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## The Maghreb facing Covid-19

The Maghreb presents itself in dispersed order in the face of the coronavirus, without any cohesion or solidarity, each country facing its own concerns. Social tensions in Tunisia, authority and outbreaks of Islamist fever in Morocco, sanitary bankruptcy in Libya, Algerian protests in search of a new breath and the Mauritanian desert protecting a population tired of confinement: the management of the pandemic heralds the post-crisis period: a disarticulation of the Maghreb scene in a world that has become multipolar, where Beijing will not fail to pursue its regional “entryism” by promulgating health as a vector of power.

The coronavirus epidemic is globally contained in the Maghreb. While the official figures may have been subject to downward corrections, a tragedy cannot be hidden; social networks are watching. Apart from the uncertainty of the Libyan case, the balance sheet of Covid-19 remains less tragic than in the West. By an effect of opportunity, the containment measures recommended by the WHO are the only ones that the countries of the zone were able to really apply.

Their security forces have been called upon, as well as the network of *moqadems*<sup>1</sup>, to limit the mobility of citizens and reduce local economic activity at the risk of provoking social tensions. This is a difficult political choice, but the only one available. Health infrastructures in the Maghreb are insufficient (lack of recovery beds, nursing staff and discontinuous medical coverage in the provinces). In the hypothesis of a general spread, the inequality of citizens in

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<sup>1</sup> Moqadems represent the authority of the State in the daily life of the population.

terms of care would be in terms of survival, with priority going to the wealthiest and most influential. The risk of disturbing public order would increase tenfold.

After the shock of television images of the confined West and of former “guardian powers” counting their protective masks and professing barrier gestures, the Maghreb has recovered. The stupor has given way to a mainstream denigration of the European Union, compared to a body without muscle, without authority (French incivility), without coordination (Spanish regionalism), without health efficiency (the Italian case), without geopolitical solidarity (the British exception), with no other solution than to inject billions of cash to prevent the collapse of the eurozone. While the political recovery is obvious - the Maghreb states are used to it - some sincerely wonder whether the European model has not reached the end of its power, whether the North-South relationship, “historic and exceptional” according to the usual rhetoric, would not fall apart in favor of a new global epicenter embodied by China.

This analysis in vogue from Rabat to Tunis does not, however, reflect the reality of the struggle against Covid-19, a reality in the image of the Maghreb: disparate.

## Algeria

When the virus appeared, the country was already at a standstill. Falling oil prices, erosion of the foreign exchange reserve and Hirak demonstrations over the last twelve months: Algiers has been experiencing a recurring crisis.

The announcement of the pandemic has awakened the specter of food shortages – unfounded since the State made arrangements before Ramadan<sup>2</sup>, but strongly mobilizing the informal sector, which is preparing to make up for the economic slowdown.

Basic commodities (flour, milk) are the target of price speculation. The cost of protective masks fluctuates according to stocks<sup>3</sup>, and illegal tax collectors take advantage of the partial stoppage of public transport. The first impact of Covid-19 is therefore the result of tension on consumer prices and a climate of anxiety that leads Algerians, even those most resistant to the caciques of the FLN, to turn to the “regalian” authority in charge of public health.

President Tebboune understands what is at stake and is trying to restore the credibility of his regime by increasing the number of health and social measures<sup>4</sup> in a country that has 1.9 hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants (13.4 in Japan). Without questioning the humanitarian dimension of his initiatives, the crisis remains a “godsend for Algiers”, according to the academic Saïd Belguidoum, who notes the continued arrests of popular figures of the Hirak<sup>5</sup>. Sources within the movement questioned the resumption of protests as soon as the confinement was lifted, fearing that the epidemiological episode had broken the momentum. A few dozen health workers recently took to the streets of Tlemcen to demand more significant state involvement in the upgrading of the health system<sup>6</sup>. Algiers did not respond.

<sup>2</sup> The Ramadan festivities are scheduled, according to the lunations of the Arab countries, from April 23rd, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is observed in all Maghreb countries.

<sup>4</sup> Extension of containment hours (5 April 2020), distribution of market opening hours (2 April 2020), launch of a solidarity caravan (1 April 2020), disinfection of freight vessels (31 March 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the author, 13 April 2020. Saïd Belguidoum mentions several cases. The court of Sidi M'hamed (Algiers) sentenced the activist Brahim Daouadji to six months' imprisonment and a fine of fifty thousand dinars (9 April 2020). The opponent Abdelouhab Fersaoui is sentenced to one year in prison (6 April 2020). Journalist Sofiane Merakchi was sentenced to eight years in prison on 5 April 2020. Opposition politician Karim Tabbou was sentenced to one year in prison on appeal (20 March 2020).

