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ARAB MAGHREB UNION-SADR EQUATION: A Moroccan Opening?

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CEN-SAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States
EU	European Union
SADR	Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
UMA	Arab Maghreb Union
UN	United Nations
US	United States

Introduction

Now that Morocco is back in the African Union (AU) without ousting the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), can the *Arab Maghreb Union* (UMA) finally become an operational reality? Can the AU make this happen by striking an historic Western Sahara compromise between the pan-African defragmenting imperative of regional and continental integration and self-determination? That is, bearing in mind Africa needs no additional states in what continually reaffirms Europe's partitioning of the continent.

Elevating the UMA dimension of the stalemated Western Sahara equation has enormously strategic implications for the broader Mediterranean security environment in urgent need of stabilization: a *Trans-Mediterranean Zone of Peace and Cooperation between Africa and Europe*? Moreover, in the absence of a functioning UMA, the continent remains de facto partitioned between a 'North Africa', which, in western foreign ministries is bureaucratically consigned to the Middle East, and a Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) with its own 'Africa bureaus.' Will this anomaly and affront to pan-Africanism ever end? Just maybe, the time has arrived – or has it?

Rabat revisits AU membership

Morocco's AU re-entry over the opposition of the Sahrawi republic's chief backers, South Africa and Algeria, at the January 2017 Addis Ababa summit was a missed opportunity by Tshwane and Algiers. It brought with it major collateral damage in the form of their eroded positioning in the interregional balance of forces within the AU. France was the major beneficiary.

The Addis showdown could and should have served as a strategic opportunity for reviving UMA prospects. This could have been in the form of a compromise over the Western Sahara had it not been for Morocco's bid and Tshwane-Algiers resistance remaining stuck in the zero-sum/win-lose pattern that has prevented resolution of this, Africa's last colonial issue. As such, the opportunity remains and should not be missed by South Africa and other interested stakeholders in breaking the log-jam on the stalemated status of Western Sahara, an expansive territory populated by little more than 200,000 people.
After all, the SADR remains in the AU; that is, although Morocco is certain to mount a campaign to oust it, an eventuality that should be resolutely pre-empted by a more creatively crafted strategy than what has proved a loser that can only lose more. Morocco's AU membership is irreversible. It is .not likely Rabat will revert back to the exit any time soon.

Paris won't let it! However, if South Africa, Algeria and the Sahrawi's are to avoid an eventual route and, in the process, recoup lost strategic ground within the AU, they will have to seriously rethink some untenable realities amid prospects for win-win possibilities that strengthen Africa by enhancing regional and continental integration. Basic questions need to be posed.

Should a vast territory comprising a tiny population of 200,000 be recognized as a sovereign nation-state in a continent stymied by weak to failing to failed states? Think South Sudan. Think The Gambia. Think Burundi. On the other hand, should Morocco's re-entry into AU membership become prelude to AU recognizing its contested occupation of Western Sahara in the absence of a solution reconciling the pan-African integration imperative in reviving the UMA as the AU's missing pillar while accommodating the legitimate self-determinative interest of Sahrawis?

Clearly, Rabat's economic diplomacy on the continent has paid geopolitical dividends. Many in Africa want Morocco in, instead of out of the AU. But are they really convinced that this should be at the expense of the Sahrawis? Sahrawi self-determinative aspirations cannot be ignored. Unresolved, they could become yet one more destabilizing factor in the Maghreb should Polisario resume an armed struggle of anti-colonial resistance. Do the Sahrawi's aspirations not deserve being seriously addressed in the interest of enhancing regional stability on the southern side of a troubled Mediterranean?

The question is whether these aspirations should be addressed in the conventional manner of 'flag independence' as yet another mini-state contributing further to AU fragmentation – or be harmonized with what ought to become uppermost priority: regional and continental integration. To be sure, the Sahrawi do not deserve being incorporated into Morocco against their will. But do they qualify as a sovereign nation-state, further complicating Africa's Berlin inheritance, and in a region abutting the troubled Mediterranean?

It is this unexamined conundrum that keeps the UMA hostage to non-functionality at a time when it is in the urgent security interests of the AU and the European Union (EU) on both sides of the Mediterranean for there to be an operational regional economic community in the Maghreb. Bringing an end to this state of affairs is long-overdue in arriving at a compromise; it should, among other things, first and foremost, finally activate the AU's non-functioning regional pillar in North Africa.

If such a prospect can be negotiated through some creative bargaining by the AU and other parties that reconciles Morocco's re-entering into the African fold in a manner addressing the Sahrawi-UMA equation, two significant achievements will be realized.

For starters, the de facto division of the continent into Sub-Saharan Africa/North Africa will come to an end. Second, a functioning UMA will constitute the AU's first step toward becoming an equal partner with the EU in stabilizing the trans-Mediterranean security challenge. A functioning UMA should emerge into a position wherein it fulfills its role as the AU's geographic pillar for fostering regional cooperation and ultimate integration in the Maghreb – and the Maghreb's integration with the rest of Africa. Morocco then can serve as a credible 'Eurafrican' bridge between Africa and Europe, possibly as an associate member of the EU which it once wanted to join (and possibly still does?).

Filling this vacuum can also allow the installing of an associated security architecture in the same manner existing with other regional economic communities within the AU. But for such a scenario to unfold, a face-saving formula unshackling the UMA to play its rightful role must happen: breaking the three-way stalemate over the status of Western Sahara between Morocco, Algeria and the territory's presumptively sovereign nation-state – the SADR with its armed wing, the Polisario Front.

