

Hybrid Power Dynamics in the Maghreb: Cyber Politics and Narrative Competition in the Algeria–Morocco Rivalry

Original article

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper investigates how hybrid threats—specifically disinformation and cyber strategies—have redefined the geopolitical rivalry between Algeria and Morocco and, by extension, the security architecture of the Maghreb. The study argues that this bilateral competition represents a paradigmatic case of regional hybridization, in which informational and digital instruments are systematically deployed as substitutes for direct military confrontation.

Results: Findings reveal that Algeria and Morocco have progressively institutionalized hybrid statecraft: each integrating disinformation, cyber espionage, and symbolic diplomacy into their foreign and defense policies. Meanwhile, the cyber domain has become a strategic arena in its own right, characterized by escalating espionage, data manipulation, and the growing involvement of external actors such as Russia, China, Israel, and the European Union.

Conclusions: The study concludes that the Maghreb’s security environment is evolving into a Hybrid Security Complex, in which cognitive, informational, and technological dimensions of power are mutually reinforcing. The Algeria–Morocco rivalry exemplifies how hybrid tools can be used to maintain deterrence, contest legitimacy, and shape perceptions without direct kinetic engagement.

Introduction

In the past decade, the Maghreb has emerged as a critical testing ground for the transformation of power in the digital age. The region's long-standing geopolitical rivalry between Algeria and Morocco—historically defined by territorial disputes, regime legitimacy, and competing regional visions—has entered a new strategic phase.

While the conventional dimensions of deterrence and balance of power persist, the rivalry increasingly unfolds through hybrid instruments: disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, symbolic diplomacy, and digital surveillance. These tools extend beyond traditional military confrontation, enabling states to project influence, manipulate perceptions, and erode adversarial credibility across both domestic and international arenas.

This transformation aligns with the global diffusion of hybrid warfare practices, which blur the boundaries between peace and conflict, and between civilian and military domains (Hoffman, 2007; Fridman, 2018; Johnson, 2018). Yet, in the Maghreb context, hybridization is not merely a reflection of global trends but a regionally embedded phenomenon shaped by postcolonial state formation, the authoritarian resilience of political systems, and the informational vulnerabilities that followed the Arab uprisings (Shires, 2021). The region's hybrid dynamics thus emerge from the intersection of regime preservation, geopolitical rivalry, and technological adaptation—a convergence that redefines how security and influence are constructed in North Africa (Boukhars, 2019; Wüst & Nicolai, 2023).

Within this evolving landscape, the Algeria–Morocco dyad functions as both the driver and the mirror of the Maghreb's hybrid security transformation. Their enduring antagonism over Western Sahara, competing alignments with extra-regional actors (Russia, China, Israel, the EU), and contrasting strategic cultures—military-centric in Algeria, diplomatically entrepreneurial in Morocco—have produced a fertile environment for informational and cyber competition. The rivalry's continuation in non-kinetic domains reflects a broader shift from deterrence through force to deterrence through narrative control and technological leverage, where legitimacy and perception become strategic assets. As a result, the Maghreb has evolved into a hybrid security complex—a regional subsystem in which the instruments of conflict have migrated into the cognitive and informational realms, yet remain tethered to geopolitical foundations (Hassan, 2024).

Despite growing attention to hybrid threats in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, scholarly engagement with North Africa's hybrid dynamics remains limited. Existing analyses often treat disinformation and cyber operations as episodic phenomena rather than components of an integrated strategic logic. This paper fills that gap by conceptualizing hybrid rivalry in the Maghreb as a systemic process of regional hybridization, driven by both local competition and global technological diffusion. It contributes theoretically by bridging Hybrid Warfare Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to explain how the Algeria–Morocco competition has reshaped the region's security architecture.

1. From Conventional Deterrence to Hybrid Competition

For much of the post-independence era, the balance of power between Algeria and Morocco was defined by conventional deterrence a strategic logic rooted in territorial defense, military parity, and ideological differentiation. The rivalry was conducted primarily through material capabilities: military modernization, arms procurement, border fortification, and diplomatic posturing. Algeria's large, Russia-equipped army and its doctrine of strategic depth contrasted with Morocco's flexible diplomacy and reliance on Western partnerships. Despite recurrent crises—from the 1963 “War of the Sands” (Torres-Garcia, 2013) to the closure of the land border in 1994—both states maintained an implicit equilibrium that kept direct confrontation below the threshold of open conflict (Zunes & Mundy, 2022). This equilibrium rested on deterrence by denial rather than by punishment, underpinned by the perception that escalation would carry prohibitive costs for domestic legitimacy and regional stability.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 marked a turning point in this strategic configuration. The erosion of state legitimacy, the diffusion of transnational information flows, and the rise of social media transformed not only domestic political landscapes but also the instruments through which states could exercise power (Abozaid, 2023). Both Algeria and Morocco internalized the lesson that control of information could substitute for control of territory. Whereas the pre-2011 security order was premised on material deterrence, the post-2011 environment privileged cognitive deterrence—the ability to shape perceptions, define narratives, and delegitimize adversarial claims. In this new ecosystem, hybrid competition emerged as an adaptive strategy for states constrained by the costs of conventional escalation yet unwilling to relinquish regional primacy (Liu, et al., 2025).

