

# Kerry's Visit to Morocco and Algeria: Navigating Between Competitors

by [Vish Sakthivel \(/experts/vish-sakthivel\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Vish Sakthivel \(/experts/vish-sakthivel\)](#)

Vish Sakthivel was a 2013-14 Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**Given Algeria and Morocco's highly developed intelligence apparatuses, strong militaries, and common extremist foes, the United States should use its leverage with each country to sidestep renewed enmities and strengthen regional security.**

**[Read an updated version of this PolicyWatch. \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-strategic-dialogues-with-morocco-and-algeria-take-two\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-strategic-dialogues-with-morocco-and-algeria-take-two)**

Over the past few days, following the State Department's announcement that Secretary John Kerry would be making his first official visit to North Africa, Morocco temporarily recalled its ambassador from Algeria. The symbolic gesture came after the two countries exchanged insults over Western Sahara, accusing each other of hegemonic ambitions and disregard for human rights. Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's statement about the urgency of dispatching human rights monitors to the disputed region, which triggered Rabat's reaction, coincides with two imminent events: the U.S.-Morocco and U.S. Algeria Strategic Dialogues, the annual summit that Kerry will inaugurate during his current trip to the region, and an expected mid-November visit to the United States by Morocco's King Muhammad VI. Indeed, this latest squabble was aimed squarely at agenda-setting. In responding to the brouhaha, the Obama administration should be mindful of the complicated diplomatic and security issues at play, careful in its reassurances to committed allies in Morocco, and realistic about the limits of potential cooperation between the two countries.

## HISTORY OF THE RIVALRY

**C**urrently, both Morocco and Algeria have relatively stable, centralized governments, elite intelligence services, and powerful militaries more or less aligned with the head of state. While Morocco mostly avoided the state-versus-Islamist bloodletting of 1990s Algerian politics, both have a good track record of internal counterterrorism

and share similar incentives for maintaining security in their backyards (despite the problems in southern Algeria discussed later in this article). Yet their rivalry for regional clout undercuts these commonalities. The protracted enmity between the two countries is compounded, perhaps even explained, by their divergent orientations following independence -- Morocco toward the West, Algeria toward the East (and, for a time, the Soviet bloc).

A prime issue in the tug of war is Western Sahara, though some view it as simply a manifestation of a deeper enmity. At the heart of Algeria's policy is a commitment to the Saharawi right to sovereignty. At times, this appears to be mere rhetoric to excuse the rivalry, but it also seems to reflect a profound anticolonial spirit stemming from Algeria's brutal fight for independence. For Moroccans, maintaining sovereignty over Western Sahara stems from the idea -- ingrained in their collective conscience since their less violent independence from a less protracted French rule -- of "territorial integrity." In addition to the phosphates and fisheries industries that the annexed region provides, Morocco is extremely apprehensive about appearing as a lesser Maghreb power and is reticent to cede ground to Algeria.

The Morocco-Algeria border has been officially closed since 1994, when an extremist Islamist guerrilla attack in Marrakesh spurred the government to expel a majority of the Algerian residents and visitors in Morocco and require visas from future visitors. Algiers responded by closing the border indefinitely. Although other such crises have arisen periodically, the two sides have avoided major direct conflict for decades.

In 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Algiers to secure backing for potential use of force -- in a joint bid with France -- against Malian extremist militants. Morocco felt snubbed when it was not consulted on the matter and feared Algeria's growing position as the regional broker on the hot-button issue of Sahel security. For its part, Algiers has obstinately favored unilateral decisionmaking on regional policy, engaging in only limited consultation with its neighbors and trying to position itself as the central actor in the regional war on terror by marginalizing the role for Sahel states and rebuffing Rabat.

In late 2010, for example, Algiers opposed Mauritanian counterterror cooperation with France, at a time when Mauritania was improving its relations with Morocco under new president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Algeria subsequently sought to reestablish its centrality by holding a multilateral meeting in the southern city of Tamanrasset, establishing a formal cell to coordinate security; Niger, Mauritania, and Mali participated in the Joint Operational Chiefs of Staff Committee (CEMOC in French), but Morocco was not invited. The move was also a clear effort to reconsolidate central government control over restive southern Algeria. In addition, Algiers declined to participate in a 2010 meeting of G8 experts in Mali after Morocco was invited -- not the first time it pulled such a move.

## **ALGERIA-TUNISIA COOPERATION NOT AN APPLICABLE MODEL**

**A**lgeria evidently partners with neighbors when it perceives credible and imminent risk. For example, in order to contain terrorist activity in the remote Tunisian region of Jebel Chaambi, it agreed to cooperate with Tunis on border issues, mostly via information and intelligence exchange, but also on weapons and mutual surveillance. The two countries have established a joint military committee that reportedly exchanges realtime information on cross-border smuggling.

