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Fikra Forum

How Morocco's Diplomatic Efforts in Africa Are Shaping the Region

by [Samir Bennis](#)

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Brief Analysis

Shifts in African continental politics and U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara are components of a deepening rift between Morocco and Algeria.

The decades-long rivalry between Morocco and Algeria has intensified in recent months after Morocco dealt a series of diplomatic blows to Algeria, the most recent of which being the U.S. recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. This decision took Algerian officials by surprise and exacerbated their frustration with the advances Morocco has achieved in Western Sahara over the past four years.

At the moment, reconciliation between Morocco and Algeria remains a mirage. Morocco has made these diplomatic maneuvers as Algeria is experiencing severe internal instability—the state's failure to address the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic crisis exacerbated by the falling oil prices and crippled state budgets signify that the Algerian ruling elite will have pressing domestic priorities for the near future that will not lend themselves to reconciliation with their western neighbor.

Moreover, shifts in the regional influence of both countries suggest additional pressure on their relationship. The 34th African Union (AU) summit, which took place virtually on February 6-7, marked a notable new episode in the fierce regional competition between Morocco and Algeria. The summit and its aftermath once again put the schism between the two Maghreb neighbors on display.

Prior to the summit, Algerian Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum conducted an African tour to garner backing for the country's agenda and bolster support at the upcoming AU summit. Boukadoum hoped to use this support to undermine the political momentum Morocco had achieved over the last few months.

Yet for Rabat, the summit demonstrated that the balance of power in Africa appears to be **shifting progressively** in its favor. This shift began with Morocco's return to the AU four years ago, which indicated the country's resolve to reunite with its African neighbors and boost its position in continental politics. Morocco's political and diplomatic achievements during this period are understood as clearly validating its decision to take back its seat in Addis Ababa. Breaking free from its empty chair policy in Africa was one the most momentous political decisions taken under King Mohammed VI's leadership, and Morocco never would have changed the AU's approach to the Western Sahara dispute had it not returned to the continental body.

The Impact of Morocco's AU Membership

For almost forty years, Morocco's outreach on the continent was limited to a number of West African states . Its absence from the African Union and its lack of strong ties with other African countries served to Morocco's detriment and hampered any of its chances of playing a more meaningful role in African politics. At the same time, Algeria extended great efforts to bring African countries in line with its own foreign policy goals, including those in Western Sahara.

However, this dynamic began to change in 2014. The appointment of former President of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano, as AU's special envoy for the Sahara was one of the catalysts that pushed Morocco to reconsider its entire African policy and consider regaining its seat within the African Union. Before Morocco's return to the AU, Algeria had long relied on the Abuja-Algiers-Pretoria axis to implement its agenda within the AU and define the organization's positions on many regional issues, notably Western Sahara.

Algeria's control over the AU's decision-making structure enabled it to create the position of the AU special envoy for Western Sahara and task Chissano with the mission. From his appointment until 2017, Chissano worked to emphasize the AU's role in putting an end to the Western Sahara dispute in line with the Algerian agenda, pressuring Morocco at the United Nations through a number of **briefings** to the Security Council.

In the past several years, Morocco has sought to change this dynamic. Even before officially rejoining the AU, King Mohammed VI has conducted over 50 visits to more than 26 African countries between 2000 and 2017. This new momentum was crowned with Morocco's return to the African Union in January 2017.

After its return, Morocco has worked to play on Algeria's turf and dismantle the Abuja-Algiers-Pretoria axis. Morocco decided to go beyond its comfort zone in West Africa and sought to gain the support of East and Southern African countries. Diplomatic efforts convinced Nigeria and Ethiopia to maintain positive neutrality in the Western Sahara dispute. The partnership Morocco secured with Nigeria four years ago evidenced the shifting balance of power on the African continent.

During its 31st summit, held in Mauritania in July 2018, the AU said the Western Sahara conflict's management fell under the exclusive **purview of the UN**, stressing that the AU's role was limited to supporting the UN-led political process. That decision constituted a watershed moment for Western Sahara dispute and heralded a period of unprecedented diplomatic setbacks for Algeria.

Rabat and Abuja

Morocco's recent reinforcement of economic and political bilateral relations with Nigeria exemplifies its recent diplomatic successes on the continent. King Mohammed VI's visit to Nigeria in December 2016 and Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari's visit to Morocco in June 2018 laid the groundwork for a new era of win-win cooperation. In a short period, Morocco has succeeded in building trust with Nigeria, and the rapprochement has

translated into the launch of the Nigeria-Morocco [gas pipeline project](#), which will shake the future balance of power. King Mohammed VI's [phone call](#) with President Buhari on January 31 cemented the alignment of Morocco's and Nigeria's strategic interests and solidified their determination to fulfill the potential of their bilateral relations. The two heads of state emphasized their keenness to build on the momentum the countries had achieved in their relations and move forward with building the gas pipeline. When completed, the project will enable Nigeria to export its energy resources to Europe. In addition, Moroccan state-owned phosphate giant OCP will construct a fertilizer plant in Nigeria by 2023.