Hybrid competition in the Maghreb manifests not through overt warfare but through what (Hoffman, 2007) termed the “convergence of modes of conflict,” where informational, cyber, and psychological instruments coexist with economic and diplomatic pressures. The Algeria–Morocco case exemplifies this convergence. Each state has learned to operate in a hybrid fashion deploying symbolic and technological tools to advance geopolitical objectives under the guise of routine statecraft. For instance, information manipulation surrounding the Western Sahara question has evolved from traditional propaganda into digitally orchestrated influence campaigns that target both domestic and international audiences. The weaponization of media whether through satellite broadcasting, online portals, or social networks—has enabled both states to perform deterrence through narrative control rather than kinetic demonstration. In effect, deterrence is no longer achieved by the threat of force alone but by the strategic management of perception (Zhang & Caple, 2021).

This transition has been accelerated by the digitization of power. Over the past decade, Morocco's rapid embrace of digital diplomacy and Algeria's parallel investment in cyber-defense capabilities have produced an asymmetric yet interdependent dynamic. As a result, the rivalry has migrated into the informational and cognitive domains, where legitimacy becomes both the target and the weapon.

At the same time, cyber operations have introduced a new layer of strategic ambiguity. Espionage, data leaks, and digital infiltration now function as non-kinetic instruments of coercion and signaling (Rid, 2013). Alleged cyber incidents—including the exposure of government communications, manipulation of social media algorithms, and targeted hacking of state-affiliated entities illustrate a pattern of hybrid deterrence in which cyber vulnerability substitutes for traditional battlefield exposure. The diffusion of cyber capabilities through partnerships with external powers Russia’s defense cooperation with Algeria (Sour, 2024), Israel’s technological transfers to Morocco (Maghraoui, 2025), and China’s expansion in digital infrastructure—further embeds the rivalry within a broader web of transnational technological dependencies. These external linkages simultaneously amplify and constrain regional agency, making the Maghreb an intersectional arena of hybrid influence rather than a self-contained security complex.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Algeria–Morocco case reveals the localization of hybrid warfare in non-European contexts (Gardezabal, 2012). Unlike the NATO–Russia confrontation, hybridization in the Maghreb does not stem from power asymmetry alone but from mutual constraints. Both states face domestic vulnerabilities—economic fragility, youth unemployment, and legitimacy challenges—that discourage overt escalation (Amirah-Fernández, 2023). Yet these same vulnerabilities incentivize the externalization of tension through low-cost, deniable instruments such as disinformation and cyber interference. This reflects what (Fridman, 2018) describes as the “strategic economy of hybrid conflict”: the pursuit of relative advantage through multidimensional means that remain politically controllable and publicly defensible. In this sense, hybrid competition becomes a rational adaptation to a context of mutual deterrence and structural uncertainty.

Moreover, the hybridization of Algeria–Morocco rivalry underscores the cognitive turn in regional security. Where classical deterrence sought to prevent action through threat, hybrid deterrence seeks to shape belief through perception. The struggle is no longer over territory but over truth—who defines it, who circulates it, and who controls its digital vectors. Disinformation, therefore, becomes a strategic currency of power, while cyber intrusion serves as its coercive twin (Galeotti, 2022). This marks a paradigmatic shift in the Maghreb’s security grammar: states now compete less through military postures and more through the capacity to manipulate information flows, technological infrastructures, and the psychological space of their populations.

2. Information Confrontation and Media Instrumentalization

The intensification of the Algeria–Morocco rivalry since the early 2010s has not primarily unfolded through military deployments or border incidents, but through a persistent and escalating contest over information, image, and narrative control (Ghanem, 2025). Both states have come to recognize that in an era of instantaneous communication, influence over perception is a decisive element of strategic power. Information has thus been weaponized not merely as a tool of propaganda in the classical sense (Henschke, 2025),

This confrontation is underpinned by a dual logic. First, at the domestic level, regimes rely on curated narratives of threat and patriotism to reinforce social cohesion and sustain legitimacy

(McMahon & Slantchev, 2015). Second, at the regional and international levels, each state engages in a symbolic diplomacy—a battle for the recognition of its position and moral standing within the Maghreb and beyond. The result is a hybrid field of informational engagement where the lines between internal communication, external messaging, and strategic deception are deliberately blurred. (Liu, et al., 2025)

Morocco has pursued a proactive strategy of narrative projection, framing itself as a modernizing, reform-oriented, and globally integrated monarchy. (Marouan & Oughlane, 2020) Through sophisticated media outreach and international partnerships—particularly following its normalization with Israel in 2020—Rabat has sought to position itself as a credible interlocutor for Western and Gulf actors, while promoting a discourse of “responsible stability.” (Maghraoui, 2025) The state apparatus, together with state-aligned outlets such as MAP (Maghreb Arab Press) and private channels sympathetic to the palace, operates within a tightly coordinated system that extends into the diaspora and social media networks. Disinformation is not necessarily overt falsification; it often takes the form of strategic framing—selective truth, amplified narratives, and emotional triggers designed to cast Algeria as isolationist, militarized, and ideologically obsolete. (International Crisis Group, 2024)

