

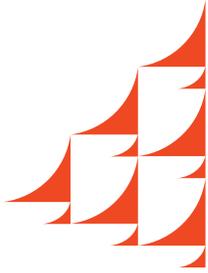
The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



The AGSIW *Gulf Rising Series*

Both Ends of the Spectrum: GCC-Maghreb Relations

Florence Gaub



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding

December 19, 2017

The *AGSIW Gulf Rising Series*

Both Ends of the Spectrum: GCC-Maghreb Relations

Florence Gaub

I s s u e
P a p e r

#15

2017

The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), launched in 2015, is an independent, nonprofit institution dedicated to increasing the understanding and appreciation of the social, economic, and political diversity of the Gulf Arab states. Through expert research, analysis, exchanges, and public discussion, the institute seeks to encourage thoughtful debate and inform decision makers shaping U.S. policy regarding this critical geostrategic region.

© 2017 Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. All rights reserved.

AGSIW does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of AGSIW, its staff, or its board of directors.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from AGSIW. Please direct inquiries to:

Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington
1050 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 1060
Washington, DC 20036

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at www.agsiw.org.

Cover Photo Credit: AP Photo/Abdeljalil Bounhar

The AGSIW *Gulf Rising* Series

Over the last decade the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have energized their role in regional politics, from the use of military intervention, to increased bilateral foreign assistance, to more robust regional coordination. This, combined with a perception of U.S. disengagement from the Middle East, has prompted GCC countries to seek and establish strong relations with other centers of power – regionally and globally.

This paper was developed as part of AGSIW's *Gulf Rising* series analyzing the energized role of the Gulf Arab states in the international system. The series looks beyond GCC relations with the United States to examine ties with other key countries and regions. Additionally, it investigates motivations behind Gulf Arab states' foreign policy choices and evaluates the implications for U.S. foreign policy toward the GCC states and the region.

About the Author

Florence Gaub is a senior analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies, where she works on the Arab world with a focus on conflict and security, with particular emphasis on Iraq, Lebanon, and Libya. She also works on Arab military forces more generally, conflict structures, and the geostrategic dimensions of the Arab region. Previously employed at NATO Defence College and the German Parliament, she wrote her PhD on the Lebanese army at the Humboldt University of Berlin and holds degrees from Sciences Po Paris, the Sorbonne, and the University of Munich. She is the author of numerous publications, including *The Cauldron: NATO's Libya Operation* (Hurst, 2018) and *Guardians of the Arab State: When Militaries intervene in politics, from Mauritania to Iraq* (Hurst, 2017).

Executive Summary

The Gulf Arab states and the states of the Maghreb are part of one strategic space defined, broadly, by shared linguistic, cultural, religious, social, and historical characteristics. Both are subregions of the Arab world, and therefore members of the League of Arab States. Perhaps crucially, they perceive themselves to be part of one political cosmos.

Within this cosmos, however, the four states of the Maghreb and the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are on the opposite ends of the spectrum in a number of ways. This begins with geography but includes economic and especially political factors. Taken together, they lead to a defined, but different, strategic posture. The superficial similarities therefore do not translate into deepening of ties despite the considerable potential.

Introduction

The “Gulf moment” – the rise of the Gulf Arab states as regional strategic players – had, from the start, a distinctly North African component to it.¹ After all, it was in Abu Dhabi that Libya’s civil war turned into an international affair: On the evening of March 7, 2011 – just three weeks after the conflict began – the Gulf foreign ministers issued a statement demanding “that the Security Council take the steps necessary to protect civilians, including a no-fly zone in Libya.”² The call was soon followed by similar ones from the League of Arab States – whose council was then chaired by Oman – and the United Nations, leading to NATO’s Operation Unified Protector. And the Gulf states did not just call for military action, they actively participated, too: Qatar sent six fighter jets and the United Arab Emirates sent 12, which even flew strike sorties. Doha went one step further, deploying special forces to assist Libyan rebels particularly in the assault on Tripoli.³ Nor did Gulf engagement in the Maghreb end there: In May 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council invited Morocco (along with Jordan) to join the group “at a future date.”⁴

