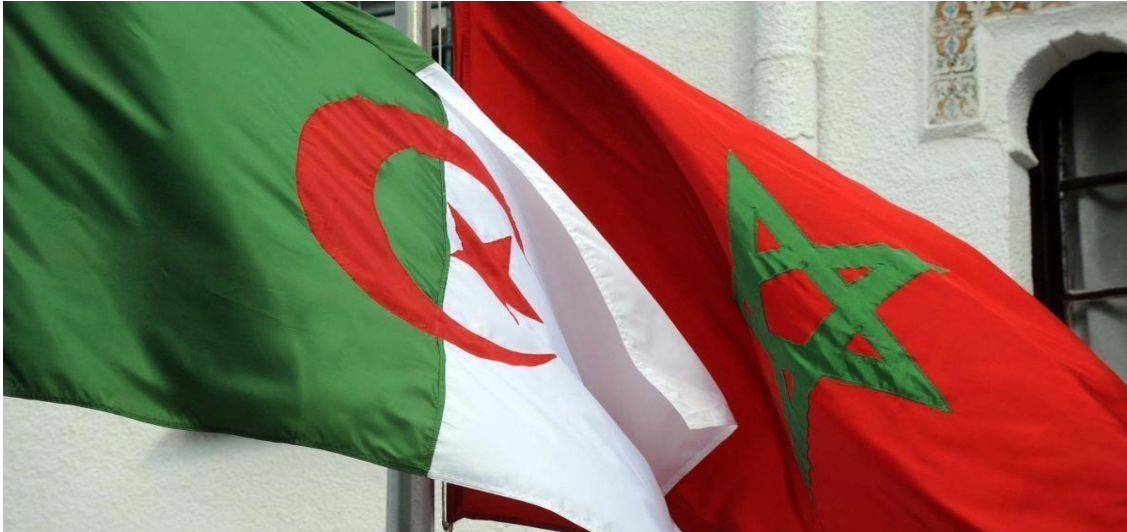


Morocco and Algeria Enter into a New Spiral of Conflict

Written by Óscar Méndez



Although the bad relations between Morocco and Algeria, main powers in the Maghreb, are not breaking news, the recent spiral of accusations, attacks, and threats are worrying for the peace in the region. Despite their historical, religious, and cultural similarities, both countries have had strained relations since their respective independences. Two players in search of regional preponderance: will this be the time when open warfare in the Maghreb will be waged once again?

UNRESTRAINED DISPUTE BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

On August 24th, Algeria severed its diplomatic relations with Morocco, after denouncing the hostile actions of its neighbour, related to the conflict that exists between them over Western Sahara. According to Algeria, Morocco is behind the severe fires that affected the country during the summer. Morocco would have given direct support to the independence movements in northern Algeria, known as the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylia, MAK.

This group, based in Paris and considered a terrorist by Algeria, defends the right to self-determination for the Kabylia region, in the north of the country, inhabited by Berbers. In fact, following an anti-terrorist operation in October, Algeria accused the "Zionist entity" -Israel- and a "North African country" -allegedly Morocco- of helping the MAK (Abidi, Jamaï, 2021). However, Algeria has not been able to show any proof of this help, although it is likely that Morocco has had contacts with them in order to weaken their rival, as

Morocco's permanent representative to the United Nations, Omar Hilal, called for self-determination for Algeria's Kabyle people (Saleh, 2021)