Algeria, for its part, conducts its own counter-narrative campaign anchored in the themes of sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and resistance to foreign manipulation. (Haddad, 2012) The official discourse emphasizes Algeria’s revolutionary heritage, its commitment to decolonization principles, and its role as a defender of the Sahrawi right to self-determination. (Belkaid, 2009; Grimaud, 1984) In the informational sphere, this translates into systematic efforts to discredit Morocco’s international alliances as opportunistic and externally driven. State-linked outlets such as APS (Algérie Presse Service), together with sympathetic commentators and social media actors, articulate a discursive field that projects moral legitimacy and regional autonomy. (APS, 2025; Arabi Facts Hub, 2025) Both sides have learned to weaponize the language of legitimacy itself—each claiming the mantle of regional responsibility and accusing the other of betraying Maghrebi solidarity. (CYFIRMA, 2025)

The result is a strategic mirroring: the same digital techniques—bot amplification, hashtag manipulation, meme warfare, and emotionally charged commentary—are deployed in opposite directions. (Bargués & Bourekba, 2022; Allen, et al., 2022) These campaigns are rarely spontaneous; they are often synchronized with diplomatic events or policy shifts. For example, the reactivation of diplomatic tensions in 2021 following Morocco’s normalization of relations with Israel coincided with an observable surge in online hostility, coordinated disinformation spikes, and the spread of falsified statements through Arabic-language networks and diaspora groups in Europe. The pattern suggests a deliberate use of the informational sphere as a signaling mechanism: a way to escalate rhetorically while maintaining plausible deniability in formal diplomacy. (Maghraoui, 2025)

What distinguishes the Maghreb’s information confrontation from similar phenomena elsewhere is its fusion of identity politics and geopolitical messaging. Narratives of national pride, religious authority, and historical grievance are entangled with strategic communication. (Willis, 2014) This fusion generates a particularly potent form of cognitive influence because it activates deep cultural frames rather than surface-level political slogans. Both regimes have

mastered this semiotic terrain, transforming historical memory—the liberation struggle for Algeria (Evans & Phillips, 2007), the imperial heritage and monarchical continuity for Morocco (Tozy, 1999)—into weapons of persuasion and social control. Disinformation, therefore, is not a transient tactic but a structural feature of governance and competition in the region. Crucially, information warfare in the Maghreb operates as a substitute for direct coercion. By shaping perceptions of strength and isolation, states can impose reputational costs on their rivals without crossing the threshold of kinetic conflict. The diffusion of disinformation narratives—such as allegations of espionage, corruption, or foreign manipulation—serves to erode trust among political elites and to disrupt channels of regional cooperation. (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020) These tactics have direct policy consequences: they undermine any prospects of Maghreb Union revival, obstruct counterterrorism coordination, and perpetuate mutual suspicion between security establishments. In this sense, information confrontation functions as both a symptom and a sustaining mechanism of the region’s geopolitical paralysis. (Gerrits, 2018)

At a theoretical level, the Algeria–Morocco information rivalry epitomizes the logic of hybrid deterrence through cognitive control. It demonstrates how states under mutual constraint transform informational resources into strategic assets. (Henschke, 2025) By engineering narratives, controlling digital infrastructures, and leveraging transnational audiences, both actors seek to manage the perceptions that shape their strategic environment. The informational domain thus becomes the principal arena where deterrence, legitimacy, and regional influence intersect. In a region historically marked by the politics of visibility and symbolism, image becomes policy, and narrative becomes strategy.

Ultimately, this ongoing informational confrontation confirms that the Maghreb’s geopolitical competition is no longer confined to the balance of arms or diplomatic maneuvering; it now unfolds within the architecture of truth itself—a space where technology, identity, and power converge. The deliberate instrumentalization of media and disinformation represents not the erosion but the evolution of statecraft in the digital era, redefining both the practice of rivalry and the very meaning of security in North Africa.

3. The Cyber Domain and the Militarization of Digital Space

If disinformation represents the cognitive front line of Algeria–Morocco competition, cyberspace constitutes its operational backbone—the infrastructure through which influence, espionage, and digital deterrence are enacted (International Crisis Group, 2024). Over the last decade, both states have progressively militarized the digital domain, transforming it from an auxiliary sphere of communication into a recognized component of national defense. The shift toward cyber confrontation illustrates a broader global trend in which information technology becomes not only a medium of governance but also a battlefield of strategic contestation. (Rid, 2013)

The militarization of cyberspace in the Maghreb has unfolded along two parallel trajectories. The first concerns the institutionalization of cyber capabilities. Algeria, drawing on its strong military bureaucracy, has established specialized units under the Ministry of National Defence tasked with cyber defense, digital forensics, and information security.

Its 2021 National Strategy for Cybersecurity explicitly defines cyberspace as part of the “national defense perimeter,” linking digital sovereignty to national independence—a conceptual continuity of Algeria’s long-standing doctrine of sovereignty and non-interference. Morocco, by contrast, has adopted a multistakeholder and externally integrated model. Through the establishment of the General Directorate of Information Systems Security (DGSSI) and partnerships with European and Israeli cybersecurity firms, Morocco has fused state capacity with external technological expertise (Direction Générale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d’Information (DGSSI), 2024). Its 2022 cybersecurity framework explicitly situates cyber defense within a globalized ecosystem of risk management, intelligence sharing, and deterrence-by-exposure.

