

Balancing U.S. Relations in North Africa Without Undermining the Abraham Accords

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Brief Analysis

The Biden administration needs to tread carefully in engaging Algeria, since preserving UN negotiations on Western Sahara and protecting Morocco's crucial relations with Washington and Israel are paramount to U.S. regional interests

On October 29 and November 5, several rockets struck the city of Smara in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, significantly escalating the decades-long conflict over the territory and exacerbating Rabat's tensions with Algeria. Against the backdrop of region-wide tensions sparked by the Gaza war, the United States faces the delicate task of managing two key relationships: its historical partnership with Morocco, which has normalized relations with Israel, and its engagement with Algeria, which has failed to contain recent escalation by the Polisario Front, the group that [likely launched](https://www.spsrasd.info/en/2023/10/30/923.html) (<https://www.spsrasd.info/en/2023/10/30/923.html>) the rocket strikes.

Israel's Connection to a North African Dispute

The roots of the Western Sahara conflict lie in Spain's post-colonial departure in the late 1970s, which created a vacuum in the area. Morocco soon asserted its historical claims over the territory, while the Polisario Front emerged to advocate for independence. The resultant conflict has defied decades of UN and U.S. efforts to find a political resolution. Morocco now has de facto control over most of the territory, but Polisario continues to contest its claims.

In late 2020, the Trump administration recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara as part of a wider [tripartite agreement](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morocco-Israel.pdf) (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morocco-Israel.pdf>) with Israel, bringing Rabat into the landmark normalization process launched by the Abraham Accords. This marked a significant victory for Rabat, which had spent years imploring countries to recognize its sovereignty claim in exchange for enhanced relations. Securing the support of the United States—a longstanding ally and penholder on the [UN Security Council resolution](https://minurso.unmissions.org/security-council-resolutions-and-statements) (<https://minurso.unmissions.org/security-council-resolutions-and-statements>) establishing the scope of negotiations over Western Sahara—bolstered Morocco's capacity to inform the ongoing international process aimed at ending the conflict.

Since then, Rabat has deepened its bilateral ties with Israel. The diplomatic side of the relationship reached another milestone

with Israel's July 2023 recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, after which King Mohamed VI invited (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/19/world/middleeast/morocco-israel-netanyahu-king-mohammed.html>) Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for a visit.

The relationship has also facilitated Morocco's acquisition of advanced weaponry like the Barak MX Defense system (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2023/08/357017/morocco-receives-first-shipments-of-israels-barak-mx-defense-system>)—a strategic move meant to counter Algeria's growing regional assertiveness. Algiers has enhanced its military capabilities as well, bolstered by a surge in natural gas revenues and close relationships with Russia (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/algeria-russia-relations-after-ukraine-invasion>) and China (see below). Indeed, the two rivals are now among Africa's top three arms buyers (https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf).

Gaza War Imposes New Constraints

Since the Hamas-Israel war unfolded, diplomatic engagement with Morocco has been shaken. The Israeli Foreign Ministry issued an evacuation order (<https://en.hespress.com/72970-staff-of-israeli-liaison-office-leaves-morocco-diplomatic-operations-frozen.html>) for its Rabat liaison office last month, while the kingdom has expressed concern (https://telquel.ma/instant-t/2023/11/02/un-conseiller-du-president-palestinien-salue-les-positions-du-maroc-en-faveur-du-peuple-palestinien_1839166/) over the Israeli military campaign in Gaza. Rabat's hesitation to be publicly seen as supporting Israel during the war reflects its complex domestic political landscape, which has been marked by broad popular support for the Palestinian cause and growing calls to reverse the normalization agreement.

For its part, the United States has maintained its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara under the Biden administration while simultaneously underscoring its commitment to the UN-led process. Washington has also actively engaged Algiers, as seen when Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Josh Harris visited (https://twitter.com/StateDept_NEA/status/1697343979124097367) the region in September and met with senior Algerian officials and Polisario leader Brahim Ghali. These meetings signaled that the administration would be taking a nuanced approach to the Western Sahara dispute, tempering Rabat's expectations of unequivocal U.S. support on that issue.

