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Morocco Calls for Dialogue with Algeria

Policy Analysis Unit

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Introduction

Morocco has called for a “direct and frank dialogue” with Algeria and has proposed setting up a “joint political mechanism” for to resolve the ongoing dispute between the two North African nations.⁽¹⁾ The invitation raises many questions regarding the background to the ongoing stalemate, the expectations and potential outcomes. On November 6 2018, during a speech to commemorate the 43rd anniversary of the Green March, King Mohammad VI invited Algeria to re-open the border that has remained closed since 1994. He also proposed a discussion about investment plans and enhancing bilateral cooperation on regional and international challenges, most importantly terrorism and migration issues. He insisted on his country’s openness to any proposal or initiative suggested by Algeria in the aim of re-instating bilateral relations. The speech did not shy away from historical references to the Algerian revolution, and to “the ambition that induced the generation who fought for freedom and independence to seek to achieve the unity of the Maghreb as symbolized, at the time, by the Tangier Conference, which was held in 1958 and whose sixtieth anniversary we are commemorating this year.”⁽²⁾ The king also alluded to religious references that encourage the good treatment of neighbors.

This step came as a surprise on several levels, especially as it is the first initiated by Morocco during the reign of Mohammad VI. It coincides with the anniversary of the Green March and follows the recent Security Council Resolution 2440, renewing the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) for six months.⁽³⁾ The invitation also comes on the eve of negotiations over the Sahara scheduled in Geneva early December this year. These considerations pose a number of questions regarding the intentions behind this initiative.

The Moroccan-Algerian Dispute

The post-colonial period was characterized by an intense conflict between Morocco and Algeria, motivated by many contributing factors. The most important of these was the lack of an agreement over the borders between the two countries, leading to the “Sand War” of 1963. Then came the Sahara issue. On November 6 1975, Morocco organized the “Green March” of around 350,000 Moroccans towards the Western Sahara, then under Spanish colonial occupation. Following the Spanish departure, Morocco took control of most of the Sahara region, which led to an armed conflict with the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro) lasting until 1991. The United Nations subsequently deployed the MINURSO mission to oversee the ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front. Algeria has consistently supported Polisario’s demands

1 “King Mohammed VI’s Speech on 43rd Anniversary of Green March” *Morocco World News*, 6/11/2018, last accessed 18/11/2018 at: <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2018/11/257090/king-mohammed-vi-speech-43rd-anniversary-green-march/>

2 Ibid

3 United Nations Security Council, “Security Council Adopts Resolution 2440 (2018), Authorizing Six-Month Extension for United Nations Mission for Referendum in Western Sahara” 31/10/2018, last accessed 18/11/2018 at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13561.doc.htm>



for a referendum on self-determination, while Morocco has maintained that the Western Sahara is an integral part of its territory and that there is no alternative to negotiations on the basis of their Western Sahara Autonomy Proposal.

Throughout the last three decades, The Sahara issue has cast an ugly shadow over relations between the two North African neighbors and this tension has remained the dominant feature of Algerian-Moroccan relations. This is despite the temporary respite at the end of the 1980s with the Zéralda summit between the heads of the five Maghrebi states on 10 June 1988, and the then the Marrakesh Conference on 17 February 1989, which saw the creation of the “Arab Maghreb Union”. Tensions quickly resumed however, to the point that the land borders between the two countries were closed in 1994 in the aftermath of an armed attack on a hotel in Marrakesh. Rabat accused Algeria of being behind the attack and the borders have remained closed and relations strained to this day.

What the Timing Means

The Moroccan initiative comes as the Sahara issue enters a significant new phase following UN Resolution 2440, which was proposed by the United States and adopted by a majority of security council members, with 12 voting in favor of the resolution and Russia, Ethiopia and Bolivia abstaining. The resolution provides MINURSO with a 6-month extension until 30 April 2019 and stresses the importance of all parties being committed to the advancement of the political process and the need for realism and the spirit of compromise in order to progress in negotiations. The resolution was in line with the US recommendation, which was at odds with the suggestion of countries allied to Morocco, especially France, calling for a year’s extension of the mission. The United States, which drafted the resolution, suggested that a six-month reduction of the mission would put pressure on the parties involved to reach a negotiated solution. At the same time, it raised the question of MINURSO funding, which has become more controversial than ever before.

The initiative also comes on the eve of negotiations due to be held on 5 and 6 November in Geneva to discuss the Sahara after the four parties (Morocco, Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania) gave into international pressures.⁽⁴⁾ They accepted the invitation of the United Nations envoy to the Western Sahara, former German President Horst Köhler, in which he explained that the aim of these talks is to discuss the next steps that will “re-launch the political process.”⁽⁵⁾

Since July 2007, Morocco and the Polisario Front have conducted several rounds of negotiations, the last of which was held in March 2012 in the US town, Manhasset, but the negotiations have been

4 At the end of August 2018, the Political Coordinator of the United States Mission to the United Nations, Rodney Hunter, stated in his address to the members of the Security Council that his country could not continue to support the United Nations peacekeeping missions in some conflict areas such as Cyprus or the Sahara Western Union for decades, without any progress on the ground; and stressed the need to make progress in the political sphere rather than the missions to perpetuate the status quo. See: Rodney Hunter, “Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Mediation and Settlement of Disputes,” New York City, 29/8/2018, accessed on 13/11/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/DD3iur>

5 “U.N. invites Western Sahara parties for new talks in December”, Reuters, 1/10/2018, last accessed 13/11/2018 at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-morocco-algeria-polisario/u-n-invites-western-sahara-parties-for-new-talks-in-december-idUSKCN1MB3FO>

generally marked by stalemate, producing no tangible results. Yet this time the issue will not be handled with “direct negotiations” in the strictest sense,⁽⁶⁾ rather it will be put to a discussion table with a 2+2 format (Morocco and Polisario + Algeria and Mauritania). This step aims to jumpstart action to solve the stagnated Sahrawi Crisis and the regional situation.