The reaction to this invitation – incredulity both East and West of the Arab world – perhaps expresses best the strategic relationship between the Maghreb and Gulf at the time. Kuwait Times noted that Morocco “is not even located in Asia but in Africa and has a completely different political structure that has been marred by financial and economic problems ... The question is this: How desperately does the GCC need a country like Morocco to be part of the organization?” Saudi Arab News echoed this sentiment about the announcement, noting it was “meeting with equal measures of optimism and skepticism in Saudi Arabia. Some ... wonder what Morocco has to do with the GCC.” In Morocco, too, the announcement was met with “bewilderment and derision.”⁵ But Khaleej Times interpreted the move rightly not as a geographic overstretch, but as a harbinger of ambition: “With the inclusion of the strategic

¹ Colin Simpson, “[‘Arab Gulf Moment’ is Trend Here to Stay, Says Academic](#),” *The National*, November 22, 2011.

² Kareem Shaheen, “[GCC Wants No-Fly Zone over Libya](#),” *The National*, March 8, 2011.

³ Ian Black, “[Qatar Admits Sending Hundreds of Troops to Support Libya Rebels](#),” *The Guardian*, October 26, 2011.

⁴ Jonathan Lessware, “[Welcome for ‘Enlarged GCC’ That Would Include Morocco and Jordan](#),” *The National*, May 12, 2011.

⁵ “[Amid Turmoil, GCC Extends Invitation to Jordan and Morocco](#),” *Middle East Policy Council*, accessed October 27, 2017; Anouar Boukhars, “[Does Morocco Have a Place in the GCC?](#),” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 25, 2011.

states from eastern Arabia and North Africa, the GCC's regional ambit is expected to widen from the Arabian Peninsula to the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region."⁶ The Gulf moment would extend to the Maghreb – or so it seemed then.

More than six years later, Gulf engagement with the Maghreb has nevertheless not seen the deepening of ties 2011 seemed to promise: In Libya, Qatar and UAE now support opposing sides; Morocco is still not a member of the GCC, and several of the investment promises made after the Arab Spring never materialized. Although the Maghreb states did sign up for the Islamic Military Alliance launched in Riyadh in 2015 (an interesting development considering Algeria's and Tunisia's resistance to the Egypt-driven counterproposal of the Joint Arab Force), this did not translate into active military support.⁷ Only Morocco participated actively in the Saudi-led Yemen campaign with 1,500 troops, six aircraft, intelligence, and logistical support, but recalled them within a year.⁸ Although Qatar remains the largest Arab investor in Tunisia, Tunis remains careful to maintain neutrality. Algeria, in turn, has been rather openly at odds with the Gulf states particularly on their Libya and Syria policy. In the Maghreb, then, the Gulf moment has stalled.

The determining factors of this diplomatic slowdown are structural and long standing, and therefore unlikely to change in the near future: Ultimately, the determining factors in the relations between the Gulf states and Maghreb are geostrategic in nature.

The Potential: Part of One Strategic Space

Gulf outreach into the Maghreb follows the logic of a shared strategic space, which is broadly Arab in nature. But the notion of an Arab space must not be confused with pan-Arabism or the desire for an Arab supra-state. Instead, it is the shared perception to be part of one region: a coherent territorial subsystem that can be distinguished from the rest of the global system. Regions in the sense of international relations are not simply made by geography, culture, or otherwise. Rather, they are the result of social processes and discourses producing them. Simply put, regions exist where the perception of regions exists.⁹

The Arab region, ranging from Iraq to Morocco, *does* exist, and is the result of several processes that began with the Arab conquests, the Umayyad and Abbassid dynasties uniting parts of the Maghreb with the Gulf, continued with the Ottoman Empire, and extended into the shared experience of foreign interference and colonialism. It also includes, of course, shared language and religion, culture, and social norms. This does not imply that the Arab region is a uniform one: It is divided into three subregions (the Maghreb, the Mashreq, and the Gulf), which are themselves part of a separate space formation. Egypt is considered to be part of no subregion (although it is, in geographic terms, part of North Africa, it is not part of the Maghreb).

