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« The Maghreb : Maritime and port overview »

Occupying the southwest corner of the Mediterranean basin and acting as a privileged partner for Europe, the Maghreb has been confronted, since its independence, with the necessity of deploying the maritime and port tools required by its economies. Geography, history, and politics have produced three economically distinct nations, yet whose maritimity represents the sole corridor for foreign trade. The small nation of Tunisia and the larger territory of Morocco, despite limited raw materials, chose to forge strong structural links with Europe. Algeria, wealthy from its hydrocarbons, remains far from this model and must still tackle numerous challenges for the future. Not always fortunate in their maritime history, all three countries seek to capitalize on their port positions within the Mediterranean corridor. Morocco aims to leverage the success of Tanger Med, while its neighbors dream of establishing large-scale hubs of international standing. This section outlines the maritime and port landscape of the Maghreb.

The hydrocarbon landscape

Upon achieving independence in 1962, Algeria could be considered a country benefiting from several assets within the Southern Mediterranean context: robust agricultural regions, an infrastructure network, a large population concentrated along coastal areas, and promising energy resource prospects. However, an economy deeply marked by socializing state control (*étatisme socialisant*) was never grounded upon a model enabling seamless integration with the neighboring European economy through subcontracting or nearshoring mechanisms. Development consequently relied on hydrocarbon wealth. For sixty years, the oil and gas rent has sustained the economy and preserved social equilibria within frequently highly unfavorable political contexts.

Out of the 120 Mt of cumulative activity across Algerian ports in 2019, hydrocarbon exports accounted for 75 Mt. Nevertheless, for the country, port performance must be measured in terms of value. Much like other petro-economies, every collapse in crude market prices (such as in 2014 and 2020) deals a severe economic blow. For instance, in 2017, foreign exchange revenues from oil and gas exports stood at \$33 billion, whereas in 2020, due to the pandemic crisis, they fell to only \$20.2 billion (oil accounting for \$13.2 billion and gas for \$7 billion), highlighting once again the structural fragility of the Algerian economic model. Naturally, market rates at the end of 2021 have conversely reversed this equation. For the future, Algeria nevertheless projects a decline in its financial revenues for the middle of the current decade, driven by a triple dynamic: stagnating production, weak investment, and growing domestic demand.

Regarding oil, Algeria is an intermediate producer with proven reserves that can be characterized as solid, standing at 12 billion barrels—though by comparison, Libya's reserves reach 48 billion barrels. The country undoubtedly holds unproven reserves, but the exploration of numerous domestic regions has been virtually impossible for years. Exports, executed primarily through the Port of Arzew, have contracted over the past 15 years. Prior to the Covid crisis, they hovered around 30 Mt for crude oil (half of which was bound for Europe) and 25 Mt for refined products. Since the 1960s, Algeria has also relied on gas markets, backed by substantial proven methane reserves. In 2020, Algeria exported nearly two-thirds of its methane to Europe via gas pipelines, though this volume is expected to momentarily contract due to tensions with its Moroccan neighbor, which triggered the closure of one of the three export axes. Marine liquefied natural gas (LNG) transport in 2020 represented 10 Mt, routed through two main gateways: the primary hub of Arzew to the west, equipped with thirteen liquefaction trains, and the secondary facility of Skikda to the east, operating with a single train.

Tunisia is a minor hydrocarbon producer whose gas and oil resources are structurally insufficient. While the nation can hope to prosper through offshore prospecting, these efforts have yielded no concrete results for the time being. Morocco holds no oil resources of its own, and since 2015, its unique domestic

refinery—the SAMIR facility in Mohammedia—has been shut down. The country is consequently a net importer of refined products, absorbing 10 Mt per year.

Nevertheless, Morocco's petroleum dimension is set to shift elsewhere in the coming years. Indeed, a greenfield Moroccan port is being constructed in Betoya Bay in the northeastern Mediterranean under the name Nador West Med, targeting a notable market position in oil supply and storage. The project, initiated in 2012, commenced construction in 2017 and is slated for completion by the end of 2022. According to Moroccan authorities, the new gateway will cost around €500 million and will handle bulk commodities (coal, grain), Ro-Ro traffic, containers, and petroleum products. Equipped with three liquid bulk berths, the site will function as a major storage hub for which the Western Mediterranean market exhibits a clear requirement. Tanger Med already incorporates a small dedicated capacity¹ for trading, importing, and marine bunkering operations. The petroleum cluster at Nador West Med will be scaled up to offer international stakeholders (refiners, traders, and storage operators) capacities at a highly strategic location. When coupled with the capacities of Algeciras and Tanger Med, the Strait of Gibraltar will function as a mini-equivalent to the Pacific logistics zones.