Finally, the Moroccan initiative comes at a very precise political moment for Algeria, which is preparing for the presidential elections scheduled for spring 2019. So far the nomination of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fifth term has not been officially announced, and the Algerian military and the Ministry of Defense have undergone a wave of changes in leadership. Thus, the future of the Algerian political landscape, in light of political infighting, is uncertain and hard to discern.

Despite the welcoming international and Arab response to this step, Algeria is yet to respond officially, but former officials have expressed reservations about the timing of the invitation. In Morocco, this invitation was not been preceded by a public debate enhancing the popularity of this proposal and revealing any political reward for the Kingdom. The issue has been neglected in recent years. Morocco is fostering a foreign policy aimed primarily at strengthening the relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa rather than the Maghreb, particularly through its re-instated membership to the African Union and its bid to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Here, too, aspects of the Moroccan-Algerian conflict remain, especially in their respective attempts to polarize the Sufi orders in Sub-Saharan Africa and their competition over the project for the Nigerian gas pipeline to Europe.

Likely Scenarios

US president Donald Trump’s decision to appoint John Bolton as National Security Advisor in April 2018, stirred anxiety in the Moroccan government. Bolton had previously served as adviser to UN envoy to the Western Sahara, James Baker, who was known for taking a position that aligned with Polisario and his sympathy for the idea of a self-determination referendum. The UN security council voted on resolution 2414 that month, “Recalling and reaffirming all its previous resolutions on Western Sahara”, and furthering Moroccan anxieties.⁽⁷⁾ While French support for Morocco’s position on the Sahara issue has remained constant, the British and US positions are raising growing concerns in Rabat. The Moroccan call for dialogue cannot be understood without considering its link to the Security Council resolution 2440. The is the second extension of MINURSO’s mandate for just six months, in contrast with formerly annual extensions, and it is a matter of concern to Moroccan diplomacy. In addition, the potential outcome of the Western Sahara negotiations to be held in Geneva under the auspices of

⁶ Algeria refuses to hold direct negotiations with Morocco on the Sahara dispute, in the belief that the matter must be resolved between Rabat and Sahrawi people directly; a few weeks ago, Algerian Foreign Minister Abdelkader Messahel reiterated to the UN General Assembly that resolving the conflict in the Sahara lies in exercising the right Self-determination. See: “Algeria: The Western Sahara Issue Will Only Be Solved through Sahrawi Self-Determination”, United Nations News, 29/9/2018, last accessed 13/11/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/2ZccEY>

⁷ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2412 (2018) last accessed 13/11/2018 at: [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2414\(2018\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2414(2018))

the United Nations on 5 and 6 December 2018, means it is imperative that Morocco takes charge and pushes for a new dynamic regarding its proposal for self-autonomy in the Sahara.

Perhaps the likelihood of Algeria accepting the Moroccan invitation for direct dialogue is weak, but this call seems directed to the international community more than Algeria itself, in the format of messages demonstrating Moroccan readiness to bring about a solution to the issue. Morocco will use any means necessary to directly involve Algeria in the Western Sahara issue, believing that Algerian support for the Polisario is a key factor. Algeria on the other hand considers the issue a UN matter, to which it is not an integral party.⁽⁸⁾ At the same time, the Polisario is justifiably concerned about any possible rapprochement between the two neighbors, which would inevitably come at its own expense.

It appears that the parties concerned are clinging to their preconceptions, threatening to bring any negotiations to an end. The distance remains wide between those calling for a referendum on self-determination and those who affirm that autonomy is the only settlement and solution to the conflict.

The Moroccan call for dialogue, despite its circumstantial and tactical aims, serves as a reminder that the dialogue between Morocco and Algeria remains an urgent necessity. It is a key to meeting the demands and aspirations of the two neighboring Arab populations, whether towards their joint economic integration or Moroccan regional integration.

⁸ Algeria is not only part of the Sahara conflict, but it is also an observer country. On June 20, 2013, Algerian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Amar Belani revealed three conditions for the reopening of the land border: halting what he called the campaign of distortion led by Moroccan official and non-official circles against Algeria; the cooperation of Moroccan authorities in stopping the flow of drugs from Morocco to Algeria; and to respect the position of the Algerian Government regarding the Western Sahara, which it regards as a decolonization issue. See: "Why Does the Land Border between Algeria and Morocco Remain Closed?" BBC Arabic, 28/6/2018, last accessed 13/11/2018 at: <https://goo.gl/GTVk7S>