The second trajectory is more subtle yet more consequential: the gradual normalization of cyber operations as a strategic signaling mechanism. Alleged intrusions, espionage attempts, and data exfiltration’s attributed to state-linked actors have become recurrent features of bilateral tension. (Strategic Comments, 2023) Although direct attribution remains elusive—a hallmark of cyber conflict—each side interprets these incidents as expressions of political intent. In this context, cyber operations perform a dual function: they collect intelligence and communicate power. Their ambiguity is their utility. They send deterrent messages while maintaining plausible deniability, allowing escalation without exposure.

This strategic ambiguity is central to what scholars describe as hybrid cyber deterrence—a form of signaling where technological action replaces or supplements traditional coercion (Tor, 2017). The Algeria–Morocco dyad exemplifies this logic. Rather than mobilizing forces or threatening war, each state employs digital disruption, exposure, or data manipulation to undermine the adversary’s credibility (Osawa, 2017). When Moroccan-affiliated media highlight alleged Algerian cyber surveillance, or Algerian sources publicize leaks implying Moroccan espionage, the message is less about the facts of intrusion than about who controls the narrative of vulnerability. Cyber operations thus serve not only to exploit weakness but to construct it discursively. Control over the perception of cyber power becomes itself a weapon of influence.

External actors have deepened this process by exporting both technology and doctrine. Algeria’s defense cooperation with Russia and technological exchanges with China have strengthened its capacity for network monitoring and defensive cyber architecture. (El Kadi & Djeflat, 2024) Meanwhile, Morocco’s partnerships with Israel and the European Union have enhanced its access to advanced cybersecurity systems and offensive cyber knowledge. (Kezzoute, 2025; Le Gorgeu, 2021) These alignments reflect a diversification of technological sovereignty, in which cyber infrastructure becomes a tool of strategic alignment. In this sense, the digital domain functions as a mirror of geopolitical positioning: each state’s cybersecurity posture embodies its broader diplomatic orientation and ideological narrative. Algeria’s insistence on “cyber independence” (Colom-Piella, 2022) contrasts sharply with Morocco’s embrace of interconnectivity and partnership. (Maleh & Maleh, 2022) Yet both paths reinforce the perception of cyber capability as an index of modern statehood and as an extension of deterrence. The strategic environment that results is characterized by low-level, continuous confrontation—what some analysts have termed “cyber friction”

(Mueller, 2021). This friction rarely escalates to destructive attacks but sustains a permanent state of insecurity and vigilance. For regional security, the implications are significant. Cyber operations, by their very nature, circumvent conventional deterrence logic: they blur the distinction between offense and defense, between espionage and coercion, between national and private infrastructure (Barrett, 2013). They also challenge legal and normative frameworks, as most regional states lack clear doctrines of cyber retaliation or international cooperation mechanisms (Barrett, 2013). In such an environment, the absence of rules becomes itself a strategic resource. Both Algeria and Morocco exploit this ambiguity to project power without legal accountability, transforming cyberspace into a theater of deniable escalation.

4. The Algeria–Morocco Hybrid Power Competition (2011–2025)

The empirical manifestation of the Algeria–Morocco rivalry over the past decade reveals a structural transformation in how power is exercised, signaled, and contested in the Maghreb (Hassib & Ayad, 2023). While the antagonism between the two states is one of the longest-standing in Africa, its modes of expression have changed profoundly since 2011. The collapse of the Libyan regime, the Arab uprisings, and the diffusion of digital technologies collectively altered the strategic ecology in which both states operate. What was once a largely conventional military and diplomatic competition has evolved into a hybrid confrontation, fought simultaneously across political, informational, and cyber domains. The actors remain the same, but the battlefield has become dispersed, the tactics subtler, and the stakes increasingly cognitive. This transformation is not the product of sudden technological innovation alone; it reflects a deep recalibration of strategic behavior in response to internal vulnerabilities and external opportunities. Algeria and Morocco, as medium powers with comparable regional ambitions but contrasting political systems, have each sought to adapt their power projection to the constraints of the twenty-first century (Sour, 2024). Algeria’s military-centered model—anchored in notions of strategic autonomy, sovereignty, and anti-imperial continuity—has faced the challenge of an informational world in which secrecy and opacity are politically costly (Yezid & Toronto, 2021). Morocco’s monarchy, conversely, has leveraged openness, soft power, and diplomatic visibility as instruments of legitimacy but remains structurally constrained by dependence on foreign technology and partnerships (Hassib & Ayad, 2023). The result is a form of strategic asymmetry: Algeria retains superior conventional capabilities, while Morocco compensates through narrative agility, diplomatic networking, and technological integration.

Between 2011 and 2025, three distinct yet interconnected phases can be discerned in the hybrid evolution of this rivalry.

The first phase (2011–2015) corresponds to the diffusion of social media and the emergence of new public spheres following the Arab uprisings. (Howard & Hussain, 2013) Both states confronted the erosion of informational monopolies and responded by building digital surveillance architectures and media ecosystems capable of shaping online discourse. The second phase (2016–2020) saw the normalization of hybrid practices as tools of regional signaling: disinformation spikes coincided with diplomatic crises, and cyber intrusions became recognized instruments of intelligence and deterrence. (Nye, 2017) The third

phase (2020–2025)—following Morocco’s normalization with Israel and the formal rupture of relations in 2021—marked the consolidation of hybrid rivalry as a systemic condition: disinformation and cyber operations were no longer episodic events but structural components of statecraft. (Liu, et al., 2025) Throughout these phases, hybrid competition has functioned as both an expression and a substitute for military deterrence.

