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Algeria's Decision to Cut Diplomatic Relations with Morocco

Background and Repercussions

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 24 August 2021, Algeria announced that it was downgrading diplomatic relations with Morocco to consular ties only. This step comes in the context of increased tensions between the two countries over recent months. The decision follows a combination of factors, some of which are based on historical and border disputes, and others related to regional and international developments.

A History of Friction

Hostilities between the two neighbours are rooted in the border dispute, inherited from the French colonial period, which eventually led to an armed confrontation (the Sand War) in 1963. While Morocco claimed a historical right, Algeria backed the existing borders. The two countries reached a ceasefire after the intervention of the Arab League and the Organization of African Unity, but the war had a profound impact on subsequent relations between the two countries. In 1975, tensions reignited with the withdrawal of the Spanish colonial forces from the Western Sahara region and its accession to Morocco, and Algeria announced its support for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia El Hamra and Oued Eddahab, known by its Spanish acronym, Polisario. The movement opposes what it considers the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, seeking to create its own independent republic. This led to the outbreak of border clashes between Algeria and Morocco in 1976, followed by Algeria's recognition of the newly established Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. After Marrakesh was bombed in 1994, in operations which Morocco accused the Algerians of involvement, Algeria decided to close its land borders with Morocco and Morocco imposed an entry visa on Algerians. In 2017, Morocco's return to the African Union constituted a positive shift in its foreign policy in Africa, reversing its 1984 withdrawal from the Organization of African Unity, due to its recognition of the Polisario Front. Since then, the two countries have been exchanging minimal diplomatic interactions.⁽¹⁾

Diplomatic Background

This is the second time that diplomatic relations between the two countries have been severed since each country won independence (Morocco in 1956 and Algeria in 1962) as Morocco first decided to cut relations in 1976.⁽²⁾ In the current instance, Algeria has claimed that Morocco had been pursuing policies hostile towards its North African neighbour, as listed below:⁽³⁾

1. The Moroccan Parliament voted, in January 2020, on two laws, one of which demarcates Morocco's jurisdiction over its maritime domain, and the other provides for the creation of a special economic zone that extends 200 nautical miles off Moroccan shores.⁽⁴⁾ This provoked

1 Abdul Razzaq bin Abdullah, "Timeline of Turbulent Algerian-Moroccan Relations: 2 North African Countries Experiencing Recurring Souring of Ties since 1963," *Anadolu Agency*, 26/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3DqE6hu>.

2 Adel Najdi and Othman Lahyani, "The Boycott of Algeria and Morocco: A Shared Loss Politically and Popularly", *The New Arab*, 26/8/2021, accessed on 26/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3mU8Npc>.

3 "Algeria Cuts Its Relations with Morocco against the Backdrop of its Hostile Acts," *Algérie Presse Service*, 24/8/2021, accessed on 26/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3kAZtUs>.

4 "Morocco's Parliament Approves a Bill to Demarcate Maritime Borders," *Arabi 21*, 22/1/2020, accessed on 26/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/38hkZb6>.

the indignation of Algeria and the Polisario Front; The latter condemned the annexation of the disputed waters to Morocco, while Morocco considered the demarcation of the maritime borders a sovereign decision, as the territorial waters constitute a natural extension of the principle of territorial integrity.

2. In November 2020, Morocco intervened militarily in Guerguerat (a buffer zone between Western Sahara and Mauritania), in response to an incursion by Polisario militants; an act that Algeria backed Polisario considered a violation of the 1991 ceasefire signed under the auspices of the United Nations after sixteen years of armed conflict between Morocco and the Front.⁽⁵⁾
3. In response to the Moroccan ambassador to the United Nations calling for the “independence of the Kabylia region” of Algeria, during the meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement on 13 and 14 July 2021, Algeria summoned its ambassador in Rabat. This followed the Algerian Foreign Minister reasserting his country’s support for the right of Western Sahara to decide its own fate. This was the second time that Morocco officially announced its support for the separatist demands from the Kabylia independence movement, MAK, which Algeria classifies as a terrorist organization,⁽⁶⁾ and which Algeria accuses of supporting both Morocco and Israel.
4. Algeria accuses Morocco of using the Israeli Pegasus spyware to spy on Algerian officials. The Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement expressing its “deep concern” that some governments, in particular Morocco, were revealed to have Pegasus against Algerian officials and citizens.⁽⁷⁾ French media also published an accusation that Morocco used the program to spy on French officials. Morocco has categorically denied the charges.
5. Morocco’s reluctance to support Algerian diplomatic efforts to prevent Israel’s accession to the African Union as an observer member, as well as the visit of Israel’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yair Lapid, to Rabat, on 11 August 2021, where he made provocative statements towards Algeria, stating that Israel and Morocco share concerns about Algeria’s role in the region, its rapprochement with Iran, and the campaign it is waging against Israel’s observer status in the African Union.⁽⁸⁾
6. Algiers accuses Morocco of being involved in the fires that swept the north of the country in mid-August 2021; claiming that these fires, especially in the Kabylia region, were the work of “terrorist groups,” one of which is supported by Morocco. The Algerian Supreme Security Council had decided to ramp up security monitoring on its western borders.⁽⁹⁾

5 “The Guerguerat Crisis and Scenarios for the Future of the Sahara Issue”, Case Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 12/7/2020, accessed on 26/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3zDvGkr>.

6 Adel Najdi, “Morocco regrets Algeria’s Decision to Sever Diplomatic Relations: Completely Unjustified,” *The New Arab*, 25/8/2021, accessed on 26/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3znJ2RC>.

