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# Cold War in Africa

## *Morocco and Algeria*

by LTC Jay Figurski, USA

### Introduction

Ask most Americans which countries are known to have deep security cooperation ties with the United States, and most will not know that there is a country in Africa that was one of the first to recognize the newly independent United States in 1786, that was a close partner during the Cold War and that has committed to spending billions of dollars on U.S. defense technology. That country is Morocco, and the partnership it enjoys with the United States is close indeed. Its military buildup and active diplomatic maneuvering are not coincidental. Morocco finds itself at ever increasing odds with its longtime neighbor and rival, Algeria. In today's dynamic global security environment, this rivalry may not make headlines. However, these two African heavyweights are stuck in a *de facto* cold war that could put U.S. diplomacy to the test.

### A History of Mistrust

To understand the nature of this rivalry, a brief history lesson is in order. Morocco and Algeria share a common Berber cultural and linguistic heritage, and they were both conquered by Islamic armies in the 7th century, beginning the process of Islamization and Arabization. Both countries were also dominated by France beginning in the 19th century, but that is where their histories started to differ. The French army conquered Algeria from 1803 to 1847 and essentially annexed it, making it a province of France proper rather than just a colony. This would have serious implications for Algeria's future; the French exercised tighter control of Algeria than they would have over a colony, and they saw it as an integral part of their nation. Morocco held on to its sovereignty much longer, only becoming a protectorate of France in 1912.

Prior to the 20th century, the border between Morocco and Algeria was never delineated. The area was remote and largely uninhabited. Then, in 1903, the French authorities in Algeria began to expand westward, laying claim to Bechar and Tindouf<sup>1</sup>—both areas the Moroccans saw as traditionally belonging to the Moroccan crown. France, however, did not formally annex the areas, nor did it delineate an Algerian-Moroccan border, as both regions fell under French control, making it a regional rather than an international border.

### 1963 Sand War

This was the status quo until 1956, when Morocco gained independence from France. Morocco demanded that Bechar and Tindouf be returned, and the French refused. Six years later, Algeria won its independence after a bloody struggle against France. Morocco then saw an opportunity to regain its lost territories, as the Algerian military was diminished after years of guerilla warfare. Limited skirmishes escalated into war in September 1963, with initial Moroccan advances grounding to a halt in October in the face of stubborn Algerian

Morocco, a U.S. partner and ally since 1786, has had a long rivalry with its neighbor Algeria, an anti-colonial, anti-Western partner to Russia and China. Their history of mutual mistrust has spawned a "cold war" in which both countries have embarked on sweeping military modernization programs and diplomatic maneuvering.

1. Karen Farsoun and Jim Paul, *War in the Sahara 1963* (Chicago: Middle East Research and Information Project, Inc., 1976), 13–16.

The flashpoint of the conflict is the territory known as Western Sahara, which favors autonomy and enjoys Algerian political-military support, but which Morocco sees as an integral part of its kingdom. The United States brokered a 2020 agreement in which Morocco normalized its relations with Israel in return for U.S. recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

resistance. Cuba, which had had its own socialist, anti-imperialist revolution just four years earlier, saw common cause with Algeria, and deployed hundreds of troops with T-34 tanks, 120mm mortars, a battery of 57mm recoilless rifles, antiaircraft artillery and 122mm field guns—with the crews to operate them.<sup>2</sup> The combined Algerian-Cuban force planned a counter-offensive for 28 October, but the Moroccans, at the urging of the international community, agreed to negotiate with the Algerians to end hostilities before the attack.

### Western Sahara

While the Sand War was brief, it set a negative tone that has colored Moroccan-Algerian relations ever since. The most significant ramification of this has been the issue of Western Sahara, a region located between southern Morocco and Mauritania, which Morocco sees as an integral part of its traditional kingdom. The Sahrawis (inhabitants of Western Sahara) reject Morocco's claim, and they launched a campaign for independence when Spain withdrew its colonial claims in 1975. Consequently, Morocco organized the "Green March," in which 350,000 Moroccans marched into Western Sahara as an act of mass protest against Sahrawi independence claims,<sup>3</sup> effectively annexing the territory into Morocco, where it remains to this day. In response, the Sahrawis established the Polisario Front as a political-military organization to advance its quest for independence. Algeria, already at odds with Morocco over the border dispute and a champion of popular independence movements worldwide, began supporting the Polisario Front both financially and militarily. Additionally, Algeria welcomed large numbers of Sahrawis in refugee camps in Tindouf. Accusations and ill will have continued to flow in both directions, resulting in Algeria's decision to close its border with Morocco in 1994.

