

The Energy Geopolitics of North Africa

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Feb 9, 2023

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Brief Analysis

The longstanding regional rivalry between Morocco and Algeria has taken on new meaning as the two countries vie for energy partnerships in Europe.

As many European countries attempt to reduce their reliance on Russian gas supplies in the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian war, attention is increasingly being drawn to the African continent, particularly in North Africa where Algeria and Morocco have battled over [European gas pipeline deals](#).

<https://www.alquds.co.uk/%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%af-%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-%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%aa%d8%af%d8%ae%d9%84-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d8%ae%d8%b7/>) Although energy dynamics have been tense in the region for a while, the Morocco-Algeria rivalry has recently entered a new chapter since Nigeria solidified [plans \(https://www.africanews.com/2022/09/16/nigeria-morocco-gas-pipeline-project-takes-off/\)](https://www.africanews.com/2022/09/16/nigeria-morocco-gas-pipeline-project-takes-off/) for a gas pipeline through Morocco to supply energy to Europe. With energy demands higher than ever, lines are being drawn all across the North African region.

Spain Seeks Energy Partnership with Morocco

For over a year now, Spain has found itself in the middle of a bitter Morocco-Algeria energy dispute since Algeria made the [decision \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/algeria-end-gas-supplies-morocco-supply-spain-directly-sources-2021-10-25/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/algeria-end-gas-supplies-morocco-supply-spain-directly-sources-2021-10-25/) in 2021 to cut off a gas pipeline connected to Spain through Morocco, thus stemming the vast majority of Morocco's gas supply. Although Algeria kept its less efficient Medgaz undersea pipeline open, providing energy to Spain without the involvement of Morocco, Spain's recent move to [reopen \(https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/spain-begins-natural-gas-exports-morocco-following-diplomatic-row-2022-06-29/\)](https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/spain-begins-natural-gas-exports-morocco-following-diplomatic-row-2022-06-29/) the Moroccan-European pipeline and boost Morocco's gas supply has greatly aggravated Algeria, despite Madrid's pledge that the renewed contract will not include sending Algerian gas to Morocco.

Importantly, Spain's realignment with Morocco on the energy issue comes at a time when Madrid has also

reasserted (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/19/world/europe/spain-morocco-western-sahara.html>) its support for Rabat in the Western Sahara debate, once again leading to strained relations between Algeria and Spain. On the whole, Spain has come to regard Algeria as an unreliable source for future gas exports, leading Madrid to rely more heavily on Morocco as an alternative energy supply route.

The forthcoming Morocco-Nigeria pipeline makes a Morocco partnership even more valuable for Spain, as Nigeria's vast gas reserves have the potential to become Europe's main energy artery in the absence of Russian gas exports. By sourcing its energy needs from Nigeria—a supplier Spain already regards as one of the “**most reliable**” (https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/news/Paginas/2022/20220601_sanchez-buhari.aspx)—through the pre-existing Morocco-Spain pipeline, Spain is able to avoid more frustrations with Algeria while Morocco is able to secure a significant strategic advantage over Russian and Algerian gas exports.

Logistically, the Morocco-Nigeria pipeline is quite practical, building upon the pre-existing offshore gas pipeline in West Africa that provides Nigerian gas to Benin, Togo, and Ghana along the coast. Under the new proposal, the offshore pipeline will be extended further, passing through countries such as the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Mauritania, and Morocco, after which gas supplies can easily reach Europe due to Morocco's close proximity to Spain.

Morocco's energy partnerships with Spain and Nigeria will allow the kingdom to achieve its own energy security and independence, accelerating the implementation of Morocco's electricity generation projects and enabling Morocco to redefine its relationship with Nigeria. In particular, Morocco hopes the economic ties with Nigeria will translate into Nigeria reconsidering its position on the Western Sahara issue—a **strategy** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-moroccos-diplomatic-efforts-africa-are-shaping-region>) that may already be working. Additionally, the developments allow Rabat to gain a broader presence in West Africa, in accordance with Morocco's recent strategy to integrate an African dimension into its foreign relations.

