

Geographical Overview | MPCs. Maghreb

Algeria and Morocco in Africa: Between Normal Competition and Diplomatic Escalation

Riccardo Fabiani

Project director, North Africa
International Crisis Group

Tensions between Algeria and Morocco have had considerable consequences across the African continent. Their rivalry has undermined regional institutions but also stimulated a potentially beneficial economic competition. Following the suspension of all diplomatic ties in August 2021, after Algeria accused Morocco of undermining its internal stability among other things, the two neighbours have been trying to outmanoeuvre each other in the Maghreb, the rest of the African continent and at the African Union (AU). The rivalry has had an impact on some countries in the neighbourhood – notably Tunisia – and at the AU, where it has created tensions within the organization.

Tensions between Algeria and Morocco Spill over onto the Continent

Following Mohammed VI's 1999 ascent to the throne, Morocco displayed an increasingly dynamic and assertive African policy. The King pursued an ambitious diversification of the country's external relations. In particular, this effort focused on sub-Saharan Africa, as Rabat strove to rebuild its reputation and relations, which had been damaged by the repercussions of the conflict over the disputed territory of Western Sahara and its related decision to quit Organization of African Unity in 1984. Through a series of diplomatic visits by Mohammed VI across the continent, Morocco expanded its cultural, trade and investment bonds with numerous West, Central and East African countries, encour-

aging its own firms and banks to open branches in various sub-Saharan markets. This diplomatic offensive culminated in its 2017 readmission to the AU, despite Algeria and South Africa's misgivings about accepting a country still involved in a major international dispute over Western Sahara (Werenfels, 2020).

In contrast with Morocco, Algeria's influence in African politics declined after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's stroke in 2013, which limited his ability to be directly involved in decision-making. The deteriorating regional security environment, including the northern Mali insurgency and the Libyan civil war, further eroded Algeria's foreign policy dynamism, despite its efforts and initial success in brokering the Malian peace talks. The Hirak protest movement from 2019 to 2021 also limited the authorities' bandwidth, as they focused on managing a politically delicate transition to new elections. It was only after the 2019 election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and his pledge to adopt a dynamic and proactive foreign policy that Algeria began to reassert its presence across the continent (Ghebouli, 2021).

Against this backdrop, tensions between these two countries have escalated since 2020. Algeria has reiterated its long-standing support for the pro-independence Polisario Front in Western Sahara, following the collapse of the ceasefire in November 2020. Bilateral ties took a turn for the worse in July 2021, when the non-governmental organizations, Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International, reported that Morocco had installed spyware on the mobile phones of several Algerian officials and citizens to listen in on their conversations. In August 2021, Algiers cut ties with Rabat, allegedly for supporting two organizations banned by the Algerian government, the Self-Determination Movement for Kabylia and Rachad, an Islamist group, and under-

mining the Western Sahara peace process, among other things (ICC, 2021).

The two countries' diplomatic tensions have also played out across the African continent, at times creating a hectic competition and at others exacerbating pre-existing divisions. In the Maghreb, this dynamic has led to a spat between Tunisia and Morocco, and encouraged Algeria to intensify its trade and investment ties with Mauritania. In the rest of the continent, Algiers has tried to outdo Rabat by launching a series of economic initiatives to reassert its presence and influence. Finally, Algeria and Morocco have turned the African Union into a battleground for their diplomatic disagreements, exacerbating some of the contradictions that had already emerged in 2017, when Rabat decided to re-join the organization.

The Maghreb: Vying for Hegemony

After President Kais Saied's July 2021 "self-coup," Algeria tightened its ties with an increasingly isolated and economically fragile Tunisia. In December 2021, Algiers lent \$300 million to its neighbour, and in December 2022, it provided an additional \$200-million loan and \$100-million grant (Desorgues, 2023). This financial support helped the Tunisian authorities navigate a delicate phase, in the absence of an agreement with the IMF for a new loan and following the July 2021 suspension of the Parliament and the President's roadmap to a new republic. In a March 2023 interview with Al-Jazeera, Algerian President Tebboune defended this policy, arguing that "Algeria is with Tunisia, regardless of its system or president," and asserting Tunisia's sovereignty in the face of external interference (Sellal, 2023).

