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Regional implications of the first border crossing between Algeria and Mauritania

On 19th August the Algerian Minister of Interior Noureddine Bedoui and his Mauritanian counterpart Ahmedou Ould Abdallah inaugurated the first border crossing between the two neighbouring countries since their independence. The crossing, named after the Algerian revolutionary fighter Mustapha Ben Boulaïd and situated near the PK (*Point Kilometre*) 75 south of Tindouf, was agreed during the 18th Algerian-Mauritanian High Joint Commission held on 20th December 2016 in Algiers. The cooperation agreement signed on 22nd March 2018 officially laid the basis of the project, which links the Algerian city of Tindouf to the Mauritanian city of Zouérat, facilitating the movement of people and goods and stimulating bilateral trade [*Bedoui et son homologue mauritanien inaugurent le nouveau poste frontalier*, 19 August 2018, APS].

During the inauguration Bedoui insisted on the economic aspects of the infrastructure, calling on Algerian businessmen to increase trade and economic relations with Mauritania. The head of the local daïra (administrative subdivision) in Tindouf Abdelhak Bouziane said that the new border crossing would create a new economic dynamic, promoting the development of the remote regions of both countries. The head of the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry Abiri Nouh also remarked that Algerian companies will now be able to access the West African markets, pushing their presence up to Senegal and Gambia [*Lilia Ait Akli, L'Algérie s'ouvre vers l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, 19 Aout 2018, Le Jeune Independent].

The economic benefits of the first border crossing between Algeria and Mauritania are not negligible. Recent figures show that trade exchanges between the two countries are insignificant: according to the Observatory for Economic Complexity, in 2016 Algeria imported goods and services for \$264.000 from Mauritania, about 0,0096% of the total export of Nouakchott, well below China (37%), Switzerland (16%) and Spain (9.1%). At the same time, Algeria's export to Mauritania in 2016 was worth \$38.6 million (1,1% of Nouakchott total import), long after China (24%), the United States (8.4%) and the United Arab

Emirates (6.1%). However, trade exchanges increased significantly in 2017, reaching \$50 million and the new border crossing would represent a springboard for bilateral trade.

In the Maghreb region, the low volume of goods and services exchanged reflects the challenging economic integration of the area. Moreover, the inability of Maghreb countries in promoting intra-trade relations also contributed to further marginalise remote areas, especially along their borders. The lack of services and job opportunities in the most impoverished regions of Algeria has recently pushed local residents to stage frequent protests and demonstrations. For instance, on the 13th of August unemployed residents protested in Ouargla, holding banners demanding jobs and threatening to kill themselves [Houria Aliouia, *Tentative de suicide collectif de chômeurs à Ouargla*, 14 Aout 2018, el-Watan]. In July protests have also been held in Béchar over the distribution list of beneficiaries to public housing [*Protestation de la population à Béchar: Le wali s'engage à satisfaire les revendications*, 8 Juillet 2018, Le Quotidien d'Oran]. Aware of the increasing social tensions in the most remote corners of the country, the Algerian government is trying to find viable solutions: during the inauguration of the border crossing, Bedoui said that other projects, such as the Gara Djebilet iron mine in Tindouf, would also be launched soon.

Unemployment and lack of opportunities are also pushing local resident towards more remunerative albeit illicit activities, exacerbating the problems of these areas, where criminal gangs and terrorist organisations are active. In July 2017 Mauritania declared its northern region along the borders with Algeria and Mali a military zone, banning all civilians to enter the area known as a safe haven for smugglers, drug traffickers and terrorist groups [Aboubacar Yacouba Barma, *Sécurité au Sabel: la Mauritanie declare sa frontier avec l'Algérie "zone militaire"*, 17 Juillet 2017, La Tribune Afrique]. In this context, both Bedoui and Ould Abdallah highlighted that the Mustapha Ben Boulaïd border crossing will strengthen the bilateral security cooperation to fight against terrorists and human smuggling networks.

Despite the emphasis on the economic and security aspects of the project, the first border crossing between Algeria and Mauritania has far reaching implications in geopolitical terms. The project sees the light after months of tensions between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara, the disputed territory a few km away from the new border crossing. Since last year Rabat has launched a diplomatic offensive in the African continent that resulted in its membership of the African Union (AU) and a request to join the *Communauté Economique des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (CEDEAO). Moreover, Morocco is also trying to repair its relations with Mauritania, damaged after years of tensions between Rabat and Nouakchott. Indeed, in June 2018 Morocco's new ambassador to Mauritania Hamid Chabar finally presented his credentials to President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz [*Hamid Chabar dans ses fonctions d'ambassadeur à Nouakchott*, 20 Juin 2018, Le Desk]. In December 2017 Mauritania also appointed a new ambassador to Rabat for the first time since 2012.

Considering the diplomatic activism of Rabat, the détente between Mauritania and Morocco is a dangerous trend for the Algerian government. Following the fall of Mokhtar Ould Daddah's regime, Nouackhott had good relations with Algiers, representing the only reliable partner along its western borders. For this reason, the opening of the first border crossing between Algeria and Mauritania seemed long overdue for Algiers, not only to increase its trade with an important partner, but also as a way of ideally containing Morocco's economic and political dynamism in West Africa.

Umberto Profazio – *Holds a PhD in History of International Relations from the University of Rome Sapienza. He is ACD Analyst for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London and a Security Analyst for a consultancy firm based in the United Kingdom.*