

Algeria-Morocco Relations: For Moroccans, It's Deja-Vu

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Aug 31, 2021

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Brief Analysis

Algeria's decision to sever ties with Morocco comes after a conciliatory message from the King of Morocco and Morocco's recent regional diplomatic successes.

On August 24, Algeria's Foreign Affairs Minister announced his country's decision to sever diplomatic ties with Morocco. The move came just five days after the Algerian High Council for Security decided to review its diplomatic relations with its neighbor.

Echoing the Council's talking points, Foreign Minister Ramtan Laamamara justified the decision by accusing Morocco of "supporting" terrorist organizations in causing the wildfires that broke out recently in Algeria. He also accused the Moroccan government of colluding with the "zionist entity" to destabilize Algeria in its decision to renew ties with Israel. Most pertinently, perhaps, Laamamara vented about his country's frustration with the decisive diplomatic setback Rabat inflicted on it with the American recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

The Moroccan View of Relations

For Moroccans, this event is the latest in a long history of Algerian officials attacking Morocco as a means of diverting criticism and boosting nationalism. As such, both the severing of ties and the unsubstantiated allegations of a Moroccan "plot" to undermine Algeria came as no surprise. However, it is notable that Algeria's decision to escalate tensions came just a month after Moroccan King Mohammed VI used his Throne Day speech—an annual speech in which the monarch takes stock of the latest developments at the domestic and external levels and makes momentous announcements—to call for genuine Algerian-Moroccan reconciliation. Moroccan media celebrated (<https://fr.le360.ma/politique/discours-du-trone-un-message-de-paix-et-de-fraternite-selon-le-politologue-mustapha-sehimi-243006>) the King's friendly tone and his eagerness to put past grievances and resentments aside to usher in a new era in bilateral relations based on good neighborliness, dialogue, and trust.

Central in the King's speech (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/07/343698/full-text-of-king-mohammed-vi-s-22nd-throne-day-speech>) was the need for Algeria and Morocco to work together to face their common economic and security challenges. Just two weeks later, as wildfires engulfed much of northern Algeria, King Mohammed VI made good on his pledge of standing together in addressing shared challenges by instructing (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/08/343866/king-mohammed-vi-offers-to-aid-algeria-as-wildfires-surge>) his government to mobilize two firefighting aircrafts and a disaster relief team to fly to Algeria's rescue.

Yet Algeria declined Morocco's offer, preferring instead to request the paid help (<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20210812-france-sends-aircraft-to-algeria-as-wildfires-claim-more-victims>) of France and Spain. Algeria's political and media class likewise increased (<https://www.algeriepatriotique.com/2021/08/08/une-contribution-dali-akika-les-fuites-en-avant-du-roi-mohammed-vi-du-maroc/>) its attacks on Morocco after the King's call for dialogue, questioning the sincerity (<https://www.tsa-algerie.com/algerie-maroc-la-fausse-main-tendue-du-roi-mohamed-vi/>) of his stated intentions. The days that followed the King's speech saw an abundance of news reports and editorials that accused Morocco of orchestrating much of what has gone wrong in Algeria in the past months—from the

wildfires to the growing visibility of organizations within Algeria that pose anti-government sentiments. Even more telling has been the claim, relentlessly relayed in the Algerian press and policy circles, that Morocco is **colluding with the “zionist entity** (https://www.mdn.dz/site_principal/sommaire/revues/images/eldjeich_ar.pdf)” and the Movement for the Self-determination of Kabylie (MAK) to destabilize Algeria.

It is these events that set the stage for Algeria’s accusations around the fire, and its subsequent decision to cut ties with Morocco. Wildfires in the Tizi Ouzou region are a common occurrence, with one resident describing them as occurring “every year.” The speed at which the Algerian regime concluded that the fires were caused Kabyle activists—who Algeria has unconvincingly claimed are sponsored by Morocco—and that the alleged perpetrators intended to flee to Morocco seems to be driven by a need to respond to diplomatic pressures. Under normal circumstances, investigations into the origins of the forest of that magnitude would presumably take several weeks or even months before the relevant authorities could determine with certainty their true causes.

