994 when the High Council of State appointed a new president. The transitional president was a general in the army and under his leadership he transferred several key powers, such as the appointing of top military, judicial, and financial officers, from parliament to the presidency. Moreover, the multi-party system was structured to function as a mere mechanism of regime legitimacy, with political parties essentially acting as extensions of state power (Lenze, 2021). When Abdelaziz Bouteflika finally got elected as new president in 1999, the regime began to show a more unified approach to addressing the conflict that had now eased up. The government implemented a strategy of selective amnesty to encourage armed Islamist groups to lay down their weapons and dissolve, while simultaneously refusing to reinstate the banned FIS or investigate human rights abuses committed by the military (Roberts, 2007). The Algerian political elite shared a general consensus on an objective with the accession of Bouteflika, to mend Algeria's relationships with Western countries and end the

country's diplomatic isolation. President Bouteflika worked to secure recognition and legitimacy, particularly from the U.S and France, by facilitating Algeria's reintegration into global affairs and endorsing neoliberal economic reforms. However, he also positioned himself as a staunch ally of the military, assuring he would protect them from any accountability for the violent actions they had committed during the civil war (Ibid.).

The aspiration for international legitimacy is still a fundamental part of Algeria's security doctrine today. Since independence, Algeria has pursued a model of complete security autonomy, straining from any form of external dependency such as military alliances, defence pacts, or the hosting of foreign military bases. The country's policies are based on several principles: international legitimacy; rejection of the military option; peaceful settlement of conflicts; not threatening to use or resort to force; supporting liberation movements; affirming the right of states to its own undiminished security mechanisms; security independence; and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and non-intervention on part of a foreign military power, including its own army (Benantar & Lobo, 2022). The non-offensive defence approach excludes aggressive or interventionist strategies and limits the army's role to only safeguarding national sovereignty. This is further upheld by the non-interference principle that was first enshrined in the 1976 constitution. While the provision does not explicitly ban military action abroad, it defines the army's responsibilities in terms of protecting Algeria's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ibid.). A partial retreat from this was made through an amendment in the 2020 constitution, however. The new article permitted army participation in foreign peacekeeping missions, under the auspices of the United Nation, African Union, or the Arab League provided that their principles and objectives are respected. Such a mission can only be joined if a two-third majority in both chambers of parliament approves. Although, the final decision still rests with the president. In essence, however, this shift is mostly seen as a symbolic or tactical adjustment, rather than a substantial transformation in the country's military doctrine (Ibid.).

Karam (2023) confirms this by highlighting that Algeria has adopted an even more assertive foreign policy stance, aiming to improve its global image further amid a shifting and increasingly unstable international landscape. Substantial political reform is difficult to achieve, because of the elite networks in the regime. Political authority is maintained by various elite factions whose

members are connected through bonds, like revolutionary affiliations, family ties, and regional loyalties (Lebovich, 2015). Affiliations like these have raised concerns about the vulnerability and independence of state institutions. For instance, judges are appointed by the High Council of the Judiciary, which is chaired by the president. Moreover, security forces regularly conduct searches without warrants and carry out arbitrary arrests and short-term detentions, particularly in cases involving political activists or former officials (Freedom House, 2024). Even though Algerian official policies often lack transparency, its agenda can mostly be discerned by reading official and unofficial media, and through these it will be clear that insecurity has played a significant role in shaping Algeria's security and diplomatic strategies, as observed by Lebovich (2015).

With this laid out, it is very much clear that Algeria suffers from a disproportionate concentration of power in the hands of the armed forces. From the outset, the country's governance model with a type of reversed democratic order, having foremost an army and secondly a state, created a governance system with a lack of transparency, responsiveness, and inclusivity. Even Algeria's attempt to introduce political pluralism did not succeed because of the army's strong stance. Instead of challenging the armed forces supremacy, it weakened the civilian side by replacing the one-party structure with a fractured and ineffective multi-party system. This reform may be deemed to serve as an example of how transformations can paradoxically deepen authoritarianism if they are not built upon consensus-building mechanisms. The presidency, particularly after Boumediene's death, operated more as a mediator between military factions than a true executive authority, illustrating a core structural failure between the separation of formal institutions and real centers of power. Moreover, oversight institutions have remained as a facade, and their powers are often bypassed through unofficial channels and within closed elite groups.

2.3.2 Military Supremacy as the Guardians of the Regime

After its independence, Algeria was not a state with an army, but rather an army with a state (Willis, 2014). Since 1962, the armed forces have stood out as the most trusted and protected institution in Algerian society, enjoying a level of public legitimacy not seen with any other state

body (Fakir & Ghebouli, 2022). The military has positioned itself as serving as the guardian of the people, which has become a central pillar of Algerian political culture. However, this self-ascribed role has rather been used to justify the marginalization of alternative political voices and sidelining democratic competition (Ibid.). Although a large proportion of the population continues to hold the military in high regard, younger generations seem to have their perceptions changed. Fakir and Ghebouli (2022) explains this shift in attitude is increasingly shaped by a more pragmatic view of the military's dominance, immunity from accountability, and expansive control over national affairs. This generational reassessment also reflects the broader context of Algeria's efforts to strengthen its security sector while distancing itself from foreign influence. However, these sentiments do not seem to influence the military's ambitions to further expand and evolve (Fakir & Ghebouli, 2022).

Moreover, there remains a belief among Algerians that the military, and to a lesser extent the police, act in the interest of the people. However, both the military, which is responsible for defending against internal unrest and external threats, and law enforcement, which is responsible for managing civilian protests, are under-resourced and overextended (Porter, 2019). This makes the state vulnerable to social unrest. For instance, if law enforcement or military officers would use fatal violence during public demonstrations, especially amid a political crisis, the people would view the incident as a profound violation of the state's duty to protect its citizens. Such an incident could then in turn act as a catalyst for national outrage and potentially spark a new, larger wave of instability (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Algeria's armed forces are constantly deemed the most capable (in addition to being the largest arms importer) on the African continent even if the estimates regarding the size of its military vary widely (Boussel, 2025; Strachan, 2018). The lack of transparency of the Algerian military is seen throughout its operations. Oversight mechanisms, such as the parliamentary committee on defense and security, lack clearly defined powers and remain largely symbolic. Consequently, detailed information regarding the defense budget and broader military expenditures is not readily available to the public or to elected representatives (Fakir & Ghebouli, 2022). This creates an apparent difficulty in correctly, and in depth, scrutinizing the Algerian armed forces.

What has been clear, however, is that the Algerian military has remained internally divided along

historical and ideological lines. There has been, and still exists, a disagreement between officers who defected from the French army to join the FLN during the independence war, and those trained in Arab countries who generally hold a more confrontational stance against Western powers (Mililess & Handoko, 2024). This internal division has had a lasting impact on Algeria's political framework, further entrenching the overlap between military influence and civilian governance. This has led to the armed forces not being monolithic, but instead organized into interest-based factions that can distribute and organize political power among themselves, avoiding open conflict (Ibid.). Despite this, the Algerian military projects a unified narrative, and each faction shares a belief in its historic mission to safeguard the nation. This sense of entitlement is reflected in the military's expectation of public gratitude and compliance, a sentiment that continues to shape civil-military relations in the country (Ghanem, 2019). Furthermore, within this system, presidents often serve not as autonomous leaders but as mediators among military factions, managing their competing claims rather than setting independent policy (Mililess & Handoko, 2024).

In the post-civil war era, the military openly asserted its role in steering electoral outcomes and brokering political alliances. Constant infighting among the civilian elites and military leaders has perpetuated an unwritten agreement where compliant politicians are rewarded with power, so long they remain loyal to the military's overarching interests (Lenze, 2021). Ultimately, the army has become deeply embedded in the country's political and administrative structures, and has effectively overshadowed competing societal actors, including the political class, business elites, civil society, and the press (Fakir & Ghebouli, 2022). When Bouteflika took over the presidency in 1999, he sought to shift the civil-military balance and reclaim some executive authority. This was done through, for example, the *Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation*. It was adopted in 2006 and sought to implement peace in Algerian society, but it also gave amnesty to the ones who had committed crimes during the civil war, ultimately reintegrating ex-militants in the system again without repercussions (Saidy, 2020). However, despite this, Bouteflika encountered strong resistance from the military elite, who remained unconvinced of the need for political reform. As a result, the core structure of the Algerian regime remained unchanged, with real power continuing to reside in the military and intelligence services, while the presidency retained only formal authority (Ibid.). While some accounts suggest a reduced level of

interference in day-to-day politics by the military, others argue that it retains final say in matters of national decision making. This is illustrated by the fact that presidential candidates still must secure the backing of senior military officials, and elected leaders often function within limits imposed by those who made their rise to power possible (Strachan, 2018).

During Bouteflika's presidency, military spending was robust and between 2014-2018, Algeria ranked fifth globally in arms imports. Although this procurement allowed for a modernization and greater professionalization of the armed forces, it did not bring any substantial reform of the country's military doctrine (Tlemcani, 2019). Instead, the country has achieved immense military capabilities that remain underused (Dekhakhena, 2021). Boussel (2025) highlights that this military buildup may appear disproportionate when compared to the scale of the regional threats it faces. However, to fully grasp the regime's rationale, it is crucial to understand the impact of the 2019 Hirak protests in Algeria. The mass demonstrations that occurred directly challenged the regime's authority and tried to undermine the central role of the military in national politics. In response, the state pursued a strategy of reinforcing the army as a pillar of domestic stability (Boussel, 2025). In justifying this posture, military leaders have claimed, in support from civilian officers and the President, that the Hirak movement was infiltrated by extremist elements, necessitating a firm response. An example of the growing institutional role post the 2019 protests was the reconfiguration of the High Security Council, which in 2021 expanded to more military representatives than before. In this way, the army's authority over internal security issues has further been consolidated (Ibid.).

In other words, the army functions as the principal arbiter in policy disputes, with elected officials depending on its support to retain office. In this way, it can be argued that the armed forces and its officers have the ability to positively influence policies serving their own interest, including increasing military spending. Therefore, Boussel (2025) emphasizes that the Algerian arms buildup appears to be less about external threats and more about projecting strength internally and internationally. A strong focus for the regime has been to frame itself as a counterweight to Morocco, and has embraced the rivalry as a strategy. Despite the improbability of direct military conflict with Morocco, this dynamic helps the regime justify continued investments in its military capabilities (Boussel, 2025). Within this broader context, the

military's entrenched role in Algerian politics remains a barrier to the development of democratic security governance. Consequently, Saidy (2020) argues that an effective security sector reform seems unrealistic if a demilitarization of political life is not done. The transition from a military-dominated regime to a civilian-led democratic government first requires deliberate efforts to negotiate a political consensus between military and civilian actors (Saidy, 2020).

In addition to political dominance, the Algerian military has also gained significant influence over the country's economic structures. Its influence extends from direct ownership and control of key economic sectors, particularly energy and mining, to indirect impact over policy-making decisions that shape the national development strategies. This influence has led to major implications for resource distribution, income inequality, and opportunities for upward social mobility (Mililess & Handoko, 2024). As an extension to this, the army also exercises strong control over media narratives, shaping public discourse and regulating access to information in both traditional and digital platforms. This control has serious implications for freedom of expression, especially in the wake of the Hirak movement which has served as an example of how the regime suppresses activities and regime critics (Ibid.).

After looking closer at the Algerian military, what can be concluded is that the country has a deeply entrenched model of military guardianship, justified culturally and politically. The public's historical reverence for the military, while once an asset for legitimacy, has morphed into a shield against accountability. The military's narrative as *guardian of the people* has come to function as a justification for the exclusion of oppositional voices and the suppression of political pluralism. Furthermore, the parliamentary committee serves as an example of ineffective oversight. Its symbolic nature demonstrates a broader problem in Algerian governance; the management and oversight bodies remain either under military influence or essentially structurally toothless. This results in a lack of transparency and an inability for the public or elected representatives to effectively partake in reform decisions. In addition, the military's influence also extends into Algeria's justice system and political party structures. The judiciary's submission to the executive power, evident in for example the requirement for military backing of presidential candidates, prevents the development of an impartial and independent legal system, which is a fundamental condition for upholding the rule of law.

The military's control over economic and media sectors further complicates Algeria's security sector, and possible reforms. Its dominance over key sectors like energy, ensures that any challenging of the societal conditions is also a challenge to the economic interests of the ruling elite. Meanwhile, its control over media narratives both stifles public debate and curtails the transparency and inclusivity required for meaningful reform. This media dominance has proven to be especially problematic post-Hirak where dissent has been conflated with extremism and repressed accordingly. The state's post-Hirak response has also exposed the regime's growing reliance on a securitized governance. Rather than addressing the movement's core demands for transparency, accountability, and civilian participation, the military expanded its control over domestic security apparatuses and intensified surveillance.

2.3.3 The Role of Intelligence Agencies in Shaping Algeria's Counterterrorism and Internal Security

Algeria's intelligence apparatus, commonly referred to as *le pouvoir*, has from its establishment operated with substantial autonomy by informally directing both political and economic affairs (Strachan, 2018). Created in 1990, the *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS) quickly became a critical actor contributing to the military's violence and aided in providing intelligence through the conflict of the 1990s. The intelligence services has since then been central to maintaining regime stability and has over time evolved into a nearly untouchable entity that is widely feared, yet officially unaccountable (Lenze, 2021). Their actions during the 1990s, consisting of controversial tactics done by for instance the espionage faction, raised questions about whether the aim was to dismantle or manipulate the insurgency for political purposes, rather than putting an end to the islamist insurgency. As a result of the extensive measures, by the early 2000s, the intelligence agencies wielded more political influence than at any point in Algeria's post-independence history (Roberts, 2007).

During Bouteflika's presidency, the DRS formally remained under military control, however following the In Amenas hostage crisis in 2013, where al Qaeda-linked militants attacked a gas plant in Tiguentourine, Bouteflika began efforts to distance the DRS from the armed forces. He

did this by essentially placing it under presidential oversight, and replaced the institution by three separate intelligence bodies, now known as *Department of Surveillance and Security* (DSS) (Fakir & Ghebouli, 2022; Sour, 2022). Despite this, the reorganization did little to curb the intelligence services operational dominance. Bouteflika's restructuring, while framed as an effort to *civilianize* political life, was ultimately overshadowed by a broader military-led institutional consolidation, where the internal security services, including those within the Ministry of Interior, remained subordinate to military control. In addition, the institution has justified its expanded powers through both genuine and exaggerated threats of terrorism and separatism, while simultaneously using these concerns to curtail dissent and neutralize civic mobilization (Fakir & Ghebouli, 2022). The rhetoric used equates Islamism with instability and thus rationalizes the dissolving of civil liberties and the postponement of democratic reforms (Aïda Ammour, 2012).

