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The Iranian threat in the Maghreb

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Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Algeria in March 2024, marking the first official trip by an Iranian president to the country in 14 years.¹ Raisi visited Algiers to attend the 7th Summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) and during his visit, he met Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and signed several bilateral agreements. Algeria and Iran share similar positions on regional matters, including their support for the Polisario Front in Western Sahara and the Palestinians.

The Algeria-Iran axis has seen remarkable momentum in recent years, with a number of exchange visits by senior officials, such as that of Algerian Parliament Speaker Ibrahim Boughali and Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf, the convening of the Parliamentary Friendship Committee in Tehran and then the invitation made by the Iranian president to his Algerian counterpart to visit Tehran.²

The visit of Iranian President Raisi to Algeria was an important step in promoting Iran's strategic goals in North Africa, which constitute an extension of Iran's strategy in the Middle East, to expand its influence and to become a dominant power in MENA and beyond.

The pattern of Iranian actions in North Africa and Western Sahara is similar to the pattern of Tehran's actions in other places where it is trying to acquire influence. Iran uses proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shi'ite militias and Hezbollah in Syria,

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Shi'ite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas to promote the Iranian strategic interests.

It is typical of Iran's approach to foreign intervention to identify proxy wars and then offer support to the non-state actors requiring weapons. Iran's support for the demands of the Polisario Front for independence and the decision to assist it with arms, including drones, are intended to gain influence over the organization and turn it into an Iranian proxy as Iran has done elsewhere in the Middle East. Iran's goal in support the Polisario Front is also to subvert Morocco, a moderate pro-Western Sunni state and another goal is getting a strategic grip on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

Iranian efforts to destabilize Morocco are congruent with Iran's antagonism to Israel. Iran together with Algeria strongly opposed the normalization of relations between Morocco and Israel (Abraham Accords) and they support the Polisario front that renewed the armed struggle against Morocco, while Israel and the US recognized Morocco's control of the Western Sahara and support Morocco's position in the conflict.

Claims that Tehran's support includes providing the Polisario with drones followed with Moroccan accusations that Algeria has upgraded little-used airstrips for drone operations close to the border with Morocco.³

The supply of drones to the Polisario Front raised concerns not only in Morocco, but also across North Africa and the Sahel region, as well as in Europe and the United States.⁴

The deployment of Iranian drones in West Sahara can be used by Iran to threaten the maritime traffic at the Gibraltar strait and this potentially could add further stress to ships transiting the Strait of Gibraltar to avoid attacks by the Houthi allies of Iran in the Red Sea.

In December 2023, Reuters reported that Iran had warned that the Mediterranean Sea could be closed if the United States and its allies continued to commit "crimes" in Gaza. "They shall soon await the closure of the Mediterranean Sea, (the Strait of) Gibraltar and other waterways," Iranian Media Tasnim quoted the coordinating commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza

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Naqdi, as saying. Iran has no direct access to the Mediterranean itself but Naqdi also talked of "the birth of new powers of resistance and the closure of other waterways".⁵

The animosity between Morocco and Algeria

The conflict over control of Western Sahara is not only a local conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front that demands independence for Western Sahara but also integral part of the regional power struggles between Morocco and Algeria.

The rivalry between Morocco and Algeria goes back decades, but it has taken a dramatic turn for the worse in the last years. In 2023, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said deteriorating relations between the countries had reached "the point of no return."⁶

The confrontation between Morocco and Algeria is complex and multidimensional and focuses on five major issues in dispute:

The territorial dispute - the Moroccan government is claiming portions of Algeria's Tindouf and Bechar provinces that French colonial administrators had awarded to Algeria.

October 1963 marks the first major outbreak of violent conflict between Algeria and Morocco, resulting largely from the Moroccan government's claim to portions of Algeria's Tindouf and Bechar provinces.

Moroccan attempts to seize the territory in 1963 led to fighting between the two countries that was dubbed the "sand war". After a few weeks of fighting the parties agreed a ceasefire.

The " Strategic Corridor" - Algeria has a common border of several kilometers with Western Sahara and the establishment of an independent state controlled by the Polisario Front will allow Algeria to create a strategically important trade corridor from the Tindouf region to the Atlantic coast.

The ideological conflict - ideological differences between Morocco's conservative monarchy and Algeria's prominent role as a supporter of third-world revolutionary movements.

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The geopolitical rivalry - for the leading role in the region.

