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IRAN'S POLICY TOWARD MAGHREB DISPUTES: DIMENSIONS AND LIMITS OF ITS INFLUENCE

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Introduction

The study aims to identify the nature of Iran's policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over Western Sahara. For decades, Iran has taken advantage of any intra-Arab dispute to advance its radical project and expand its strategic achievements. In addition, it has advanced its soft and hard power in the Maghreb, with the latter based on its forward defense strategy. The Maghreb region is not excluded from Iranian military options, although the region is not a top priority for Tehran's strategic calculations. However, the Maghreb's geopolitical position as an entry point into Africa and its geographical and demographic linkage to Iran's project in West Africa are all reasons which have motivated Tehran to seek more influence in the region. West Africa has turned into a competitive arena for many emerging regional and international powers. Iran's intervention in the region is based on exploiting intra-Maghreb disputes, particularly the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over Western Sahara.

The study mainly investigates the determinants of Iran's policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute, and attempts to explore the dimensions and objectives behind this dispute. The study is based on an analysis and interpretation of Iran's position on the Western Sahara conflict, and it seeks to examine Iran's expansion of its clout in the Maghreb, particularly in light of its African aspirations. A number of important questions arise: what are the determinants of Iran's policy toward the Arab Maghreb countries? What are the limits of Iran's penetration into this region? What is the reality of Maghreb-Iranian relations amid the Algerian-Moroccan dispute? What are the implications of the Moroccan-Israeli rapprochement on Iran's policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute? And how will Iranian policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute be influenced against the backdrop of current developments? The study attempts to answer the aforementioned questions through discussing four topics: the determinants of Iran's policy toward the Arab Maghreb countries in light of its sectarian and geopolitical considerations; second, Maghreb-Iranian relations amid intra-Maghreb differences (the Algerian-Moroccan dispute as an example); third, Moroccan-Israeli rapprochement and growing Iranian ambitions; and fourth, the future of Iranian policy toward Maghreb disputes against the backdrop of current developments.

The Determinants of Iran's Policy Toward the Maghreb in Light of Its Sectarian and Geopolitical Considerations

Iran-Maghreb relations differ from Tehran's relations with the countries of the Arab Mashreq. This is due to a number of causes and motives, particularly Iran's sectarian motives and its Persian nationalism. The Arab Mashreq countries currently view Iran as a historical opponent that has a strong attachment to the Persian Empire and a country that has numerous geopolitical and strategic bases, making it a greater threat than any other. This historical context and background is missing from the determinants of Iran-Maghreb relations. The countries in the Maghreb achieved independence from European colonial countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Iran-Maghreb relations took off after the 1979 Iranian revolution.

After the fall of the shah's government, fluctuation has been the main feature of Iran-Maghreb relations. Differences have characterized Iran's relations with each of the Maghreb countries; bilateral relations with Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Mauritania have differed depending on factors such as interests, context, and time. Some factors explaining Iran's varied relations include the position of the Maghreb countries on the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War as well as Iran's position on domestic and regional disputes in the Maghreb.

Iran-Algeria relations have experienced a number of transformations. Relations between the two sides started with Iran's political support for the Algerian revolution against French colonialism, resulting in close relations between the two countries post-independence. Friendly relations were reflected in many files, particularly the success of Algerian mediation between Iran and Iraq, culminating in the 1975 Algiers Agreement. Algeria's balanced position during the Iran-Iraq War maintained relations between Algiers and Tehran. After 1979, the change of Iran's political system did not impede bilateral relations. However, Iran's position on the cancellation of the 1992 Algerian legislative elections was a key turning point in Iran-Algeria relations leading to diplomatic relations being severed between the two sides. This coldness between the two lasted for nearly a decade and did not end until Abdelaziz Bouteflika took over the Algerian presidency. Iran-Algeria relations entered a phase of relative stability against the backdrop of Algeria's regional calculations and its need to establish a balance with Tehran considering its commitments in the Arab sphere. In addition, the resetting of relations was based on Algerian national interests and international calculations. Algeria's relations with Iran and other pivotal Islamic countries such as Turkey are often seen in the context of its longstanding thorny issues with France because of Paris' past occupation of Algerian territories. France has similar issues with the other Maghreb countries.⁽¹⁾