⁶ "GCC's Widening Ambit," *Khaleej Times*, May 12, 2011.

⁷ "Algerian Support for Joint Arab Military Would Be 'Limited,'" *The New Arab*, April 1, 2015; "Egypt Proposal for Arab Force 'Unrealistic': Tunisia," *Middle East Monitor*, March 12, 2015.

⁸ "Factbox: Saudi-Led Coalition against Yemen's Houthis," *Reuters*, April 10, 2015; "Yémen: Le Maroc Dépêche 1500 Soldats d'Elite pour une Intervention au Sol contre les Rebelles Houthis," *Le 360*, December 3, 2015; "Pourquoi le Maroc Rappelle ses Troupes du Yémen," *Les Debats*, June 26, 2016.

⁹ Florence Gaub, "Middle Eastern Multipolarity in Movement: The Instability of Structural Change," *Orient* (2015): 57-65.

Relations between these subregions have been less deep and constructive than pan-Arabism wished – as in Europe, a shared strategic space does not automatically translate into good neighborly relations – rather the opposite, in fact. Nevertheless, Arab foreign policymaking remained distinctively Arab in nature, in the sense that the region's decision makers prioritized regional issues and relations before most others – even those with Europe or the United States. When King Salman bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia turned to foreign policy in his first speech after assuming the throne in 2015, he used “the Arab and Islamic nations” as the paradigm within which Riyadh operates. He stressed that “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is keen to defend the Arab and Islamic issues at international platforms” (including of course, the most Arab of all policy issues, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). In total, the king referred six times to “Arab and Islamic” as the cornerstones of the kingdom's foreign policy – not mentioning once Europe, Asia, or the United States.¹⁰ In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Bahrain's foreign minister referred to his country not only as an “Arab and Islamic entity,” all the foreign policy issues he enumerated – ranging from the spat with Qatar to Palestine, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and the threat from Iran – are issues that confront the whole region, not just Bahrain.¹¹ This also applies to the Maghreb states, although their strategic outlook has African and European components the Gulf Arab states do not share. Comparatively isolationist Algeria sent its foreign minister to 13 bilateral visits in 2017 – nine of which were to Arab countries.¹² And even Morocco, whose focus has been less Arab than that of other states in the Maghreb, has shown an Arab dimension to its foreign policy – be it the visit of King Mohammed VI to the first Morocco-GCC summit in Saudi Arabia in 2016 or the suspension of diplomatic relations with Tehran in response to its “interference” in Bahrain in 2009. Stressing mutual interests, the king said that “the security and stability of the Gulf states is in Morocco's interest. We have similar views on common issues which increase the depth of the ties between our nations.”¹³

When King Salman bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia turned to foreign policy in his first speech after assuming the throne in 2015, he used “the Arab and Islamic nations” as the paradigm within which Riyadh operates.

The Arab space is therefore a distinctly strategic paradigm that unites the states of the Gulf and those of the Maghreb in a shared region – and yet, relations between the two subregions continue to lack the strategic depth both share with others.

¹⁰ “The King's Speech – State of the Kingdom,” SUSRIS, December 24, 2015.

¹¹ “The Statement of the Kingdom of Bahrain before the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York,” Kingdom of Bahrain, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 23, 2017.

¹² “Coopération et Activités Internationales,” Embassy of Algeria in Germany, accessed December 1, 2017.

¹³ “Gulf Arabs Back Morocco in Western Sahara Rift with U.N.,” *Reuters*, April 21, 2016.