Crucially, this empirical trajectory underscores the entanglement between domestic legitimacy and external rivalry. Hybrid tactics are used outwardly to weaken the adversary’s credibility and inwardly to reinforce regime authority. Disinformation serves to rally national unity and externalize social frustration, while cyber operations bolster the image of technological sovereignty. This dual utility explains the resilience of hybrid rivalry: it satisfies both internal and external strategic imperatives. (Mohamed, 2016; Moreno-Almeida & Gerbaudo, 2021) For Algeria, portraying Morocco as a destabilizing actor reinforces the army’s narrative as guardian of national sovereignty; for Morocco, projecting Algeria as obstructionist legitimizes its diplomatic activism and partnerships with Western and Gulf powers. (International Crisis Group, 2024) In both cases, the management of perception becomes a form of governance.

Empirically, the information and cyber dimensions of the conflict are mutually reinforcing. Online campaigns—whether orchestrated by official agencies or informal nationalist networks—create the cognitive environment in which cyber incidents acquire political meaning. Each narrative provokes a digital counter-action; each cyber incident triggers an informational justification. This recursive dynamic sustains a low-intensity but perpetual confrontation that defines the contemporary Maghreb security landscape. (Bolaños, 2025)

From a regional perspective, the Algeria–Morocco hybrid confrontation has broader implications. It projects instability outward by fragmenting the prospects of Maghreb integration and by injecting distrust into regional security mechanisms, particularly those concerning counterterrorism and Sahel coordination. It also attracts the attention and participation of external powers whose technological and intelligence assets become embedded in the local balance of power. Russia’s cyber cooperation with Algeria, Israel’s technology transfers to Morocco, and China’s infrastructure investments exemplify the external amplification of the rivalry. (Belkaïd, 2023; Dworkin, 2022; Rabeih, 2024; Chabouni & Rouibah, 2025) Thus, the Maghreb’s hybrid competition operates not in isolation but as a regional node in a wider network of global power diffusion, where middle powers test the instruments of the digital age under minimal normative constraint.

Ultimately, the empirical record from 2011 to 2025 reveals that the Algeria–Morocco competition has transitioned from a deterrence equilibrium based on force to a hybrid equilibrium based on perception. The rivalry’s endurance lies not in its capacity to escalate but in its ability to reproduce itself through informational and technological adaptation. The hybridization of statecraft has ensured that confrontation persists below the threshold of war yet above the threshold of peace—a liminal condition in which influence replaces invasion, and cyber operations perform the functions once reserved for military exercises. In this sense, the Algeria–Morocco hybrid rivalry is not an anomaly but an archetype: it captures

the global shift from physical to cognitive struggle and situates the Maghreb as an early laboratory of this new form of strategic interaction.

5. Political Narratives and Symbolic Power

At the core of the Algeria–Morocco rivalry lies a contest not merely over territory or influence, but over meaning—the authority to define legitimacy, modernity, and regional leadership. Both states engage in a continuous struggle for symbolic power, understood in Bourdieu’s sense as the ability to impose a vision of reality that is collectively recognized as valid. (Bourdieu, 2001) In the Maghreb, where historical memory and political identity are tightly interwoven, symbolic power functions as both a strategic resource and a terrain of confrontation. The projection of narratives—of sovereignty, progress, and moral authority—has thus become central to the practice of power and deterrence in the region’s hybrid security complex

The political narratives deployed by Algiers and Rabat draw from contrasting historical and ideological reservoirs. Algeria’s self-conception is anchored in the legacy of its revolutionary legitimacy. The 1954–1962 war of independence remains the foundational myth of the state and the source of its moral capital. This narrative continues to inform Algeria’s foreign policy ethos: anti-colonial solidarity, defense of sovereignty, and resistance to external domination. (Byrne, 2016) Within this frame, Algeria positions itself as the guardian of regional authenticity—a state that resists normalization with postcolonial dependency and foreign penetration. Its diplomatic behavior in the African Union, the Non-Aligned Movement, and its support for the Sahrawi cause are extensions of this ideological posture. (Willis, 2014) The symbolism of sacrifice, dignity, and resistance provides the moral grammar of Algerian statecraft, reinforcing its self-image as a strategic conscience of the Maghreb.

Morocco’s counter-narrative is equally coherent but ideologically inverse. The kingdom projects itself as a modernizing monarchy—a reformist power that combines historical legitimacy with developmental pragmatism. (Miller, 2013) Since the early 2000s, under King Mohammed VI, Morocco has cultivated an image of stability, moderation, and international engagement. Its political narrative emphasizes continuity of leadership, religious legitimacy through the institution of the Commandership of the Faithful (Amir al-Mu’minin), and strategic openness to global partnerships. This discourse is carefully crafted to resonate with Western and Gulf audiences while simultaneously asserting Morocco’s exceptionalism within North Africa. The 2020 normalization with Israel, framed as a sovereign decision grounded in Morocco’s “historic role in promoting coexistence,” exemplifies the kingdom’s use of symbolic diplomacy to signal modernity and autonomy.