Italy Seeks Energy Partnership with Algeria

Of course, Algeria is far from being sidelined in the competition for European energy contracts. In fact, Algeria has become the main focal point in Italy's expanding energy strategies. In September 2022, the Italian energy company Eni **announced** (<https://www.reuters.com/markets/deals/eni-acquires-bps-gas-business-algeria-2022-09-07/>) its acquisition of BP's business in Algeria, including the In Amenas and In Salah gas fields, two major gas-producing sources in Algeria. Eni is expected to play a key role in safeguarding Italy's energy security as it plans to replace the 29 billion cubic meters of gas supplied by Russia by the end of 2023.

Going even further, Eni and state-owned Algerian company Sonatrach have **established** (<https://www.reuters.com/markets/deals/italys-eni-algerias-sonatrach-sign-deals-gas-supply-decarbonisation-2023-01-23/>) a new long-term joint venture aimed at increasing Algeria's energy export capabilities to Europe and researching Algeria's capacity for renewable energy expansion. The venture aligns with Eni's long-term production outreach across Africa, purchasing gas supplies, jointly-held pipelines, hydrocarbon processing plants, and oil refineries.

Through the Transmed gas pipeline, Algeria is sending an additional 10 billion cubic meters of gas to Europe according to a **bilateral agreement** (<https://foreignbrief.com/daily-news/transmed-gas-pipeline-to-resume-delivery-to-italy/>) with Italy. This reinforced partnership is part of Italy's ongoing work to maximize its geoeconomic partnerships with African countries overall, not just in Algeria but in Nigeria, the Congo, Angola, and Mozambique.

It is worth mentioning that the selection of both Italy and Spain as partners can be attributed to reasons beyond energy, as well. For example, the strengthened partnership between Algeria and Italy provides a basis for enhanced

cooperation between the two countries on other key issues such as illegal immigration across the Mediterranean, the situation in Libya, and the Western Sahara issue. On the other hand, Morocco's position as a "key partner" for Spain enables not just investments in energy, but profound cooperation on immigration and security matters, especially in combating terrorism.

The Morocco-Algeria Rivalry in Context

The fierce geoeconomic battle between Algeria and Morocco for natural gas partnerships in Europe has led to numerous economic proposals throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In an attempt to counter the Morocco-Nigeria pipeline, for example, Algeria has suggested the development of a "Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline" to divert Nigerian gas through the Republic of Niger and Algeria, in addition to a Mauritania-Algeria pipeline to transport gas extracted from the offshore Turtle Ahmeyim energy platform located in the coastal waters between Senegal and Mauritania. Beyond the economic implications, however, this rivalry plays into a much larger diplomatic battle for dominance in the region.

On the Western Sahara issue and elsewhere, Morocco and Algeria have increasingly sought footholds throughout the continent in renewed foreign policy efforts. Morocco's 2017 re-entry into the African Union is an excellent example—a move that demonstrated Morocco's desire to improve its regional relationships and support continental economic and political efforts. Of course, Moroccan diplomatic efforts have led to diplomatic counter-reactions from Algeria. In particular, Morocco's recent alliance and normalization with Israel has presented an opportunity for Algeria to assert itself as an Arab leader and key regional player.

Since normalization, cooperation between Morocco and Israel has reached an unprecedented level. Case in point, the latest [visit \(<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-morocco-gantz-signs-israels-first-ever-defense-mou-with-an-arab-country/>\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-morocco-gantz-signs-israels-first-ever-defense-mou-with-an-arab-country/) of the Israeli Minister of Defense to Rabat resulted in the signing of a military agreement between the countries. This rapprochement has alarmed Algeria, which feels targeted by Moroccan-Israeli relations due to its support for the Palestinian cause. Algeria has since accused Morocco of transferring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the Middle East to North Africa, and has further entrenched its support for Palestinians.

In essence, Morocco and Algeria's current efforts to outdo each other in the sphere of energy exports is yet another manifestation of the two countries' larger tug-of-war. Luckily for Europe, this reality provides some significant solutions to the problem of energy scarcity as Europe seeks to end its reliance on Russian gas. ♦

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