By presenting terrorism in vague terms and as a persistent threat, the Algerian regime has, according to Aïda Ammour (2012), normalized a perpetual state of emergency. During recent years, the measures in the name of internal security have become more intense. The expansion of the legal definition of terrorism in 2021 to include obstructing the stability of public services, spreading so-called fake news, or disrupting the functioning of state institutions has effectively blurred the line between dissent and criminality (Amnesty international, 2021). While the laws concerning internal security and anti-terrorism were updated to align with international counterterrorism mandates, including UN Security Council Resolutions 2178 and 2199, Mansour-Ille (2021) argues that their domestic application illustrates a pattern of overreach. Surely, Algeria has taken measures against foreign terrorist fighters and their supporters, but in doing so, it has also reinforced a legal and political environment where national security trumps democratic accountability (Mansour-Ille, 2021). For example, the authorities have increasingly prosecuted seemingly peaceful activists and civil society figures, and delegitimized civil liberty movements under these broadly defined laws (Amnesty International, 2021; Mansour-Ille, 2021).

Additionally, the legal provisions have extended to include financing, supporting, or recruiting foreign fighters and using digital platforms for terrorist purposes as criminal offences, and as a result internet providers are held legally accountable for failing to block extremist content.

Internet platforms can also face criminal liability for the content or websites they host, particularly if the material is deemed contrary to public morality or societal norms (Strachan, 2018; U.S Department of State, 2023). According to reforms introduced during the 2000s and 2010s, the government is permitted to carry out electronic surveillance to prevent terrorism, subversive activity, or threats to state security, provided that written authorization is obtained from a judicial authority (U.S State Department, 2023). Furthermore, in 2024, a new law regulating the film industry was enacted. The legislation imposes prison sentences for those who fund or participate in films that violate broadly defined principles such as national values and principle, national sovereignty, national unity, or the supreme interests of the nation (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The government has also employed religious counter-narratives, encouraging former militants to publicly disavow violent extremism and endorsing state-trained *moderate* imams through the tightly controlled national media (Strachan, 2018). Moreover, the counterterrorism efforts have also tried to serve to rehabilitate the image of the security services. The civil war in the 1990s, and the post-9/11 global security environment, offered the regime opportunities to recast itself as a critical partner in the international fight against terrorism and not simply protecting the Algerian people, but being a guardian of the people globally as well. One of the tactics has been to infiltrate terrorist networks. The DRS, despite its secretive operations, has been credited with significant success in disrupting al-Qaeda activities, particularly through infiltration strategies that, while effective, have drawn international criticism. While this may be considered controversial, the tactic seems to be widely understood as rooted in Algeria's traumatic experience with internal insurgency (Lagatta et al., 2012; Sour, 2022; Tlemcani, 2019).

Algeria has also, like Morocco, introduced reforms to oversee the religious dimension as a counter-terrorism effort. For instance, only state-sanctioned imams are allowed to preach, mosques are prohibited from being used for public gatherings outside of prayer, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs maintains tight control over religious discourse (Mansour-Ille, 2021). Altogether, Algeria's approach has led to their intelligence services being considered by some as among the most effective agencies in countering al-Qaeda in the Sahel (Sour, 2022). This has aided Algeria in its efforts in trying to position itself as the regional anchor for counter-terrorism.

However, the country has continued to prioritize unilateral, domestically focused operations, rather than in the more vulnerable southern territories, where the state's presence remains thin (Aïda Ammour, 2012). However, despite international pressure, Algeria has consistently refused to deploy its armed forces in external counter-terrorist operations. Since 2012, it has declined requests from France and the U.S to participate in military interventions in Mali and Niger (Dekhakhena, 2021). Roberts (2007) confers that the Algerian government benefits from the perception of a persistent terrorist threat, which it uses to justify its militarized governance model, but its reluctance to contribute to regional efforts raises questions about the strategy's stability and sustainability.

Taken together, the country's intelligence agencies have seemingly bypassed standard oversight and accountability mechanisms. This can possibly explain why there has been no meaningful, large-scale reform of the Algerian security sector. The expansion of the legal definition of terrorism to include acts like disrupting public services or spreading fake news is also an example of an overreach that undermines the rule of law, but also blurs the boundaries between legitimate political expression and undermining of it as well. Oversight bodies, such as the Ministry of Interior or the judiciary, are neither empowered nor independent enough to counterbalance aspects like these. In other words, the checks and balances does not function adequately concerning a sector already non-transparent in its nature.

Moreover, the intelligence sector's continued justification of repressive tactics under the guise of combating terrorism reflects an institutional logic rooted in the 1990s civil war. But, rather than transitioning from crisis-mode governance toward a participatory security reform, the Algerian state has evidently doubled down on surveillance, censorship, and legal intimidation instead. By branding critics as destabilizers or foreign agents, and by delegitimizing grassroots movements like Hirak through security narratives, the state has weaponized its intelligence capacity against democratic demands. This directly contravenes Born and Schnabel's (2011) emphasis on inclusive participation and consensus-building as the foundation for legitimate security governance. The controlling of narratives also stretches to the country's reputation internationally. Despite being mentioned as one of the region's most capable militaries, the state remains reluctant to use force beyond its borders. This refusal can be argued to not be a matter of

doctrine alone; it reflects a defensive political image that uses the *idea* of regional instability to reinforce domestic militarization without exposing the regime to international accountability or risk.

2.3.4 Reflections on Algeria's Security Sector Reform Trajectory

In sum, Algeria's security sector can be argued to not be simply defined by military dominance, but by the rigid institutional structure that has internalized that dominance as a normalcy. The country does not seem to have attempted reform in a transformative sense, as the reforms have continually been limited in scope, focusing on small technical adjustments instead of addressing deeper structural or political problems. It can even be said that the Algerian state treats reform itself as a security threat, possibly disrupting this rigid institutional structure. This mindset turns tools meant to support reform, like public oversight or independent courts, into ways of controlling risk. Instead of limiting state power, the rule of law is used flexibly to serve the state's interests. The laws imposed have been vaguely written deliberately as a tactic to expand interpretive discretion to the regime. In practice, this leads to the high risk of having a security sector that follows strict rules on paper but acts flexibly and unpredictably in reality.

It seems like the incisions like the High Security Council and the parliamentary defense committee are mostly symbolic. Meanwhile, real security operations, especially in intelligence and counterterrorism, are carried out flexibly and behind the scenes. Naturally, these operations cannot function in full transparency, but the arbitrariness creates a sort of gap in oversight. This is true as official institutions do not have the power or credibility to control action that may follow the law on paper but are authoritarian in practice. Furthermore, notably absent in Algeria's security sector is meaningful engagement with non-statutory security forces. This is most likely not because such forces do not exist, but because the state has strategically depoliticized or merged them into other elements of the security apparatus. Afterall, the Algerian state is single handedly built upon the works of these kinds of forces, and the formal institutions that carry their legacy, as the military, is highly respected and accepted by the people. The national narrative, that has sustained this acceptance, is another dimension that seems to have complicated reform further. The military's role in the independence war, its self-image as the

custodian of national unity, and the civil war are strengthening the vision of a country that tends for itself, without foreign interference. This can be linked to the country's reluctance to fully participate in regional cooperation. This stance reflects a realist, self-reliant strategy in which the state maintains complete authority over its security apparatus. By keeping foreign actors on an arm's length from the regime, it can avoid external pressure for internal reform, and shield its policies from outside criticism.

2.4 Hard Power Versus Soft Power, Two Different Paths? Comparative Analysis of the Two Security Sectors

The security sector reform trajectories of Algeria and Morocco reveal different policy paths, but also opposing conceptions of power as exercised through the security apparatus. Algeria has arguably entrenched a model of hard power strategies premised on coercive institutional governance, while Morocco has leaned toward a strategy of soft power underpinned by symbolic legitimacy, selective liberalization, and religious authority. However, both models are oriented toward not democratizing the security sector, but toward reinforcing regime sovereignty and strategic autonomy. The reforms that have been imposed reflect deliberate strategies by regime elites to maintain power, manage risks, and optimize institutional control. The way security sector reform has taken shape in both countries reflects deliberate choices by elites to respond to firstly internal, and secondly external threats, not to democratize security, but to protect their own power and strengthen consolidation of regime control.

In Algeria, the military is not an instrument of the state – it is the state. From independence, the FLN and the armed forces fused into a structure where revolutionary legitimacy justified the military's assumption of political control. The military's self-image as *dépositaires du nationalisme* (El Auofi, 2023), or protectors of the people, has entrenched a guardianship role that places security, and by extension regime durability, above democratic accountability. Reforms are either superficial or deliberately minimal, as any foundational change risks destabilizing the rigid balance of militarized control. In contrast, Morocco's path of security sector reform reflects a monarchical strategy that combines symbolic reform with institutional

insulation. El Auofi (2023) points this out as well by arguing that the monarchy retains undisputed authority over military and security institutions, which exist primarily to protect the throne, not the public. While a rhetoric seeking to showcase a larger focus on implementing security reforms have been adopted, particularly following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, reforms have served more to modernize surveillance and increase international legitimacy than to democratize control. Intelligence reforms, religious centralization, and initiatives like the INDH have provided an image of governance through soft power, yet real oversight remains absent and dissent is still managed through securitized frameworks (Privacy International, 2016; Amnesty International, 2007).

While the two countries' approaches differ, both reproduce a realist logic in which state security is defined as regime survival. Furthermore, both countries display a common structural feature: the securitization of internal dissent and the prioritization of a focus on military and security measures over democratization. This reflects a strategic decision to maintain regime dominance even at the cost of stagnation in development and humanitarian efforts. In other words, this trade-off confirms that regime security consistently outweighs societal security. Even in Morocco's case, where the monarchy's use of seemingly progressive reforms, such as the quotation of women in parliament and the decentralization of political influence to regional levels, has not altered the balance of power. Instead, these reforms are better understood as strategic recalibrations rather than structural democratizations. Conversely, the Algerian attempts of liberalization, like political pluralism, have only deepened authoritarian entrenchment. The failure of civilian institutions to counterbalance the military further reflects the institutionalization of hard power as the primary mode of governance. Even after the Hirak protests of 2019, the military responded not with reform but with expanded control, reaffirming its role as arbiter of internal stability and of political succession.

Moreover, both states repeatedly use terrorism as a legitimizing discourse to avoid more liberalized democratized reforms. Both Fakir (2009) and Mansour-Ille (2021) highlight how the securitization of political opposition, either by equating dissent with extremism or by embedding civil society oversight within intelligence frameworks, has allowed both the Algerian and Moroccan governments to shield their security sectors from public scrutiny. Morocco's

integration of religious institutions and digital surveillance into counterterrorism efforts, and Algeria's expanded definition of terrorism to include public criticism or online dissent, further exemplify this pattern. In essence, the security sector's core purpose, to be a legitimate, accountable force for peace and development, has been systematically undercut. Instead of being transformed into tools of inclusive governance, security institutions have been weaponized as extensions of regime strategy. While Morocco's path reflects soft authoritarianism and Algeria's hard militarism, both clearly converge on a realist logic of power preservation. Neither strategy has offered a security sector reform capable of delivering transparency, accountability, and reliability.

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Chapter 3: Internal Exclusion, External Projection: Civil Society and Foreign Alliances

This following chapter will explore the dual dynamics between domestic authority and international strategy in the security governance of Algeria and Morocco. As mentioned above, effective and successful security sector reform emphasizes democratic oversight, public participation, and international cooperation for peace and development. Two central elements in a state's functions and dynamics are therefore the inclusion of civil society and international engagement. Taken together, domestic exclusion of civil society and the strategic pursuit of foreign alliances can be understood not as isolated dynamics, but as mutually reinforcing elements. The discussion of this will unfold in two parts. First, it investigates the relationship between each regime and its civil society, focusing on the opportunities and limitations civic actors face in participating in governance. Second, the look is turned outward to the different foreign partnerships and diplomatic orientations of each state, demonstrating how external relationships reflect and reproduce internal dynamics. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the key insights and assumptions emerging from the preceding analysis.

3.1 Civil Society

To understand Algeria and Morocco's approaches to security sector reform and civil-military relations, it is essential to examine who is excluded from security governance and why. Both states claim to recognize the importance of civil society as a partner in governance, but in practice, they exclude it from core security matters. In both cases, civil society remains peripheral to decisions regarding defense, intelligence, and foreign policy; domains tightly monopolized by executive elites (Colin, 2024; Patil, 2025). As Kodmani and Chartouni-Dubarry (2009) express, real reform can only happen if security sector reforms are part of broader democratic efforts led by civil and political society. When this integration is hindered, security sector reform risks becoming superficial, used by ruling elites to reinforce existing power structures rather than to facilitate substantive transformation (Kodmani & Chartouni-Dubarry, 2009). Bottom-up attempts to reform security structures through human rights campaigns,

investigative journalism, or protests against societal issues, often prove more effective than top-down initiatives. These civic efforts, however fragmented, constitute a form of grassroots security governance. They expose abuse, demand accountability, and create informal arenas for civic dialogue. However, their success depends on the political opportunity structures available (Ibid.). The exclusion of civil society from security governance is not affecting the domestic sphere exclusively, but it shapes foreign relations and regional attitudes as well (Born & Schnabel, 2011).

Therefore, this section explores how civic actors in Algeria and Morocco challenge, navigate, or are marginalized by authoritarian structures in Morocco and Algeria, and what this implies for the possibility of reform grounded in public accountability.

3.1.1 Civil Society in Morocco

Although the Moroccan monarchy has, over the decades, succeeded in consolidating and expanding its authority, its control over civil society remains limited and frequently challenged. An array of civil society actors, including oppositional parties, independent media, and grassroots movements, continue to pressure the regime. Their differing and sometimes overlapping demands allow the monarchy to manage dissent by using a mix of co-optation, containment, and institutional reforms (Colin, 2024; Malka, 2016). Grassroots resistance has long been a part of Moroccan politics, but began to take a clear shape in the 1990s and continued to grow after the 2011 Arab uprisings. The 2017 Hirak movement in the Rif region showed that earlier claims of the regime successfully absorbing public dissent were overly optimistic. Instead, it revealed that street-level protests continue to challenge the ruling elite and draw attention to deep, unresolved social and political issues (Colin, 2024). The civil society in Morocco should not be viewed simply as a collection of associations, unions, and political groups acting as a neutral space between the state and its citizens. Rather, it reflects a broader set of cultural values, practices, and institutions deeply rooted in Moroccan history and identity (Yachoulti, 2020).