The phosphate economy

North Africa possesses another major resource within its soil: phosphate. Morocco alone holds 72% of global reserves and stands as the world's second-largest extractor behind China. The country naturally initiated an industrial transformation process to process the raw ore locally into fertilizers. Today, the large state-owned enterprise, OCP Group (*Office Chérifien des Phosphates*), derives more than half of its profits from fertilizer exports, reducing raw phosphate and phosphoric acid to 20% and 15% of its portfolio respectively. The ore is extracted from three main zones and handled at a volume of 10 Mt through the ports of Casablanca, Laayoune, Safi, and Jorf Lasfar. However, only the latter two are equipped with dedicated industrial complexes for processing fertilizers (11.8 Mt in 2020) and phosphoric acid (3.5 Mt).

The political and social evolution in Tunisia has severely crippled the phosphate activity within the Gafsa region. The country plummeted from the 5th to the 12th global exporter rank, crashing its production from 8 Mt a decade ago to just 2.7 Mt in 2020. The exporting port of Sfax also houses the chemical cluster dedicated to fertilizers. To the west of Gafsa, but on the Algerian side of the border, lies an extraction site that was slated for a major industrial transformation project—though it is ultimately moving forward without the Chinese partnership that had been announced for some time.

Ro-Ro connectivity and trade links

Morocco has historically maintained an economically open stance, fostering substantial trade with Europe, from agricultural exports to industrial subcontracting flows. The maritime translation of this partnership is clearly visible in the rolling freight traffic of Tanger Med, which handled 357,000 freight units (trailers) in 2020. The vast majority relies on the rapid crossing of the Strait which, when combined with the economic conditions of road transport, makes it exceptionally difficult for alternative short-sea shipping lines to compete. The rollout of La Méditerranée's new maritime line between Marseille and Tanger Med represents a bold operational experiment, especially given that it was launched during the challenging times experienced since 2020.

Tunisia is the smallest nation in North Africa, operating with limited natural resources and export-oriented agriculture. There as well, industrial integration with Europe has been the primary vehicle for development. Numerous European corporations rely on nearshoring and Tunisian subcontracting. While the textile industry has receded, sectors such as chemicals, electrical equipment, and automotive manufacturing continue to fuel trade. In 2019, rolling freight volumes amounted to 148,000 trailers, almost exclusively processed through the port of Radès and split between Marseille and various Italian ports.

In contrast, European roll-on/roll-off (Ro-Ro) traffic flows with Algeria have become marginal. Shippers heavily favor the security of containerization over the logistical hurdles of trailer-based trade with this country. Broadly speaking, the container is far better suited to highly protracted logistical timelines, cargo security, and the physical risks facing unaccompanied trailers. Few dedicated lines remain active (such

¹ Horizon Tangier Terminal SA is owned by Horizon / ENOC (Dubai), Akwa Group (Morocco), and Independent Petroleum Group (Kuwait).

as CMA CGM and Suardiaz), handling diversified rolling cargo, though in 2020, Algérie Ferries announced its intentional repositioning into the freight sector.

The massive success of Tanger Med

Thirty years ago, containerization in North Africa relied on the primary national gateway ports of Radès, Algiers, and Casablanca, predominantly absorbing imported European goods. Since then, globalization has unleashed waves of Asian containers routed through the regional hubs of major ocean carriers. Nevertheless, the port landscape of each country has dramatically diverged. In Algeria, traffic has fragmented across multiple sites; Morocco has equipped itself with a global mega-port, while Tunisia is finally embarking on a new deepwater project.

In Morocco, the port complex of Tanger Med stands out as one of the most spectacular port successes in global maritime history. What Algeciras had achieved on the northern shore by becoming the primary hub for Sea-Land (1975) and subsequently Maersk (1986), Morocco realized it could perfectly replicate on the southern shore of the Strait.

The project was launched in 2003 under the aegis of a dedicated entity, the Tanger Med Special Agency (TMSA), controlled by the Hassan II Fund for Economic and Social Development. TMSA acts simultaneously as the landlord port authority and the driver for the industrial and logistical projects of the zone. The greenfield port commenced operations in 2007, rapidly emerging as a pivotal transshipment hub in the Mediterranean. Equipped with a capacity of 3 million TEUs in its Phase 1, it will unlock an additional 9 million TEUs once Phase 2 is fully operational.