These two narratives—revolutionary sovereignty versus monarchical modernization—constitute the ideological poles of the Maghreb’s hybrid rivalry. Each state’s external messaging reinforces its internal legitimacy while undermining that of its rival. (Boukhars, 2019) Algeria portrays Morocco’s diplomatic activism as opportunistic alignment with foreign powers and betrayal of the Palestinian cause; Morocco depicts Algeria’s revolutionary rhetoric as anachronistic, obstructive, and inconsistent with the imperatives of globalization. The informational battle that accompanies these discursive positions is not merely rhetorical—it

shapes foreign perceptions, investment flows, and alliance patterns. In this sense, symbolic power operates as a form of strategic capital, influencing both material and immaterial dimensions of security.

The performance of symbolic power in the Maghreb operates through multiple channels: diplomatic theater, international media, cultural diplomacy, and historical framing. Algeria leverages multilateral platforms to reaffirm its image as a defender of self-determination and non-interference—principles that it associates with its revolutionary legitimacy. (Malley, 1996) Its participation in African and Arab summits often carries the subtext of moral leadership. Morocco, conversely, invests heavily in public diplomacy and global branding, using think tanks, cultural exchanges, and international summits to project an image of reformist leadership. Initiatives such as the African Atlantic States Conference and the Rabat Process on migration management exemplify Morocco's attempt to redefine the Maghreb's role in continental geopolitics. (Fernández-Molina, 2016; Wüst & Nicolai, 2023; Kaya & Drhimeur, 2022) Both states seek to own the narrative of what constitutes responsible regional leadership.

The competition extends into the domain of symbolic gestures and historical appropriation. Algeria invokes the memory of anti-colonial struggle and Pan-African solidarity; Morocco reclaims the symbolism of dynastic continuity and religious tolerance. Each draws from the past to justify its present strategy. For instance, the dispute over Western Sahara is narrated by Algeria as a continuation of decolonization (Sour, 2024) and by Morocco as the completion of national unity. (El Morabety, 2017) These competing interpretations transform a territorial dispute into an existential struggle over historical legitimacy. The discursive framing of the Sahara thus becomes a proxy for defining the meaning of independence itself.

Symbolic power also operates through the politics of recognition—the quest to be acknowledged as the legitimate voice of the Maghreb on the international stage. Morocco's re-entry into the African Union in 2017, after a 33-year absence, was a symbolic coup that demonstrated its diplomatic adaptability. (Banerjee, 2017) Algeria, in response, intensified its role in mediation initiatives and counterterrorism cooperation within the African Peace and Security Architecture, reinforcing its image as a stabilizing actor. (Zoubir, 2015) The competition for recognition often plays out through symbolic parity: each state seeks to neutralize the other's achievements by asserting equivalent or superior initiatives. When Morocco secured foreign investments in renewable energy and defense cooperation, Algeria responded by expanding its military modernization and defense diplomacy. This continuous calibration of symbolic gestures reflects the hybridization of deterrence: image management replaces military brinkmanship as the dominant mode of competition.

From a theoretical perspective, the Algeria–Morocco narrative struggle illustrates how symbolic power has become the connective tissue between soft and hard power. It mediates the relationship between legitimacy and coercion, between domestic identity and international posture. As Nye observed, the capacity to attract and persuade complements the ability to coerce; (Nye, 2011) in the Maghreb, however, attraction and persuasion are strategically manufactured through state-controlled media, orchestrated events, and selective storytelling.

The state becomes both author and actor in an ongoing play of legitimacy. This theatricality is not superficial—it constitutes a mechanism of governance and regional signaling that operates with real material consequences.

6. Information Operations and Disinformation Ecosystems

The evolution of information operations between Algeria and Morocco represents the operational layer of their hybrid rivalry—where narrative construction, perception management, and technological affordances converge into a strategic system of cognitive confrontation. Unlike episodic propaganda of the past, contemporary disinformation campaigns are organized, adaptive, and structurally embedded in the states' political communication architectures. (Unver & Ertan, 2023) They operate across traditional and digital media, exploiting linguistic, emotional, and technological interfaces to influence domestic and international audiences simultaneously. (Forest, 2021) The period between 2011 and 2025 witnessed the gradual formation of a bidirectional ecosystem of disinformation: a dynamic, self-reinforcing environment in which both regimes act as producers, amplifiers, and consumers of hybrid informational tactics.