Throughout the evolving landscape, political opposition has historically originated from three principal sources in Morocco. Namely, formal political parties engaged in parliamentary

processes; Islamist movements operating outside the parliamentary framework; and civil society organizations. However, the effectiveness and autonomy of these actors have been limited by institutional constraints and strategic interventions from the monarchy, and the palace continues to exploit the organizations' fragmentation and divergent agendas (Malka, 2016). Some civil society organizations have managed to remain relatively independent, especially when their causes are important to the Moroccan public and the international community but still face resistance from influential domestic actors. In such cases, the palace struggles to fully absorb or co-opt the movement (Kaye et al., 2008; Sakthivel, 2015). Similarly, while Morocco boasts a vibrant and often issue-focused civil society, its scope of action is constrained by the state's willingness to tolerate dissent. The regime has implicitly created *red lines* in the public debate, topics not to be discussed or criticized by media, civil society organizations, and citizens. These *lines* are the country's muslim faith, the monarchy, and Morocco's territorial integrity (Benchennaf & Marchettiare, 2021). A transgression of these, particularly those concerning core national questions such as the Western Sahara, but also past and present political repression, or the boundaries of executive accountability, is recurrently seen to not be tolerated by the regime (Campbell, 2003).

This repression is exemplified by the early human rights movement in Morocco. The *Association Marocaine des Droits de l'Homme* (AMDH), founded in 1972, operated under intense state repression and limited maneuverability because of its left leaning political affiliations. To the contrary, the *Ligue Marocaine des Droits de l'Homme* (LMDH), also founded in 1972, was seen to be more aligned with the political right and created divisions within the human rights movement which ultimately weakened its credibility. It did this by mainly avoiding criticizing regime abuses or addressing sensitive issues like disappearances, women's rights, and the Western Sahara (Campbell, 2003). This constrained environment was then further institutionalized during the 1990s when the state created new councils, or bodies, like the *Conseil Consultatif de Droits de l'Homme* (CCDH) and *Cellule Intégration de la Femme au Développement* (CIFD). They claimed to encourage public participation, but in reality, they functioned as a top-down mechanism for consensus-building. Only voices supportive of the regime agenda were included, actively sidelining critics who challenged the monarch's dominance (Colin, 2024). Nonetheless, Moroccan human rights organizations have continued to

use international standards and the recommendations of transitional justice mechanisms to push for reforms in the security sector. These efforts are tied to global human rights norms and frameworks, knowing that the Moroccan state is sensitive to its international image, and therefore vulnerable to international normative pressure (Arab Reform Initiative, 2009).

Still, the civil society in Morocco faces oppression and challenges. Parliamentary oversight of the security apparatus is weak, human rights violations persist as routine practices within some security institutions, and public discourse on security reform remains confined to civil society and the media. This while official actors often remain conspicuously silent or obstruct reformist attempts (Arab Reform Initiative, 2009). At the same time, the relationship between the civil society, the media, and the security sector has undergone transformation, particularly since the early 2000s. As independent media has slowly grown and old divisions between government and partisan press have moderately faded, the media has become more active in exposing security abuses, prompting both symbolic and substantive shifts in state behavior. This shift has been seen in the regime occasionally imposing sanctions on officials in the security sector, and even if these sanctions may be light, they still represent progress in terms of accountability. Furthermore, the state has abandoned older, more repressive tactics of media control in favor of narrative management through official statements instead (Ibid.). A key challenge is the existence of state created *clone organizations* that mimic independent civil society groups. While these organizations sometimes produce useful research, they also promote alternative narratives that align with the monarchy, presenting the King as the central figure behind each organization's mission, whether it relates to women's rights, human rights, Western Sahara issues, or Amazigh identity (Sakthivel, 2015).

Concerning the monarchy's approach to civil society, the launch of the *Initiative Nationale pour le Développement Humain* (INDH) in 2005 marked a turning point. While officially presented as a strategy to support disadvantaged communities through human development, targeting rural poverty, urban exclusion, and youth integration, it also served to deepen the state's influence over civil society, particularly at the local level (Colin, 2024). The INDH opened doors for civil society actors to engage in political life, but it also promoted a depoliticized model of participation. However, reforms like the INDH have raised concerns about the quality of citizen

participation in development projects, noting that many of these initiatives lack long-term sustainability (Ibid.). Decision-making is still mostly controlled by local officials from the Ministry of Interior, which has ultimately weakened the influence of elected representatives and strengthened clientelist networks. While the INDH did change how citizens interact with the state, it mainly did so by, for instance, removing political content from civil society activities. Instead of pushing for accountability, many associations often focused on carrying out projects in partnership with the state (Colin, 2024). Although the initiative allowed new actors to enter public life, it also reinforced existing power structures through built-in mechanisms of control. Ultimately, the INDH's main impact was to give the state a participatory image, turning the idea of participation into a sort of political slogan. This approach arguably shifted citizen involvement away from political demands and framed civil society engagement as a technical, non-political task (Ibid.).

This depoliticized approach to participation has extended into the broader public sphere, where protests and civic action is increasingly tolerated by the state, as long as they target symbolic institutions like the government or parliament and not the monarchy itself (Yachoulti, 2020). This reflects a general trend in which Moroccans do not express an aim to overthrow the monarchy, but to push for constitutional and democratic reforms focused on transparency and reducing corruption instead. For instance, during the February 20 movement, born during the Arab Spring in 2011, protesters chanted against corruption, not the monarchy. This showcased a clear difference from revolutionary movements in other Maghreb countries, where the uprisings led to regime collapse. In Morocco, the outcomes were relatively peaceful and the monarchy was preserved because of the people's focus on actions by the regime rather than the regime itself (Ibid.). As mentioned in chapter 2, the protests in 2011 initiated change by the state and a new constitution was implemented. However, the key demands of the protesters and the civil society in large, ending corruption, promoting equality, expanding freedoms, and improving education, have mostly gone unfulfilled. The reforms leading to more profound change remain unimplemented and seem to only exist as official rhetoric but with no real impact (Yachoulti, 2020).

Worth of noting, however, is that the 2011 constitution included a reform which formally allowed

non-governmental organizations (NGO) and civil society organizations to take part in shaping, implementing, and evaluating public policy. The reform was said to be intended to encourage citizen participation and seemed to signal a move toward democratization. However, in reality, it further reinforced state control over civil society, turning these organizations into actors that worked within the system rather than challenging it (Patil, 2025). Furthermore, it served to build public trust in the regime without altering its core power structure. The King has continued to hold concentrated power, and civil society has stayed largely excluded from meaningful parliamentary influence (Ibid.). Instead, the 2011 protests' and the February 20 movement's most significant legacy is that it helped Moroccans overcome the fear of public activism instilled during the oppressive regime of King Hassan II. This has led to the rise of spontaneous protests, solidarity actions, and other grassroots responses against issues like injustice, poor living conditions, and the state's inaction. Yachoulti (2020) argues that these new forms of resistance represent a shift away from traditional, ideology-driven activism. They reject political parties, unions, and sometimes even civil society organizations, preferring more decentralized, individual and collective action. Some activists go as far as to criticize the February 20 movement itself for failing to meet its political goals, viewing it as a starting point for a more radical culture of resistance (Yachoulti, 2020).

This new spirit and fearlessness of civil society to turn to public protest was showcased again in October 2016. Mouhcine Fikri, a fisherman from the town of Imourzen, jumped into a garbage truck after attempting to retrieve his confiscated swordfish, which authorities claimed he was not permitted to catch. Reports later indicate that a local official then gave the order to activate the compactor, ultimately crushing Fikri to death (Yachoulti, 2020). His death, widely seen as symbolism of state abuse and neglect, ignited widespread protests across Morocco, and within 48 hours it had quickly expanded. The protests addressed broader grievances such as corruption, regional marginalization, and inadequate public services, especially in the Rif region located in the northern part of the country. The movement evolved into a national concern known as the *Hirak El-Shaabi* (Popular Movement), with many observers viewing it as a second wave of the Moroccan Spring (Ibid.). Initially, the state responded with restraint, given the peaceful nature of the mobilization. However, when movement leader Nasser Zefzafi disrupted a Friday sermon in May 2017, after the imam denounced the protests as a source of *fitna* (chaos), the government

used the incident to justify a harsh crackdown. Zefzafi was arrested days later and eventually sentenced to 20 years in prison. Dozens of other activists were detained, and demonstrations were forcibly dispersed (Yachoulti, 2020).

Individuals who were detained during the protests in the Rif region have reported being subjected to torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement while in custody. The allegations have included beatings, threats of rape, forced confessions, and prolonged solitary confinement. However, when some protestors signaled about the conditions in detainment, they were charged with false reporting of police abuse (Amnesty International, 2017). Yet, the uprising pushed the state to take corrective measures. Most notably was the King's dismissal of several ministers and senior officials for failing to deliver on promised development projects in the Rif region, a move that was described in the Moroccan media as a "political earthquake" (Yachoulti, 2020). In the wake of these events, several civil society actors have spoken out against the government's repressive response and called for long-term solutions. For example, the AMDH has condemned the heavy police presence and criticized what it called a militarization of the region. Meanwhile, the *Confederation Democratique du Travail* (CDT), one of Morocco's leading trade unions, urged a review of the harsh prison sentences for the protestors and called for realistic socio-economic plans for affected regions. Despite the civil society organizations' raised voices, some analysts have raised concerns about the need for these organizations to go beyond reactive calls for reform and play a more proactive role in articulating local grievances and advocating concrete development alternatives (Berrada, 2019).

However, in 2024, the Moroccan government adopted a bill limiting civil society organizations further in their advocacy. The organizations have played a key role in fighting corruption in the country, often initiating legal proceedings against public officials accused of embezzlement. These efforts led to major breakthroughs, including the arrest of former Minister of Civil Service and Administrative Reform Mohamed Moubdii (Al-Ashraf, 2024). But the 2024 bill restricted civil society's ability to take legal action in such cases, arguing for concerns over potential misuse of this power for extortion or political agendas (Patil, 2025). In response, civil society associations have firmly rejected these claims, insisting that isolated abuses should be dealt with through legal oversight and not by restricting their broader role and competencies. They maintain

that an independent and active civil society is crucial for ensuring accountability and transparency (Al-Ashraf, 2024). Moreover, in large, civil society organizations argue that current reform efforts are inadequate as they are largely state-driven and lack public consultation (Arab Reform Initiative, 2009). Despite this, the rise in civil society activism reflects a growing recognition of citizens' role in shaping political life in Morocco. However, the activism also reveals the limits of permissible dissent, leading to the conclusion that state criticism is tolerated only when it does not challenge the monarchy's authority and stays outside the realm of formal partisan politics (Colin, 2024).

3.1.2 Civil Society in Algeria

In the case of Algeria, the interest for civil society was renewed in the early 2000s with the security-focused approach of President Bouteflika. The regime saw civil society as a tool to help rebuild state authority after the turmoil of the 1990s (Dris, 2023). Despite attempting to liberalize the country during this period, the state has continued to repress civil society, driven by a fear of change rather than by any real threat from the organizations, according to Northey (2018). Civil society actors themselves suggest that state hostility often stemmed from a sense of rivalry or jealousy, particularly when associations proved more effective than official institutions. However, in reality, many associations have been weak, fragmented, or under regime influence, with limited access to external funding. Even those organizations not addressing politically sensitive topics have had to tread carefully to maintain official approval. Poor relations with local authorities have proven to lead to legal obstacles, accusations of mismanagement, or forced closure (Northey, 2018). The regime portrays civil society as a partner in its development agenda, yet it expects this support to be apolitical. Unlike the earlier one-party era, when associations were direct extensions of the ruling party, today's regime insists that civil society avoid political activity unless it aligns with state objectives. In this way, similar to Morocco, political engagement is only problematic when it opposes the regime, while support for the regime is framed not as politics, but as patriotic duty (Dris, 2023).

The civil society is further strained by complex state-society dynamics which has created significant challenges for foreign actors to engage with the country's civil society. For example,

international donors like the EU face large constraints, with Algeria receiving some of the lowest funding in the region by the Union. This is because foreign engagement with Algerian civil society requires navigating intricate legal frameworks and state practices that govern both domestic civil society and the presence of external actors (Northey, 2018). Algeria's authoritarianism is seen by some as the primary obstacle to both foreign involvement and a thriving civil society, but others argue that the underlying issue is rather the state's structural weakness which hinders civil society development (Ibid.). As a result of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the Algerian state and civil society entered a renewed phase of negotiation to redefine the boundaries of their respective roles, responsibilities, and rights (Northey, 2018). Even though many Algerians still had the memories of the civil war in the 1990s present, which discouraged many citizens from embracing large-scale upheaval, the Arab Spring did influence Algeria's political landscape. Fearing open confrontation, the state eventually intervened to curb parliamentary influence, shutting down efforts to make the legislative process more participatory. It introduced some legal reforms, yet these often reinforced state control instead (Ibid.).

In response to the uprisings, the government introduced the Law on Associations in 2012, citing concerns over foreign funding and the autonomy of civil society. While the regime had long dominated the associative space, it remained wary of organizations developing beyond its reach. Ironically, the law replaced Algeria's most liberal civil society framework with highly restrictive measures that undermined the original intent of reform (Dris, 2023). Moreover, the law was initially promoted as a positive step, meant to recognize the role of civil society in Algeria's development. However, oppositional parties criticized it as a superficial solution, arguing that a more thorough and improved enforcement of existing laws was needed instead (Northey, 2018). Overall, the 2012 law has effectively tightened control over NGOs by regulating their formation, operations, and funding. For example, organizations must inform the government of any internal changes and report on all sources of funding. Accepting foreign support without prior state approval can lead to steep penalties, including imprisonment (Amnesty International, 2024). This shift fits a broader pattern of controlled liberalization: while the state has encouraged the formal expansion of civil society, it has also imposed strict boundaries on its political engagement. Many civil society organizations have received regular state subsidies, which deter open criticism. Furthermore, ties between the organizations' leaders and regime officials, often

through personal or bureaucratic networks, reinforce state influence and blur the line between civic activism and political loyalty (Lorch & Bunk, 2016).