Although the 1979 revolution is a key factor in the history of Iran-Maghreb relations, Iran-Morocco relations have experienced various transformations. The shah's government was close to the Moroccan monarchy because of their proximity in political identity and loyalty to the West. However, Morocco's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War was critical in determining Iran's position on the Sahara dispute. These files have always overshadowed Iran-Morocco relations, resulting in cautious rapprochement or tension. The decades of consensus during the Pahlavi dynasty marked the greatest period of warmth between the two sides. This period of consensus ended after the 1979 revolution; Morocco was the first destination for the shah after fleeing Iran. The level of relations between the two sides drastically declined, reflected in the appointment of a chargé d'affaires by both countries. After Morocco supported Iraq in the war with Iran, the latter responded by officially recognizing the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people. This Iranian position contributed to diplomatic relations severing between the two sides in January 1981; this severance in relations lasted for 10 years. Relations resumed in 1991, however, they were characterized by a cautious rapprochement. Then, relations were severed again in 2009 but resumed in 2015 only to be severed once again in 2018 due to Iran's support for the Polisario, according to Morocco's narrative.⁽²⁾

Iran's relations with Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania have also been characterized by volatility. Iran-Libya relations were much more stable due to Libya's position on files such as the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. However, Iran's relations with Tunisia and Mauritania fluctuated between severance and cautious rapprochement.

The Arab Maghreb countries are less aware of the historical concerns of the Arab Mashreq countries; the latter remain doubtful about Iran and its motives. The Maghreb countries have moved toward acceptance of Iran's policy; to play a role in the region through which it can flex its political and strategic weight, allowing it to present itself as a pivotal country in the Middle East, bordering the Arab Mashreq. Iran has a presence in the region, and its future role cannot be erased but it can be arranged within the framework of acceptable limitations. However, accepting Iran in the Arab region has been limited due to the tools and objectives of Iranian foreign policy. Most Arab countries, especially those in the Arab Mashreq, perceive Iran as a threat to their national security, with some perceiving Iran as an existential threat.

Many Maghreb countries have severed their relations with Iran at different periods, which were very often based on regional calculations and Iran's position on regional conflicts in the Maghreb; most prominently the Sahara conflict and Iran's approach to the internal affairs of the Maghreb countries. Iran's approach triggered suspicions because it reflected its attempts to expand its soft power through promoting Shiism — a sectarian determinant in its foreign policy. The Maghreb countries completely reject Iran's attempt to spread Shiism. However, the Maghreb position is not related to its opposition to Iran's influence in the region. The Maghreb countries sometimes adopt stances against Iran as part of their political coordination with the Arab powers such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Their stances usually do not impact Iran-Maghreb relations.⁽³⁾

Shiism: An Explanatory Approach to Iranian Policy Toward the Maghreb Countries

Shiism has been one of the most important determinants of Iranian foreign policy since the 1979 revolution, and is one of the major drivers of Iranian policy in the Islamic world in general and the Arab region in particular. The Maghreb countries are not an exception to this Iranian determinant, although Shiite influence in the Maghreb disappeared centuries ago when the last Shiite emirate dissipated in the region. However, Shiism re-emerged driven by the Iranian project of Wilayat al-Faqih, one of Iran's key tools of penetration. The Arab Spring revolts in Tunisia and Libya jolted the region, and even the Moroccan monarch was forced to pursue political reforms in response to popular protests. In light of these revolts, Iran attempted to exploit the course of events to serve its expansion projects, however, its efforts differed from one country to another.

No official statistics are available to identify the extent of Shiite penetration in the Maghreb countries; however, several reports have warned of a significant increase in the number of Shiites there. Iran's attempts to spread Shiism have been countered by official apparatuses and unofficial entities; government and popular rejection, expressed through religious and political currents. Although the aforementioned have successfully limited the threats of Shiite expansionism in the Maghreb, they did not eliminate it permanently. Shiism still exists on the ground, with the existence of Shiite sleeper cells that increase their activity during periods of political instability as witnessed in Tunisia, Libya, and to a lesser extent in Morocco after the so called "Arab Spring" in 2011. Iran's activities to spread Shiism increased in frequency and quality; under the cover of civil society institutions and private schools such as the Progressive Messengers Association and the Imam Muhammad al-Shirazi Commission in Morocco.⁽⁴⁾