The conflict in Western Sahara

Since 1975, the dominant issue between the two countries has been the conflict in Western Sahara. After the former colonial power Spain withdrew its forces and handed control of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania, Algeria threw its support behind the local Sahrawi people's claims for self-determination and the Polisario movement fighting on their behalf.

Once Morocco seized the bulk of Western Sahara, Algeria began support the Polisario Front. Algeria assists the Polisario front in several areas:

Provides shelter to the leaders of the Polisario Front and its fighters.

Provides weapons and ammunition to the Polisario Front.

Hosts thousands of Western Sahara refugees in 5 refugee camps in the Tanduf area near the border with Western Sahara.

Gives the Polisario Front political support in the international arena.

Algeria has also been a leading diplomatic supporter of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the state proclaimed by Polisario in 1976.

With Algerian backing, Polisario was able to cause serious problems for Moroccan forces in Western Sahara, but the conflict stabilized in the mid-1980s following Morocco's construction of an enormous wall, along the boundary of the territory it controlled. The diplomatic relations, which Morocco had broken off in 1976, were re-established in 1988.

In 1994 Morocco accused Algeria of involvement in a terrorist attack in Marrakesh and imposed a visa requirement on Algerians visiting Morocco, Algeria closed the border between the two countries and it has never reopened.

In response to Algerian support for Polisario, Morocco launched a campaign promoting the cause of the separatist movement in Algeria's Kabylia region.

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In July 2021, Morocco's UN ambassador, Omar Hilal, distributed a note saying that "the valiant Kabyle people deserve, more than any other, to fully enjoy their right to self-determination."

Since August 2021, Algeria has severed diplomatic relations with Morocco, cut off gas shipments that previously ran through Morocco to Spain, and closed its airspace to Moroccan planes.

The armed conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco (2020 – 2024)

In 2020, the leader of the Polisario Front, Ibrahim Ghali, said the group had ended a 29-year ceasefire with Morocco to resume its armed struggle following a border confrontation over the Guerguerat crossing.

Morocco sent troops to the Guerguerat crossing to disperse Sahrawi protesters blocking the sole highway to Mauritania and the rest of Africa, which the Polisario says was built after 1991 in violation of the agreement. Since the clearing of the Guerguerat crossing on November 13, 2020, Morocco has been dealing very strictly with all separatist attempts to approach the positions and centers of the Royal Armed Forces in the Sahara.⁷

On September 1, 2023, the Polisario Front announced the death of the head of the sixth military region, Abba Ali Hamudi, a member of the Polisario national secretariat, along with four of his comrades, in the Mahbes area near Tindouf in eastern Morocco. The Sahrawi presidency declared three days of national mourning. The statement did not mention the details of the incident, but AFP reported that they were attacked by a Moroccan drone.⁸

The Front said that Hamudi participated in several military operations and was wounded several times, noting that he underwent multiple military training in Syria, Libya, and Algeria.

This comes at a time when the Sahara buffer zone is occasionally witnessing attacks by armed groups from the Polisario against the Moroccan Armed Forces in a violation of a 1991 ceasefire.

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On October 29, 2023, four explosions rocked the city of Smara in Morocco's Southern Province, resulting in the death of a young man and the injury of three others.⁹ Smara is the nearest major city to Algeria, the rear base of the Polisario Front.

The Polisario Front, in a press release by Sahara Press Service has claimed responsibility for the explosions. "The attacks of the SPLA (the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army) targeting the entrenchments of the Moroccan occupation forces continue, inflicting heavy losses in lives and equipment along the wall of shame."¹⁰

An article published on a news website in Morocco, Hespress, suggested the possibility of Iran being behind the attack." The incident took place a few days after the threats made by the Iranian Foreign Minister, through an American media platform, in which he vowed to open new fronts against the United States of America and its allies if it continued its support for Israel (during Gaza war).¹¹

On December 16, 2023, four projectiles were dropped 6 kilometers away from residential areas but did not leave any casualties. The attack carried out by the Polisario Front in Aousserd targeted an area where Moroccan Royal Armed Forces prepared to begin military exercises with live ammunition.¹²

On January 3, 2024, a Moroccan drone struck a vehicle carrying four members of the Polisario militia who were attempting to infiltrate the buffer zone with intentions of carrying out terrorist attacks.¹³

On March 19, 2024, three Polisario fighters were killed in a drone strike carried out by the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces (FAR) near the buffer zone in Mahbes.