<sup>6</sup> « [Coronavirus in Algeria: caregivers demonstrate in Tlemcen](#) », dzid.com, April 7, 2020.

## Morocco

Mistreated during the Arab revolts of 2011, challenged by the Al-Hoceima demonstrations in 2017, the Moroccan monarchy had to take up the challenge of the coronavirus. Rabat is leading a diplomacy based on the notion of exemplarity; towards the North, by trying to impose itself as a credible regional interlocutor, and towards the South, by consolidating its strategic depth on the African continent. A failed management of the epidemic would generate discredit.

Backed by a strong security apparatus, King Mohamed VI reacted quickly to Covid-19. His strategy was twofold: authority to enforce the rules of containment, and solidarity through the adoption of a series of social measures that were unprecedented in the Kingdom and some of which had been politically incorrect at other times, such as massive support for the informal sector, which was clearly the most vulnerable to the epidemic<sup>7</sup>.

The sovereign was able to transform the health threat into a national cause. Donation campaigns are carried out at full speed (companies, employees). Civil society is mobilized in favor of the homeless, street children and other neglected people. On the basis of this, the IMF has granted a loan of 3 billion dollars<sup>8</sup> to Rabat, a gesture hailed by the official Chinese media as a "commitment" by international bodies in favor of the Kingdom<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, two signs of fragility remain perceptible. The weight of the informal economy: it is certainly a precious factor of resistance in these turbulent times; without it, the little people would not survive; but it is also a societal reality that indicates the long road still to be travelled before reaching the standards of the world economy. Finally, the Islamists are still in ambush. At the announcement of the closure of the mosques, the Salafist preacher Abu Naïm launched an appeal for passive resistance by shouting "*Allahou akbar*" on the roofs of the houses<sup>10</sup>. After two nights of loud protests and a few rallies on the Tangiers-Tétouan axis, the police arrested the instigator of the events<sup>11</sup>. The episode recalls the prevalence of political Islamism in Morocco, which seizes every opportunity to brave power.

### CHANGE SIGNALS

#### **Release of prisoners due to Covid-19 (Algeria, Libya, Morocco)**

The judicial authorities ensure that individuals detained for acts of terrorism are not released. There is a lack of reintegration programmes. Prisoners are going to join the informal sector and petty crime, the usual beds of radical movements.

#### **Reopening of borders**

Although Maghreb diplomacy does not address this eminently sensitive issue, what will become of the Schengen borders after Covid-19?

#### **Weight of social networks**

While the erosion of the official media audience seemed inevitable, the multiplicity of fake news has the effect of restoring credit to government news sources. Algeria and Morocco are prosecuting the peddlers of false news.

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<sup>7</sup> « [Urgent measures to support informal workers and households](#) », medias24.com, March 27, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> 3 billion Precautionary and Liquidity Line (PLL), repayable in 8 years (5 years + 3 year grace period). Afifa Dassouli, « [LPL, one stone for many strokes](#) », La Tribune, April 10, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> « [The IMF expresses its commitment to Morocco](#) », Xinhua News Agency, April 9 2020.

<sup>10</sup> The events took place on 21, 22 and 23 March 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Inquiry March 17, 2020. The investigation was entrusted to the National Brigade of the Judicial Police for violation of State security.

## Tunisie

After months of jousting and political uncertainty, the election of a quasi-unknown man to the presidency of the republic, Kaïs Saïed, Tunisia has returned to state voluntarism.

Three men form the keystone of the struggle against Covid-19. The president is the first: photos show him carrying boxes of humanitarian aid sent to the suffering population<sup>12</sup>.

Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh reorganizes the state apparatus. The mistakes of the first few weeks have been acknowledged, such as forgetting to include small pensioners in the category of vulnerable Tunisians. The executive branch corrected - by adopting an exceptional pension revaluation measure<sup>13</sup>. Finally, one finds the Minister of Health, Abdellatif Mekki, a doctor and member of the Islamist movement Ennahdha. What was a simple ministerial chair obtained through political transactions has become a resolutely strategic position<sup>14</sup>.