President Saied's growing international isolation and Algeria's financial help pushed Tunisia into its neighbour's diplomatic orbit. In August 2022, President Saied officially received Polisario chief Brahim Ghali in Tunis, creating a diplomatically important precedent for a country that had historically adopted a stance of "positive neutrality" towards the Western Sahara conflict. The reception seemed to signal that Tunisia had now moved into the pro-Polisario and pro-Algeria camp, while Morocco denounced Tunisia's "hostile attitude" and recalled its ambassador. Tunisia responded in kind, triggering a diplomatic crisis between the two countries (France 24, 2023).

The rivalry between Algeria and Morocco had more benign consequences for Mauritania, as Nouakchott's relative political and economic stability enabled its leadership to keep its neighbours at bay and stick by its policy of neutrality on Western Sahara. Following the November 2020 collapse of the ceasefire in Western Sahara, Mauritanian officials continued to hold regular meetings with Algerian, Moroccan and Polisario officials, reiterating their country's support for a return to UN-brokered negotiations.

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Unlike Tunisia, Mauritania successfully managed to continue to cultivate ties with both of its neighbours. In March 2022, Nouakchott signed a series of bilateral cooperation agreements with Rabat on agriculture, fishing, environmental protection, tourism and manufacturing (Khirchi, 2022). In July 2022, Algiers announced a plan to build a 700-km-long road linking Tindouf in Algeria to Zoueirat in Mauritania. The purpose of this infrastructure would be to transport goods to the port of Nouadhibou on the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, this road will allow Algeria to export the iron extracted from the Gara Djebilet deposit, a mine that Algeria and Morocco had planned to exploit jointly in the 1970s as part of their plans to increase bilateral cooperation (Radio Algérienne, 2023).

Economic Competition in Sub-Saharan Africa

A hypothetical gas pipeline connecting Nigeria to Europe via Algeria or Morocco became the object of intense diplomatic competition between Algeria and Morocco. The project to build this connection dates back to the 1970s and gained some traction in the 2000s, when Algeria and Nigeria began discussions around the idea of a pipeline from Nigeria to Algeria via the Sahara Desert. Yet, funding and security con-

cerns related to the intensification of jihadist activity in the Sahel meant that the Algerian authorities shelved the project. Following a visit by King Mohammed VI to Nigeria in 2016, Morocco proposed an alternative route for the pipeline, along the West African coast to Morocco.

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Now Algiers and Rabat appear in a rush to get as much diplomatic support for this pipeline as possible from the other African countries, even though there are serious doubts about the feasibility of both projects. The Nigerian-Moroccan pipeline would run for 6,000 km and be connected to the existing pipeline linking the North African country with Spain. This infrastructure has been idle since 2022, when Algeria ended its gas exports in retaliation against Morocco's allegedly hostile stance. Rabat already signed a series of agreements with Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana and ECOWAS to lay the groundwork for this conduit. In July 2022, Algeria, Niger and Nigeria also signed a memorandum of understanding to build a 4,000-km-long trans-Saharan pipeline that would be connected to Algeria's existing network. Yet, energy experts point out that Nigeria is already building LNG export terminals that are more than sufficient for its projected gas production, having realized that both Algeria and Morocco's projects are unfeasible due to their high costs and challenging political conditions (Kasmi, 2022).