Yet such coordination between Algeria and Morocco is unlikely. First, given their mutual distrust, neither country wants the sort of foreign military presence inherent in many joint security operations, nor would they be comfortable with their rival surveilling their territory. Second, exchanging intelligence would inevitably force them to reveal potentially strategic information regarding their allies in Western Sahara (e.g., the Polisario Front, the Algerian-supported secessionist group that Morocco regards as a terrorist organization).

In addition, the two countries see the extremist threat in very different lights. Algeria perceives al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as motivated mainly by ideology. Yet Morocco believes the group and its affiliates are more interested in power and profit than religious extremism, citing their heavy operational focus on drug and arms trafficking. And since Algeria has been so unsuccessful in wiping out terrorism in its vast, desolate southern region -- AQIM was born in Algeria, and most AQIM leaders and related extremist figures are Algerian, including the powerful Abdelmalek Droukdel -- Morocco and the Sahel countries have little cause to believe Algerian methods will prove successful elsewhere.

These dissonant views of the threat impair Algeria and Morocco's ability to pursue a cohesive response. The rivalry is particularly inopportune given the precarious security situation in Mali, where Morocco has taken an even greater role lately due to disappointment with Algeria's lackluster performance in countering terrorism outside its borders. Indeed, some Malians blame Algeria for pushing extremists from its northern region to the southern border.

## ECONOMIC FACTORS

**A**lmost a fourth of the fuel that Algeria produces is smuggled in across the border with Mali, and revenue from this activity funds drug trafficking networks and violent extremists. Poor border communities rely on this and other contraband, providing extremist-linked traffickers with significant leverage. Given that the lack of economic integration in the Maghreb is costing the countries in terms of both revenue and security, the potential benefits of greater economic cooperation would seem to be clear.

Yet the economic/political elite in Algeria and Morocco actually benefit from the border closure, keeping costs on goods high rather than having to compete with the relatively cheaper goods that would come in from trade. The losers, of course, are the average citizens. As a result, arguments appealing to the economic advantages of legal trade have hardly nudged the two governments to action -- particularly Algiers, which still buys off dissent with oil rents. Morocco is a bit more eager to trade and has long spoken of further economic liberalization.

Going forward, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) -- founded in 1989 with the aim of spurring free trade in the region -- could prove helpful. Despite not holding a summit between 1994 and 2012, the organization finally reconvened this January, and it may play a positive role if the proper balance of economic and political incentives can be found.

## KERRY'S VISIT

**T**he latest diplomatic "crisis" will likely not last long, but Secretary Kerry faces an arduous test in navigating between Rabat and Algiers while maximizing the benefits to the United States. The most critical challenge is finding a way to show Morocco that its stability and security remain American strategic interests without imperiling the important U.S.-Algeria relationship. This test is especially challenging now because the Moroccan foreign policy community, like others in the Middle East, is disdainful of Obama administration policy. Many in Rabat believe that Washington is chasing the latest regional crisis, taking the alliance with Morocco for granted, and giving less support to policies that have facilitated stability in the past.

In particular, Morocco wants to hear a more decisive U.S. message on Western Sahara during Kerry's visit and the king's trip later this month. After years of satisfactory U.S. positions on the issue, many Moroccans now see American vacillation on the disputed region's fate as the biggest threat to the bilateral relationship. This assessment is fed by controversial reports delivered by Christopher Ross, the UN envoy to Western Sahara and a former U.S. diplomat. It was also stoked by last year's failed attempt to require the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) peacekeeping force to monitor human rights in Moroccan-controlled areas, which Rabat ascribed to then UN ambassador and current U.S. national security advisor Susan Rice. For Moroccans, repairing the damage on this issue is the only way for Washington to cement the relationship and affirm that the kingdom is America's most enduring and committed partner in northwest Africa.

Yet it is not certain that Washington can or should meet this expectation. Rather, U.S. reassurances will need to be tempered and discerning. Acceding to either Morocco or Algeria's view on Western Sahara would only cost the administration leverage with the other party -- a counterproductive move at a time when there are gains to be made on security cooperation. The contest for influence, reputation, and U.S. favor remains the biggest contributing factor to regional counterterrorism cooperation.

Accordingly, Washington should work with each country -- bilaterally for now -- to identify relative strengths and security priorities. If Algeria is helping militarily to contain the crisis in Jebel Chaambi, the administration should determine strategic openings there and offer its expertise. And if Morocco is playing to its strengths by taking a preemptive, soft-power approach to Malian deradicalization, Washington should support that. For example, it could consider funding greater cooperation between Morocco and Mali's religious-affairs bodies if current efforts prove successful. Recently, Rabat has sought to train 500 Malian imams to imbue their country with the Moroccan model of state-led, moderate Islamic practice.

Over time, a careful U.S. approach may lead Algeria and Morocco to acknowledge the economic and security losses perpetuated by their ongoing feud. Balancing this desire to maximize relations with both countries while signaling the specialness of the relationship with Rabat may not win Secretary Kerry a Nobel Peace Prize, but it is one of the most difficult diplomatic challenges he will face.

*Vish Sakthivel is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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