Like in Morocco, new protests emerged a few years after the 2011 uprisings. However, in Algeria they were sparked because of President Bouteflika. A two-term limit on the president post was introduced in 2016, but it was not applied retroactively. As a result, the sitting President Bouteflika announced his candidacy for a fifth term in office in 2019. This move ignited widespread public outrage and triggered a nationwide wave of protests, called simply the *Hirak* in Algeria (Freedom House, 2024). The protests ultimately led to Bouteflika's resignation after he lost the support of the military. Moreover, even though the protests began as a peaceful, inclusive popular uprising across the country, the movement quickly evolved. Once Bouteflika had stepped down and several senior officials were prosecuted for corruption, the regime believed it had fulfilled the people's demands (Dris, 2023). Yet, protesters began calling for deeper, systemic change and not just a change in leadership. The regime, however, maintained its course, insisting that elections were necessary to prevent a power vacuum and that a new president could initiate reforms in response to the people's demands (Ibid.). However, one change the *Hirak* achieved was the change in election oversight. Before 2019, the oversight had been managed by the Ministry of the Interior and was often criticized for lacking transparency and credibility. But in response to the protestors demands, the government created the *Autorité nationale indépendante des élections* (ANIE) to enhance electoral oversight and restore public trust in the process (Freedom House, 2024).

Despite the mass mobilization, the state's approach to civil society has remained largely unchanged, and most observers agree that the *Hirak* did not fundamentally alter the status quo. Official actors continue to view civil society not as a pluralistic space for diverse societal expression and negotiation, but as a tool for implementing state-defined political, economic, and social agendas. However, because of its loud presence and mobilization efforts, the *Hirak* movement is still deemed to represent the most significant political development in Algeria since independence (Dris, 2023). Instead of a progressive change, it rather seems like the government has instead intensified its clampdown on political opposition, civil society organizations, and independent media in recent years (Amnesty International, 2024). The UN has voiced strong

criticism of Algeria's treatment of its civil society particularly following the forced dissolution of two major human rights organizations: the *Ligue Algérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme* (LADDH) and the *Rassemblement Actions Jeunesse* (RAJ). In the case of LADDH, the organization was never even informed of the changes against it or given an opportunity to respond before the court ordered its dissolution. Some of the organization's members were also faced with retaliation for cooperating with the UN during Algeria's Universal Periodic Review in 2022. The UN highlights that these actions constitute serious attacks on the space for civil society to operate freely (North Africa Post, 2023; OHCHR, 2023). Furthermore, the Algerian civil society continues to struggle with limited independence, both financially and intellectually. Many organizations remain closely tied to state agendas, and their heavy dependence on state resources undermines their capacity to act as genuine intermediaries between citizens and the state (Bouanani & Boualem, 2024).

Overall, the relationship between civil society and the Algerian state remains filled with tension and distrust. Authorities continue to exclude civil society from meaningful participation in decision-making, viewing its engagement as a potential challenge to regime stability rather than as a partner in governance (Bouanani & Boualem, 2024). While authorities have acknowledged the importance of civil society, the rentier nature of the Algerian state has led to a dynamic where civil society has become a tool to win favor with the government. Dris (2023) emphasizes that both the regime and its aligned civil society actors work to hide this mutual dependence behind populist rhetoric, propaganda, and suppression of dissent. Public discourse about democracy and freedom of expression is seen being monopolized by the very actors who work to silence independent media and limit free speech. As a result, civil society has largely been turned into a passive by-stander to a stalled democratic transition. Even many young people involved in civil society, especially after the Algerian Hirak, have adopted the same political culture as the country's older generation. Despite large numbers of youth running in post-Hirak elections, their rhetoric often echoes that of long-standing regime loyalists from the *Front de libération nationale* (Dris, 2023).

3.2 Foreign Policy and Strategic Alliances

Foreign policy, particularly toward regional and global actors, is both a reflection of strategic interests, and a continuation of internal governance logics. In this sense, examining the external relationships and alliances of Morocco and Algeria is critical to understanding how security sector reform failures and authoritarian consolidation at home shape patterns of rivalry abroad. Born and Schnabel (2011) argue that the purpose of security sector reform is to ensure that the security sector becomes an asset, not an obstacle, to peace, development, and stability. The reforms thus remain incomplete when foreign alliances reinforce rather than challenge authoritarian structures. As both Saidy (2020) and MacColman (2016) observe, the security sector cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political system, rather, it must be embedded in democratization processes that reshape how states perceive both internal and external security threats. Therefore, this section explores how Morocco and Algeria extend their domestic approaches into Africa, Europe, and beyond, and how these foreign actions reflect and reinforce their internal security strategies.

Africa

Looking at their closest neighbors, both Algeria and Morocco have pursued expensive engagement in Africa and the Sahel, but their strategies have diverged. Both countries use regional blocs for influence. According to Zaanoun (2024), Algeria backs a potential mini-Maghreb alliance with Tunisia and Libya, and has traditionally relied on institutional mechanisms, particularly the African Union (AU), to advance its regional agenda (Bennis, 2021). This while Morocco since 1999 has focused on bilateral and diplomatic relationships. One reason for this is the country's withdrawal from the AU in 1984, triggered by the Western Sahara conflict. Since his accession, Mohammed VI has instead pursued a quite assertive and diversified African policy, focusing particularly on sub-Saharan Africa in an effort to repair the ties that were damaged in 1984 (Fabiani, 2023a). This has been done by frequently visiting multiple sub-Saharan countries and economic outreach. These tours have institutionalized Morocco's presence in African politics and business, helping to entrench its role as a key regional player. The monarchy has tried to position itself as a credible political economic actor by showcasing its active embassies and the signing of a wide array of agreements, but also through soft power tools

like religious and economic influence (Pham, 2013; Moisseron & Daguzan, 2017).

This combination of pragmatism and symbolic leadership has allowed Morocco to deepen ties even with regimes under sanctions, such as those in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, by offering alternatives to isolation through trade and security partnerships (Moisseron & Daguzan, 2017). In 2017, however, Morocco decided to once again join the AU. After the Moroccan exit in 1984, Algeria used the AU as a platform to cement its anti-colonial credentials and counter Morocco diplomatically. Therefore, a paradigm shift occurred when Morocco re-joined the union and strategically dismantled Algeria's leverage (Bennis, 2021).

Furthermore, Algeria has maintained a dominant position in Africa concerning military power, this is evident as it has long been one of the region's biggest militaries (Boukhars, 2019). Although Algeria's 2020 constitutional reforms now legally permit the deployment of its military abroad, the country has remained reluctant to intervene directly in regional hotspots like Mali or Libya, despite serious concerns over Tuareg separatism and the destabilizing role of groups such as Wagner. Mali's accusation in 2024 that Algeria supports the Tuareg rebels has further intensified distrust and undermined Algeria's credibility as a neutral mediator (Chemam, 2025). Instead of taking visible action, Khettache (2024) argues that Algeria has preferred discreet diplomatic channels, quietly conveying its concerns to Moscow. Morocco, in contrast, employs a more multifaceted strategy in combining military cooperation, peacekeeping forces, and training programs. In this way, Rabat has built a reputation as a security provider, particularly among its neighbors in the Sahel (Pham, 2013; Moisseron & Daguzan, 2017). This is done beside an emphasis by the regime on pan-African solidarity, sovereignty, and development, wrapped in anti-colonial rhetoric (Bennis, 2021). These messages are backed by concrete economic initiatives such as the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline and the Morocco Atlantic Initiative, aimed at integrating landlocked Sahel states into global markets via Moroccan infrastructure (Fabiani, 2023a; Zaanoun, 2024).

Europe

The different approaches to foreign regimes can be seen in the states' relationships with Europe as well. For instance, Morocco has made an effort to position itself as a vital partner for Europe,

particularly in the realms of migration, energy cooperation, and regional security (Gath, 2024). This cooperative relationship has endured despite occasional tensions; for instance, in 2015, Morocco temporarily cut ties with the EU after a European court ruling excluded the disputed territory of Western Sahara from a bilateral trade agreement covering fisheries and agricultural products (Sakthivel, 2015). The country's geographic position with key migration routes, granting access to both Europe and Africa through the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean, has especially over the last years dramatically increased its leverage towards Europe. With this leverage, Morocco has effectively secured concessions from EU member states. For example, Belgian authorities reportedly dropped investigations into Moroccan suspects linked to the European Parliament's Qatar/Morocco Gate corruption scandal in exchange for a deal on repatriating undocumented migrants. Similarly, France also tried, with limited success, to pressure Morocco into cooperation by limiting visas between 2021 and 2022 (Fernández-Molina, 2024). In essence, it can be argued that Morocco has transformed migration control into a bargaining tool for broader diplomatic gains. Furthermore, although the EU remains as Morocco's main trade and financial partner, Rabat seems reluctant to restart negotiations on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which began in 2013 but were quickly suspended by Morocco. Fernández-Molina (2024) means that Morocco views the EU's demands, especially the requirement to align with complex and evolving regulations, including environmental standards, as costly and restrictive, even seeing them as a form of hidden protectionism.

By contrast, Algeria's relationship with Europe is largely shaped by political sensitivity, historical grievance, and a more rigid approach to sovereignty. For example, France's and Algeria's relationship remains particularly fragile with repeated diplomatic crises, and Algeria's deep-rooted nationalist sensitivities continue to pose challenges. When President Emmanuel Macron took office in 2017, he pledged to confront France's colonial past more openly than his predecessors, becoming the first French leader to acknowledge France's use of torture during the Algerian War of Independence. However, his efforts backfired in 2021 when he accused Algeria's political system of exploiting colonial history as a tool for legitimizing its rule, a remark that sparked outrage in Algiers and stalled his attempt to rebuild bilateral ties (Dworkin, 2024). Recently, tensions intensified further with the arrest of an Algerian consular official in

France in 2025, linked to the kidnapping the year prior of exiled dissident and social media figure Amir DZ, known for his outspoken criticism of the Algerian government. This provoked a harsh response from Algiers, which in turn expelled 12 French diplomats. France retaliated with its own expulsions and recalled its ambassador (Kirby, 2025). Algeria's Secretary of State, Sofiane Chaib, publicly blamed French Interior Minister Gérald Retailleau for the crisis, calling the justification for the arrest "grotesque". In response, Retailleau defended the move, stating that France could not allow itself to become a base of operations for Algerian intelligence (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, Algeria's broader relationship with the EU is also a complicated one. Tensions regarding trade have escalated in recent years, with the EU launching formal dispute claims over Algeria's restrictive trade policies, which Brussels argues violate their 2005 Association Agreement. Algeria's limited policies has led to a significant drop in EU exports to Algeria since 2015, and multiple European firms have faced barriers to market entry due to Algerian protectionism (European Commission, 2024). The relationship is further complicated because, unlike Morocco, Algeria refuses to sign an EU-wide readmission agreement for migrants, by arguing that migration is a matter of sovereignty. While Germany and Spain have secured limited bilateral deals, EU efforts to cooperate in migration control with Algeria have largely failed. As highlighted by Ghanem (2024), the Algerian elites view such agreements as neo-imperial offence, reinforcing Algerian resistance for cooperation. Subsequently, it is clear that Algeria adheres to a doctrine where its sovereignty comes first when interacting with Europe, an attitude often framed by distrust and limited flexibility. This contrasts Morocco's approach of pragmatic cooperation. Europe is, in different capacities, dependent on the two states, but while Morocco turns that dependence into leverage, Algeria frames it as intrusion.

Global West versus the Global East

Concerning bilateral relationships, Morocco and Algeria have historically leaned towards two different global actors. For Morocco, this has been the U.S. Morocco is one of the oldest diplomatic partners to the U.S and was the first country to recognize its independence in 1777 (Pham, 2013). This deep historical bond has evolved into a strategic partnership, especially concerning the military and security domains. For instance, Morocco was designated as a Major non-NATO Ally (MNNA) in 2004 which grants it priority to U.S. defense equipment and

training, participation in research programs, and preferential financing for military purchases. The only other African state granted this privilege is Egypt (U.S Department of State, 2025; White, 2008; Yade, 2024). Morocco is also the largest purchaser of U.S. military equipment in Africa (U.S Department of State, 2025). In addition, Morocco plays a crucial role in the largest annual joint military training on the African continent, the *African Lion* military exercises, where the U.S also is one of the key participants (Yade, 2024). Moreover, since 2003, Morocco has maintained a training collaboration with the Utah National Guard through the U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program. This initiative has offered the Moroccan Armed Forces access to specialized training and military exchanges (U.S Department of State, 2025).

Furthermore, Morocco has also been actively aligned with American and Western interests in general in the broader Atlantic and Sahel regions. Through initiatives like the *Abraham Accords*, and its efforts to position itself as a hub between Africa, Europe, and the Atlantic world, Rabat has projected itself as a force multiplier for Western security strategies (Boussel, 2025; Roudani, 2025). In contrast, U.S-Algeria relations are more recent and more issue-specific, primarily evolving around shared counterterrorism concerns (Riedel, 2019; Aftandilian, 2023). The U.S highlights Algeria as an important ally and security partner, but Algeria still does not hold a MNNA status and lacks the institutional military ties that Morocco has. In this sense, the relationship seems to be rather transactional and conditional (U.S Department of State, 2023; Henneberg & Medini, 2024). Initiatives like the *U.S-Algeria Joint Military Dialogue* and multiple visits from senior U.S. security officials show a willingness to deepen ties. However, as per the U.S Department of State (2023) itself, and further expressed by Henneberg and Medini (2024), Algeria's enduring alignment with Russia, its reluctance to publicly acknowledge the destabilizing effects of Russian activities in the region, Algeria's political insularity, its historic suspicion of NATO, and its closed political system continue to limit the scope of cooperation (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, in 2025, American defence officials expressed a new spark for collaboration when the U.S and Algeria signed a *Defense Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU). While such agreements are not legally binding, they intend to establish mutual intentions and outline how the involved parties plan to cooperate. Although specific outcomes, such as

intelligence sharing or technology transfers, have not been confirmed, it can be speculated that this MOU initiates a formal process to identify areas for joint activity, including foreign military sales, training programs, and joint exercises (Vincent, 2025). Moreover, counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries, which is already ongoing, is expected to grow under the new framework. Some see the agreement as a sign that Algiers is becoming more open to cooperating with the *U.S. Africa Command* (Africom) (Ibid.). An effort like this, to improve and expand its relations with the West, is taking place amid rising frustration in Algiers over Russia's strategic behavior and destabilizing influence in Africa, especially the Sahel. While Algeria's relationship with Russia is longstanding, Gower (2025) means that while making a full break or a complete shift toward the West is improbable, it is clearly working to rebalance its international partnerships.