Location, Location, Location: Implications of Geography

Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was convinced that “the policy of a state lies in its geography” – or rather, in the diverse physical and biological features of a certain area. Of course, in foreign policy terms, geography is never just about topographical configurations or contrasts of climate, but about their *implications*.¹⁴

This applies to the Gulf and Maghreb as well – although they are part of a strategic space, their outlook is very much informed by their geostrategic location. Rabat is 3,438 miles from Manama, but only 1,129 miles from Paris; the distance between Algiers and Marseille is only marginally greater than that between Doha and Bandar Abbas in Iran. These distances are not merely geographical, they translate into geostrategic considerations.

For instance, relations with the European Union matter more to the Maghreb than to the Gulf. With the exception of Libya, all the Maghreb states have trade agreements with the EU. For most of the Maghreb states, the EU is the largest trading partner – it absorbs 55.7 percent of Morocco’s foreign trade, 54.1 percent of Algeria’s, and 65.5 percent of Tunisia’s. Crucially, Algeria is the third largest energy provider of the EU, which imports more than half of its energy sources. (Russia and Norway are the other two).¹⁵ Morocco in particular is moving to translate this proximity into a Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU, negotiations for which have been underway since 2013. In comparison, the GCC’s economic relationship with the European bloc is mainly one in which the Gulf imports rather than exports goods: EU imports from the GCC accounted for only €37.7 billion (over \$44 billion) in 2016.¹⁶ This is reflected politically as well: Despite a cooperation agreement signed in 1988, relations between the GCC and the EU have not yielded tangible results.

The Gulf states support the Moroccan claim, but the move is to be understood in a larger regional balancing rather than an isolated diplomatic act – after all, Iran, Syria, Libya, and Algeria recognize Western Sahara as an independent state.

More generally, Gulf trade relations are much more diversified than those of the Maghreb, divided evenly among the United States, Europe, and trading partners in Asia and Africa.¹⁷

And while the Maghreb’s geographic location translates into economic considerations when it looks north, it translates mainly into security considerations when it looks south. For Morocco, this has to do with Western Sahara (a territory it has claimed since 1975) and as a result with its African relations more generally. In 2017, it rejoined the African Union, which it had left in 1984 after the organization recognized Western Sahara as an independent state – but the

¹⁴ Yves Lacoste, “Geography and Foreign Policy,” *SAIS Review* 4, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 1984): 213-27.

¹⁵ “[Trade: Algeria](#),” European Commission, accessed October 27, 2017; “[Trade: Morocco](#),” European Commission, accessed October 27, 2017; “[Trade: Tunisia](#),” European Commission, accessed October 27, 2017; “[Trade: Libya](#),” European Commission, accessed October 27, 2017.

¹⁶ “[Trade: Gulf Region](#),” European Commission, accessed October 27, 2017.

¹⁷ “[GCC Exports and Imports by Trade Partners](#),” Knoema, last modified February 11, 2016.

issue remains unresolved and has a decidedly military component for Rabat.¹⁸ The Gulf states support the Moroccan claim, but the move is to be understood in a larger regional balancing rather than an isolated diplomatic act – after all, Iran, Syria, Libya, and Algeria recognize Western Sahara as an independent state.¹⁹

But the region south of the Maghreb has security implications for Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya as well, even without ongoing territorial disputes. For all three, the Sahel region is a concern as it has developed into an uncontrolled space in which all kinds of illicit networks operate – notably terrorist networks (including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) but also smuggling networks of drugs and people.²⁰

To the Gulf states, neither the relationship with Europe nor the Sahel security concerns of the Maghreb states matter greatly in strategic terms.

In return, the GCC countries have their own priorities because of their geographic location. These are, firstly, the relationship with Iran, which is not only physically close but also in a position to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which the Gulf states export a considerable share of oil and gas. The Gulf Arab states' use of the name "Arabian" rather than "Persian" Gulf can perhaps be seen as an attempt to regionalize the antagonism with Tehran, but the further west in the region, the less Iran is seen as a strategic threat. In part, this is because there are very few Shias in the Maghreb who could be suspected of divided loyalties (which is the case in the Gulf); but it also has to do with geographic distance and, most importantly, politics. Algeria, for instance, a state that sees itself as a revolutionary power just as Iran, has entertained good relations with Tehran for decades. Last but not least, Yemen, a main concern for the Gulf Arab states, is not a priority for the states in the Maghreb. Although, in some ways Yemen might be considered the Sahel zone of the Gulf as it displays some common features with the area, Maghreb engagement in the ongoing Saudi-led military operations has been very limited.