Yet the Gaza war and the escalating Polisario attacks could complicate this strategy. For instance, increasingly apprehensive officials in Rabat might interpret overtures to Algiers and Ghali as a departure (<https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-november-20-2023/>) from U.S. commitments under the tripartite agreement, which explicitly supports Morocco's advanced autonomy plan as the "only basis" for resolving the Western Sahara dispute. Such a perceived shift could undermine the kingdom's wider bilateral relations with Washington and Israel.

In addition, ever since Polisario ended the last ceasefire in late 2020, the situation has shown worrisome signs of military escalation, exemplified by the deadly Smara attacks. Weeks before that incident, the Algerian coast guard fatally shot two Moroccan-French jet skiers whom it claimed had entered the country's territorial waters. Moroccan authorities have opted for a domestic judicial response to both the jet ski incident (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66704750>) and the Smara strikes (<https://www.lesiteinfo.com/maroc/600398-attaque-contre-es-smara-le-maroc-promet-une-reponse-implacable-source-autorisee.html>), clearly preferring this approach over military action. Indeed, the threat of direct clashes between the two countries remains low given that neither sees significant benefit in going to war. Yet Rabat will nonetheless find it more difficult to deflect provocations in today's charged environment.

Meanwhile, Moroccan Islamist groups are increasingly articulating popular opposition to Israel in order to bolster their standing at home. The resurgence of such groups—including the pervasive al-Adl wal-Ihsan, whose stance on Middle East issues is free from the complexities, limitations, and contradictions that necessarily shape a government's foreign policy—poses a challenge to Rabat, which is keen on pursuing more pragmatic, nuanced relations abroad. Amid these challenges, the outlook for the Abraham Accords, U.S.-Morocco relations, and the Western Sahara issue becomes increasingly ambiguous.

The Algerian Angle and Great Power Politics

Western Sahara is a matter of critical national interest for Algiers as well, and bilateral tensions over the issue have been magnified since August 2021, when Algeria severed diplomatic ties and ceased gas exports to Morocco amid a global surge in energy prices. In announcing the decision, Algerian authorities cited vaguely defined

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/24/algeria-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-morocco>) “hostile actions” by the kingdom. Algeria also closed its airspace—one of the largest in Africa—to all Moroccan aircraft, adding significant time and cost to eastward flights.

Meanwhile, Rabat angered Algiers by reportedly stepping up its [drone operations \(https://www.barrons.com/news/polisario-commander-western-sahara-fighters-killed-by-drone-c9d967fa\)](https://www.barrons.com/news/polisario-commander-western-sahara-fighters-killed-by-drone-c9d967fa) in Western Sahara’s UN-monitored buffer zone, killing Polisario commanders and, in one November 2021 incident, wounding [Algerian civilians \(https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211103-algeria-blames-morocco-for-bombing-of-three-truck-drivers-state-media\)](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211103-algeria-blames-morocco-for-bombing-of-three-truck-drivers-state-media). Today, any further escalation by Polisario—which is operationally based on Algerian soil—would only aggravate the bilateral friction. Although Algiers can publicly distance itself from Polisario attacks launched from Western Sahara’s buffer zone, all parties are well aware that the group’s survival is inextricably tied to Algerian security assurances.