Consequently, the gantry cranes of Algeciras and Tanger Med form the new Pillars of Hercules of the Strait. In terms of operational performance in 2019, Tanger Med recorded 4.8 million TEUs, tracking closely behind Algeciras (5.1 million TEUs). The global health crisis subsequently favored the Moroccan hub through a rationalization of liner services within the Strait, notably because Maersk prioritized its new Moroccan capacities. Tanger Med shattered its operational records last year, reaching 5.7 million TEUs.

The Strait has become a textbook case illustrating the strategic positioning of global stakeholders around major transshipment clusters. Phase 1 of Tanger Med comprised the first two container terminals. The first terminal (TC1) was conceded to Maersk, allowing the Danish giant to anchor itself on the southern shore of the Strait. The second terminal (TC2) was awarded to a trio composed of the German terminal operator Eurogate alongside the ocean carriers MSC and CMA CGM.

Phase 2 of the Tanger Med project served to demonstrate Morocco's massive ambition as well as the intense interest of global shipping giants. Maersk inaugurated an even larger automated terminal (TC4) in 2019. The latest terminal (TC3), which commenced operations in 2021, is structured as an alliance between Eurogate, Hapag-Lloyd, and Marsa Maroc. CMA CGM—which owns one of Casablanca's terminals following its corporate acquisition of COMANAV—did not engage in Tanger Med's Phase 2; however, in 2021, the French carrier acquired a corporate stake in Algeciras's TTIA terminal. As for MSC, it chose to develop its regional hub further north at Sines in southern Portugal.

While Tanger Med operates under the direct authority of TMSA, the remainder of the country's ports falls under the oversight of the National Ports Agency (ANP), with cargo handling and port services managed by Marsa Maroc². The company operates two of Casablanca's three terminals (the latest opened in 2016), where traffic has now reached 1 million TEUs, alongside the Port of Agadir, which specializes in agricultural fruit exports (174,000 TEUs in 2020). Marsa Maroc will also be embedded within all future Moroccan port developments: beyond Nador West Med, this includes the *Safi Grand Vrac* bulk terminal serving the country's central industrial hub, the Dakhla Atlantique deepwater port located in the southernmost region of the country, and finally Kénitra Atlantique, tailored for bulk cargo, energy, and the new PSA automotive plant (2019). For the time being, the export gateway for this automotive production remains Tanger Med, which already handles the vehicular flows of the local Renault-Nissan factory. The 2020 crisis triggered an 18% contraction in this automotive sector, dropping to 358,000 units.

² In 2021, TMSA acquired a 35% stake in Marsa Maroc, becoming the primary shareholder ahead of the Moroccan State. TMSA is also involved with a 49% shareholding in the capital of the Nador West Med Agency.

New port gateways in Algeria and Tunisia

For Algeria, ports have for decades stood out as primary nodes of economic inefficiency and operational bottlenecks. The establishment of inland dry ports (*ports secs*) helped relieve congestion, particularly in Algiers. The expansion of Djen Djen, located east of the capital, was intended to serve this purpose, but the port suffers from notorious design flaws. Furthermore, the 2009 transfer of operational management for two key ports to DP World via joint ventures was expected to optimize efficiencies³, but the Emirati group largely failed in this mission. Corporate relationships between the public entity *Groupe Services Portuaires* (Serport) and DP World remain frequently strained.

Today, Algiers monopolizes half of the national traffic (0.812 million TEUs in 2019), with the remainder distributed among the country's secondary gateways: Oran (0.278 M), Béjaïa (0.243 M), Skikda (0.190 M), and Annaba (0.120 M). The country handles a cumulative total of around 1.7 million TEUs of containerized cargo. Nominally, all national ports are slated to expand their container handling capacities. Given the projected population growth and economic development over the coming decades, port modernization represents an absolute structural necessity.

This modernization strategy centers on a macro-project for a deepwater port at El Hamdania, within the municipality of Cherchell west of Algiers. Launched in 2015, the project was shelved before being reactivated, and is now scheduled for delivery by the middle of the decade under the governance of the *National Agency for the Realization of the Center Port*, established in 2020. The ambition for El Hamdania targets a container gateway boasting a capacity of 6.5 million TEUs, serving both the domestic market and acting as a well-positioned transshipment hub within the Western Mediterranean. Mirroring the Moroccan model, adjacent industrial and logistical free zones coupled with direct highway connectivity are planned. It appears evident that China will be directly involved in this Algerian project. Currently, the \$3.3 billion infrastructure project is announced as being financed through a national investment fund coupled with a credit facility from the Exim Bank of China. A 2016 protocol also binds two Chinese state-owned construction giants: CSCEC, a seasoned actor in Algerian civil engineering contracts, and CHEC, a port construction specialist heavily active across West Africa⁴. The Shanghai-based terminal operating giant SIPG has been repeatedly cited as a potential stakeholder for the future port, which stands as a clear hallmark of the New Silk Roads (*Belt and Road Initiative*) within the Mediterranean basin.