On the ground, the containment measures are greeted by nights of protests in the working-class districts (Ettadhamen-Mnihla). It would be an exaggeration to speak of a riot, as the protest has never stopped since the 2011 revolution<sup>15</sup>, but it must be admitted that the fear of famine warmed the spirits. The epidemic is reawakening the social divide in Tunisia and shows the weakness of a state that is struggling to organize the distribution of emergency aid, some EUR 50 million. The endless queues to receive subsidies are sometimes used by citizens carrying the virus, who, for lack of means of subsistence, join the crowd to live (or survive) from day to day<sup>16</sup>.

## Libya

The humanitarian truce called for by the United Nations has never been respected, as evidenced by the counter-offensive of the GNA, which has just loosened the noose around Tripoli by liberating the coastal cities of Sorman and Sabratha<sup>17</sup>. The circling of drones continues tirelessly in the Libyan sky. Patients with Covid-19 had to be evacuated from the Independence Hospital (formerly al-Khadra) because of the bombings<sup>18</sup>. As for water and electricity cuts, they continue to worsen the living conditions of the population, especially the elderly.

Not adapted to the epidemiological risk, as it is not adapted to the war trauma. According to the WHO, the medical sector is "close to collapse"<sup>19</sup>. The few distributions of masks in Tripoli and disinfection operations in the Misrata parks are the result of an el-Sarraj government that is nevertheless trying to react. The Libyan National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) is communicating on the barrier gestures. An e-site has been set up to monitor the pandemic<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> « [Kaïs Saïed participates in the shipment of parcels](#) », Espace Manager, April 5, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Samir Belhassen, « [Elyes Fakhfakh announces support measures for pensioners](#) » *La Tribune*, April 3, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> In April, the President of the Republic promulgated a law authorizing the Head of Government to sign legislative decrees as part of the fight against Covid-19, which was supposed to speed up the legislative process. The Parliament will be sidelined and the Executive - embodied by Elyes Fakhfakh and Abdellatif Mekki - strengthened, it is currently around 30 dollars for the desert Brenturd'nse which is advising it.

<sup>15</sup> Ettadhamen-Mnihla has already experienced incidents in 2016 (« [La garde nationale disperse des manifestants](#) », Agence TAP, January 21, 2016).

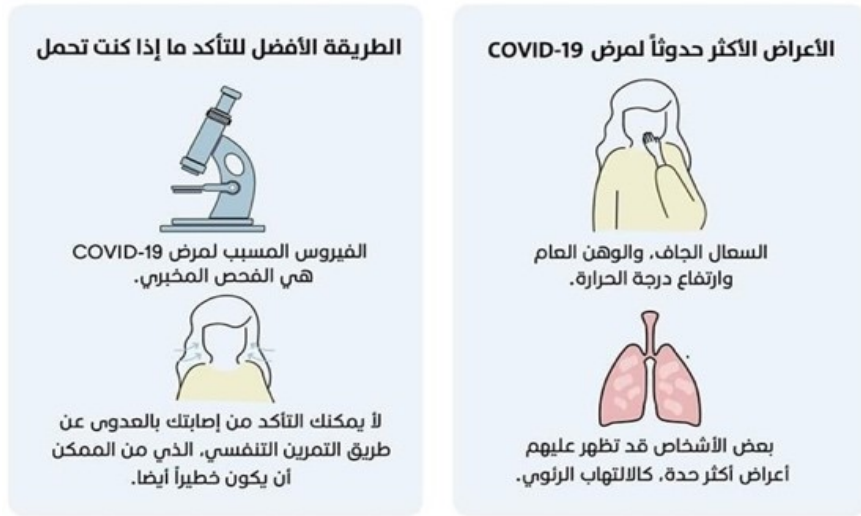
<sup>16</sup> With regard to security, it should be noted that in the Mount Chaambi region, where an Islamist maquis is rampant, the confinement facilitates the monitoring of supply lines for combatants.

<sup>17</sup> As an indication of the violence of the fighting, 20 Turkish soldiers have been killed in recent weeks. Ana Rodriguez, « [La violence en Libye menace le système de santé](#) », atalayar.com, April 7, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> « [Libya: Coronavirus Patients Evacuated from Hospital Bombed by Haftar Militia](#) », middleeastmonitor.com, April 8, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Elisabeth Hoff, Head of the WTO Mission in Tripoli. (« [Libya Confirms First Coronavirus Case amid Fear over Readiness](#) », Reuters, 24 mars 2020).