At the core of this system lies a logic of strategic opportunism. Both states engage in information operations that oscillate between defense and offense, legitimacy-building and delegitimization. During moments of crisis—such as Algeria's 2019 Hirak movement, (Mattoni & Sigillò, 2022) Morocco's 2020 normalization with Israel, or the 2021 rupture of diplomatic relations—online spaces became arenas of orchestrated disinformation surges. (Zoubir, 2022) Each side capitalized on its rival's political vulnerabilities: Moroccan-affiliated networks emphasized Algeria's political stagnation, military dominance, and lack of civilian legitimacy; Algerian-linked outlets magnified narratives of Moroccan corruption, repression, and subservience to foreign powers. The timing of these campaigns reveals a pattern of information synchronization with political developments—an indicator of institutional coordination rather than spontaneous mobilization. (Liu, et al., 2025)

Disinformation ecosystems in the Maghreb function through multi-layered mechanisms of production and amplification. At the primary layer, state-aligned news agencies (APS and MAP) and semi-official television channels serve as the initial nodes of narrative framing. (El Herri, 2025) They produce authoritative storylines, which are then relayed by secondary amplifiers—digital portals, pseudo-independent blogs, or social media accounts with nationalist branding. At the tertiary layer, automated or coordinated networks (bots, trolls, or paid influencers) perform content multiplication and emotional engagement, ensuring algorithmic visibility and audience polarization. (Wilson & Starbird, 2020) Studies of Arabic-language Twitter and Facebook activity during key bilateral crises show patterns consistent with cross-platform coordination: identical hashtags emerging simultaneously from different geolocations, identical phrasing in comment clusters, and deliberate tagging of foreign media to draw international attention. (Bakrim, 2022; Mazurier, 2023; Si Ahmed, 2023; Velluet, 2023) The structure resembles the “information laundering” model observed in Eastern European and Middle Eastern hybrid campaigns, where falsehood circulates through multiple intermediaries until it attains the appearance of legitimacy. (Klein, 2012)

The thematic repertoire of these information operations reveals a triadic typology. First, delegitimization narratives, portraying the rival regime as internally repressive or externally manipulated. These include fabricated leaks of official documents, manipulated videos of protests, and exaggerated claims of foreign infiltration. (Lin, 2025) Second, moral inversion narratives, in which each state accuses the other of violating pan-Arab, Islamic, or African solidarity—particularly regarding the Palestinian question, Western Sahara, or African diplomacy. (Bargués & Bourekba, 2022) Third, performance comparison narratives, focusing on economic development, governance efficiency, or international recognition. These narratives are designed to influence not only domestic publics but also the perceptions of third-party states and international organizations, thereby shaping the broader field of geopolitical legitimacy. (Hedling & Ördén, 2025; Hellman, 2024)

The technological infrastructure of these campaigns further reveals an increasing sophistication of hybrid tactics. Advances in artificial intelligence, automated translation, and deepfake technology have lowered the cost of content fabrication while increasing credibility. During 2023–2024, monitoring groups documented several instances of AI-generated imagery used in social media posts to simulate protests, policy statements, or international endorsements. Although neither government officially claimed responsibility, forensic patterns pointed to coordination consistent with state-affiliated clusters. These tactics mirror global trends in what (Palmertz, et al., 2025) calls “cognitive maneuvering”—the strategic manipulation of the informational environment to erode trust in empirical verification itself. In this sense, disinformation ceases to be merely false information; it becomes a governance technology that manages uncertainty and social perception. Algeria–Morocco disinformation battles shape perceptions, making credibility and emotion outweigh facts. These campaigns erode the shared information space, weaken deterrence, obstruct cooperation, and create lasting uncertainty. By circulating rival narratives, both states wage cognitive conflict—seeking reputational advantage without direct confrontation.

7. Rethinking Deterrence and Security in Hybrid Rivalries

The empirical analysis of the Algeria–Morocco confrontation invites a broader reconsideration of how deterrence, security, and power are conceptualized in regional politics. Classical deterrence theory, rooted in Cold War strategic thought, presupposes a clear boundary between war and peace, offense and defense, and military and political instruments. (Snyder, 1961; Schelling, 2008) The Maghreb’s hybrid rivalry demonstrates the obsolescence of these dichotomies. The absence of open warfare between Algeria and Morocco does not imply the absence of conflict; rather, it signifies a reconfiguration of confrontation into informational, symbolic, and cyber dimensions. Deterrence in this environment is no longer about preventing military aggression but about managing perception and resilience in an era where influence is projected through data, discourse, and networks. (Kello, 2019; Libicki, 2007).

Hybrid deterrence operates through credibility without confrontation. Both Algeria and Morocco engage in continuous signaling—via media, diplomacy, or technological display—to convey resolve and capability while avoiding escalation. This mirrors what (Snyder

& Diesing, 1977) once called the “politics of limited coercion,” now refracted through digital technologies. The Algerian model relies on strategic opacity: cultivating the perception of robust, self-reliant defense capacities that discourage external manipulation. (Ammour, 2019) Morocco, by contrast, employs strategic visibility: demonstrating transparency, international engagement, and technological advancement to deter through alliance reassurance. (El Morabety, 2017) The coexistence of these opposing deterrence logics within the same regional system produces a hybrid equilibrium, sustained less by arms races than by narrative signaling and symbolic parity.

The Maghreb’s experience also challenges the conventional RSCT assumption that regional stability depends on the absence of great-power interference. (Buzan, 1991) In hybrid environments, external involvement becomes both a stabilizer and a destabilizer. External amplifiers—whether through technology transfers, intelligence cooperation, or cyber partnerships—enhance the capabilities of local states but simultaneously entrench dependency and vulnerability. (Nye, 2017; Taddeo, 2018) The resulting configuration is a form of entangled deterrence, where local actors depend on foreign technologies and global actors depend on local access. (Brantly, 2018) Deterrence thus becomes distributed: it is maintained not by a single state but by an assemblage of networks linking governments, corporations, and technological infrastructures. The Maghreb, in this sense, represents a frontier of deterrence pluralization, where control over the informational environment substitutes for control over territory.