Iranian embassies in the Maghreb support the promotion of Shiism via soft power tools such as the organization of cultural activities and book fairs as well as tourist and commercial exchanges. Tunisia attracted nearly 5,000 tourists in 2015. Iran has always participated in the Annual Book Fair in Rabat, and Algeria and Tunisia have promoted Iranian cinema, which supports the promotion of Shiism via indirect ways. To achieve its sectarian objective, Iran attempts to form regional alliances with economic, cultural and tourist dimensions. This is the case especially with Algeria and Morocco, which are considered a gateway to Western and sub-Saharan Africa. Iran uses this platform to promote its sectarian cultural project in West Africa as well through investments and Shiite missionaries. This promotion of Shiism might explain the diplomatic crises between Iran and a number of Maghreb countries; for example, Algeria deported the Iranian cultural attaché Amir Mousavi in 2018 after he was accused of violating his diplomatic role by supporting the promotion of Shiism in Algeria. It is reported that the number of Shiites in Algeria is approximately between 1,500 and 3,000. The promotion of Shiism is a key soft power tool that Iran depends on to promote its sectarian project in the Maghreb; this has been authorized at the highest levels of decision-making in Tehran. In his speech marking the occasion of Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, in March 2014 Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said, "I have named this year 'The Year of Economy and Culture with National Determination and Jihadi Management.'" In his speech, he focused on the influential impact of culture on Iran's expansionist project.⁽⁵⁾

The Pragmatic Dimension Amid Iranian Geopolitical Calculations Toward the Maghreb Countries

Iranian policy toward the Maghreb countries can be best described as a mixture of "sectarianism and pragmatism," given the duality of "religion

and interest.” Iran seeks to extend its sectarian influence in the Maghreb countries and link it to its larger sectarian project in West Africa. Meanwhile, Iranian geopolitical and geostrategic calculations are not devoid of benefits for Iran’s soft and hard power alike. Northern and West Africa, traditional French spheres of influence, have become an arena for competition between the major powers: the United States, Russia and China and emerging regional powers such as Turkey, India and Israel. Therefore, Iran is striving to find a foothold in this region and link it to its geostrategic spheres of influence in West Africa. Figures show that nearly 7 million people have embraced Shiism in the Maghreb. Iran has worked to secure a foothold there through relying on the Shiite community through politicizing and militarizing it, like the Nigerian Hezbollah. This promotion of Shiism is part of Iran’s security doctrine which is based on its “forward defense strategy.” The aim is to turn many countries, especially the Arab ones, into Iran’s front line of defense in line with its national security considerations. The Maghreb countries can provide Iran with several economic investment opportunities, starting with energy, a strong area of cooperation with Algeria and Libya, to tourism, a hallmark of its relationship with Tunisia and Morocco. Iran’s geostrategic calculations have always linked its pragmatic ambitions in the Maghreb to its deeper aspirations in West Africa, which is rich in resources such as oil, gas, uranium, gold and precious metals, estimated at about \$13 trillion, according to studies by Africa Group and Africa Investor. The heavy presence of Hezbollah (the Lebanese version) and businesspeople closely associated to it, reflect the proliferation of Shiite networks in West Africa. They actually control the trade of gold and diamonds as well as many other precious metals in several African countries. The economic dimension is still present in the Maghreb countries, including West Africa, therefore, the sectarian and pragmatic dimensions of Iran continuously integrate, with campaigns to promote Shiism happening alongside investment and economic initiatives.⁽⁶⁾

Maghreb-Iran Relations Amid Intra-Maghreb Disputes (Algerian-Moroccan)

When speaking of bilateral relations between Iran and the Maghreb countries, Iran’s relations with Algeria and Morocco automatically come to the fore as a measure for many Iranian geostrategic and geopolitical considerations. Algeria is a gateway to Africa and is the largest and most pivotal Maghreb country; geographically it comprises 2.4 million square kilometers of land, and demographically it has a population of 50 million people. Algeria holds an estimated 12 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves, proven gas reserves of about 2.4 trillion cubic meters, a population of 45 million people and has the largest phosphate reserves in the world (70 percent of global reserves), and the majority of these reserves are in the Sahrawi region, which has been riven

by chronic conflict for nearly half a century. Morocco enjoys similar strategic privileges to that of Algeria.