Balancing priorities toward synthesis

The Western Sahara challenge for the AU – and South Africa and Algeria – with Rabat readmitted, is to determine where the balance of priority should reside between the UMA and the SADR. In 2017, the imperatives of regional security and integrationist defragmentation should take precedence over narrowly conceived 'self-determination' so that the latter priority achieves self-governing reality within the context of kick-starting integration in advancing a pan-Africanist stabilization of the Maghreb. This will benefit the continent as a whole. In other words, the status of the UMA needs to take equal if not greater priority over strictly defined SADR 'sovereignty' while accommodating SADR self-governing autonomy: not under Morocco but under the UMA. In other words, what might be debated is the dovetailing of regional integration and self-determination into an SADR that is afforded special status within the Maghreb and the AU as the Arab Maghreb Union Sahrawi Republic.

The Sahrawi would enjoy sovereignty in everything but name in what, politically, would have to reflect a tripartite agreement between themselves and Algeria as well as Morocco tying SADR status to that of the Arab Maghreb Union. What might this entail?

The outlines of SADR-UMA linkage might involve headquartering UMA in the Western Sahara, with this region being recognized within the Maghreb and the AU as a UMA autonomous region or territory governed by the SADR. Conversely, the UMA would be headquartered in the SADR.

SADR would, in turn, be vested with a dual governing function: jointly governing the UMA as an AU regional economic and security community in tripartite consultation with Algiers and Rabat – cooperative regional governance; and governing itself as an autonomous (not sovereign) nation-state within the UMA and the AU. As such, with Morocco rejoining the AU, the SADR would continue retaining its seat under the UMA banner.

Rabat's pre-condition that its readmission be accompanied by AU suspension of the SADR was always a nonstarter and should remain so now that Morocco has rejoined without SADR's expulsion. Rather, Morocco should be encouraged to begin a process of negotiation wherein the AU sets terms of reconciliation between itself, SADR and Algeria.

The forgoing is purely an illustrative outline of how activating the UMA and confirming Sahrawi self-determination might dovetail into a settlement that, hopefully, everyone might be able to live with as opposed to all sides holding out for a zero-sum, win-lose solution that no one can realize and that fails to stabilize the Maghreb and the southern Mediterranean. The only AU member that might be best positioned to navigate such a UMA-SADR convergence is South Africa which, as leading continental out-of-area actor, should still, post-Dlamini-Zuma's AU chairmanship, enjoy sufficient credibility with all three claimants to nurture and broker a settlement that passes AU muster. Indeed, undertaking this should be integral to its BRICS Africa strategy.

To be sure, Morocco's re-entry into the AU has strained relations between Rabat and Tshwane. However, for Tshwane, will it be able to nuance its support for SADR, its close relations with Algeria in restoring relations with Morocco sufficiently to bridge the divide between them and that which has opened up within the AU on recognizing or de-recognizing SADR?

Conclusion: A role for South Africa?

Were South Africa willing and able to negotiate a compromise bridging the Moroccan-SADR/Algeria divide, it could go a long way toward restoring its African diplomatic credentials as the continent's default leader. In the process, should a

UMA-SADR synthesis emerge, this could potentially result in a stabilizing game changer for regional and trans-Mediterranean security in the Maghreb. The ultimate goal: a Eurafrican 'Zone of Peace and Cooperation' architecture for the Mediterranean. There is no reason, for example, why, with an autonomous Sahrawi republic headquartering the UMA, the Polisario Front could not form the military nucleus of a *Regional Stabilization Force* within the AU's still underdeveloped peace and security architecture with the Eurafrican interregional security cooperation potential that might derive from such a development.

This would refill the vacuum left by the destabilizing western ouster of Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi. Qaddafi, with his Sudano-Sahelian CEN-SAD grouping, exercised an inherently unstable dominance throughout the Sahara and borderlands. This also precluded the UMA. Revealingly, the western-Arab League alliance against Qaddafi exposed the failure in mobilizing an AU-Arab League Libyan strategy that might have been facilitated had there existed a functioning UMA as a regional pillar of linkage between the AU and Arab League.

Western intervention could have been pre-empted and channeled in support of an Afro-Arab Libyan peace initiative. But what might have been remains relevant in post-Qaddafi regional instability affecting the trans-Mediterranean. Thus, the UN, U.S and European interlocutors on the Western Saharan stalemate have a major stake in a UMA-Sahrawi breakthrough. But that breakthrough has to be an African midwifed by Africa.

Indeed, with a functioning UMA in place, the stage might eventually be set for establishment of an *AU-EU Permanent Joint Commission on Mediterranean Security and Economic Cooperation* as the oversight mechanism governing a 'Zone of Peace and Cooperation' architecture. Hence, Morocco's AU re-entry without SADR suspension could very well turn out to be the tip of an Afro-Mediterranean 'iceberg' advancing peace and security if sufficient political and diplomatic will and creativity is ever mustered to settle Africa's last remaining colonial inheritance.

The stakes for Africa could not be higher in an era of global economic integration where the sovereignty of nation-states is eroding amid the emergence of continental, subcontinental and regional economic blocs, the crisis of EU integration notwithstanding. Multipolarity is effectively regionalizing along global federalist lines. Within this unfolding scenario, Africa must decide for itself on what terms its insertion into the evolving global economy and security framework

will be confirmed by, especially given its demographic expansion beyond 2 billion after 2050 and how these trends will be interregionally governed in a changing multilateral global order. For Africa, the 2063 goal should be that of achieving Continental Sovereignty. This is why the missing link of the Maghreb must be rediscovered in the sands of the Western Sahara in an Algeria-Morocco-SADR compromise.