Against this backdrop, the United States could disrupt its longstanding relationship with Morocco if it does not use caution in navigating its evolving ties with Algiers. Rabat already appears to be [diversifying its foreign partners \(https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/moroccan-foreign-policy-under-mohammed-vi-balancing-diversity-and-respect#:~:text=Aside%20from%20Morocco's%20growing%20focus,examples%20of%20Morocco's%20shifting%20foreign\)](https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/moroccan-foreign-policy-under-mohammed-vi-balancing-diversity-and-respect#:~:text=Aside%20from%20Morocco's%20growing%20focus,examples%20of%20Morocco's%20shifting%20foreign) amid growing regional skepticism about Washington’s reliability, betting on China and Russia’s strong push in Africa. In the past month alone, several Chinese companies [have announced \(https://www.ft.com/content/9539f746-82bf-49db-ae87-237196a60c88\)](https://www.ft.com/content/9539f746-82bf-49db-ae87-237196a60c88) new investments in the kingdom, including the establishment of [cathode materials plants \(https://ledesk.ma/2023/09/24/gigafactory-lg-chem-en-duo-avec-le-chinois-huayou-pour-ses-deux-usines-au-maroc/\)](https://ledesk.ma/2023/09/24/gigafactory-lg-chem-en-duo-avec-le-chinois-huayou-pour-ses-deux-usines-au-maroc/), a critical component in the burgeoning electric vehicle industry. And in October 2022, Morocco’s Energy Ministry [signed \(https://tass.com/economy/970060\)](https://tass.com/economy/970060) a memorandum of understanding on peaceful nuclear cooperation with the Russian state-owned corporation Rosatom. Moscow has also [ramped up \(https://www.mees.com/2023/9/1/geopolitical-risk/north-africa-imports-record-volumes-of-cut-price-russian-distillates/fd983950-48c3-11ee-907d-83a0618d07b0\)](https://www.mees.com/2023/9/1/geopolitical-risk/north-africa-imports-record-volumes-of-cut-price-russian-distillates/fd983950-48c3-11ee-907d-83a0618d07b0) its fuel supplies to the kingdom in an attempt to reroute oil products amid EU sanctions. Yet Rabat has been cautious about such relations given Russia’s pro-Algerian position on Western Sahara and [open engagement \(https://thearabweekly.com/tensions-rise-morocco-russia-receives-polisario-delegation\)](https://thearabweekly.com/tensions-rise-morocco-russia-receives-polisario-delegation) with Polisario.

For its part, Algeria has developed a [deep security and strategic partnership \(https://www.africanews.com/2023/06/16/russia-algeria-tighten-strategic-ties/\)](https://www.africanews.com/2023/06/16/russia-algeria-tighten-strategic-ties/) with Moscow that remains a cornerstone of its foreign policy, despite [occasional disagreements \(https://en.sputniknews.africa/20231006/putin-says-possible-accession-of-algeria-to-brics-should-be-worked-out-calmly-1062582123.html\)](https://en.sputniknews.africa/20231006/putin-says-possible-accession-of-algeria-to-brics-should-be-worked-out-calmly-1062582123.html). It has cultivated a strong partnership with China as well. In 2022, the two countries [signed \(https://www.mfa.gov.dz/en/press-and-information/news-and-press-releases/algeria-china-sign-2nd-five-year-comprehensive-strategic-cooperation-plan-2022-2026\)](https://www.mfa.gov.dz/en/press-and-information/news-and-press-releases/algeria-china-sign-2nd-five-year-comprehensive-strategic-cooperation-plan-2022-2026) another five-year comprehensive strategic cooperation plan, and the depth of the relationship was reinforced when President Abdelmadjid Tebboune visited Beijing this summer. Additionally, Algerian army chief of staff Said Chanegriha [visited \(https://twitter.com/yayingruan/status/1723765444316639487\)](https://twitter.com/yayingruan/status/1723765444316639487) Beijing last week to meet leading arms manufacturers, reflecting a significant push to modernize the country’s military capabilities.

Given the depth of these ties, U.S. efforts to engage Algiers do not guarantee that it will shift away from Moscow and Beijing or grant concessions toward de-escalation with Rabat. In fact, these efforts could wind up injecting ambiguity into Morocco’s relations with the United States and Israel at a time of regional crisis.

The Way Forward

In this evolving landscape, Washington should continue supporting the UN-led process to resolve the Western Sahara dispute while also upholding its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. This balanced approach can help facilitate active engagement with Algeria without eroding Morocco’s ties with Israel, which serve broader U.S. strategic interests in the region.

Washington must also use its careful engagement with Algeria to mitigate tensions with Rabat and discourage further military escalation in Western Sahara. This requires a nuanced approach, leveraging U.S. influence to tamp down hostilities and return to dialogue.

Finally, U.S. officials should bear in mind that Morocco's diplomatic ties with Israel could contribute to humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Gaza after the war. Absent consistent U.S. support and a robust vision for an Israel-Palestinian peace process, however, Rabat will find it difficult to commit to U.S.-led initiatives in Gaza, especially if they may entail considerable domestic or reputational costs.

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