This shift is deemed improbable because of the deeply entrenched relationship between Algeria and Russia. In the 1960s, the Soviet Union helped shape the Algerian military, transforming it from a guerilla force into a modern army with considerable conventional capabilities (Zoubir, 2024a). This has later on continued with Algeria purchasing its vast majority of arms from Russia, and from 2016 to 2020, Algeria was Russia's third largest arms customer, accounting for almost 15 percent of Russia's global arms sales (Zoubir, 2024b; Fakir & Ghebouli, 2022). This level of interdependence has created an institutional rigidity. As Fakir and Ghebouli (2022) notes, the strong influence of senior military figures in Algeria has fostered a risk-averse and traditionalist approach to foreign policy, one that continues to favor established alliances despite changing geopolitical conditions. However, despite the strength of the bilateral relationship, Algerian concerns about Russia's activities in Africa seem to be growing. The deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali and Libya has led Tebboune to publicly denounce the use of mercenaries, warning that they exacerbate rather than resolve regional instability. Moreover, Wagner's regional involvement complicates Algeria's mediation efforts with Tuareg separatists and undermines its border security (Khettache, 2024; Zoubir, 2024b). This unease has prompted Algeria to express its concerns to Russian officials through quiet diplomacy (Khettache, 2024).

While it has not taken public or punitive measures against Moscow, Algeria has signaled its discomfort by reportedly declining Russian requests for access at strategic ports, citing national

sovereignty and its policy of avoiding foreign military involvement (Benantar & Lobo, 2022; Zoubir, 2024a). Algeria abstained from UN resolutions condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine and rejected unilateral sanctions against Moscow, yet it has also declined Russian requests for deeper military basing (Zoubir, 2024b). This approach proves that Algeria remains shaped by a postcolonial lens that emphasizes national sovereignty over all else, and as Ghebouli (2022) highlights, can at times hinder the flexibility of Algerian foreign policy, but also reinforces its consistent stance of nonalignment, even as global power dynamics shift. This can also explain the developments towards a measured diversification of Algeria's strategic partnerships. The relationship with Russia remains robust but the pressures of regional instability, domestic security concerns, and changing global alliances are prompting Algiers to slowly rebalance its foreign relations. Algeria's partnership with Russia can be argued to function as a strategic balance to Morocco's alignment with Western powers, yet it does not go so far as to position Algeria fully within an anti-Western camp (Zoubir, 2024a).

Overview

At large, Morocco has through the years deliberately transformed its international role, positioning itself not merely as a North African power, but as a strategic hub connecting Europe, Africa, the U.S, and the Arab-Muslim world. As Roudani (2025) notes, in a world of fragmented alliances and shifting paradigms, Morocco now presents itself as a pole of strategic resilience and a key player in transregional security and connectivity. However, Fernández-Molina (2024) brings forward that Morocco's foreign policy has historically balanced two, sometimes conflicting, logics; a liberal, pro-European economic orientation, and a territorial-geopolitical agenda centered on asserting an expanded territory and countering Algeria's regional influence. These two desires can possibly become an increasing obstacle for Moroccan diplomacy, especially as Morocco adopts more assertive positions. According to Oumansour (2024), Morocco's position has become more uncompromising, particularly toward European and Arab partners who do not comply with Rabat's requests. In contrast, Algeria's foreign policy is slowly evolving, with President Tebboune showing a growing interest in re-engaging globally.

However, it is still centered around the principles of sovereignty, nonalignment, and anti-colonial identity while simultaneously focusing on avoiding major crises with international partners

(Figurski, 2024; Ghebouli, 2022, Zoubir, 2024b). Algeria avoids *quid pro quo diplomacy* and values sovereign equality in foreign affairs, even if this firm stance can limit the tangible benefits of its diplomatic efforts (IISS, 2024). The 2020 constitutional reforms enabling foreign military deployments has been seen by some analysts as a direct challenge to Morocco's re-entering to the African Union, attempting to limit Rabat's influence on the territorial disputes in the region (Figurski, 2024). The African Union has turned into an arena for the two countries' diplomatic disagreements. Also, Algeria has tried to compete with Morocco for influence around the African continent by launching a series of economic initiatives, reasserting the country's presence (Fabiani, 2023a). This calculated behavior has also been visible in Algeria's accusations and in responses to perceived Moroccan provocations. The normalization of Morocco-Israel relations through the Abraham Accords, and Moroccan statements supporting separatist groups in Algeria finally prompted the country to cut diplomatic ties with Morocco in 2021. Since then, the rivalry has deepened into a zero-sum competition for influence across Africa and the Mediterranean (Dworkin, 2024).

In conclusion, where Morocco embraces a pragmatic approach based on multi-alignment, Algeria stands firm with its strategic non-alignment. Rabat seeks to act as a bridge between regions and systems, offering itself as a stable partner in a largely unstable neighborhood. Algiers, meanwhile, positions itself as a guardian of sovereignty and regional independence, seeking to reaffirm its status through selective military engagement and ideological consistency. Morocco is building relationships through economic diplomacy, religious soft power, and Western-aligned security partnerships while Algeria does it through counterterrorism cooperation, limited interference, and conditioned diplomacy. Their divergent approaches reflect clear differences in how the two regimes understand their role in global politics; Morocco as a connector and Algeria as a protector.

3.3 Comparative Insights: Linking Domestic Exclusion and Foreign Alignment

An examination of civil society and foreign policy in Morocco and Algeria reveals a sort of paradox of external alignment and internal exclusion. Despite formal commitments to reform and democratization, both regimes maintain tight control over the strategic sectors of defense and diplomacy, sidelining civil society and broader participatory mechanisms. This behaviour could be understood as a calculated attempt by ruling elites to preserve regime security, even at the expense of public inclusion, accountability, or long-term institutional coherence.

In Morocco, civil society plays a visible but constrained role in the citizens' lives. While there is an appearance of pluralism, most civil society organizations remain excluded from participation in the shaping of critical policy domains such as foreign policy, defense, and national stability. The monarchy uses a strategy of soft co-optation, channeling participation through state-controlled initiatives like the INDH or state-linked NGOs, tolerating issue-based activism on non-sensitive topics, and harshly repressing movements that cross the regime's *red lines*. However, the Algerian civil society has been systematically suppressed even further. The regime post the civil war, under Bouteflika and later Tebboune, has treated independent activism as a threat to national stability, restricting foreign funding, enforcing repressive legislation, bureaucratic obstruction, and the criminalization of dissent. The 2019 Hirak protests created a brief opening for public engagement in political discussions, but this window was quickly closed. As Ghebouli (2022) notes, the changing generational landscape and pressures from below may eventually force the Algerian leadership to adopt more inclusive foreign and security policies, but for now, the political elite continues to dominate international decision-making with little input from domestic actors. By maintaining its opacity and centralization of governance, the regime stability is preserved and ensures the protection of core security actors from both domestic scrutiny and international normative pressure. These internal political structures are not simply symptoms of domestic authoritarianism; they actively contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of external rivalries.

Strikingly, both Morocco and Algeria seem to instrumentalize foreign policy and regional alliances not to implement security sector reforms and improvement, but to reinforce domestic regime interests. Morocco's kinship with the U.S and the EU is driven by its desire to secure international support for its domestic politics and to present itself as a stable, cooperative actor in the Sahel and the Mediterranean. This strategy relies on its ability to contain internal dissent and marginalize reformist voices while simultaneously promoting a narrative of progress and participation. On the other hand, Algeria defends its autonomy by maintaining close ties with Russia and relying on its non-alignment doctrine. This firm stance is possibly a limitation for any real ship toward democratized governance in the country. However, Western actors, for their part, have arguably reinforced this political landscape in Algeria and Morocco. Driven by their own strategic imperatives like counterterrorism, migration control, and energy security, European and American partners have deprioritized further security sector reforms as a condition for cooperation or convergence. As a result, in both contexts, the international community's emphasis on practical partnerships strengthens elite-dominated rule and diminishes the pressure or motivation for meaningful domestic reforms.

Rather than reflecting societal interests or fostering regional integrations, foreign policy in Morocco and Algeria is shaped by internal power dynamics rooted in each state's distinct civil-military structure. These differences are not just tactical, they are embedded in the structural organization of state authority and security governance. Despite apparent differences, both systems rely on parallel logics. In both states, civil society is not excluded due to a lack of capacity, but because its inclusion would disrupt elite dominance over strategic policy domains. A statement by the Moroccan monarch is bluntly supporting this as well. One of the *red lines*, territorial integrity, is directly linked to the country's foreign policy and relationships with external actors. In a speech in 2022 King Mohammed VI said: "The Sahara issue is the lens through which Morocco looks at the world. It is the clear, simple benchmark whereby Morocco measures the sincerity of friendships and the efficiency of partnerships." (Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Conclusively, it is clear that internal dynamics and politics does have a presence in foreign policy. This will further be demonstrated in Chapter four, where the Morocco-Algerian conflict,

including what Mohammed VI referred to as the *Sahara issue*, will be discussed through the prism of their respective internal security dynamics.

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Chapter 4: Explaining the Algeria-Morocco Rivalry Through Domestic Security Logics

In this final chapter, the previous findings will be applied and seen in the light of key events in the conflict between Algeria and Morocco. Through this, it will be exemplified and explained how the structures and approaches to security sector reform in the countries contribute to the persistence of the conflict. This will be done by first disclosing the dispute over Western Sahara, highlighting Morocco's, Algeria's, and the liberation movement *Polisario Front's* roles. Thereafter, the significance of the border and the management of it will be discussed. Later, some events that have strained the diplomatic relationship further from the last couple of years will be examined. Finally, external actors' influence on the trajectory of the conflict will be reviewed. The final section of the chapter will consist of an examination of the analysis, providing a synthesis of the concluded results of this research.

4.1 Key Events as Expressions of Security Paradigms in Practice

4.1.1 The Western Sahara Conflict

Even though the Sand War was resolved, another conflict has persistently made the Algerian-Moroccan relations tense since 1975; the Western Sahara conflict. Algeria has consistently opposed Morocco's claims of sovereignty over the territory, advocating for the Sahrawi people's right to self determination instead and supporting the Polisario Front (Oumansour, 2024). For 50 years, the dispute over Western Sahara has been cited as the principal reason for the enduring hostility between the two states. Morocco treats the territory's integration as a non-negotiable matter of national identity, while Algeria maintains its backing of the Polisario's aspirations for independence (Rachidi, 2022).

The disputed territory is largely a desert area stretching from the Moroccan and Algerian border to the Atlantic Ocean. Originally a Spanish colony since the 1880s, Western Sahara had been

administered as the Spanish Sahara from 1958 until Spain's decolonization efforts in the mid-1970s (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). Western Sahara became the subject of territorial claims from both Morocco and Mauritania after Spain's departure, resulting in division of the land in defiance of a 1975 International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion, which had stated that neither Morocco nor Mauritania possessed sovereign rights over the territory (Ibid.). Moreover, Spain's handover of control to Morocco and Mauritania through the *Madrid Accords* was rejected by the United Nations, which, in a 2002 legal opinion, reaffirmed the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. In 1976, from exile in Algeria, the Polisario Front (derived from the Spanish acronym for *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro*) proclaimed the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), recognized by the UN as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people (Chograni, 2021; Pollock, 2021). This came as a reaction to an event a few months prior, in 1975, when Morocco organized the symbolic *Green March*, mobilizing around 350 000 civilians to settle in Western Sahara territory. The event marked a public declaration of Moroccan claims over the territory. In retaliation, Algeria expelled approximately 45 000 Moroccan nationals from its territory and shortly after formally recognized the SADR (Rachidi, 2022).

The Polisario soon launched a guerrilla war against the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. Mauritania eventually signed a peace agreement with the Polisario and withdrew from the southern part of Western Sahara in 1979. Morocco annexed the former Mauritanian area as well and by the early 1980s, and still today, it had asserted control over roughly three quarters of the Western Saharan territory (Crisis Group, 2021; Chograni, 2021; Yerkes & Triche, 2025). In response to the Polisario's resistance, Morocco began constructing a fortified defensive barrier, known as the sand berm, stretching over 2700 kilometers, dividing Moroccan-held territory from areas under Polisario control (see figure below) (Ibid.). It is the second-longest military wall in the world, and remains heavily militarized, guarded by an estimated 100 000 Moroccan troops (Chograni, 2021). The UN assesses that the area on both sides of the berm is still heavily contaminated by landmines and other sorts of explosives (UNMAS, 2023). Throughout the conflict, tens of thousands of Sahrawis fled to refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, where the SADR established a government in exile. Algeria provided the Polisario with military support, training, diplomatic recognition, and logistical backing (Boukhars, 2012; Yerkes & Triche,

2025). The motivation for Algeria to support the Polisario Front and their cause, could most likely lay in the nature of the conflict. The country's enduring backing of the organization arguably functions as a pillar of regime legitimacy for the military elite as well. By resonating with a liberation struggle against occupation, the Algerian regime reproduces its foundational anti-colonial identity and sustains its image as a champion against imperialism, both internally and regionally. The Sahrawi people called for independence after its lengthy occupation by the Spanish, a fight Algeria could resonate with. The anti-colonial sentiments have, as we have seen, since Algeria's independence, entrenched itself into the nation's core structures and is in the center of the Algerian identity.



Figure 1: Map over Western Sahara and its sand berm (UN, 2024)

Eventually, in 1991, a UN-brokered ceasefire was reached. The UN also introduced the *United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara* (MINURSO), a mission with the objective to organize a referendum allowing the Sahrawi people to choose between full independence or integration into Morocco. The agreement also delineated a buffer zone east of the sand berm to separate Moroccan forces from Polisario-controlled territory, with peacekeepers deployed to monitor compliance (Crisis Group, 2021; Fabiani, 2023b). While both parties accepted the UN's framework, persistent disagreement over voter eligibility has obstructed the progress. Morocco has challenged the inclusion of many voters nominated by the Polisario, while simultaneously promoting the settlement of Moroccan citizens in the territory to shift demographic proportions in its favor. These tactics complicated the UN's efforts to establish a credible and agreed-upon electoral process and has allowed Rabat to stall the process indefinitely. This has led to the fact that while the ceasefire is holding in relative terms, the political component of the settlement, the referendum, has never been implemented (MINURSO, n.d.; Yerkes & Triche, 2025).

