

Always Approaching, Never Arriving: 'War' Between Algeria And Morocco

By Amir Alberto M. Fernandez
President Abdelmadjid Tebboune remarked that deteriorating relations between his country and neighboring Morocco had reached "the point of no return."^[1] Algeria had broken off diplomatic relations with Morocco in August 2021 and ties had not improved even though Morocco did send its Foreign Minister to an Arab League Summit held in Algiers in November 2022.



Arab media outlets since 2021 have continued to regularly speculate about the possibility of outright war between the two countries.^[2] The land borders between the two states have been closed for decades but there is a long history of tension, rhetoric and even outright conflict between Algiers and Rabat.^[3]

We are almost at the 60th anniversary of the "Sand War" fought from September 25-October 30, 1963, essentially a series of border clashes between the two countries about where exactly the border should be drawn. At the time, the smaller, but better equipped and better funded Moroccans had the upper hand and a desperate Algeria actually invited in military support from both Nasser's Egypt and Castro's Cuba. Incredibly, in 1963, a Cuban armored column under General Efigenio Ameijeiras and armed with 22 Soviet T-34 tanks and 36 artillery pieces was poised to invade Morocco before the operation was cancelled by Algeria's then President Ahmed Ben Bella only hours before launch time.^[4] The Cuban plan had the taking of Casablanca as its military objective.

The basic struggle between the two states is one for regional hegemony and dominance. Historically, specific points of contention between Royalist Morocco and leftist Algeria have been many but much of the tension has focused on the fate of the former Spanish territory known as Western Sahara. The region had been absorbed by Morocco in 1975 after the enormous "Green March" which led to the region's decolonization under the Madrid Accords.

Algeria became and remains the great patron of the Polisario rebels (along with, at the time, Qaddafi and Fidel Castro) fighting for independence against Morocco. From 1975 to 1991, this was a hot war – the Western Sahara War – a guerrilla conflict waged by the Polisario, armed and funded by Algeria against Morocco. A ceasefire agreement in September 1991 ended that war and initiated a decades-long international political process that went nowhere.

Tension has increased because in recent years Morocco has grown stronger and more successful while oil-rich Algeria seemed to grow weaker. While Algeria was wracked by popular, ultimately unresolved, mass demonstrations against government corruption and tyranny from 2019 to 2021, Morocco was able to secure American recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020 as part of the price of the Trump Administration's Abraham Accords. Making peace with Israel also strengthened Morocco, as did Spain's abandoning, in 2022, its former position on Western Sahara and drawing closer to Rabat.^[5] A diplomatic offensive that garnered American, Israeli, and Spanish support fortified Morocco while enraging the Algerians, who are not only the patrons of the Polisario but also strongly pro-Palestinian.^[6] The Biden Administration has distanced itself from but not reversed the Trump recognition.^[7]

Algeria has lashed out rhetorically against Morocco and punished Spain but it has few real options. The Russia-Ukraine War has been an economic windfall for Algeria so it has money – a lot of it, and much more than Morocco – to spend on shoring up its military. Algeria already had the best funded military on the continent and the latest budget proposal takes defense spending from \$10 billion to \$18 billion, or 10 percent of GDP.^[8] Algeria's long dependence on Russian weapons – it is the third largest purchaser of Russian equipment worldwide – may be diversified with new purchases from China and Iran. There is a lot of boasting by Algeria's partisans about its military, and a lot of mocking by Moroccans of these claims.^[9]

The Global Firepower Index of modern military strength ranked Algeria 26th out of 145 countries ranked. Morocco was ranked 61st in the same estimate.^[10] Another survey ranked the countries as near equals in their Global Power Index, Algeria ranked 70th and Morocco 77th.^[11] Morocco's military and population are slightly smaller than those of Algeria. Rabat's military budget – almost \$11 billion – is also smaller than Algeria's projected \$18 billion.^[12] And it is also looking to diversify, just like Algeria but with different partners, adding Israel and India to Rabat's

overwhelmingly American military equipment.[13] The arms race between Morocco and Algeria is very real and the rhetoric is toxic.[14]



With so much money, energy policy, and purchased firepower Algeria cannot be discounted, but it is in the intangibles that Morocco seems to excel. Morocco seems to be more politically stable than Algeria, its economy is more diversified. Oil and gas still represent more than 90 percent of Algeria's total exports. It has profited tremendously since the war in Ukraine but a global recession will deflate energy prices.

What is missing thus far in a potential conflict is a spark and an endgame. Moroccans in late August 2023 protested the killing of two men on water scooters by the Algerian Coast Guard, decrying the use of live ammunition on unarmed civilians who may have strayed across a sea border.[15] Earlier this year Algeria's Army Chief of Staff and various Algerian organizations accused Morocco (and "the Zionist Entity" – Israel) of aiding Kabyle Berber factions considered by Algeria to be terrorists.[16] But neither of these incidents seems primed to lead to outright war. And the endgame is unclear.

If there was a side more interested in conflict, it would be Algeria, but a border war is not going to overthrow the government in Morocco, reverse relations with Israel, nor bring the Polisario to power. It does bring the possibility of unforeseen circumstances if, for example, the performance of the Algerian military would turn out to be less than stellar after so many billions spent and so many years of corrupt FLN rule.[17] That outcome could have dire, domestic ramifications among an already restless population. For that reason, the likely outcome of the arms race and saber rattling by both nations will be continued tension without actual explosion, spikes in incendiary rhetoric and symbolism, but war that is constantly approaching but never actually arriving.

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[1] [Aljazeera.net/news/2023/3/22/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%81](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2023/3/22/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%81), March 22, 2023

[2] [Independentarabia.com/node/405366/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A6-2023-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%84%D8%9F](https://independentarabia.com/node/405366/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A6-2023-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%84%D8%9F), December 30, 2022.

[3] [France24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9/20220415-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B0%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1](https://france24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9/20220415-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B0%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1), April 15, 2022.

[4] [Granma.cu/file/pdf/2015/10/23/G_2015102309.pdf](https://granma.cu/file/pdf/2015/10/23/G_2015102309.pdf), October 2015

[5] [Elnacional.cat/en/world/spain-morocco-abandons-independence-western-sahara_728439_102.html](https://elnacional.cat/en/world/spain-morocco-abandons-independence-western-sahara_728439_102.html)

- [6] See MEMRI TV Clip No. 9151, Algerian FM Ramtane Lamamra: We Respect The Sovereign Decision Of Some Arab Countries To Establish Relations With Israel, October 24, 2021.
- [7] Newarab.com/news/un-envoy-de-mistura-visits-disputed-w-sahara-first-time, September 5, 2023.
- [8] Mei.edu/publications/algerias-2023-budget-president-tebbounes-make-or-break-first-term-project, March 8, 2023.
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- [16] Echoroukonline.com/%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%A4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%83-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7, April 10, 2023.
- [17] Youtube.com/watch?v=j0AEnUZ6qYU, March 7, 2022.