In Tunis, the container terminal of Radès (438,000 TEUs in 2020) suffers from a severe reputation regarding technical unreliability and social labor disputes, structural weaknesses that have favored Ro-Ro traffic from Europe, but also transshipment operations via an MSC Ro-Ro feeder line from Gioia Tauro. In July, CMA CGM suspended its bookings to Radès due to the unacceptable port-call conditions facing its Malta-based feeder vessel.

Fully aware of Radès's structural limitations, Tunisia reactivated its own flagship project: the new port of Enfidha. Initially launched before the 2011 revolution and subsequent political transitions, the project has been revived. The objective is to construct a greenfield deepwater gateway 100 km south of Tunis. The master plan spans a 1,000-hectare port zone coupled with a 2,000-hectare industrial and logistical cluster, slated for construction over ten years at a cost of \$1 billion. Here as well, the goal is to provide the nation with a modern gateway equipped for regional transshipment. The *Enfidha Port Company* is tasked with selecting the primary contractor within a fierce Euro-Chinese corporate competition, targeting a delivery date by 2022.

The relative deficiency of the shipping fabric

Trailers throughout the year and the massive summer transit of Moroccans residing in Europe (650,000 passengers and 180,000 vehicles) feed a substantial ferry market. European shipping lines dominate long-distance corridors (GNV, Grimaldi) as well as the Strait of Gibraltar (Trasmed, Baleària, FRS), yet a Moroccan corporate presence remains. Admittedly, the bankruptcy of COMARIT in 2012, which dragged down COMANAV with it, dealt a severe blow. Since then, the Moroccan presence within the Strait has been reconstituted through two private companies: first with Inter Shipping (2012) and subsequently via Africa Morocco Link (AML) in 2016, structured as a joint venture between the Greek group Attica and the Moroccan bank BMCE. For a time, the Kingdom also possessed an ocean carrier

³ In contrast, since 2005, the management by Portek (Singapore) in the dynamic port of Béjaïa has functioned exceptionally well.

⁴ CHEC is working on infrastructure developments for the Skikda LNG terminal.

specialized in regional feeding (IMTC), but it vanished in 2013. Ultimately, Morocco's relative maritime weakness must be contextualized and balanced against its spectacular port development.

Logistical requirements between Europe and Tunisia feed a high density of traffic, and to secure a degree of control over national trade, Tunisia remains highly protective of its state-owned company. The Tunisian Navigation Company (CTN) operates a fleet of ferries and freight vessels in direct competition with European shipowners (Corsica Linea, CMA CGM, DFDS, Grimaldi, GNV). The company periodically renews its fleet to maintain the quality of its service offering, though the local press regularly highlights labor disputes and social dysfunctions that harm the corporate image of the enterprise.

The Algerian public maritime sector has undergone multiple structural reconfigurations. Within the freight sector, the Algerian Maritime Transport Group (GATMA) controls two distinct entities organized by geographical focus: CNAN Nord and CNAN Med, the latter having become a joint venture with the Italian company Dario Perioli (holding a 49% stake). While GATMA attempts to modernize its fleet, regular port state control detentions of its vessels raise serious questions regarding the operational reliability of the Algerian operators.

The public sector counts two other carriers. The ENTMV (established in 1987), commercially known as Algérie Ferries, operates lines to France and Spain utilizing both chartered and owned vessels—the latest of which was delivered in 2020. The final public actor is Hyproc Shipping Company (1982), which functions as the specialized shipping arm of the national state-owned oil giant Sonatrach, commanding a fleet tailored for petroleum products, bitumen, LPG, and LNG. The landscape is completed by Nolis, a shipping subsidiary of the private industrial conglomerate Cevital, which operates bulk carriers and general cargo ships. Algeria presents a stark contrast with the minuscule share of its national fleet in its overall foreign trade (only 3%). Furthermore, the government occasionally enforces highly restrictive regulations, exasperating international shipowners who historically suffer from the country's logistical hurdles. While these bottlenecks were previously mitigated by the rollout of inland dry ports (ports secs), the latter were summarily shut down by Algerian customs this year, signaling yet another wave of distrust from Algiers toward international maritime transport. Nevertheless, the capacity to (re)build a modern national shipping line remains an exceptionally difficult challenge. Just as in neighboring countries, the focus must undeniably remain on expanding and modernizing the ports, which represent the genuine bottleneck of the nation's economic architecture.

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