As the peace process stalled, human rights conditions in the occupied territories deteriorated. International observers and NGOs have documented widespread abuses by Moroccan authorities against Sahrawi activists, including arbitrary detention, torture, and the suppression of peaceful protests. Pro-independence demonstrations have been routinely met with violent crackdowns, reinforcing Sahrawi grievances and international concerns over the humanitarian consequences of the occupation (Kaye et al., 2008). In other words, the Moroccan regime consistently used the same tactics for suppressing dissent among the Sahrawis and in the Western Sahara issue, as it has done to its own Moroccans. The silencing of unwanted opinions and violent repressions have, as seen in the three previous chapters, been recurring in Morocco when citizens and civil society have attempted to take part of the democratic process in the country. It is possible to conclude that, in this instance, a clear pattern of the Moroccan regime's behaviour is present in the Western Sahara conflict as well.

Despite the efforts of MINURSO, Morocco insisted that its sovereignty over Western Sahara was non-negotiable, and rejected other proposals that included independence as an option. Instead, in 2007, it began, through the UN Security Council, advocating for autonomy under Moroccan rule

(Sun, 2024). Framed as a constructive response to international calls, particularly from France and the U.S, for a political resolution to the conflict, the plan offered a limited form of self-government under Moroccan sovereignty (Fabiani, 2023b). The plan envisioned elected regional institutions with legislative, executive and judicial powers, financial autonomy, and Sahrawi representation in national political life, while retaining Moroccan control over defense, foreign affairs, and the religious and constitutional powers of the monarchy (UN Security Council, 2007). The Sahrawi people themselves, and Algeria, outright rejected the autonomy plan arguing it denied the Sahrawi their internationally recognized right to choose their political status (Fabiani, 2023b; Crisis Group, 2021). By proposing the solution to the UN, and leading the discussion in the organization's forum, Morocco has practically used the institution to gain legitimacy for its plan and thereby being able to influence member states to show approval for their side of the conflict. Moreover, the details of the autonomy plan plainly reflects the priorities and goals of the Moroccan regime. By retaining the most fundamental parts in their own hands, namely the defense, foreign affairs, and the religious and constitutional powers of the King, the Western Sahara would essentially remain a powerless entity. The Moroccan monarch would, just as in Morocco, be the ultimate head of the nation.

Nonetheless, in the years following 2007, the UN facilitated multiple rounds of direct negotiations, but none yielded progress, and Morocco remained firm in offering only autonomy as a compromise. Simultaneously between 2004 and 2014, an exchange program, facilitated by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, allowed Sahrawis in the Tindouf camps to visit relatives in Moroccan-controlled areas. The program was suspended in 2014, with refugees accusing Morocco of being responsible for its termination (Crisis Group, 2021). Eventually, towards the end of the 2010s, Morocco also began to refuse to permit MINURSO to monitor the human rights situation in the Western Saharan territory, despite persistent international calls to expand the UN mission's mandate (Saidy, 2020). Over the same period as the stalled negotiation process and stricter control of external monitoring of the area was happening, the demographic composition in the Moroccan-controlled area (west of the sand berm) shifted significantly. This was a result of decades of settlement encouraged by Rabat, which resulted in the Sahrawis becoming a minority in the area (Crisis Group, 2021). This tactic can arguably be said to have created a form of symbolic state-building. The encouraged settlement by the Moroccan regime

possibly aimed to normalize Moroccan presence and create the appearance of popular consent, which supports Morocco's narrative that Western Sahara is an integral part of its national territory.

This attempt to solidify and legitimize the Moroccan leverage in Western Sahara advanced further in 2019. Through diplomatic efforts, Morocco persuaded several Arab and African states to open consulates in cities like Laayoune and Dakhla, located in the Moroccan-controlled portion of Western Sahara. This move signaled growing international recognition of Morocco's sovereignty claims over the disputed territory and was viewed by the Polisario as a provocation (Fabiani, 2023b). Surely, this increased Morocco's symbolic legitimacy over the territory and could thereby shape international perceptions and normalize its sovereignty claims. It can also be argued that the opening of consulates could help reinforce that Morocco's claim is widely supported, aiding in the country's narrative framing and reinforcing its image as a stable and attractive partner in Africa and beyond. However, tensions escalated significantly in November 2020 when Moroccan forces entered the Guerguerat border crossing; a UN-monitored buffer zone along the southern frontier with Mauritania. The aim was to remove unarmed Sahrawi demonstrators who had been blocking the road linking Morocco to sub-Saharan Africa. The Polisario interpreted this as a breach of the 1991 ceasefire agreement, and shortly after announced the resumption of the armed conflict, effectively ending nearly three decades of formal truce (Chograni, 2021).

As MINURSO's ability to operate diminished, the mission warned of a possible withdrawal due to waning fuel and food supplies. Morocco's ambassador to the UN, Omar Hilale, responded by stating that if the UN mission was to disband, Morocco would reoccupy the buffer zone. Such a move would bring the Moroccan troops into direct proximity with Algeria's border near Tindouf, where approximately 173 000 Sahrawi refugees had come to reside and from where the Polisario units operated (Crisis Group, 2024). This scenario posed a real risk of direct military confrontation between Morocco and Algeria. Concerned by the potential for escalation, U.S. officials intervened, urging Algeria to convince the Polisario to ease its blockade of UN access to the buffer zone. In April 2023, the Polisario agreed to allow safe passage for MINURSO convoys on a *provisional and exceptional basis*, a compromise that has been periodically renewed ever

since (Crisis Group, 2024). Since then, little progress has been achieved in a resolution to the territorial conflict. Instead, it continues to be a cornerstone of the Algeria-Morocco hostility, with both states framing the issue both as a territorial dispute, and as a battleground for regional influence and ideological identity. For example, the Algerian President Tebboune has repeatedly affirmed Algeria's unwavering support for the Sahrawi right to self-determination, describing Morocco as an *occupier* (Bennis, 2021; Chograni, 2021). His rhetoric arguably reflects Algeria's long-standing position, rooted in its anti-colonial ideology, which views the Sahrawi cause as a moral and legal imperative. Morocco continues to assert that Western Sahara is an integral part of its sovereign territory, framing the issue as central to its national unity and foreign policy. Meanwhile, Algeria persists in demanding a UN-led process to determine the territory's status, emphasizing multilateralism over bilateral negotiations with Morocco (Oumansour, 2024; Fabiani, 2023b).

Algeria's support for the Polisario Front is speculatively rooted in the mutual distrust dating back to the 1963 Sand War over the Tindouf and Bechar regions. The fact that the Polisario is using the Tindouf as its operational base can therefore also be seen as a symbolic action. Yerkes and Triche (2025), highlight that for Morocco, on the other hand, the conflict is framed as a symbol of national unity as well as an economic asset to the country. Since assuming control of the territory, Morocco has significantly expanded operations in phosphate mines, and developed fishing zones along the Atlantic coast (Ibid.). Furthermore, Western Sahara also holds offshore oil and gas potential, and has become a site for renewable energy projects involving Western firms such as Siemens and Enel. Many Sahrawis view this exploitation of natural resources as forms of dispossession (Chograni, 2021). These resource interests most likely further entrench Rabat's refusal to allow a referendum that includes the possibility of independence. They also demonstrate how Morocco further attempts to legitimize its sovereignty or right to the territory by opening the opportunities to external Western companies to operate in the area.

Meanwhile, Morocco has sought to delegitimize the Polisario by welcoming defectors and portraying the Tindouf camp as a site of repression and hardship. After the implementation of the ceasefire in the 1990s, the Moroccan state has even integrated Sahrawi returnees into its political structures, offering them incentives such as welfare access and political appointments. A notable

example is Ould Souilem, one of the founding members of the Polisario who defected in 2009. He was later appointed Moroccan ambassador to Spain (Boukhars, 2021). Disillusioned with the Polisario's leadership and its Algerian backers, Souilem asserted that "the Sahrawi Polisario is dead, only the Algerian Polisario remains" (Ibid.). In other words, the Moroccan regime has utilized Polisario's own (former) members to reframe the narrative of the conflict and in that way effectively accentuate the issue to its liking. The most striking example of its own framing, however, is that the Moroccan regime, and media, consistently refer to the area as *Moroccan Sahara*, rather than *Western Sahara* (Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d). This disposition serves both in emphasizing the territory's part in the national identity and also reinforces the monarchy's domestic legitimacy. By framing the Western Sahara as an indivisible and natural part of the nation, the monarchy consolidates its symbolic role as the guardian of territorial integrity, using the conflict to cultivate nationalist loyalty and fend off internal dissent. Internationally, however, Western Sahara remains on the UN list of non-self-governing territories awaiting decolonization (UN, 2024).

Ultimately, the Western Sahara conflict is deeply embedded in the domestic political logics of both states, and functions as more than a territorial dispute. Morocco's monarchy and Algeria's regime have instrumentalized the conflict to reinforce regime legitimacy, viewing it as either national unity or anti-colonial duty. The persistence of the conflict, despite international mediation, reveals how external confrontation has become integral to domestic survival strategies on both sides.

4.1.2 Border Management as Regime Defense

As briefly mentioned in previous chapters, the borders between Algeria and Morocco are the foundation for the bilateral conflict, and ever since the Sand War, the borders have continued to play a part in the rivalry. In 1994, a bombing occurred in a hotel in Marrakech, for which Morocco accused Algerian intelligence for being involved (Boukhars, 2019; Rachidi, 2022). As a result, Morocco decided to impose visa requirements on Algerian nationals, ultimately triggering Algeria to close the land border between the countries in retaliation (Saddiki, 2022). The border has remained closed ever since (Zarhloule, 2025). Despite this formal closure, the

border remained relatively porous during the late 1990s and early 2000s. but a shift has occurred in the past decade, as both states have begun fortifying their sides of the border, transforming it from a somewhat flexible frontier to a militarized zone (Ibid.). In 2013, Algeria constructed five meter wide trenches along its western border in an effort to curb fuel smuggling. When these initial measures proved insufficient, the trenches were widened to seven meters and deepened to eleven meters by 2015. Surveillance capacities were further enhanced through the use of helicopters to monitor movement across the northern border (Saddiki, 2022; Zarhloule, 2025). Around the same time, Algeria officially transferred the border management from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of National Defense, and civilian movement across borders was drastically curtailed, permitted only with prior authorization and in humanitarian cases (Saddiki, 2022). This securitized approach reflects Algeria's internal security paradigms, where the border control acts as a tool for the military against both external destabilization and internal dissent, only allowing certain citizens approved by the regime to cross the border.

Morocco responded by constructing a 150 kilometer fence along its eastern frontier in 2014. The fence, equipped with electronic sensors, was explicitly said to be aimed at countering terrorism, irregular migration, and transnational smuggling. In 2016, Moroccan authorities extended the barrier to encompass the province of Figuig, tracing a road for patrol units along its length. However, this extension cut off local residents from their agricultural lands, creating tensions within the borderland communities (Saddiki, 2022). This demonstrates the Moroccan regime's assertiveness in sustaining its, at least claimed, internal stability, rather than prioritizing the interest of the people. Furthermore, the fencing and surveillance systems, framed in terms of counterterrorism and smuggling, also serve to reassert state presence and authority. By 2022, Rabat announced plans to convert the entire 1559 kilometer border with Algeria into a closed military zone, citing the need to contain regional instability and secure national territory (Zarhloule, 2025). The year prior, however, Algerian President Tebboune ordered a ban on Moroccan aircrafts entering Algerian airspace, essentially closing off all direct connections between the two countries (Soudan, 2024). Morocco has repeatedly advocated for reopening the border, largely for economic reasons, but Algeria has consistently denied the proposition (Saddiki, 2022). This refusal can arguably be said to be driven by security concerns, but by Algeria's desire to preserve its strategic position as well. The country is the only Maghreb

country with direct access to all Sahelian states, an advantage it protects by restricting Morocco's regional influence.

In 2021, a dispute erupted between Morocco and Spain as well after Spanish authorities allowed Polisario leader Brahim Ghali to receive medical treatment on Spanish soil. In what was widely interpreted as retaliatory action, Morocco relaxed its border controls, resulting in an influx of approximately 10 000 migrants into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta within just a few days (Zaanoun, 2023). Although the immediate actions stemmed from Ghali's hospitalization, it also took place amid growing Moroccan pressure on Spain to shift its stance on Western Sahara. Spanish officials later said that the action was perceived as a coercive act and diplomatic blackmail (Dworkin, 2024; Zaanoun, 2023). However, Morocco's migration practices have faced sharp international criticism in other areas as well. Human rights organizations and investigative reports have revealed that Moroccan authorities, often with EU backing, have abandoned migrants in remote desert zones, including in the Western Sahara region. This practice has been referred to as *desert dumps* (Mendes Raouf, 2024).

While both countries frame their border securitization in terms of national security, citing threats such as terrorism, smuggling, and irregular migration (Saddiki, 2022), the underlying driver may still be the strategic rivalry. The lack of cooperation between Morocco and Algeria is symptomatic of this. What appears as interstate strategic rivalry is also a reflection of internal priorities; both states externalize insecurity as a way of justifying domestic authoritarian consolidation. The Moroccan and Algerian regimes converge in using external confrontation and securitized border narratives as a means of regime stability and legitimacy management.

4.1.3 Crises Over the Recent Years

Over the recent years, the relationship between the two countries have been strained further as a result of numerous events. For instance, the diplomatic tensions between Algeria and Morocco reached a breaking point after the Moroccan ambassador to the UN, Oman Hilale, expressed support for the right of self-determination of the ethnic Berber group located in Kabyle, northern Algeria. Hilale's remarks were made during a meeting of the *Non-Aligned Movement*, where he

described the Kabyle as a people under prolonged foreign domination who therefore deserved international support for self-rule (Oumansour, 2024; Lmrabet, 2021a). This statement was interpreted by Algeria as a direct attack on its territorial integrity, and a retaliatory provocation against its support for the Polisario. In response, Algeria recalled its ambassador from Rabat and accused Morocco of interfering in its internal affairs (Rachidi, 2022). This reaction is a clear sign of Algeria's hyper-independence that it has embraced since independence. Through the accusations of foreign interference, the Algerian regime clearly demonstrates that it does not tolerate intrusion in its handling of its own state affairs. Also, by framing Morocco's support for Kabyle self-determination as a threat to national unity, the Algerian military elite reasserts its cemented role as protector of the state, using external provocation to consolidate internal legitimacy. In this framing, Morocco's symbolic gestures in support of Kabyle independence are not merely provocations but challenges to Algeria's core postcolonial identity.