### Morocco: An Enduring U.S. Partner

Since it gained independence from France, Morocco has developed a special relationship with the United States. Morocco was officially non-aligned during the Cold War, but allowed U.S. forces overflight and access rights to Moroccan air bases.<sup>4</sup> The United States designated Morocco as a major non-NATO ally in 2004, and the two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2006. Morocco has embarked on a military modernization program known as Vision 2030, with the goal of becoming interoperable with the United States and NATO.<sup>5</sup> It has allocated \$17 billion to the program and has already acquired or committed to acquiring M1A1 Abrams tanks, High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), F-16 fighters, MQ-9B Guardian drones and more.<sup>6</sup> By far, the United States is the main supplier of weapon systems for Morocco's military modernization, to such an extent that the Moroccan army in 2030 will function as a small-scale reflection of the U.S. Army.

The U.S.-Moroccan partnership has also proven its strength in the diplomatic realm. In 2020, both the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed bilateral agreements, brokered by the Trump administration, to normalize their diplomatic relations with Israel. Later that same year, Morocco followed suit by signing an agreement with Israel, pledging to quickly begin direct flights, promote economic cooperation, reopen liaison offices and move toward "full diplomatic, peaceful and friendly relations."<sup>7</sup> As part of the agreement, the United States agreed to recognize Morocco's claim to Western Sahara while urging the parties to negotiate "using Morocco's autonomy plan as the only framework to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution."<sup>8</sup>

### Algeria: An Anti-Colonial, Non-Aligned Philosophy

While Morocco escaped the worst of French colonialism and cast its lot in with the United States, Algeria suffered an extremely bloody war for independence that has influenced its perception of the outside world ever since. The National Liberation Front, which

2. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

3. "The Green March: A Unique Chapter in Post-Colonial Moroccan History," *Morocco World News*, 6 November 2023.

4. "Royal Moroccan Air Force," *GlobalSecurity.org*, November 2023.

5. "Morocco to receive four MQ-9B Guardian drones from USA," *Global Defense Corps*, 17 March 2021.

6. "Morocco to receive four MQ-9B Guardian drones from USA."

7. Department of State, *Joint Declaration*, 22 December 2020.

8. Department of State, *Joint Declaration*.

has ruled Algeria as a one-party state since it gained its independence in 1962, has remained distrustful of the West in general, and especially opposed to Western military interventions—such as the 2003 U.S.-Iraq war and the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya. Due to its leftist-socialist leanings, Algeria initially developed ties with the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc nations—and, more recently, with China and South Africa.

Militarily, Algeria maintains the second largest standing army in Africa, second only to Egypt.<sup>9</sup> It has the continent's largest defense budget: \$16.7 billion in 2023.<sup>10</sup> It has sourced roughly 75 percent of its arsenal from the former Soviet Union and, secondarily, from China.<sup>11</sup> In response to Morocco's military modernization with the United States, Algeria signed a large contract with Russia in 2022 for submarines, Su-57 (Sukhoi) stealth aircraft, Su-34 bombers and Su-30 fighters. It also hopes to acquire new air defense systems, such as the S-400, the Viking and the Antey-4000.<sup>12</sup>

Algeria is also an important part of China's Mediterranean strategy as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese investment will expand from traditional sectors, such as basic infrastructure and energy, and the primary contractor for building railways, ports and mosques, to emerging areas like aerospace, telecommunications and new energy.<sup>13</sup> Prior to his resignation in 2019, Algeria's longtime President Abdelaziz Bouteflika started building what will be the world's largest mosque in Algiers and awarded the contract to a Chinese firm. China is also now the largest builder of infrastructure in Algeria.<sup>14</sup>

## Algeria Steps onto the International Stage

The military buildup is not the only reason the rivalry has escalated in recent years. Several factors have emerged that have strengthened Algeria's diplomatic position. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has compelled Europe to look elsewhere for its energy security, especially when it comes to natural gas. This has been an unexpected windfall for Algeria, which is rich in natural gas reserves and relatively close to Europe. In 2022, the International Monetary Fund estimated that Algeria recorded its first budget surplus in nine years, swelling international reserves to \$53.5 billion (up \$6.8 billion from 2021). A budget surplus was expected again in 2023.

The new Algerian government of Adelmajid Tebboune has taken other steps that have brought the country out of its long diplomatic isolation. For example, in 2020, the Algerian constitution was amended to allow the deployment of the armed forces outside the country. The move was made ostensibly to allow Algeria to intervene in Libya, if necessary, but constitutional revisions also allow participation in peacekeeping operations under the Arab League, the United Nations (UN) and—perhaps most important—the African Union (AU).<sup>15</sup> Algeria's increased participation in AU peacekeeping missions is significant because it can be seen as a direct snub against Morocco, which rejoined the group in 2017 after a long absence. Morocco had hoped to use AU membership to advance its own interests vis-à-vis Western Sahara and to improve its standing among African nations, but Algeria's move to lift its self-imposed restrictions will limit Morocco's ability to accomplish its goals.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Algeria submitted its application to join the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) group of emerging economies in 2022<sup>17</sup> and hosted an Arab League summit, where it took a pro-Palestinian stance critical of Morocco's rapprochement with the Jewish state. It even orchestrated a "unity meeting" between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and former Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (this was prior to Hamas' 7 October 2023 attack on Israel).<sup>18</sup>