<sup>20</sup> <https://covid19.ly>



*Libyan Covid-19 Risk Awareness Brochure*

Many Libyan sources fear that the population will pay dearly for the fratricidal struggle between East and West, two-headed authorities whose low reactivity to the virus is explained by the idea that containment was useless because Libya is already confined. Airports are closed. Mobility is reduced. Economic flows are sluggish. Even clandestine migrants are confined to their places of transit, where they pile up in "alarming epidemiological conditions"<sup>21</sup> before attempting to cross the Mediterranean to join, they hope, the Schengen area.

In the Maghreb, the Libyan case remains the most worrying. Opaque and inaccessible to health care teams, if an infectious powder keg were to appear, the worst would be feared.

## Mauritania

Unaccustomed to health crises, the Mauritanian government made a few communication errors at the beginning of the crisis before recovering<sup>22</sup>. President Ould Ghazouani announces the mobilization of \$64.88 million for the purchase of essential drugs and equipment<sup>23</sup>. A program of support for pastoral activities is launched<sup>24</sup>.

In Mauritania, the epidemic is not very virulent. The first death occurred on 30 March 2020, whereas in France, at this date, more than 3,000 victims had already died. Nouakchott is taking simple and pragmatic measures to anticipate the global crisis. Instructions are given to build up a food stock of 20,000 tons of fish that will be subtracted from the fish catches initially intended for export<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Humanitarian source requesting anonymity.

<sup>22</sup> « [Mauritania: the Minister of Health's blunders](#) », kassataya.com, April 16, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Speech to the nation on March 26, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> This program consists of partially covering the cost of feed and veterinary products for livestock.

<sup>25</sup> « [Mauritania stores 20,000 tonnes of fish for local consumption](#) », Bénin24tv.com, April 9, 2020.

Mauritania and Senegal have closed their borders.



The Mauritanian army has positioned elements along the river of the same name to prevent smugglers from transporting illegal migrants, sometimes ordinary Mauritanian citizens desperately trying to reach their homes<sup>26</sup>. In cities, the implementation of containment measures is causing impatience among economic actors, including informal ones, who aspire to resume their activities. Some are desperate, believing that the state is overplaying the health rules in view of the number of cases observed. Mauritanians confined to a hotel in Nouakchott go on (temporary) hunger strike to protest against their quarantine<sup>27</sup>.

Mauritania appears lucid and is aware that it is experiencing an epidemiological episode of lesser virulence, being as little affected as it is supported by the international community. "We can only count on ourselves first," wrote Mohamed Mahmoud Mohamed Salah, a professor at the University of Nouakchott<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, when the G20 decided to commit 5 trillion dollars to resolve the coronavirus crisis, the Mauritanian issue was far from being one of its priorities.

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<sup>26</sup> Via Dakar airport until Senegal closes its air borders on March 16, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Three weeks of quarantine when the initial period was fourteen days (« [People confined "too long" go on hunger strike](#) », AFP, April 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Journal *Le Calame*, March 31, 2020.

## Covid-19, a revealing agent

Although it is premature to take stock of the epidemic, let us note these few facts. The Maghreb is resisting. The epidemic is generally contained. The containment measures are accepted by the populations and the States which, however contradictory they may be, share the concern to establish, or even restore, a bond of trust with their citizens.

One of the first lessons of the crisis, unexpected in many respects, is the importance of the informal sector, the *de facto* real economy, without which containment measures would be unbearable for the middle classes and the underprivileged. This autarkic model between economic actors of misfortune, the famous *Système D* that does not appear on any World Bank PowerPoint, allows us to wait for *déconfinement*. Although unorthodox and calamitous from an empirical point of view, the informal sector has the merit of constituting a basis for subsistence which, coupled with state aid, makes it a co-actor of political stability.

The question now is how to reboot the region. Libya will be exempted from it, due to the civil war, and Mauritania, which is generally little affected. On the other hand, the economies connected to the world chessboard will be subject to turbulence. Algeria - the State needs a barrel of 100 dollars to balance its budget. With Brent crude oil in its early thirties, the situation was almost impossible<sup>29</sup>. Morocco – with its attractive FDI bubble (foreign direct investment<sup>30</sup>), including Renault and PSA – is preparing for difficult times due to the dizzying drop in new vehicle sales<sup>31</sup>. Finally, there is Tunisia. In an open letter to the Prime Minister, the conciliatory tone of which should be stressed, some sixty civil society actors expressed their alarm. "We are aware that there is little or no room for manoeuvre in the state budget. And yet the State must come to the aid of all its economic operators"<sup>32</sup>. It is a fact: the coffers of the Tunisian state are empty. Once again, the mission seems impossible.