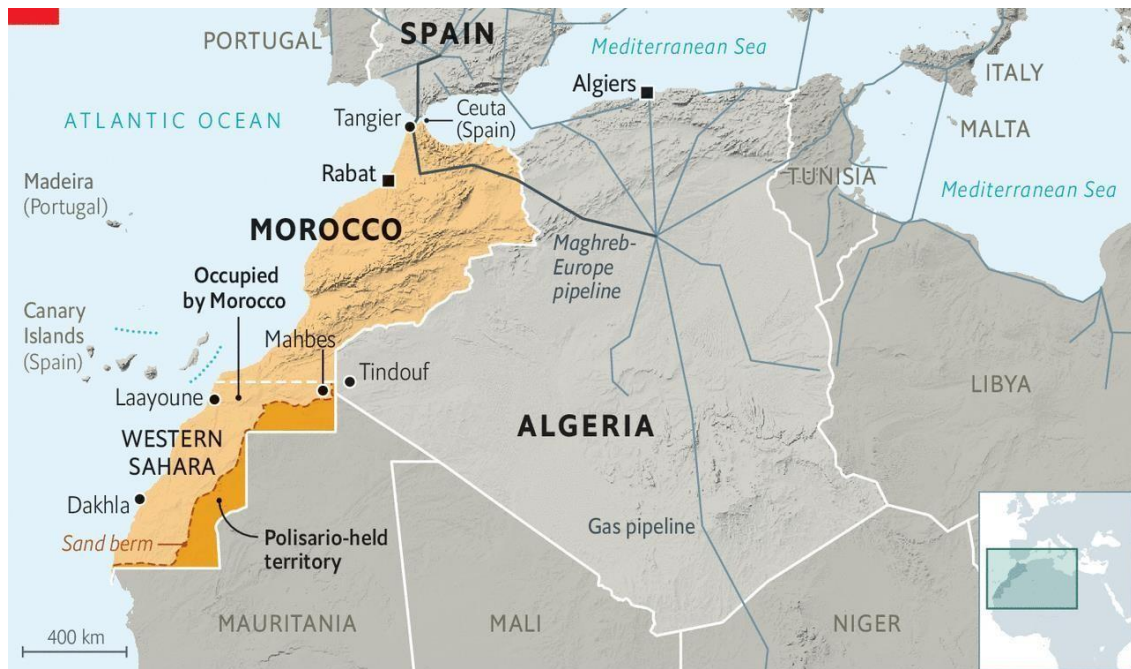
Another of the reasons given by Algeria for breaking off relations has been the use of the Pegasus spyware by Morocco's intelligence against its officials. This espionage software, designed by the Israeli company NSO (Saleh, 2021), is said to have been used to spy on Algerian political and military leaders such as the Chief of Staff Said Chengriha and the former Algerian ambassador in Paris, Abdelkader Mesdoua (Abidi, Jamai, 2021).

In this context, during the visit of the Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, to Morocco, he indicated his concern about Algeria's regional role as well as its "rapprochement with Iran". Algeria considered that these words were not only Israel's opinion but also Morocco's, which is considered an act that breaks the principles of unity and good neighbourliness signed in 1989 through the Arab Maghreb Union (Abidi, Jamai, 2021).

Finally, another reason for this break in relations has been the reactivation of the armed conflict between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan Royal Moroccan Army. This has directly affected to the relations between Algeria and Morocco, as the Alawite kingdom was accused by Algeria of breaking the cease-fire by mobilizing troops into the buffer strip at the Guerguerat border zone between Morocco and Mauritania (Abidi, Jamai, 2021).

After the breakdown of relations at the end of August, the situation has only worsened. A month later, Algeria announced the closure of its airspace to all aircraft registered in Morocco, both civil and military (DW, 2021). In addition, Algeria announced in August that it would not renew the Gas-Maghreb-Europe (GME) pipeline contract, which was due to expire on October 31 (Zoubir, 2021). This pipeline, which pass through Morocco and that has been supplying gas to Spain and Portugal for the last 25 years, signified for some analysts the beginning of a new era of partnership between the two countries in the style of the Coal and Steel Community in Europe. The pipeline was beneficial for Algeria, which could easily sell gas to Europe, and for Morocco, which imports 95% of its energy, as it obtained 10% of the gas passage for free in return. Therefore, it was assumed that being a mutually advantageous infrastructure, it would lay the foundations for a peaceful future relationship. This has been proven wrong on this occasion, demonstrating the depth of the rift between the two countries today. In the meantime, Algeria has switched to supplying gas to Spain through the Medgaz and, foreseeably, LNG tankers. Despite being

able to maintain its supply with this pipeline, the situation is not good for Algeria either, which has not alternatives in case of an accident, failure, etc., making it a less reliable supplier in the future (Holleis, 2021).



The Economist

The Economist. (2021). "Things are heating up in Western Sahara". The Economist, accessed on November 23, 2021, https://www.economist.com/sites/default/files/images/print-edition/20211106_MAM923.png.

On November 1st, 3 Algerians were killed on the border between Mauritania and Western Sahara when the trucks in which they were traveling exploded. According to the official Algerian news agency, the attack was carried out by drones owned by the "Moroccan occupation forces" (Al Jazeera, 2021). The Algerian media indicated that the attack would not go unpunished. Meanwhile, Morocco, in a calmer tone, did not want to make any statement about what happened, indicating only that Morocco "has never targeted and will never target Algerian citizens, regardless of the circumstances and the provocations". Moroccan sources also indicated that "If Algeria wants war, Morocco doesn't" (Al Jazeera, 2021). However, according to MEMO (2021), the Spanish intelligence agency, CNI, confirmed that the assassination of the Algerian truck drivers was indeed carried out with drones, doubting that it happened by mistake.

Meanwhile, following this attack and in the context of the commemoration of the Green March, which led hundreds of thousands of Moroccans to invade Western Sahara, King Mohammed VI indicated that Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara cannot be questioned and that "it will never be up for negotiation" (Jeune Afrique, 2021). Moreover,

Moroccan sources indicated that his country is ready to turn the page and to resolve a conflict which it considers artificial, as well as to reach a peaceful solution to the Western Sahara conflict, but always on the basis of the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over this territory (France24, 2021).