The aforementioned facts have many political and strategic implications for Iran's relations with Algeria and Morocco as they are the two main countries for Tehran's foreign policy approach in the Maghreb. The political differences between Algeria and Morocco over many files, particularly the Sahara file and its regional and international repercussions, have contributed to making these two countries of great significance for Iran. These differences aid the penetration of many regional and international powers that seek to find and expand their spheres of influence in the Maghreb, similar to Iran and Israel. This quest for spheres of influence is fixed in Iran's strategy. This is evident not only in the Maghreb but also in other strategic circles, where Iran seeks to expand its influence by exploiting inter-state differences.

The Western Sahara Conflict: Iran's Gateway to the Maghreb

After the Iranian revolution and in February 1980, Iran officially announced its recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and the Polisario Front in the midst of strained relations between Iran and Morocco. Iran officially announced that it would not exploit the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over the Western Sahara conflict to enhance its strategic objectives. Iranian officials reiterated this position on several occasions, emphasizing Iran's desire to find a political solution to resolve the dispute. However, these assurances did not convince Morocco, which has always been suspicious of Iran's role in this file. The reality on the ground proves undoubtedly that Iran, amid the current regional and global balances, will not significantly impact the direction of the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over Western Sahara. Iran depends on a number of dimensions to disrupt the aforementioned balances, such as the entry of Israel into the equation after it normalized relations with Morocco in 2020 and the two sides increased security and military cooperation. Iran hopes this development will result in Algeria embracing it much further in the face of Morocco-Israel normalization. Algeria is aware that the nature of Iran's presence in the Maghreb and the current equation will hamper Tehran's role in the Moroccan-Algerian dispute. This does not mean that Iran will not exploit the differences between Morocco and Algeria to further its geopolitical goals.

Iran-Algeria relations have been stable since their resumption in 2003. They later developed following the "Arab Spring" in 2011, given their common positions on many regional issues. The dynamics of Iran-Algeria relations are influenced by three main determinants as follows:

■ **Regional and international:** Algeria finds it necessary to balance between its relations with Iran and its commitments to the Arab countries — while ensuring its relations with Iran do not clash with anti-Iran Western countries.

■ **National interests:** Algeria uses its relations with Iran to confront international powers such as France and the United States which support Morocco in the Western Sahara conflict.⁽⁷⁾

■ **Algerian ruling elite:** This determinant relies on the extent to which Algeria's ruling elite, especially the Francophones, accept rapprochement with Iran. This determinant is one of the main obstacles that thwart Iran's economic penetration and share of investments in Algeria, like Turkey and China — which have significantly increased their investments.

Morocco-Iran relations were marked with tension even during periods of cautious rapprochement. Relations between the two sides were severed many times due to Iranian interference in Moroccan internal affairs by supporting Shiism and the Polisario Front. Some believe that Morocco wants to use this Iranian card to gain the support of the Gulf countries led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in many files, most notably the Western Sahara file and to obtain greater support from Western powers led by the United States. Morocco-Israel normalization in 2020 is not free of the aforementioned goals. The severance of Morocco-Iran relations since 2018 have only been limited to Moroccan strategic calculations, especially on the Western Sahara case. Morocco's bond with Iran historically and culturally is much deeper than Iran's bond with the rest of the Maghreb countries, even if political interactions do not reflect this bond currently due to the regional situation that has blocked this rapprochement between the two sides. The current conditions leave Morocco in dire need of improving its relations with the Gulf countries, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, much more than its need to establish strategic relations with Iran. Morocco is betting on strong French and American support regarding the Western Sahara conflict. All these factors will contribute to the total severance of relations between Morocco and Iran.

Algerian-Moroccan Differences and Conflicting Perspectives on the Boundaries of Iran's Penetration