This redefinition of deterrence also reshapes the ontology of security itself. In traditional paradigms, security referred to the protection of sovereignty, borders, and institutions. In hybrid rivalries, security extends to the cognitive and epistemic domains—the integrity of information, trust, and perception. (Cornish, 2021) Both Algeria and Morocco have institutionalized mechanisms to safeguard informational sovereignty, such as national cybersecurity centers and state-controlled media ecosystems. (Sipos, 2023; Maleh & Maleh, 2022) Yet, in doing so, they paradoxically increase societal exposure to manipulation and polarization. The securitization of information reinforces the logic of suspicion that sustains the hybrid security complex. Security thus becomes both the goal and the by-product of perpetual competition: each act of protection generates new vulnerabilities, and each technological upgrade demands further securitization. (Côté, 2016; Balzacq, 2005)

From a theoretical standpoint, the Maghreb case invites the articulation of Hybrid Security Complex Theory as an extension of Buzan and Wæver’s RSCT. In classical RSCT, regions are structured by geographical proximity and interdependence of threat perceptions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In the hybrid variant, proximity is digital rather than spatial, and interdependence operates through informational and technological connectivity. The Maghreb illustrates how digital infrastructures have compressed distance and intensified rivalry. Cyber interdependence binds adversaries even as it divides them: the more Algeria and Morocco digitize their governance and communication systems, the more they expose themselves to each other’s influence operations. The density of connectivity thus replaces physical adjacency as the organizing principle of regional insecurity.

The implications of this transformation extend beyond North Africa. Hybrid rivalries challenge the Westphalian assumption that sovereignty resides in territorial exclusivity. Instead, sovereignty becomes performative and relational—constantly enacted through symbolic gestures, narrative control, and cyber vigilance (Brandon & Maness, 2015; Pierucci, 2025). Deterrence shifts from material power to perceptual credibility: states deter not because they possess overwhelming force but because they can shape the interpretive context within which force is imagined. In such a world, strategic communication and cybersecurity are no longer support functions of defense—they are defense itself. (Soesanto & Smeets, 2021)

In rethinking deterrence and security through the Maghreb lens, one discerns the contours of a post-Clausewitzian paradigm. War has not disappeared; it has migrated into the cognitive infrastructures of society. The center of gravity is no longer the enemy's army but its attention, trust, and belief. The tools of influence—narratives, algorithms, cyber intrusions—constitute the new arsenal of statecraft. The Maghreb's hybrid security complex thus offers both a warning and a model: a warning of how fragile informational ecosystems can erode regional stability, and a model for how middle powers innovate under constraints to assert agency in a fragmented international order.

Conclusion

The Algeria–Morocco rivalry, long a fixture of North African geopolitics, has entered a qualitatively new phase—one defined less by conventional deterrence than by the continuous interplay of information, perception, and technology. This paper has argued that the transformation of this rivalry reflects the emergence of a Hybrid Security Complex, in which hybrid tools—disinformation, symbolic narratives, and cyber operations—constitute the central mechanisms of competition and stability. By integrating Hybrid Warfare Theory with Regional Security Complex Theory, the study has offered an analytical framework capable of capturing both the technological and structural dimensions of contemporary regional security in the Maghreb. Empirically, the analysis demonstrated that the hybridization of power in the Maghreb proceeds through three interlocking domains: symbolic power, where legitimacy is constructed through competing narratives of identity and modernity; informational operations, where perception is managed through orchestrated disinformation ecosystems; and cyber operations, where state and external actors converge to shape the digital battlefield. These domains do not operate in isolation but form a recursive system that sustains rivalry without escalation. The result is a regional equilibrium of competitive stability—a persistent, low-intensity conflict that legitimizes state authority while preventing outright war. Theoretically, the notion of a Hybrid Security Complex advances the study of regional security by recognizing that power interdependence now extends beyond geography into the cognitive and technological realms. In this configuration, connectivity replaces proximity, and influence supplants coercion as the primary vector of interaction. Deterrence becomes distributed and performative: states maintain credibility not by monopolizing force but by mastering the narratives and infrastructures that define perception. The Maghreb thus exemplifies a broader global transition toward post-territorial security, where boundaries are informational, and sovereignty is enacted through digital vigilance. Practically, this transformation poses significant challenges for policy and regional governance. Hybrid rivalry erodes

the informational commons, polarizes societies, and complicates multilateral cooperation on issues such as counterterrorism, migration, and energy security. Yet, it also opens new avenues for innovation in regional diplomacy and resilience-building. Initiatives aimed at transparency, media literacy, cyber norm-setting, and cross-border dialogue could mitigate escalation and restore minimal trust in the regional order. Recognizing the hybrid nature of contemporary threats is therefore the first step toward developing equally hybrid forms of security governance. In conclusion, the Maghreb's hybrid transformation is neither an anomaly nor a peripheral episode. It represents the leading edge of a global reconfiguration of power-one in which security is contested through narratives, sustained through information, and projected through cyberspace. To study the Algeria-Morocco rivalry, therefore, is to glimpse the future of regional security itself.

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