

U.S. Strategic Dialogues with Morocco and Algeria: Take Two

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Secretary Kerry's visit comes amid Morocco's efforts to expand its regional influence and an upcoming vote in Algeria.

Next week, Secretary of State John Kerry will head to Rabat and Algiers to reconvene [the Strategic Dialogues that were postponed in November](#) when he had to travel to Geneva for urgent Iran negotiations. While the broader themes to be discussed remain the same, certain developments in the two countries' diplomatic positioning will likewise inform the talks.

Morocco and Algeria hold strategic importance for the United States largely thanks to their ability to stem the growing influence of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Action against the extremist group occurs in pockets of these countries as well as in the ungoverned spaces of the vast Sahel region. Yet these same states often express indignation when the United States focuses on crisis management rather than the long-term interests of their respective alliances. The Strategic Dialogues were established in late 2012 -- first with Morocco and later with Algeria -- as opportunities to reaffirm existing commitments, allow higher-level diplomatic attention to the region, align policies, and perhaps eventually progress toward more significant partnerships.

Morocco -- where Kerry will cochair dialogues with Foreign Minister Salah Eddine Mezouar -- appeals to the United States on a number of fronts. Aside from its support in counterterrorism operations, Morocco is relatively stable and has seemingly fewer domestic extremists than other regional states. It also bolsters its alliance with the United States by engaging in cultural and educational exchanges.

Since the November dialogues were postponed, Morocco has acted to strengthen its position in the Sahel states to its south. In February, for example, King Muhammad VI traveled to Mali, Guinea, Gabon, and Cote d'Ivoire to oversee cooperation agreements on economics, African development, trade, and counterterrorism. Morocco's southern outreach comes at a moment of flux for its North African neighbors, which had previously sought diplomatic influence on the continent. Whereas Algeria's diplomatic influence will likely remain strong, Tunisia's internal stalemates and Libya's near state-failure allow Morocco its moment to rise. With the shaky position of Tunisia -- once Morocco's rival on stability and modernity -- Morocco can signal its "exceptional" status to the United States.

Perhaps ironically, Morocco has benefited from its neighbors' unrest, attracting investors and tourists who would otherwise be investing in and visiting other parts of the region. Such developments have reinforced Rabat's bid to become a regional leader, with new attention to sub-Saharan Africa. This extended hand may help Morocco elicit support for its long-held claims to Western Sahara -- from both its Sahel allies and Western partners. Increasing continental influence also carries the promise of trade, and possibly access to natural resources, whereas intra-Maghreb trade and integration efforts have languished.

Morocco's intensified Sahel presence must also be seen in the context of its previous exclusion from multilateral initiatives such as the Joint Operational Chiefs of Staff Committee (CEMOC), which is headquartered in Algeria and also includes Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. Another point of reference is Morocco's nonmembership in the African Union, although Morocco chose to withdraw from this body. The notion, however, that Sahel security does not interest Morocco -- an argument often advanced by Algeria, whose southern territory includes a swath of the Sahel -- was blunted by the September Moroccan-led Rabat Declaration, which created a joint border-security training facility. This effort garnered praise from groups displeased with and eager to discredit Algeria's performance in the Mali unrest, in counterterrorism, and in its overall regional role. Moreover, it hinted at a realignment of Sahel influence in Morocco's favor.

In Algiers, Kerry will cochair the dialogue with Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra. One central topic for discussion will likely be the diversification of Algeria's economy, given the country's decline in oil production -- a trend with important implications for both U.S.-Algeria trade and Algeria's ability to distribute rents and satisfy an increasingly restive population. The United States has, for some time, been pushing Algeria to diversify its manufacturing and export sectors, as well as open up its markets. And Algeria, like Morocco, pursues economic initiatives in the Sahel.

Another likely agenda item is Algeria's value as a counterterrorism partner. Last year, the Algerians gave France unprecedented overflight rights at the outset of Operation Serval -- the continuing intervention in northern Mali aimed at countering Islamist militants' encroachment on the country's more heavily populated middle and

southern sections. Algeria has likewise sought to facilitate talks between the Malian government and the Tuareg over greater Tuareg autonomy in the disputed northern Malian region known as Azawad. Needless to say, Algeria always strives to avoid seeking Morocco's help in such initiatives.