Shortly, tensions escalated further with Algeria blaming Morocco for instigating deadly wildfires in the Kabylie region. It also alleged that Rabat supported two organizations considered terrorist groups by the Algerian state: the Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie (MAK) and the Islamist group Rachad. However, Morocco denied all of these claims (Serrano, 2023; Rachidi, 2022). The incidents culminated in August 2021, when the Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra formally announced the severance of diplomatic ties with Morocco. During the announcement, Lamamra presented a long list of grievances dating back to the 1963 Sand War, including the ongoing dispute over Western Sahara. However, the Kabylie incident seemed to be the final trigger, with Lamamra warning that the rhetoric used by Morocco could provoke an armed conflict. Moreover, the President Tebboune convened the High Council of Security, after which Algeria publicly blamed MAK for the forest fires and accused Morocco of training separatist militants in military camps (Lmrabet, 2021a).

When Algeria severed its diplomatic ties with Morocco in 2021, it also announced that it would no longer use the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline, which had supplied Algerian gas to Spain via Morocco (Lmrabet, 2021a). This decision abruptly ended Morocco's access to roughly 65 percent of its natural gas consumption. Therefore, Morocco had to make large efforts to find new alternatives to keep its energy sector afloat (Serrano, 2023; Onyango, 2023). The pipeline had

also provided Morocco with significant economic benefits in the form of transit fees, exceeding 50 million euros annually (Onyango, 2023). This move by Algeria can therefore be seen as a part of a strategy to weaken Morocco's economic resilience and infrastructure stability, using its energy assets as leverage. The Algerian regime also showed its leverage in the military sector compared to Morocco. As discussed in previous chapters, both Morocco and Algeria have engaged in steady rearmament since the early 2000s, where Algeria has acquired a significantly larger and more advanced arsenal among the two countries. This growing asymmetry in military capacity was demonstrated by Algeria's 2021 military exercises held in Tindouf, the region housing the Polisario refugee camps and its leadership near both Western Sahara and the Moroccan border (Lmrabet, 2021b). These drills can arguably be interpreted as a display of force and a signal of Algeria's preparedness to defend its regional interests through staged demonstrations of readiness and strength. In the same year, a bombing occurred in Western Sahara killing three Algerian truck drivers traveling from Mauritania. Algeria immediately blamed Morocco for the attack, although Rabat did not officially comment on the incident. Either way, the event sparked serious concerns among the international community about the potential for direct military confrontation between the two countries (Rachidi, 2022).

In 2023, civilians were once again the source of straining the relations. A group of four French-Moroccan tourists inadvertently crossed into Algerian waters on jet skis from the town of Saidia in northern Morocco. Two of the tourists were fatally shot by the Algerian coast guard for the perceived trespassing into Algerian territory. Algerian authorities claimed the individuals ignored multiple warnings, referring to heightened security due to ongoing smuggling of narcotics and organized crime. This harsh response reflects the securitized approach that both states have adopted toward their borders, where any unauthorized crossing is interpreted through the lens of threat. It clearly shows how border governance has become an extension of internal regime stability framed as defense against terrorism or smuggling, but also used to justify repressive and militarized control of peripheries. However, a surviving member of the group disputed this account, stating they were given no warning before shots were fired. A fourth individual was reportedly arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison, according to Morocco's National Human Rights Council (Armstrong, 2023). Also, heightened security measures were referred to when Algerian authorities reinstated visa requirements for Moroccan nationals in

September 2024, alleging that visa-free travel was being exploited to facilitate cross-border criminal activity (Amara, 2024).

The dispute has also moved into the cyber sphere. In July 2021, Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International revealed the Pegasus Spyware Project (Amnesty International, 2021). As part of the revelations, the investigations disclosed that Moroccan authorities allegedly had used the Pegasus spyware to target the phones of Algerian officials and citizens (Oumansour, 2024; Fabiani, 2023a). Morocco categorically denied the claims and even initiated a legal process against Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International, suing them for defamation (France24, 2021). Eventually, tensions in the cyber space resurfaced again in April 2025 when Morocco's social security agency suffered a major data breach. Hackers leaked sensitive personal and financial information of millions of Moroccans via the communication app Telegram, and claimed the attack was in retaliation for Morocco's alleged harassment of Algeria on social media. Although the perpetrators were not officially identified, Moroccan media attributed the breach to Algerian hackers (Metz, 2025). The exposed data, some of which was potentially manipulated, touched on politically tense topics such as income disparities, executive salaries at state-run enterprises, and the finances of individuals connected to the royal palace and foreign diplomatic offices (Ibid.).

A more indirect part of the conflict is visible through both countries' media landscapes. The media in Algeria and Morocco have become significant arenas for the propagation of nationalistic narratives, disinformation, and mutual antagonism. State-controlled and pro-government media outlets in both countries frequently disseminate content that vilifies the other (Crisis Group, 2024). This dynamic reflects how both regimes instrumentalize media as an extension of internal security policy. Rather than enabling open debate, media ecosystems are securitized, serving as platforms for loyalty signaling and public narrative control that aligns with each state's core interest in regime preservation. For instance, Algerian media is constantly pointing to Morocco working with Israel, or Zionists as they frequently refer Israeli officials to, and to aiding in the ongoing crimes and war in Gaza (e.g. Chenouf, 2025). The Moroccan state is portrayed as fragile, with news media publishing stories of how corruption is to be found everywhere throughout all levels of the state (El Moudjahid, 2025a). Moroccan nationals are also

regularly accused of aiding in transnational crimes such as terrorism and drug trade (El Khabar, 2024; El Moudjahid, 2025b). Furthermore, Morocco's role in Western Sahara is highlighted as the role of an oppressor and colonizer who frequently dismisses the Sahrawis' human rights (Algeria Press Service, 2025; Hamdoud, 2024; Echorouk, 2024). In other words, Morocco is portrayed as an immoral country contributing to regional instability. By constructing this external threat narrative, Algerian authorities can justify internal controls and reinforce the military's role as guardian of the state against foreign manipulation and regional uncertainties.

Conversely, Moroccan media consistently use accusing language towards Algeria. The narratives often paint Algeria as a state that supports separatist movements within Morocco (Hespress, 2024), and that both civilians and the military disseminate propaganda and spread *fake news* (El Grari, 2022; Faouzi, 2024; Kasraoui, 2022). In a piece in *L'Opinion Maroc*, Machloukh (2024) even argues that these tactics are hybrid warfare from Algeria's side. Thereby, Morocco actively portrays Algeria as an actor threatening its national unity and security. Rachidi (2022) points out how these smear campaigns have created distance between the countries and where today's political actors do not actually know each other. Moreover, the younger generation has been raised with misconceptions and stereotypes promoted by state-aligned media in both Algeria and Morocco, which further reinforces these skewed narratives. In this sense, the media operates both as a regime mouthpiece and as a tool for ideological reproduction, ensuring that domestic stability is tied to the sustained vilification of the other.

4.1.4 External Powers as Enablers of Regime Security Strategies

As mentioned in the final part of chapter 3, the Western Sahara issue has become the main focal point for Morocco in its foreign policy. The Moroccan rule has long sought international recognition for the claim, but, until fairly recently, it stood alone. Since 2007, Morocco has promoted its autonomy plan internationally to gain foreign support and legitimacy. In 2020, the U.S acknowledged the proposition. After aggressive diplomatic campaigning, U.S President Trump officially recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020, legitimizing the 2007 autonomy plan. However, in exchange, Morocco normalized relations with Israel (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). This response by Morocco illustrates how the country's monarchy operationalizes its internal logic of centralized policymaking, where the King, as the de-facto

leader, uses foreign recognition to consolidate domestic authority. This aligns with the broader pattern as seen in chapter 3 where foreign policy is monopolized by the palace as a continuation of domestic legitimacy-building. The recognition by the U.S was complemented with a visit by Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump to Dakhla in late 2020, the second most populous city in Western Sahara. Although Morocco publicly avoids linking its normalization with Israel to the U.S. recognition of its territorial claims, American government documents consistently list Morocco alongside other Abraham Accords signatories, such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (Ibid.).

Trump's 2020 proclamation marked a fundamental departure from previous U.S policy, which had only acknowledged Morocco's autonomy plan as *one* possible solution among others. His declaration instead framed it as the sole viable basis for resolving the conflict, thereby sidelining the UN peace process (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). Biden's administration attempted to slightly shift the rigid position by emphasizing the importance of international law and the UN process, but at large, it chose not to revoke Trump's decision (Fakir, 2024). These developments ultimately influenced Algeria's decision to sever diplomatic ties with Morocco in August 2021 (Zoubir, 2024). It has been known that Morocco and the U.S have had long diplomatic ties, but for Algeria, the normalization with Israel by Morocco was perceived as a deeply destabilizing act. Not due to the normalization with Israel per se, but because of the growing military and intelligence ties between Rabat and Tel Aviv (Zoubir, 2024). Algeria quickly condemned Trump's move, describing it as an illegal act that undermines the UN decolonization framework. They also viewed it as part of foreign attempts to destabilize the region and there now was a desire by the *Zionist entity* to come closer to its borders (Aftandilian, 2023). Some Algerian officials have also referred to it as the establishment of a *Zionist vanguard* in the Maghreb (Boussel, 2025). Moreover, Algerian analysts see Israel's growing role in the Maghreb as part of a wider regional shift, driven by the failures of Western policies and weaknesses in Algeria's own foreign strategy (Crisis Group, 2024). Algerian authorities have also accused Morocco of espionage, claiming that *Zionist agents* with Moroccan passports had entered Algerian territory (Amara, 2024).

Further complicating the situation is that Morocco has accused Iran, through Hezbollah, of supplying arms to the Polisario Front with Algerian complicity (Hespress, 2025). Although no credible evidence has been laid forward to substantiate this claim, the possibility of it being true fuels concerns that the Western Sahara may increasingly serve as a proxy battlefield (Lmrabet, 2024a). These dynamics reflect a broader pattern where both regimes externalize their internal security logics. Morocco's use of alliance-building reflects its internal strategy of elite co-optation and narrative control, while Algeria's response reaffirms its model of guarded sovereignty and regime preservation through defensive rhetoric and symbolic retaliation. Furthermore, the former Israeli Foreign and Prime Minister Yair Lapid publicly condemned Algeria's ties with Iran, an act that was seen by Algerians as an attempt to further export Israel's rivalry with Iran into North Africa (Ibid.). Despite maintaining diplomatic ties with Israel, Morocco has faced strong domestic backlash, especially after the October 7 attacks by Hamas in 2023 and subsequent Israeli bombardment of Gaza. Mass protests erupted in solidarity with Palestinians, for instance outside the Moroccan Parliament, and Morocco provided humanitarian aid while reaffirming its support for Palestinian rights at the UN. However, Rabat has at the moment chosen not to cut ties with Israel (Yade, 2024).

Two years after Trump's endorsement of the 2007 autonomy plan, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez followed suit. In a letter sent to King Mohammed VI, Sánchez expressed support for the plan as "the most serious, realistic and credible solution" for the Western Sahara conflict (Parra, 2022). This marked a shift in Spain's position in the dispute, as they previously had regarded Morocco's control over the territory as an occupation. Interestingly, this move occurred shortly after the hospitalization of the Polisario leader Ghali in Spain in 2021, which, as discussed above, was not appreciated by Morocco. With this in mind, international voices therefore accused Spain of yielding to Moroccan diplomatic pressures (Ibid.). Similarly, in 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron also endorsed the autonomy plan meaning it was the *most* viable solution to the conflict (Fakir, 2024; Eljechimi & Irish, 2024). This prompted Algeria to recall its ambassador in Paris and to refuse accepting deported citizens from France, while condemning France's shifted position as a denial of the Sahrawi self-determination (Eljechimi & Irish, 2024). Algeria's strong reaction lays in line with its tendency to rapidly and demonstratively act in instances where it seems to feel disrespected. In this instance, it is possible to assume that

Algeria views the changes in policy by Spain and France, as well as the U.S and Israel, as a part of a broader pattern of international alignment with Morocco, aimed at isolating Algeria both regionally and beyond. On the other hand, Morocco's ability to convince a growing number of nations, important in the global arena, to endorse its plan and support its national interests displays the regime's capacity in effectively using diplomatic soft power tools in achieving its goals.

However, Spain and France most likely try to balance their alliances with Morocco against their relationships with Algeria, which still remains a vital energy supplier to Europe. This balancing act has grown more delicate in the wake of Europe's energy crisis following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Fakir, 2024; Fabricius, 2024). Even though the relationship between Western countries' relationship with Russia has been damaged since 2022, the endorsements and support for Morocco may lead to a stronger relationship between Algeria and Russia as a response. Algeria likely sees this Western backing as a direct threat to its national security (as it also has claimed, see above) and a dismissal of its fundamental interests. This change in conditions may deepen the alliance between Algeria and Russia. Also, the Algerian-Russian partnership arguably reinforces Algeria's internal security model. By maintaining ties with a partner that does not demand reforms or transparency, Algeria preserves the autonomy of its military-led regime. Zoubir (2024) highlighted how President Tebboune underscored that Algeria's sovereignty was historically bolstered by Russian support, particularly in terms of military assistance and regional defense, during a visit to Moscow in 2023. In other words, the relationship with Russia is surely a countermeasure for the West's legitimizing of Morocco's claim for Western Sahara, but it also reinforces Algerian nationalism.

The Algeria-Morocco rivalry has also had effects across Africa, weakening regional institutions while simultaneously encouraging strategic competition for influence. Following Algeria's severance of diplomatic ties with Morocco in August 2021, both countries intensified efforts to outmaneuver each other across North and sub-Saharan Africa. It has also caused tensions within the African Union decision-making (Fabiani, 2023a). Moisseron and Daguzan (2017) argues that Jihadist groups have been seen exploiting the diplomatic deadlock between Algeria and Morocco, which undermines the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies in the Sahel, but the

bilateral conflict has also paralyzed regional diplomatic cooperation and obstructing development initiatives. These consequences demonstrate how a resolution to the dispute between the two countries, and in Western Sahara, is a key to unlocking regional stability and security cooperation. If the conflict persists, or escalates, it could highly likely disrupt critical trade routes, further affect Algeria's gas exports to Europe, and also undermine efforts to control irregular migration but also create a new wave of refugees. The durability of the hostilities is not just geopolitical, it is structurally embedded in how both regimes define security and legitimacy. International actors, by prioritizing transactional partnerships over pressuring for democratic reforms, have contributed to institutionalizing this conflict, allowing domestic security paradigms in both states to dictate regional diplomacy and hinder normalization. Considering the instability in the region overall, an escalated conflict could also instigate the spilling of violence into neighboring countries, increasing the risk of higher levels of terrorism and radicalization. As Chadian General Adoum Ngare Hassan expressed it; cooperation between Algeria and Morocco is essential for the region to not slide "into hell" (Maclean, 2012).