Thus, while the two subregions share a number of concerns – including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Libya – ultimately geography determines the key foreign policy priorities for both in very different ways.

Show Me the Money? Economic Opportunities

If geography does not provide sufficient reason to both Maghreb and Gulf states to cooperate more, economy could be another reason to extend relations. Formally, the basis for this is already in place: In 1997, the Greater Arab Free Trade Area was launched, to be completed by 2005; in addition, an Arab common market has been envisaged for 2020. But GAFTA has still not been implemented, with tariffs and other trade restrictions remaining in place.²¹ Incentives to implement the agreement fully are weak: Inter-Arab trade generally remains comparatively low with around 5 percent of the total share – but it is unevenly distributed. The subregion benefiting most from inter-Arab trade is the Mashreq, which exports 19 percent of

¹⁸ Habibulah Mohamed Lamin, "[Threat of War Emerges Again in Western Sahara](#)," *Middle East Eye*, January 6, 2017.

¹⁹ "[Gulf Arabs Back Morocco in Western Sahara Rift with U.N.](#)," *Reuters*, April 21, 2016.

²⁰ Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, "[Conditions in the Sahel Benefit Al Qaeda](#)," *The Cipher Brief*, January 29, 2017.

²¹ "[Full, Free' Trade Agreement Can Enhance Inter-Arab Ties](#)," *Gulf Times*, May 12, 2013.

its goods and services to the Arab region – but both the Maghreb and Gulf display much lower numbers with 4.3 and 5 percent respectively. Consequently, economic links between the two are weak: Less than 1 percent of Maghreb exports go to the GCC, accounting for 2.5 percent of GCC imports.²²

This is a phenomenon that afflicts the whole region, but particularly these two subregions: Less than 10 percent of trade takes place within the GCC, and numbers are even worse in the Maghreb, where a mere 3 percent of trade takes place among the states in North Africa (in comparison, 65 percent of European trade takes place within Europe).²³ Interestingly, most of what Arab states export outside the region – chemicals as well as agricultural products – is traded less within the region. Instead, manufactured products are traded most.²⁴

In part, this low level of economic integration is the result of political obstacles. The difference in income makes the subregions also difficult to compare in terms of consumer goods. While the GCC states have an average gross domestic product per capita of \$30,863, North Africa's is \$3,677 (the difference between oil producers and non-oil producers in North Africa is not significant). On average, the GDP in the Gulf is 10 times higher than that in North Africa. Consequently, even an implementation of GAFTA would not

On average, the GDP in the Gulf is 10 times higher than that in North Africa.

result in a substantial increase in GDP: Tariffs are already low, but so is trade. An economic simulation showed that implementing GAFTA, even though it would increase inter-Arab trade, would result in zero GDP increase for the Maghreb states and those of the GCC. In another scenario, the lifting of tariffs on agricultural products in an Arab custom union would in fact negatively affect the economies of Morocco and Tunisia (while benefitting the agricultural sector in the GCC states).²⁵ Even the restrictions on labor in the Gulf would benefit mainly the states in the Mashreq and Egypt, but not the Maghreb.

The potential for more economic integration is therefore particularly limited when it comes to the Gulf and the Maghreb. Both subregions can benefit from trading among immediate neighbors or with the Mashreq, but not with each other.

But economic relations between the two areas aren't limited to trade or labor. There are some links in OPEC, where the Maghreb states Libya and Algeria are members, as are Gulf states Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait. However, within the consortium, the two Maghreb exporters – which have smaller reserves than the Gulf states – have traditionally advocated limited oil output to keep prices up. And while the Gulf states have invested funds in the Maghreb – particularly since 2011 – these are limited in volume and impact. Between 2003 and 2012, Gulf investment in the Maghreb amounted to \$45.4 billion, a number dwarfed by

²² Simeon Kerr, "GCC and Maghreb: Countries are Long on Initiatives, Short on Execution," *Financial Times*, September 28, 2011.