In Mali, and the Sahel more generally, heavily militarized Algeria has tended to pursue counterterrorism through hard power. This approach contrasts with Morocco's use of soft power, including the export of its state-led religious jurisprudence model, state-run and funded mosques, and female *mourchidat* (Muslim clerics). But Algeria itself has lately begun exercises in soft power. Both Morocco and Algeria mainly follow the Maliki-based school of jurisprudence, and following the initiative begun by the Moroccans in September, Algeria has taken steps toward importing its own state-run religious model to Mali. Algeria's former "get it out, keep it out" approach to terrorism at its borders, therefore, appears susceptible to adaptation.

Yet Morocco, which has extended its religious training efforts to Tunisia and Libya, still seems to be prevailing in the competition for influence in Mali. Moroccan government propaganda can be thanked, in part, for the frequent perception that Algeria views Mali as a satellite. And the Moroccans are considered "nicer" than Algerians -- another point of leverage.

Future Considerations

1. Algeria's hand could be strengthened if Morocco's soft-power efforts, much vaunted by the United States, do not work over time. Whether Morocco's effort to train Malian and other imams yields success remains to be seen, especially where extremist dynamics are hyperlocalized, at times tribal, and thereby irreligious and rather criminal. Indeed, the key difference between the two countries' approach to AQIM is that Morocco views the group as ideological whereas Algeria considers it criminal. Both approaches are important, and questions about the Moroccan stance are valid. The Moroccans may be able to stem participation and low-level recruitment, but addressing the leadership, and its ties to criminality, presents another challenge. Morocco's inability to rid its own borders of Islamist extremist elements has provided fuel for skeptics. Any perceived weakness of Morocco's position may boost Algeria as the "better option" for counterterrorism partnership in the Maghreb. In the interim, the dual approach offers a strategic benefit to the United States in combating AQIM, and Washington should continue working separately with each country.

2. Algeria's subpar performance during the 2012 Sonatrach hostage crisis may have been an isolated event. Some have argued that this incident, in which a group of AQIM militants took over the In Amenas gas facility, with dozens of hostages killed, showed Algeria to have softened as a counterterrorism partner. But since the incident, Algeria has redoubled efforts to guard its oil infrastructure and protect foreign workers. The Sonatrach facility, meanwhile, has been officially reopened.

3. The Obama administration should remain apprised of growing discontent in Algeria. Lately, movements targeting Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika -- e.g., Barakat, Rafd -- have gained significant traction. Over the next few weeks, many Algerian statesmen will likely be preoccupied with internal politics tied to the April 17 elections. While Secretary Kerry plans to discuss "strengthening civil society" with the Algerian government, he is unlikely to apply too much pressure for political reform before the upcoming vote. And even as Washington should eye opposition movements, it must remember that Bouteflika still enjoys significant support nationally -- and that the economic benefits and counterterrorism savvy offered by the present leadership are too great to justify significantly upsetting the status quo.

4. U.S. administration challenges persist regarding the Western Sahara. The difficult dance here remains evincing empathy over the situation's humanitarian aspects while supporting a negotiated solution that accounts for Morocco's regional interests. Secretary Kerry can now put his personal stamp on the reset endorsed by President Obama when he hosted King Muhammad VI last November. The meeting was itself intended to reinforce the bilateral relationship after the 2013 Security Council decision to insert a human rights monitoring clause in the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) renewal resolution. Rabat was stunned by the U.S.-backed measure, and a full-blown bilateral crisis ensued. Just this past Monday, the Sahrawi activist Aminatou Haidar testified before a private congressional committee regarding Moroccan human rights abuses against Sahrawi dissidents and pushed for expanded human rights monitoring under the MINURSO mandate. Kerry must navigate carefully: while voices calling for policy shifts are legitimate and deserve a platform, the administration needs to continue working cooperatively with the Moroccans, whose nerves remain frayed from last year's dustup.

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