4.2 Analysis: How Domestic Governance Sustains Confrontation

All taken together, it is possible to conclude that the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria is more than a reaction to historical disputes or external alignments. It is also continuously formed and reproduced by internally entrenched security paradigms that shape how each state's ruling elites organize security, institutions, and resources to maintain power and prevent challenges to their authority. Morocco's monarchy-centered security governance and Algeria's military dominated regime represent structurally incompatible models of rule. In other words, the regimes have been organized in such a way that both states naturally produce conflicting behaviours. Morocco has built an active, outward-looking diplomacy where the King personally seeks international alliances and recognition to consolidate power at home. This is seen most of all in the regime's tireless struggle to legitimize its sovereignty over Western Sahara. Algeria, on the other hand, has formed a regime whose political logic is defensive and anti-interventionist. Its foreign policy is cautious, reactive, and often aimed at resisting perceived neo-colonial or expansionist threats. Therefore, these institutional models, one based on proactive alliance-building to project sovereignty and the other based on military-led insulation and

resistance to external influence, condition each state's strategic behavior. This produces a foreign policy logic that sees the other as a rival, and as a systemic threat. These systems have led to the two countries having constructed two different, incompatible world views, where both view the other as the enemy.

The colonial pasts served as the foundation for these world-views. As a reaction to its over a century long colonization and long war for independence, Algeria developed a hyper-independent foreign policy opposing every kind of possible external interference relying on its national guardian, the military, to ensure its freedom. However, this paranoia of losing the power over itself quickly affected the regime's relationship with its own citizens, fearing the threat could be within the nation as well. In contrast, Morocco's independence came without an armed conflict and the transition was peaceful. Nevertheless, centralized control seemingly became the only viable solution when the trust for its own people was broken. Both countries became intensely centralized, with the clear goal of regime preservation. This element may explain why neither of the states have managed to successfully go through an effective security sector reform. The centralization is seen as a rational tool to survival, and not a dysfunction to be corrected.

The reforms introduced in Morocco have been reduced to technical and symbolic ones, aimed at enhancing international legitimacy, while leaving the monarchy's ultimate control over the armed forces and intelligence services untouched. The Algerian regime has treated reforms as a reactive process, used to recalibrate power within the ruling elite and diffuse both the organization of the state, but also the rules the citizens have to comply with. The goal has seemingly been to make it challenging to hold institutions accountable or know the limits of the citizens' own freedoms. In both cases is civic engagement tolerated, as long as it does not question the countries' lack of transparency, accountability, and civilian oversight. The regimes have ensured that civil society remains depoliticized or securitized, preventing the emergence of bottom-up forces demanding for democratic security reform, or regional unity rather than dissension. Civil society actors who challenge official narratives, on Western Sahara in Morocco or military dominance in Algeria, are seen to be systematically marginalized or repressed.

This inability of both states to meaningfully reform their institutions shows an institutional path dependence. Early state-building decisions in Algeria and Morocco, such as the Algerian military's role as guardian of the nation post-independence, or Morocco's consolidation of royal supremacy over all state domains, set each regime on a path that became increasingly difficult to reverse. These foundational choices were contingent and not necessarily predetermined, yet, over time they solidified into institutional patterns that delivered increasing returns to the elites. This meant that power became more centralized, dissent more controllable, and legitimacy more easily framed in securitized terms. This created a sort of passivity for change, because once the security sectors were institutionalized in this form, the costs of deviation, both politically and structurally, grew too high. Even failed or partial reforms, which most of the reforms in both of the countries can be argued to be, can be seen as part of this path dependent process. This is because they allow the regimes to signal change externally while preserving internal power dynamics. Over time, for both Algeria and Morocco, these paths have narrowed the range of plausible alternatives for change. Civilian oversight, trust-building diplomacy, and clear separation of powers are no longer viewed as practical options, but as political liabilities. In this sense, the responses and actions made by the regimes, that in their view are rational and logical, have actually been constrained by the historical institutional path each regime has entrenched.

In addition, international actors have unintentionally assisted in entrenching the regimes' securitized approaches. Western powers, with their prioritization of counterterrorism cooperation over the requirement of credible democratization, have reinforced Morocco's monarchy-centered security model. Meanwhile, Russia's arms trade and strategic backing have allowed Algeria to modernize its military without undergoing civilian oversight. It can be argued that these relationships have frozen the domestic security constructions in place, ultimately giving elites little incentive to pursue structural reform or compromising in their policy goals. Even though both regimes are aware that the bilateral rivalry obstructs trade, undermines regional cooperation, and fuels transnational instability, the short-term benefits of governance stability outweigh long-term regional benefits. The institutions have been entrenched in such a way that confrontation with the perceived enemy is more politically rewarding than compromise. In plain terms, the two states continue to securitize each other because the costs of de-escalation, loss of control, scrutiny, or legitimacy, are perceived as greater than the risks of sustained rivalry.

All things considered, the failed security sector reforms have not been neutral. Instead, they have served regime interests and reinforced a fixation on securitization. The securitization of the other state has become a strategic imperative, it is both a reaction to genuine security threats and a mechanism for consolidating internal authority. Algeria's support for the Polisario is portrayed as a direct threat to Moroccan national unity. The monarchy's claim to Western Sahara has become central to its legitimacy, and therefore does Algeria's position become an existential challenge. Morocco's alliances with Western powers are framed by Algeria as neo-colonial invasions. The military uses this narrative to sustain its foundational role as defender of sovereignty against external manipulation. It is clear that these constructions of the other are not accidental. Rather, they are rational choices by the elites to externalize domestic pressures and consolidate internal control. In this way, securitization has become both a rhetoric and a mode of governance that extends inward and outward. In other words, by failing to democratize security institutions, both states perpetuate internal systems that view regional diplomacy as a zero-sum game rather than a trust-building action.

In conclusion, given Algeria and Morocco's institutional histories and power structures, the regimes perceive it as more logical to sustain the threat narrative instead of dismantling it. The securitization of the other is a strategic and discursive act driven by the rationale of regime survival. Arguably, their approach reveals how domestic security paradigms are projected outward, shaping regional relations not through cooperation, but through institutionalized mistrust. These logics are not just upheld by the ruling elites, but are also reproduced socially. A new generation has grown up consuming media that villifies the neighbouring state, entrenches myths of betrayal, and erodes the possibility of mutual understanding. In this sense, the conflict is both institutional and discursive, sustained through education, censorship, and nationalistic propaganda. With this in mind, it is clear that the regimes have solidified their approaches to national security through a top-down process. This entails that successful security sector reform will be incredibly challenging to perform. The regimes will have to reconstruct the nations, and all the layers within them, to be able to achieve sustainable and peaceful nations. If this is not done, the findings of this research suggests that the conflict between the two nations will persist.

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Figure 1

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Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to understand the deeper causes behind the enduring hostility between the two states. Specifically, it has aimed to answer these following questions:

"How have Morocco and Algeria's different approaches to security sector reform and civil-military relations (since independence) contributed to the persistence of their bilateral conflict?" and *"What does this reveal about the role of domestic security paradigms in shaping regional rivalries?"*

A hypothesis was presented in the introduction, speculating that the bilateral conflict is not driven primarily by external factors or unresolved historical disputes, but is instead an outcome of internally entrenched deliberate security governance models. By having comparatively analyzed the trajectories of security governance, foreign policy, and the relationships between the state and civil society in both countries, the hypothesis seems to be true as it becomes clear that the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco is not simply a byproduct of postcolonial grievances or external alignments. Rather, it is a structurally produced and strategically sustained conflict, deeply rooted in domestic political structures. Therefore, the conflict persists not despite of internal political logics, but because of them.

Algeria and Morocco have both failed to meaningfully reform their security sectors. This is most likely due to external constraints, as well as the fact that genuine reform would risk destabilizing the internal power structures that sustain each regime. In Morocco, security sector reform has been done through a selective approach and as a symbolic and externally oriented strategy to gain international legitimacy without touching the monarchy's control over crucial institutions. Military and intelligence bodies remain accountable solely to the monarch, and civilian oversight remains absent or simply symbolic. In Algeria, security sector reform has been reactive and elite-centered, serving to recalibrate the military power as a response to internal instabilities without shifting authority away from the armed forces or enhancing democratic control. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that both regimes view security as an extension of regime survival and not a public service or a tool for trust-building. This has direct consequences for foreign policy behavior. Morocco's diplomacy is tightly linked to its domestic legitimacy

strategy, where, for instance, international recognition of its claim for Western Sahara is framed as a validation of monarchical sovereignty and influence. Conversely, Algeria's military-backed regime treats external engagement with suspicion, viewing normalization with Morocco as potential threat to its post-colonial legacy of independence and internal stability. It is in this context that Algeria's support for the Polisario also must be understood. It is not just a sort of ideological solidarity, but a calculated counterweight to Moroccan regional influence.

The conflict over Western Sahara, in this view, is not the cause of the rivalry, but a symptom of deeper going incompatibilities between the regimes. In other words, the conflict may seem to be mainly about Western Sahara, but the results show that this dispute is just one part of a deeper rivalry and reflects both regimes' behavioral patterns. By viewing the conflict through a rational choice theoretical framework, it becomes clear that both states behave strategically and, in their view, rationally within the constraints they themselves have inherited and entrenched. They have rooted a securitization of the other into their systems which have served the regimes through justified defense spending, fueling of nationalist sentiments, delegitimization of dissent, and deflection of attention from domestic shortcomings. In this sense, continued rivalry is a rational tool of internal governance. Neither state has an incentive to de-escalate, if doing so would threaten elite consensus or control. At the same time, path dependence theory may explain why these strategies persist, even when their costs are high. Foundational decisions, such as Algeria's post-independence militarization or Morocco's centralization of royal authority, have created institutional pathways that produce increasing returns. The longer these paths are followed, the more difficult and politically costly it becomes to reverse them. Even failed or cosmetic reforms can be seen to be part of this logic, enabling the regimes to project change without altering the underlying power structures. In other words, the failed security sector reforms have in reality strengthened the existing power structures that reinforces the conflict.

Arguably, in the light of this, the findings in this research points to the fact that a reframing of the conflict in itself needs to be done. The rivalry is not just a reaction to past wars, ideological divides, or territorial disputes. It is the outcome of two incompatible models of highly centralized security governance, one monarchical and mostly soft-authoritarian, the other military-led and mostly hard-authoritarian. These models define the rules of engagement, shape the incentives of

the elite, and structure policy options. They exclude civil society from meaningful participation, limit oversight, and suppress dissent, ultimately creating an environment in which diplomacy becomes an extension of internal control. This is evident in both discourse and practice, where each regime constructs the other as both a diplomatic rival and also as a threat to national identity. For instance, Morocco frames Algeria's support for the Polisario as an existential attack on territorial integrity, and Algeria frames Morocco's foreign alliances as proof of neocolonial aspirations. These constructions of a perceived threat are not accidental, but rather, they are strategies to maintain domestic unity and elite cohesion. Even the media in both countries has become a tool for vilification and myth-making, reinforcing a socialization of mistrust.

As the findings have shown, civil society and foreign policy are not domains to examine separately. This is because they are mutually reinforcing the extensions of the states' security paradigms. In both countries, civil society organizations are depoliticized or repressed when they challenge dominant narratives. For instance, in Morocco, independent civil society organizations have been systematically restricted in cases where their activities are perceived as critical of the monarchy or its security policies. In Algeria, associations have been subjected to surveillance and administrative barriers to make their operations more difficult. Such acts position civil society organizations as potential threats to national unity, reinforcing the thought that dissent or opposition fuels destabilization. The securitized relationship with civil society reflects how both countries approach foreign policy, treating dissent as disloyalty and viewing dialogue with the other as a sign of weakness. The international partnerships have further entrenched this reasoning. Western powers have largely accepted Morocco's and Algeria's ways of governance and their support has reinforced centralized control rather than incentivized reform. This clearly demonstrates how external relationships can become a part of domestic systems of rule.

The results of the research has also shown that the Algeria-Morocco rivalry does not just damage bilateral relations, but has broader consequences for the region as well. The bilateral conflict undermines counterterrorism coordination, regional cooperation, and overall stability. In this sense, the dispute acts as a bottleneck in regional security governance. Without a resolution to the rivalry, the region will continue to experience fragmented diplomacy, militarized borders, and acts risking escalation. However, as this study has pointed to, a resolution is unlikely unless it is

preceded by an aspiration to meaningfully and genuinely conduct successful security sector reforms. Until then, the conflict is likely to persist as a result of the deliberate domestic governance strategies. In this sense, the regimes do not simply fail to resolve the conflict, but they depend on it. This is because if the systems would change, the military and the monarchy, respectively, would lose what they over again show they protect the most; influence, control, and power.

Finally, future research could build on the findings of this thesis in several directions. For example, one approach would concern the role of international actors in shaping the trajectories of security sector reform, especially in authoritarian-leaning states. This study has shown how external actors have indirectly reinforced existing governance structures in both countries. However, further study is needed to systematically analyze how external support conditions or disrupts security sector reforms processes. This research could focus on the impact of large international players like the EU or the U.S. Such studies could possibly clarify whether international engagement incentivizes genuine reform or, conversely, enables authoritarian resilience by sidestepping demands for transparency, accountability, and civilian oversight. An understanding of these dynamics would shed light on the broader international responsibility in either sustaining or challenging entrenched highly centralized security models.

Furthermore, this research raises wider questions about the generalizability of the relationship between authoritarian-leaning security governance and persistent regional conflicts. Therefore, future research could also explore whether similar dynamics exist in other regions, such as in the Middle East or among post-Soviet states. Comparative case studies could assess whether the pattern of failed security sector reforms, exclusion of dissenting voices, and the projection of domestic insecurity outward is a wider feature of the regimes, or whether the case is unique to the Maghreb/Sahelian/North African area. In either scenario, this study has contributed to a growing body of literature suggesting that regional rivalries are not solely driven by geopolitics, but they also serve as tools for managing domestic power and regime legitimacy. This highlights the importance of analyzing enduring conflicts through the view of internal structures of governance, rather than focusing only on diplomacy or military engagement.