MOROCCO-ALGERIA RELATIONSHIP HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DIFFICULT

Algeria gained its independence in 1962, 6 years after Morocco. The Algerian independence fighters maintained relatively good relations with King Mohammed V of Morocco, although he died in 1961. His successor, Hassan II, made claims on Algerian territory. In fact, this led him to invade Algeria in 1963, provoking a war that caused the death of hundreds of Algerians. This conflict was marked in the minds of Algeria's political and military elites, which led Algeria in 1976 to recognize the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, proclaimed by the Polisario Front after the Green March of 1975 (Zoubir, 2021). This march was organised by King Hassan II, making more than 350,000 civilians and 50,000 military troops walk to Western Sahara, still a Spanish colony at the time, to gain control of it. In this way, they sought to force the government and, primarily, the newly crowned Spanish king, Juan Carlos I, to abandon the colony and hand it over to Morocco, even though a referendum of self-determination should had been held as it was a colonized territory. Due to the Green March and the Polisario Front's boycott of Spanish actions in the colony through guerrilla attacks, the referendum had been impossible. Similar to today, Morocco dared to feel that it had the support of the US.

This situation led to a rupture of relations between the two countries until 1988. The recovery of relations was based on a series of agreements of good neighbourliness, cooperation, the creation of the Arab Maghreb Union, the non-interference of Algeria in Moroccan affairs or the resolution of the Sahara situation through a self-determination agreement (Zoubir, 2021). However, the 1990s were a complicated decade for Algeria, with a civil war that lasted more than ten years between the government, rebel groups and Islamist groups. In the midst of their fratricidal struggle, in 1994, Morocco falsely accused the Algerian intelligence of being behind a terrorist attack on the Asni hotel in Marrakech. Morocco imposed visas on the Algerians, to which they responded by closing their borders to Moroccans. Moreover, in 1995, the institutions of the Arab Maghreb Union were paralyzed because of Algerian support for the Polisario Front (Zoubir, 2021).

Subsequently, the new Algerian president Bouteflika tried to smooth things over and put aside the Western Sahara issue in search of a better relationship with his neighbour. On the other hand, the new King Mohammed VI continued to show no willingness to solve the Sahara conflict within the terms of the United Nations. It would not be until the fall of Bouteflika in 2019 that Algeria would reiterate its support for the self-determination of Western Sahara.

SEEKING ALLIES... AND WEAPONS

Lately, Morocco has worked hard to win the favour of other countries and powers to partially or fully recognize Western Sahara as part of Morocco. To do so, it went back to the African Union in 2017, succeeded in getting Arab and African countries like Gambia, Gabon, Senegal, Jordan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates to open consulates in the disputed territory (Abidi, Jamai, 2021). Morocco also lobbied different European states -unsuccessfully- and the US, from whom it obtained recognition during President Trump's administration in exchange for normalising its relations with Israel. This recognition by the US has made Morocco feel strong on the international level in defending its sovereignty over the Sahara, which has led it to suspend relations with Germany, to discredit the EU Court of Justice (Reuters, 2021) for not allowing member states to commerce with the Sahara as it was part of Morocco or to threaten and blackmail Spain (Lmrabet, 2021). Besides, the recognition given by the former US President is not going to be withdraw by Biden, as US officials have confirmed (AFP, 2021)