²³ Courtney Trenwith, "The Case for Free Trade in the GCC," *Arabian Business*, August 28, 2015.

²⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, *Arab Integration: A 21st Century Development Imperative* (Beirut: ESCWA, 2014), 51.

²⁵ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, *Arab Integration: A 21st Century Development Imperative* (Beirut: ESCWA, 2014), 160, 170.

Europe's investment, which stood at \$40 billion in 2015 alone. In addition, Gulf investment remained concentrated in mining and real estate, two sectors that do not have a significant impact on job creation.²⁶

Overall, the potential for economic ties between the Gulf and Maghreb is limited politically and structurally, as well as financially.

A Matter of Principle: Political Posture

Last but not least, relations between the Gulf and Maghreb are limited not only by their different geostrategic priorities and limited economic ties, but also by their different political positioning when it comes to crucial policy issues on which they indeed share an interest.

Libya is one example: It is itself a theater of Gulf antagonism, with Qatar supporting the government based in Tripoli, and the UAE supporting the one based in Tobruk. But Libya is also what limits Gulf engagement with the Maghreb more generally. Algeria, for instance, opposed the intervention pushed by the Gulf states in 2011, and continues to favor a mediated political solution, but the UAE has supported anti-Islamist Libyan militia leader Gen. Khalifa Hifter not just politically but also militarily. UAE forces carried out at least one airstrike (reports indicate there may have been a second) in Libya, and provided 93 armored personnel carriers, 549 armored and nonarmored vehicles, drones, and helicopters to Hifter. Algiers sees this type of behavior as upsetting the options for a political settlement it actively pushes.²⁷

Overall, the potential for economic ties between the Gulf and Maghreb is limited politically and structurally, as well as financially.

Algeria is also at odds with the Gulf states when it comes to Hizballah. In March 2016, acting on a Gulf initiative, the League of Arab States declared Hizballah a terrorist organization. Algeria voted against the measure, considering Hizballah a rightful resistance organization (Tunisia signed the declaration but its president rejected the term "terrorism"). Algeria also disagrees with Saudi Arabia on designating Hamas as a terrorist organization: In the context of the Qatar crisis, Doha was accused by its Gulf neighbors of funding the organization that Algiers considers, as Hizballah, a resistance movement.²⁸ Disagreement between Algeria and the Gulf states does not end there: On the Syrian conflict, Algiers remained true to its traditionally noninterventionist stance. Although never outspokenly supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, it nevertheless disagreed with the Gulf push for regime change in Damascus and abstained from Arab League resolutions slapping sanctions on Syria. It also maintained contact with Syrian officials: Algeria's foreign minister met his counterpart twice in 2016, and each

²⁶ "The EU Continues to be a Net Investor in the Rest of the World," *EuroStat*, January 12, 2017; Carolyn Barnett, "GCC-Maghreb Relations in a Changing Regional Order," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, August 2013.

²⁷ Laurence Aida Ammour, "In the Libyan Conflict, Algiers Stands up to France and Egypt," *Middle East Eye*, March 27, 2015; Mélanie Matarese, "Algeria Emerges as Quiet Mediator in Quest for Peace in Libya," *Middle East Eye*, February 1, 2016.