Algeria also tried to respond to Morocco's growing economic influence across sub-Saharan Africa by launching a series of initiatives to boost its trade and investment ties across the continent. During the course of 2022, the Algerian government asked state-owned carrier Air Algérie to open or resume several air routes, including destinations such as Bamako, Dakar, Brazzaville, Luanda, Johannesburg,

and Addis Ababa. Previously, the airline had ceased its services to African destinations, with the exception of Tunisia and Egypt. In the same period, Algeria also organized trade fairs in several African capitals, including Dakar and Addis Ababa, and announced the imminent establishment of the state-owned financial institution Banque Extérieure d'Algérie in Senegal and Mauritania (Boukhlef, 2022). In February 2023, the government earmarked \$1 billion to help finance development projects in Africa through the agency for international development, which President Tebboune created in 2020 (Rikz, 2023).

The AU: A Diplomatic Battleground

It was directly inside the AU that Algeria and Morocco fought their most intense diplomatic battles. Shortly after Morocco rejoined the AU in 2017, the AU Assembly agreed to limit the organization's role in the Western Sahara conflict to backing the UN-led process, reversing its previous support for joint AU-UN talks to facilitate a self-determination referendum, despite several countries (including Algeria) pushing to increase the organization's involvement. The debate inside the AU heated up again after the resumption of hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front, and the Trump announcement in 2020, in which Washington recognized Rabat's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Morocco continued to oppose any changes to the AU's self-constrained approach and a number of African states proceeded to open consulates in Western Sahara, in an implicit recognition of the Kingdom's claims over the territory (Louw-Vaudran, 2018).

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Tensions between Algeria and Morocco also somewhat hindered the normal functioning of the AU's institutions. In February 2023, the AU's rotating vice presidency, which fell to a North African country this time, became particularly contentious, especially be-

cause the vice president usually becomes president the following year. Algeria, Morocco, and the Sahrawi-Arab Democratic Republic each presented its own candidate for the position, creating a stalemate (Hamadi, 2023). Faced with a deadlock, Mauritania tried to step forward and propose its candidacy, but to no avail. A final decision might be postponed until closer to the next summit in February 2024 (Soumaré, 2023). In April 2023, tensions also surrounded the appointment of Moroccan diplomat Amina Selmane as the Arab Maghreb Union's (AMU) representative to the AU. The Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the diplomat of falsely presenting herself and considered the nomination as null and void, arguing that a unanimous vote of all AMU member states was needed for this appointment, and therefore Algeria's, too (Islah, 2023).

Mauritania has succeeded in benefiting from the heightened competition between Algeria and Morocco thanks to its relative political and economic resilience

The other major dividing line between Algeria and Morocco concerned Israel's role at the AU. In February 2023, the organization expelled Israel's delegation from the opening ceremony. The decision came after it had set up an ad hoc committee of heads of state to deal with the issue and as a result of an intense diplomatic campaign led by Algeria and South Africa against Israel's participation. Israel had gained observer status in 2021, also thanks to Morocco's support, following the December 2020 diplomatic normalization between the two countries (TSA, 2023). Tensions between Algiers and Rabat contributed to Israel's expulsion, although they were not the only factor behind this decision.

Conclusion

The persistent bad blood between Algeria and Morocco has had political and economic impact across the continent, but its repercussions have been very

different depending on the local context. In North Africa, a politically and economically precarious country like Tunisia has been unable to maintain its traditional equidistance between its two bigger neighbours, while Mauritania has succeeded in benefiting from the heightened competition between Algeria and Morocco thanks to its relative political and economic resilience, which has supported its policy of neutrality on Western Sahara. In the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the rivalry has been more benign, as Algiers has deployed a series of economic initiatives to boost its influence and counter Rabat's growing soft power. And at the AU, their historical rivalry has developed into a full-blown diplomatic battle, which has created or contributed to some turbulence inside this institution, such as over Western Sahara and Israel.

As prospects for diplomatic normalization between the two countries remain dim, the AU will need to find more or less precarious compromises to manage the friction that their fractious relations can create. Other North African states sufficiently distant from this competition, such as Egypt and Mauritania, might also have to step in and offer their diplomatic help to contain the negative effects of this competition.

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