Morocco's open hand policy towards Nigeria has already started to pay its dividends. Though Nigeria still has not decided to suspend its recognition of the Polisario's self-styled republic, it has recently adopted a position of positive neutrality. Up until 2015, Nigeria repeatedly voiced [support for the Polisario](#) Front during the annual debate held by the UN General Assembly every September. Not only did Nigeria support Polisario, but it equated the Western Sahara situation with the Palestinians' plight.

As the new nature of Morocco-Nigeria ties took shape, Western Sahara disappeared from Nigeria's annual address to the UN General Assembly. Nigeria has instead joined the cohort of countries calling on the parties to reach a mutually acceptable political solution in line with UNSC resolutions. Moreover, following Algerian Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum's visit to Abuja last November, [Nigeria's](#) foreign ministry published a statement that did not mention [Western Sahara](#), though Algeria's top diplomat had urged African countries to condemn Morocco's recent dislodging of Polisario members from El Guerguerat crossing.

A Shifting Continental Divide

The 34th AU summit held in Addis Ababa last month put Morocco's newfound influence into sharp relief. Algeria no longer holds any seat on the AU's councils and committees, including the Peace and Security Council, which it had controlled since 2008.

The summit also saw the reelection of former President of Chad, Moussa Faki, to head the AU Commission for four years, seen in Rabat as favorable to Moroccan interests. It also saw the election of the president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)—one of the fifteen African countries that has opened a consulate in Western Sahara at Morocco's behest—to the AU's rotating presidency. Furthermore, the summit glossed over discussion on Western Sahara despite Algeria's and South Africa's attempts to include it on the agenda.

That countries such as Zambia—which had recognized Polisario's self-styled republic—have since opened a [consulate](#) in Western Sahara is symptomatic of Algeria's dwindling influence in Africa and the shifting balance of power on the continent. Algeria is aware that these developments are merely initial steps and that other African countries are likely to follow suit.

There is also the sense that as the AU gradually leans in favor of Morocco, the expulsion of the Polisario Front from the AU is likely no longer a matter of "if" but "when." Algerian media's recent bout of attacks against Morocco and harsh [critique](#) of King Mohammed VI reflect the weight of Algeria's concerns over these recent gains. The U.S. decision to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, concomitant with Morocco's decision to reinstate diplomatic ties with Israel, resulted in an unprecedentedly vitriolic media campaign against Rabat that used [anti-Semitic overtones](#) to describe Morocco's reinstatement of diplomatic ties with Israel, including one network host's description of Jews as a "danger."

Moreover, in one of his first public appearances following four months of COVID-19 hospitalization in Germany, Algerian President Abdelmejid Tebboune [described](#) Morocco as an "occupier" of Western Sahara, which he called

the “last colony in Africa.” Many Moroccan social media users called on the government to sever its diplomatic ties with Algeria in response, though Morocco has chosen to dismiss the president’s comments.

However, Rabat is concerned over the Algerian ruling elite’s zero-sum mentality. Despite sustained popular unrest in Algeria and attempts by Morocco to open a new chapter in relations between Algiers and Rabat, the Algerian ruling elite seems intent on maintaining power and keeping the Maghreb in a state of cold peace. This uncompromising position could quickly escalate into a military confrontation. In the face of weakening regional influence and ongoing internal challenges, Algeria could trigger a military confrontation in order to distract public attention and rally support against a foreign enemy.

This scenario could have terrible human, security, economic, and geopolitical consequences not only for both countries, but also for EU and U.S. strategic interests in the region. A military conflagration could disrupt international economic exchanges in the Strait of Gibraltar, the world’s **second busiest maritime** route, and disrupt the provision of gas from Algeria to Europe. It could also cause an unprecedented wave of migrations and of internally displaced persons. The migration crisis that resulted from the civil wars in Syria and Libya should be a stark reminder of how migration crises have **impacted politics** in the EU, which have a secondary impact on U.S. interests as well.

The EU and the United States could avoid this scenario by leading a diplomatic effort aimed at deescalating tension between the two countries. The current escalation between Morocco and Algeria—along with the changing regional dynamics exemplified by the shifts in the AU—requires EU and U.S. attention and underscores the need for both parties to use their political and economic clout to initiate a thaw between Morocco and Algeria, thus averting the scenario of an all-out military confrontation in the Maghreb. ❖



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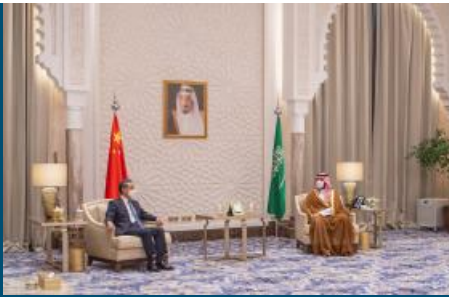
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