²⁸ Adlène Meddi, "Algeria's Hezbollah Stance 'Reflects View on Resistance, Not Terrorism,'" *Middle East Eye*, March 29, 2016; Adnan Abu Amer, "Amid Qatar Crisis, Hamas Lays Groundwork for Official Presence in Algeria," *Al-Monitor*, July 28, 2017.

country's embassy remained operational. Assad himself drew a parallel between the Syrian civil war and Algeria's fight against Islamist extremism in the 1990s: "The Algerian people's position on the Syrian conflict is not surprising, considering they had to undergo a challenge that was similar to the Syrian people's, which is currently facing terrorism."²⁹

Relations are not necessarily easier in neighboring Tunisia, although Tunisia is less confrontational than Algiers. Following the fall of the regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (who fled to Saudi Arabia) the new Ennahda-dominated government was close to Qatar. This was apparent in 10 agreements signed between Doha and Tunis, covering a wide array of areas including investment, construction deals, humanitarian services, and vocational training. The Tunisian military participated in a drill in Doha and received equipment from Qatar. When Ennahda left the government, these relations became less intense, but they were not cut off.

This is in stark contrast to the rather tense relations Tunisia had with the UAE post-2011. Traditionally its second Arab trade partner (after Libya), the UAE halted its investment in Tunisia after the revolution. Relations reached their nadir when President Moncef Marzouki used his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2013 to call on Egypt to release toppled President Mohamed Morsi. In response, the UAE withdrew its ambassador. When Ennahda left the government, the UAE hoped to lure Tunisia away from a pro-Muslim Brotherhood stance by reaching out to Nidaa Tounes – but the desired effect did not take place: The current government maintains excellent ties with Doha. Abu Dhabi's zero-sum game only reduced its impact in Tunis.³⁰

And even Morocco, the Gulf's "natural" counterpart in the Maghreb, is at times at odds with the GCC states. In the confrontation with Qatar, for example, Rabat offered mediation (while sending food supplies to Doha). Following the removal of Morsi in Egypt, Morocco procrastinated over recognizing the new government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and only recently did Morocco resume relations with Iran. The exclusion of Western Sahara from a map showing Morocco on an Emirati TV show was interpreted as a diplomatic rebuke of Rabat for not suspending ties with Doha; so was the last-minute cancellation of a football match between the Moroccan and Emirati national teams by the UAE in September.³¹ Overall, Rabat remains politically and financially stable enough, and sufficiently geographically remote, to pursue what amounts to a nonaligned policy regarding most Gulf-related disputes.

Conclusion: The Gulf Rises – but Not in the Maghreb

Gulf foreign policy activities in the Maghreb are a logical extension of its strategic perception. Both the Gulf and Maghreb are part of one strategic space and are stakeholders in several of the region's pressing issues. Alas, shared interests and strategic similarities are not enough to promote further integration.

²⁹ Hassan Masiky, "[Algeria Deepens its Isolation by Endorsing Assad and Iran in Syria](#)," *Morocco World News*, December 23, 2016; "[Algeria Minister Meets Syria's Assad on Rare Visit](#)," *AFP*, April 25, 2016; "[Assad Compares Syria War to Algeria Conflict](#)," *AFP*, November 6, 2013.

³⁰ Youssef Cherif, "[Tunisia's Fledgling Gulf Relations](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 17, 2017.

³¹ "[UAE Slammed for Excluding Western Sahara from Map of Morocco](#)," *Middle East Monitor*, June 14, 2017; "[Morocco-UAE Football Split Raises Possibilities of Strained Political Relations](#)," *Morocco World News*, September 27, 2017.

In fact, the two subregions differ on three accounts profoundly, limiting further engagement substantially. First, they do not share their top strategic priorities when it comes to foreign relations. Where the Maghreb states are mainly focused to their north when it comes to economy, and their south when it comes to security, the Gulf looks mainly east when it comes to security, and has a global outlook when it comes to economy. Second, prospects for deeper economic ties are limited not just politically, but also by the structurally different nature of the economies the two subregions possess. Even where they share a stake, such as in OPEC, Maghreb states have promoted different policies than their Gulf counterparts. Third, and perhaps most important, the states of the Maghreb and the Gulf do not share a common vision even on those issues in which they share a common interest. Whether with regard to Libya, the Palestinian issue, or Iran, the Maghreb has proved to be less easily persuaded by Gulf agenda setting and rather independent minded. Ultimately, there are therefore natural limits to new Gulf engagement in North Africa – despite the theoretical potential.