These attempts are mostly concentrated in the Mahbes sector near Tindouf, given the ease of withdrawing from danger zones towards Algerian territory.¹⁴ The recent attacks mark a concerning deviation from established conflict patterns. The acknowledgment by the Polisario Front of their responsibility for targeting civilians raises significant concerns about a potential shift in the conflict's dynamics, signaling an escalation of the already delicate situation in the region.¹⁵

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On June 7, 2024, units of the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA) carried out a concentrated bombardment targeting Moroccan military backup bases behind the wall in the Oued Aswal area in the Hawza sector.¹⁶

On June 8, 2024, the units of the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA) carried out concentrated bombardments targeting the bases of the Moroccan army in the areas of Aguiet Ould Abelal and Sabkhet Tanushad in the Mahbes sector.¹⁷

The animosity between Morocco and Iran

Morocco and Iran have been at odds with each other for decades. The animosity between Morocco and Iran can be traced back to 1979 when the Moroccan king allowed Iran's former Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, to flee to Morocco after the 1979 Iran revolution. This was the first sign of tension between Rabat and the new leadership in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

It was in 2009 when Rabat and Tehran first cut off ties. This time, it was over Morocco's support for Bahrain in its historical conflict with Tehran and Rabat accused Tehran of disseminating Shi'a in the country.

In March 2017, Morocco arrested a Hezbollah agent – a Lebanese financier who stopped in Casablanca on his way from Guinea-Bissau to Beirut. Following his arrest, he was extradited to the United States. According to the US Department of the Treasury, he gave Hezbollah \$1 million in cash.

In 2018, Moroccan Foreign Minister ,Nasser Bourita, announced that Rabat was cutting diplomatic ties with Tehran over its support for the Polisario Front. According to Rabat, the Algeria-backed group received financial support through the Iranian embassy in Algiers and military training via a Tehran-backed Hezbollah proxy. all of the accused parties strongly denied the claims, but the Arab League, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt all expressed support for Morocco's decision at the time.¹⁸

Algeria and Iran have both expressed opposition to the Abraham Accords. When Algeria cut off ties with Rabat in 2021 over Morocco's normalization with Israel, Iran

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strongly supported Algiers' decision to "protect its borders" after "Rabat's betrayal and a stab in the back" of the Palestinians.

In an interview, Morocco's head of intelligence said that "Reports and information clearly demonstrate that Iran is supplying the Polisario militia with anti-aircraft missiles and drones, through Hezbollah and with the help of Algeria". He said that "Iran, the separatist Front (Polisario) and Hezbollah represent a double threat. It is about the arming of the Polisario and the training of its members by Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and all of that is done with the assistance of Algeria. *This Iranian support is a source of destabilization for the Kingdom of Morocco.*"¹⁹

The alignment of Algeria and Iran on the issue of Palestine forms a cornerstone of their respective foreign policies. Algeria and Iran criticized US support to Israel amid the war in Gaza ("Iron Swords") and have reiterated their unwavering support for the Palestinian cause. In Algeria, the parliament has voted unanimously to support the war against Israel following the policy of the Algerian National Liberation Front and of the military leadership in power.

Omar Hilal, Morocco's ambassador to the United Nations said in March 2024 that "Iran, after undermining the stability of Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, is in the process of destabilizing our region."²⁰

Summary

Iran's engagement with Algeria and the Polisario Front needs to be seen as part of its objective of an arc of influence stretching from the Middle East through North Africa and into the West Africa. In this broader context, there's a real danger that the Iran-Algeria axis will grow stronger and more dangerous for the stability of the region. Iran's accreting support for Algeria and Polisario threatens not just Morocco, but also the stability of the broader region.

The supply of drones to the Polisario Front raised concerns not only in Morocco, but also across North Africa and the Sahel region, as well as in Europe and the United States. *The deployment of Iranian drones in West Sahara can be used by Iran to threaten the maritime traffic at the Gibraltar strait.*

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The resumption of hostilities by the Polisario Front does not pose a significant military threat to Morocco's ability to enforce its sovereignty over Western Sahara. The main threat is that the military activity of the Algerian-backed Polisario Front could lead to a direct confrontation between the Algerian and Moroccan armies. A military confrontation between the countries could have devastating effects on the stability and security of the Maghreb.

The international community must act quickly and decisively in order to block the Iranian involvement in the region and prevent an escalation between Morocco and the Polisario Front and Algeria.

Notes

¹ Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi was killed in helicopter crash on May 19, 2024.

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