In 2009, Morocco severed its relations with Iran for several reasons including Iran's statements about Bahrain and Morocco, accusing Iran of interfering in its internal affairs. The severance of relations has again come to the fore after Morocco accused Iran of militarily supporting the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian embassy in Algeria.⁽⁸⁾ This infuriated Algeria, which officially replied that Morocco had no right to involve Algeria as a party to the crisis between itself and Iran and it had no right to interfere in Algeria's diplomatic and internal affairs. Algeria-Iran relations are normal; they can be stable and at other times strained, just like any other bilateral relationship. Algeria believes that Morocco is not really concerned about Algeria-Iran relations. According to the Algerian point of view, Morocco exploits Algeria-Iran relations to strengthen its position on the Western Sahara conflict in the eyes

of international powers. Morocco aims, as Algeria claims, to gain the sympathy of Iran's rivals so they support Morocco in its confrontation against Algeria. It is worth noting that Morocco's timing of severing ties with Iran is not a mere coincidence. Its accusations against Iran of supporting the Polisario Front through Hezbollah are not new. Therefore, Algeria raises questions about the timing of cutting off relations and the accusations levelled against it.⁽⁹⁾

According to one of its leaders Abi al-Bashir, the Polisario Front denied Moroccan accusations of its cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah. He added that Iran is one of the 80 countries in the world that recognizes the Sahrawi Republic, and it does not receive any support from Iran other than political support. He accused Morocco of using this card to get closer to the Trump administration as well as by preparing the ground for normalizing its relationship with Israel. Iran also denied Moroccan accusations about the reasons behind its severance of relations with Tehran. Iran believes that Morocco's goal behind cutting relations goes beyond what has been officially declared, given the fact that Iran's position on the Western Sahara conflict has not changed for a long time.⁽¹⁰⁾

According to the aforementioned discussion, it seems quite unlikely that a settlement of the Algeria-Morocco disagreement on the Western Sahara conflict will be reached given the fact that each party to the conflict adheres to its position. The Polisario Front insists on holding a referendum for self-determination. On the other hand, Morocco categorically rejects this referendum by insisting on its approach to end the dispute, the autonomy of Western Sahara, which is rejected by the Polisario Front. Amid this controversy, the region appears likely to be a hotbed for foreign interventions, and Iran is not far away from taking advantage, especially given the growing Israeli presence via the normalization of Morocco-Israel relations, and the desire of the current Iranian government led by President Ebrahim Raisi to increase Iran's presence and expand it to include the security and military aspects in Africa in general, rather than only limited to the cultural, sectarian and economic aspects that were prevalent in its relations with Africa during the period of Rouhani's government.⁽¹¹⁾

Morocco-Israel Rapprochement and Iran's Growing Ambitions for Penetration

In the first official remarks of an Arab official to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the political arm of the Israeli lobby in the United States, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita stated on May 5, 2021 that Morocco and Israel need to "work as allies," adding that "there is no limit" for Israeli-Moroccan ties.⁽¹²⁾ Some argue that such remarks reflect the progression in Morocco-Israel relations; they have gone beyond the limits of normal diplomatic relations. It is believed that Morocco's dependence on Israeli lobbies in many Western countries is to place pressure on Western

governments so that they are in line with Morocco's position on the Western Sahara conflict. According to Algeria, Morocco-Israel relations have gone beyond mere security and military cooperation; it views their relations as a threat to its national security.

Although Morocco has successfully achieved strategic benefits through its alliance with Israel, such as changing Washington's position, with it adopting the Moroccan position to end the Western Sahara conflict during the Trump administration, this alliance risks escalating tensions further with Algeria. This alliance is one of the most important reasons which prompted Algeria to sever its relations with Morocco in the summer of 2021, especially given the hostility of Israel to Algeria due to its historical and immediate position on the Arab-Israel conflict, and the active role of Algeria in curbing joint Israeli-Moroccan efforts to accept Israel's membership in the African Union as an observer country; an Israeli aspiration for more than two decades. Algeria perceives the Israeli security and intelligence presence on its western border as one of the threats to its national security and political stability, especially amid the growing security and military cooperation between Morocco and Israel and the visits of senior Israeli intelligence and military leaders to Morocco and the signing of a number of agreements.⁽¹³⁾ The last visit by Israeli Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi was on July 18, 2022, and the two parties signed defense agreements. It was preceded by a visit of Defense Minister Benny Gantz on October 24, 2021, and the two parties signed a security agreement which Israel has never signed with any other Arab country according to Western reports.⁽¹⁴⁾