Let's make two predictive assumptions :

A-1. Following the pandemic episode, the Maghreb records measured losses. The stakes become economic ones. The financing of *déconfinement* can be ensured by the West at the margin, as the latter is preoccupied by its own recovery plans. In the region, only one power has the cash flow to intervene massively: China.

A-2. A delayed deflagration occurs, a second pandemic round like the Spanish flu. Africa, which accounts for 1% of global health spending, experiences an unprecedented tragedy. People stand up to their governments overwhelmed by the crisis. Political Islam seizes the issue on the grounds that Covid-19 is a curse of globalization that persists in humiliating the Ummah. The time has come for "true" Islam to triumph. War breaks out.

Clearly, the A-2 scenario is highly unlikely. If a second epidemiological wave were to strike the

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<sup>29</sup> About 75% of Algeria's budget revenue comes from hydrocarbons. The trade deficit stood at USD 6.11 billion at the end of 2019.

<sup>30</sup> According to the Moroccan Foreign Exchange Office, foreign direct investments were already declining before the crisis - 10.53 billion dirhams (MMDH) at the end of July 2019 against 12.71 MMDH for the same period in 2018.

<sup>31</sup> [In Morocco : - 61,61 %. In France : - 72 %.](#)

<sup>32</sup> « [Open Letter to the Head of Government](#) », webmanagercenter.com, April 9, 2020.

Maghreb, all the indications are that states would be able to resist – in pain, poverty and social tensions, but resist.

## Health, a new vector of power

The question is not an absurd one in the light of this unprecedented health crisis: what has become of the French Doctors of the 1980s? What remains of the duty to interfere, when humanitarian ships crossed the oceans and planes unloaded on tarmacs of misfortune the medical aid coming from a West then at the height of its power?

Since March 2020, the North African sky has been silent. The rare planes that land unload Chinese equipment and medical teams that have come to support the "African brothers". While the West is retreating behind its borders, Beijing is projecting its relays of influence in the area.

The diplomacy of the mask suits the Maghreb, because it does not promote any civilizational project<sup>33</sup>. Apart from a discourse of little substance on the solidarity of peoples, the partnership with China is based on the organic solidarity of nations (Emile Durkheim), with no other implication than diplomacy by mutual agreement, with the best saying tariff, the best price, the slightest political pressure. Weary of the passionate relations with the former colonial powers, the Maghreb states appreciate China's political stability, its accounting metrics, and the fact that it is a country with a strong and stable economy<sup>34</sup>.

Making the health sector a vector of power in Africa is an attractive idea. Rabat has just launched an initiative with Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire to provide a joint response to the Covid-19 threat<sup>35</sup>. Still imprecise in content, the posture consists in developing a health diplomacy, without a Western presence of course, by strengthening multisector collaborations<sup>36</sup>. In short, it is a question of not leaving the field open to the Chinese and of pre-positioning ourselves for the decades to come. Doesn't an Arabic expression say *ما يدوم ما*?<sup>37</sup> Nothing lasts? While Africa welcomes Beijing's action, some people are already thinking about its departure.

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<sup>33</sup> The Silk Road Initiative, the Belt & Road Initiative, includes a component on "health prevention" (Antoine Bondaz. « ["Route de la soie de la santé" : comment la Chine entend profiter de la pandémie pour promouvoir sa diplomatie sanitaire](#) », *Notes de la FRS*, 11/2020, March 26, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the question of the sustainability of the Sino-African relationship arises. Beijing is struggling to maintain its reputation as a neutral partner. Hirak demonstrators do not appreciate its unconditional support for the Tebboune regime; Beijing has ambitions for Algerian fossil resources. The Sino-African idyll also knows its limits in China. In the city of Guangzhou, the African diaspora, suspected of being carriers of the coronavirus, complains of discrimination - eviction from housing and bans on entering restaurants. (Frédéric Lemaître, « [Coronavirus: Africans in Canton suffer from stigmatization](#) », *Le Monde*, April 14, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> « Mohammed VI proposes to his African allies a joint anti-Covid initiative-19 », *ledesk.ma*, April 13, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Abdelali Belghiti Alaoui, « [Investing in health security, now more than ever before](#) », Policy Center for the New South, April 13, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> « ما يدوم حال » *ma yadum hal*, literally: no state (situation) lasts; implied eternally.



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