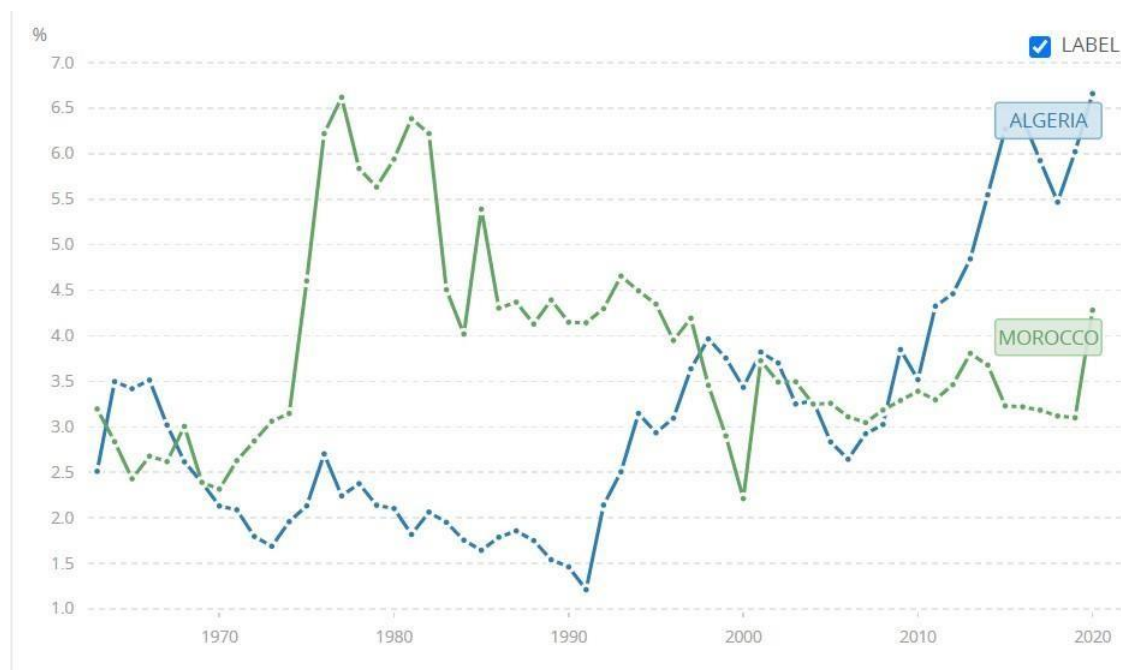
In addition, Algeria has felt that France has shown little inclination to intervene in the recent conflicts between the two countries, which has been interpreted by Algeria as new tacit support to Morocco (Abidi, Jamai, 2021), something the Alawite country has largely counted on in previous conflicts, such as the 1963 Sand War between the two countries, or during the Green March. In fact, relations between Algeria and France are not good at present, which has led to the closure of Algerian airspace to French military aircraft, hampering French military actions in the Sahel.

On the other hand, Algeria has more or less clear support of Russia. The two countries forged good relations during the Cold War that have been maintained to the present day. In fact, in early 2021, the two countries conducted joint manoeuvres near the border with Morocco (Chahir, 2021). And more recently, Algeria sent troops to participate in joint

exercises with the 58th Russian Army in the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republic of South Ossetia (Lmrabet, 2021).

On the other hand, it should be noted that Russia is the largest arms supplier to Algeria, with Germany and China in second and third place respectively. For its part, Morocco's main supplier is the United States, although it also acquires them from Israel -which wants to build an armament factory in Morocco- or Turkey -drones-, although France and the United Kingdom are still the second and third suppliers (MoroccoWorldNews, 2021).

All of the above has brought Algerian-Moroccan relations to their worst moment in years. Morocco is in the midst of modernising its military and has recently increased its defence spending to 4.5% of its GDP. For its part, Algeria has steadily increased its defence spending since 2006, from 2.6% to 6.66% of its GDP today. And, as if that were not enough, both countries have announced an even greater increase in defence spending by 2022.



Méndez, Óscar (2021). "Morocco (Green) and Algeria (Blue) defence expenditure as GDP percentage". Data from World Bank.

For the time being, however, it seems that open warfare between the two is unlikely. Still, it is not entirely out of the question given that it is likely that both countries will constantly use hybrid warfare methods or low-intensity attacks that affect the other without starting an open war, which could lead to miscalculations and mistakes that could worsen the situation.

Moreover, it should be taken into account that Morocco feels supported by two major military powers such as the US and Israel, which may lead it to be emboldened in a possible conflict against Algeria. At the same time, Morocco has open diplomatic disputes with the EU, especially with Germany and Spain, so it should consider whether it is opening more conflicts that it can handle.

For its part, Algeria may be able to count on Russia, although it remains to be seen to what extent an open conflict in this region may be in Russia's interests, however much it may serve to counterbalance American power. In addition, according to Lmrabet (2021), there is the possibility of greater Algerian collaboration with Iran and, probably, with Hezbollah in the event of a conflict with Morocco.

CONCLUSIONS

In short, the situation is worrying, both because of the danger it poses to peace in the region and because of the disastrous consequences it could have for both countries. Moreover, it is not beneficial for the resolution of the conflict in Western Sahara, both because of the Polisario Front's stagnant power and because of Morocco's policy of appropriation of the Sahara. Moreover, the recognition of this incorporation by the US has further worsened the chances of a resolution within the UN framework. At the same time, Spain, still recognized as a colonial power in Western Sahara, wants nothing to do with the issue, as it does not want to worsen its relations with Morocco and Algeria. Despite this, the medical treatment provided by the Iberian country to the Secretary-General of the Polisario Front, Brahim Gali, has had a significant impact on the relations between Spain and Morocco.

Meanwhile, the situation may be beneficial for the regimes of both countries internally, creating external enemies at a time when the social situation in both countries is not good due to the pandemic or the economy, such as the rise in fuel or food prices, or political unrest and the death of the country's former leader, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in the case of Algeria (BC, 2021), or because of the protest in Morocco against the new relation with Israel.

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