## Tensions Rise

So how might a resurgent Algeria threaten Morocco? Algeria is taking a temporary seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2024–2025, which will enable it to use new mechanisms to try to reframe the Western Sahara issue. The Algerians are also likely to attempt a reform of the UNSC to give African nations a more prominent voice. It will be difficult for

9. Victor Oluwole, "Top African military powers in 2023 according to Global Firepower," *Business Insider Africa*, 25 August 2023:

10. John Hill, "Algeria risks falling behind in its arms race with Morocco," *Army Technology*, 21 March 2023.

11. "Distribution of arms imports into Algeria between 2018 and 2022, by country of origin," *Statista*, 30 November 2023.

12. Rabi' Al-Thani, "Algeria to sign 'huge deal with Russia to import advanced arms,'" *Asharq al-Awsat*, 2 November 2022.

13. "China, Algeria to deepen BRI cooperation amid Tebboune's visit," *Global Times*, 19 July 2023.

14. "China, Algeria to deepen BRI cooperation amid Tebboune's visit."

15. Thomas M. Hill, "A Newly Assertive Algeria Seizes an Opportunity," *United States Institute of Peace*, 19 January 2023.

16. Hill, "A Newly Assertive Algeria Seizes an Opportunity."

17. Alessandro du Besse, "Algeria applies to join BRICS: what's next?" *Impakter*, 14 November 2022.

18. Hill, "A Newly Assertive Algeria Seizes an Opportunity."

The United States can help ensure the conflict doesn't escalate by striking a balance between deepening cooperation with Algeria as it emerges from its self-imposed diplomatic isolation and continuing to support the UN-led process to resolve the Western Sahara dispute while upholding its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.

Algeria to reverse the diplomatic victories Morocco has won on the Western Sahara issue in recent years (especially U.S. recognition of its claims), but it will surely increase tensions with Rabat, the capital of Morocco, simply by trying.

Neither country wants war, nor would they benefit from it. There will continue to be regular provocations, however. These will likely range from rhetoric at international fora to expensive military exercises along their shared border as shows of force. But escalation will be unavoidable if any further incidents lead to deaths on either side. As Morocco and Algeria disagree more vocally on the international stage, both sides will continue to back up their diplomatic talk by projecting strength. In 2022, the two countries accounted for 74 percent of all military spending in North Africa, with Algeria allocating \$9.1 billion to its armed forces and Morocco spending \$5 billion, according to figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).<sup>19</sup> While Algeria has kept mostly constant levels of

spending, Morocco's military expenditure has doubled since 2005. It has focused increasingly on armed unmanned aerial systems, acquiring the MQ-9B Guardian drone from the United States and other models from Israel and Turkey. Morocco likely intends to use the systems for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions as well as for targeting Polisario combat power in Western Sahara.

### **Conclusion: Consequences to U.S. Interests**

These rising tensions have the potential to put the United States in a precarious position. It needs Algeria to remain a viable and economic alternative natural gas source for Europe. Without it, already high energy costs will increase even more, and European governments will be hard pressed to ask their citizens to continue supporting the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, the United States has already promised much to Morocco, and the bilateral partnership is good for U.S. business as well as national security.

Recent developments suggest that the Biden administration is striking the right balance by applying engagement and messaging strategically. Several senior-level U.S. delegations have visited Algeria over the past two years, including Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs Chidi Blyden.<sup>20</sup> U.S. messaging to Algeria has focused on the strong security and counterterrorism ties both countries have developed since 9/11, but it has strategically omitted pressure to increase political freedoms and to encourage democratic reforms, despite the fact that Algeria remains a one-party, autocratic state.

Likewise, the Biden administration has continued to support the UN-led process to resolve the Western Sahara dispute while also upholding its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory to preserve the diplomatic progress made between Morocco and Israel. However, the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war has complicated that relationship. The Morocco-Israel agreement has been strained as Moroccan support for the Palestinian cause has been rekindled. The Moroccan government has joined most Arab nations in criticizing the Israeli occupation in Gaza, and it is cautious of being seen by domestic audiences as supporting Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Although the Morocco-Algeria "cold war" poses no direct military threat to the United States, it continues to slow the economic development of two of Africa's most important countries—while threatening to derail U.S. diplomatic initiatives elsewhere, such as the Abraham accords. Keeping a lid on the Morocco-Algeria tensions without incurring consequences to U.S. interests will take continued strategic balance and skilled diplomacy.

19. "Trends in Military Expenditure, 2022," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, April 2023.

20. Gregory Aftandilian, "US-Algeria Relations Remain Troubled, but Neither Side Wants a Break," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 25 January 2023.

21. Sabina Henneberg and Amine Ghoulidi, "Balancing U.S. Relations in North Africa Without Undermining the Abraham Accords," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 22 November 2023.