Accordingly, in light of these facts, Iran is keen to exploit Algerian-Moroccan differences over the Western Sahara conflict to penetrate the Maghreb countries. Therefore, Iran will have an opportunity to present itself as one of the alternatives at Algeria's disposal to confront the Morocco-Israel alliance. Algeria has so far not shown great enthusiasm to increase the current level of interactions with Iran to include security and military cooperation similar to Morocco's relations with Israel. However, the future cannot be predicted due to the current ambiguity about the repercussions and nature of the risks of Israel's presence on Algeria's western border.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Future of Iran's Policy Toward the Algerian-Moroccan Dispute Amid the Current Developments

The current Algerian-Moroccan dispute does not reflect the common bonds of their peoples. The dispute over the Western Sahara has attracted the attention of regional powers that foster strategic aspirations to expand their spheres of influence in the region. Iran has aimed to expand its radical project based on the dualism of sectarianism and pragmatism, and it is fully aware that the Algerian-Moroccan dispute is one of the most important tools for extending its influence into the Maghreb region, which

is an important link to its project in West Africa. Iran has become more interested in securing further influence in the Maghreb following the Israeli presence there which it deems as a destabilizing factor in the region; especially in light of the growing political, military and security alliance between Morocco and Israel. Their cooperation has been practically translated into agreements and mutual visits. Israel and Iran are seeking to exploit the Algerian-Moroccan dispute and turn it into another proxy war scenario for the sake of their respective strategic interests. The current developments, including the severance of Moroccan-Algerian relations since the summer of 2021 and the Israeli presence, which has fueled the dispute further, are a strategic opportunity for Iran to achieve potential benefits. This opportunity will inevitably become an additional means of pressuring the West that seeks to curb Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Israel is unhappy over Algeria's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict and over its obstruction of Israeli efforts to penetrate the institutions of the African Union. Therefore, Tel Aviv seeks to inflame Algerian-Moroccan differences. This is of common interest for both Israel and Iran though this common interest takes different forms. Israel, through its explicit alliance with Morocco, openly supports Morocco against Algeria. This was evident in their normalization process. Iran is cautious in declaring its goals, mainly due to the Arab and international commitments to which Algeria attaches importance when managing its relations with Iran.

The rising conflict between Algeria and Morocco will clearly have consequences,⁽¹⁶⁾ especially as regional parties to this conflict, led by Israel and Iran, fuel this conflict and the Arab fold is unable to resolve this conflict. This escalation will encourage the ambitions of those wishing to exploit this conflict, serving only their interests. Iran urgently wishes that the current developments will push Algeria to warm to it, allowing both sides to expand their areas of convergence in defiance of the Morocco-Israel alliance, which seems to have advanced since normalization. If the two brotherly countries do not reconsider their visions to forge new understandings that help resolve their differences and if the position of Arab countries, especially the pivotal Arab countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, do not counter Iran's ambitions and even Israel's ambitions, the status quo may escalate into a proxy war given the current strategic developments. Algeria believes that the Morocco-Israel rapprochement poses a threat to its national security. On the other hand, Morocco thinks that Iran is seeking to achieve a rapprochement with Algeria through the Western Sahara conflict. Therefore, the region will potentially be on the verge of entering a proxy war in which Iran and Israel will aim to settle their strategic scores.⁽¹⁷⁾

Conclusion

The inter-Maghreb differences, particularly the Algerian-Moroccan dispute, are an ideal opportunity for Iran to increase its penetration into the Maghreb region and link it to its sphere of strategic influence in West Africa. This will inevitably prepare the ground for a crescent similar to the “Shiite crescent” in the Arab Mashreq, but with bolder goals since the African crescent will be closer to Europe, which seeks to preserve its traditional influence in North and West Africa, after the region has emerged as a hotbed of regional and international competition between many powers: the United States, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and India. Israel’s entry into the equation after it normalized its relationship with Morocco has made the situation worse. This alliance has changed the traditional balance in the region, which has continued since the outbreak of the Western Sahara conflict in 1975 after Spain left the region. This new situation, i.e., the new balance of power, will inevitably provide a new opportunity for Iran to penetrate the region by either consolidating its relations with the Polisario Front, which aspires for developments to take place in this longstanding conflict — especially after the US recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020. Iran is also betting on enhancing its relations and the scope of its cooperation with Algeria in light of new developments. Unlike Rouhani, Raisi works effortlessly to expand Iran’s influence outside its traditional spheres of influence within the Arab world and is now much more aggressive in its regional and international efforts to achieve further influence, especially in Africa and the Maghreb countries.

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