7 “Lamamra Denounces Morocco’s Spying on Algerian Citizens and Officials”, *Algérie Presse Service*, 24/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3sWh2SP>.

8 Mohamed Ladib, “Israel’s Foreign Minister: The Rapprochement of Algeria and Iran is Worrying.. and Relations with Morocco are Profitable,” *Hespress*, 12/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3sUPZXQ>.

9 Tebboune chairs an extraordinary meeting of the Supreme Security Council”, *Algérie Presse Service*, 18/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3mMiZ3j>.



International and Local Responses

While Moroccan political forces rallied behind the government, considering the decision a continuation of Algerian hostility towards Morocco, the Movement of Society for Peace in Algeria, criticized its government's decision, which it described as hasty, and suggested that the government should have held consultations with all political partners, including the opposition.⁽¹⁰⁾ There is polarization at the grassroots level within the two countries, where each supports their own government.

Other responses have been limited to expressing regret and calling for dialogue between the two parties.⁽¹¹⁾ As an exception, Iran's ambassador in Algeria argued that "the reasons that led Algeria to sever its diplomatic relations with Morocco are what should receive attention and not the decision in itself,"⁽¹²⁾ referring to the Moroccan-Israeli normalization. The European Union, which has invested interests in the region, with some member states dependent on Algerian gas supplies passing through Morocco, has not taken a clear stance on the deterioration in relations between the two countries, nor any concrete steps to mitigate its repercussions. This hesitance indicates its familiarity with and adaptation to this type of turmoil between the two Maghrebi neighbours.

Regional Repercussions

This latest deterioration in relations between the two countries has seen tensions surface between the two largest Arab countries in the region, both of which are facing several economic and social challenges. A number of repercussions are likely, most notably:

1. Intensified regional rivalry between the two countries, including an arms race that is already raging between them. The competition is fuelled not by the decision itself, but the context that delivered it, with Moroccan-Israeli normalization at the fore. The statements of the Israeli Foreign Minister referred to above confirm that the Israeli presence in the region cannot have a positive impact on the relations between the two countries, and between Arab countries more generally.
2. The continued intractability of the issue of Western Sahara, which Morocco (both the leadership and the public) insists is an integral part of its national soil, while Algeria deals with it as subject to the principles of its foreign policy and an international issue on the UN agenda. This stubbornness would fuel competition between the two countries to achieve regional gains, but through alliances with external forces.

¹⁰ "Makri: The decision to cut ties with Morocco is hasty." *Elkhabar*, 26/8/2021, accessed on 27/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3t6665j>.

¹¹ Michel Ghandour, "Morocco and Algeria... the US State Department Clarifies the Importance of Improving Relations," *Al-Hurra*, 25/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://arbne.ws/3ztjgW>; "France Calls for Dialogue after Algeria Announces Severing Ties with Morocco," *RT Arabic*, 25/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3BjQiy>; "Arab and International Calls for Calm between Algeria and Morocco," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 26/8/2021, No. 15612, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3sRU3Z6>.

¹² "Iran Has Its Opinion on the Reasons for Algeria's Severing of Relations with Morocco," *RT Arabic*, 27/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2WvxvBZM>.

3. Undermining joint economic cooperation projects between the two countries; in April 2021, Algeria announced its withdrawal from the cooperation agreement with Morocco signed in 1972 in order to invest the gas of the Djebilet region⁽¹³⁾ of southwest Algeria, and instead signed a memorandum of understanding with a consortium of Chinese companies in March 2021.⁽¹⁴⁾
4. Algeria is unlikely to renew the contract for the development of the Euro-Maghreb gas pipeline, which extends from Algeria to Europe through Morocco, and which supplies Europe with Algerian gas. This means depriving Morocco of the ability to collect transit fees in the form of natural gas. Two days after diplomatic ties were announced to be severed, the Algerian Ministry of Energy and Mines confirmed that all natural gas supplies to Spain will be through the Medgaz pipeline,⁽¹⁵⁾ which connects Algeria with Spain directly via the Mediterranean. Although no official data has been published regarding losses to the Moroccan economy as a result of this,⁽¹⁶⁾ the decision would harm Morocco's supply of natural gas.

Conclusion

Historical tensions, border disputes, and regional choices will continue to govern the nature of Moroccan-Algerian relations, as they have for decades. But continuing hostility is not inevitable either. The two neighbouring countries have many shared interests and commonalities, which can be built upon to move on towards more positive relations. But reaching this point requires a solution to the ongoing points of friction that led to the current low point in relations.

Perhaps it is assumed that the interim goal will be coexistence and the stability or a relative normalization of relations, despite the differences. Resolving these differences requires a radical change in the two countries' approach to some of the above-mentioned issues, based on a strategic choice that favours their fraternal relationship over these controversial issues.

¹³ "After Its Denial of a Cooperation Agreement with Morocco, the Exploitation of the Iron Mine at Djebilet in Tindouf", Anfas Press, 3/4/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3BgKpCf>.

¹⁴ *Algérie Presse Service*, "Exploitation of the Ghar Djebilet Mine: Signing a Memorandum of Understanding between Chinese Companies," YouTube, 3/30/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3mCTe5f>.

¹⁵ "Arkab: All natural gas supplies from Algeria to Spain will take place through the 'Medgaz' pipeline," *Algérie Presse Service*, 26/8/2021, accessed on 28/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3kxyetY>.

¹⁶ "The Algerian Gas Pipeline Controversy..Who is the Biggest Loser in the Battle of Conflicting Statements?", *TRT Arabi*, 27/8/2021, accessed on 27/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3t82D6h>.