Given this background, Algeria’s decision to sever ties with Morocco and accuse the country of masterminding a conspiracy against Algerian interests is but a culmination of a process that has been brewing for nine months.

A Matter of Diversion

What is likely actually at issue here is Morocco’s recent advances and diplomatic breakthroughs, combined with the existential threat the Algerian regime faces from ongoing popular challenges to its grip on power. The Algerian establishment appears to have run out of strategic moves to counter Morocco’s growing diplomatic outreach, and is instead resorting to diversionary tactics centered on deviating the attention of the Algerian public opinion to mobilize against a common foreign “enemy.”

To be sure, the Algerian decision to sever ties with Morocco is in many ways a non-event, as diplomatic relations between the two countries have been frozen for most of the last 27 years. Borders have remained closed since 1994. Despite Morocco’s repeated calls since at least 2005 to reopen them, Algeria has repeatedly refused, instead **building a wall** (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2017/10/232543/algeria-construction-high-tech-border-wall-moroccan-border-morocco>) and a five-meter-wide trench along the border. As a result, cooperation between the two countries is already non-existent: there has been no exchange of high-level state visits since 2012. Even so, **Moroccan media** (<https://fr.le360.ma/politique/la-decision-dalger-de-rompre-les-relations-avec-le-maroc-vue-par-la-presse-nationale-244483>) has presented the recent Algerian decision as “absurd and unjustified” and a desperate attempt by the Algerian ruling elite to camouflage its failure to address its domestic challenges and meet the most basic needs of the Algerian people.

This view is bolstered by two recent Moroccan diplomatic successes. American recognition of the Moroccanness of the Sahara likely deeply frustrated Algeria. Moreover, this recognition came a little less than a month after the events of Guerguerat on November 13, 2020, when Moroccan forces **dislodged** (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2020/11/325900/morocco-concludes-successful-guerguerat-operation-to-lift-blockade>) armed elements of the Polisario that had been impeding the international transport of goods between southern Morocco, Mauritania, and much of sub-Saharan Africa.

In less than a month, Algeria suffered two major diplomatic setbacks that have considerably tilted the regional balance of power, especially as far as the Sahara conflict is concerned, in Morocco’s favor. Algeria may even have made the decision to sever ties when it became clear that the Biden administration would not rescind his predecessor’s decision on the conflict.

Indeed, Algeria has since undertaken a number of hostile actions that are understood in Morocco as designed to provoke the kingdom and drag it into an open confrontation. Both the Algerian media’s **campaign of insults** (<https://www.theafricareport.com/66775/morocco-algeria-tensions-on-the-rise-after-algerian-show-mocks-the-king/>) against Morocco’s King and the expulsion of **Moroccan farmers** (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2021/03/337326/figuig-algeria-urges-farmers-in-eastern-morocco-to-evacuate-farms-before-march-18>) from the Arjat oases last March seem chiefly aimed at pushing Morocco to the limits of its patience.

It is likewise telling that Algeria has lashed out at Morocco for re-normalizing relations with Israel while remaining conspicuously silent about the similar decisions made by UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan. Since Algeria has not leveled the obsessive criticism at Bahrain, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, or the UAE that it has lobbed at Morocco, it seems safe to argue that Morocco’s increasingly irreversible upper hand in Western Sahara diplomacy—rather than the defense of the Palestinian cause—is the motivating reason behind the Algerian state’s frustration with and fixation on Morocco.

An Offer for Dialogue

In such a tense context, the Algerian establishment expected King Mohammed VI to use aggressive language against Algeria in his Throne Day speech, especially following Morocco’s UN representative Omar Hilale’s July letter to the Secretary General of the Non-Aligned

Movement.

Hilale's letter, framed as a response to Algeria's undermining of Moroccan territorial integrity, characterized the Algerian government as duplicitous when it comes to the question of self-determination. Hilale presented Algeria as eager to have itself seen as a staunch defender of the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination while **denying** (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/07/343464/algeria-omar-hilale-s-kabyle-remarks-seen-as-declaration-of-war>) 11 million Kabyles—ethnically Amazigh Algerians—the very rights it champions in the Sahara.

Given the strength of this letter and the furious Algerian media response, many Algerians and Moroccans alike expected an equally vigorous response to follow from Rabat. Instead, King Mohammed VI opted to promote dialogue—urging Algerian leaders to overcome the decades-long stalemate between the two “twin” countries and lay the foundations for a true Maghreb union.

This pivot seems to have caught the Algerian establishment off guard, especially as the King's conciliatory words were so far removed from the Algerian regime's narrative of Morocco for the past six decades—likely embarrassing the regime in front of its public. Morocco is the go-to scapegoat, with Algerian media often presenting its *raison d'être* as undermining Algeria's strategic interests. However, the King's speech suggested a different path and suggested that Morocco would be willing to transcend the past and advocate for regional stability and shared prosperity.

The royal speech may have been seen as particularly dangerous as it comes at a time when Algeria is facing a serious political crisis. The anti-government Hirak movement continues to push against the regime, and has exposed the ruling class' loss of popular legitimacy. Compounding popular frustrations is the country's decade-long **economic crisis** (<https://www.ft.com/content/07691fbd-fa6c-414d-9299-ce848073a5d7>), which Algerians have had to suffer on top of the tragedy of the COVID crisis: a high **level of inflation** (<https://www.africanews.com/2021/04/28/algeria-struggles-to-feed-its-people-as-crisis-persists/>), the dizzying loss of hydrocarbon revenues, and **depreciation of the Algerian dinar** (<https://atalayar.com/en/content/international-monetary-fund-warns-critical-economic-situation-algeria>). The Algerian government is unable to meet the basic needs of a population tired of being helpless and horrified spectators of their own fates as the same ruling class hijacks the present and future of their country.

For a regime whose driving philosophy and political legitimacy has relied on a demonization of Morocco, accepting a Moroccan offer of dialogue and reconciliation offer would deprive it of a preferred means of diverting popular frustrations. It is a well-established fact that when faced with increasing popular discontent and declining popular legitimacy, regimes often create “an enemy of the nation”—usually a foreign government—to divert the attention of public opinion from their failure to effectively govern.

Therefore, the **Algerian press**

(<https://www.echoroukonline.com/%2525D8%2525AE%2525D8%2525B7%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A8%2525D9%252583-%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525B6-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525B5%2525D9%252581%2525D8%2525A9-%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525B7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A9-%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525B9-%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525B5%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%252581%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252583-%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525A4>) response to an offer of reconciliation in the days following King Mohammed VI's Throne Day Speech quickly **set the tone** (<https://www.elhiwardz.com/event/208829/>), accusing Morocco of ‘treachery.’ Even so, the subsequent timing of Algeria's decision to sever ties and its obsessive denunciation of the resumption of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel suggest that Morocco's **advances on Western Sahara** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-moroccos-diplomatic-efforts-africa-are-shaping-region>) have all contributed to Algeria's decision.

Yet Algeria may have shot itself in the foot by placing the Moroccan-Algerian rivalry at the center of global news cycles. This new bout of tension between the two countries will certainly push many in the international community to dig deeper into the underlying reasons behind the latest developments in relations.

While the Algerian regime is presenting itself as an advocate for Sahrawis and Palestinians, the timing of its decision to sever ties—along with its treatment of Kabyles—demonstrates its more likely motivations.

What Algeria suggests through this decision is that it wants unchallenged hegemony in North Africa—which necessitates unfettered access to the Atlantic Ocean in southern Morocco and an assertive presence in African geopolitics. However, this requires catching up with Morocco's continental strategic depth, or altogether spoiling Rabat's African successes. ❖

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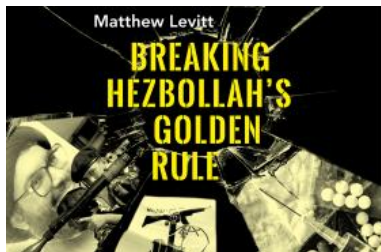
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