

The Post-COVID-19 Trajectory for Algeria, Morocco and the Western Sahara

by Michaël Tanchum

As Algeria and Morocco enter 2021, the bilateral relationship stands at a crossroads in which the status quo is no longer tenable. The COVID-19 pandemic and Morocco's spate of diplomatic successes during 2020, culminating with the US's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara in December, have altered the long-standing, geopolitical dynamics of the Western Maghreb. Algeria now faces the critical decision of whether and how to attempt to offset Morocco's rising power.

The enduring détente between Algeria and Morocco had been characterised by limited coordination against shared threats such as terrorism and a contained competition in the Western Sahara. Since 1991, the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, which seeks to establish an independent Sahrawi state in the Western Sahara, abandoned its armed struggle in favour of working through

the framework of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

Yet, in response to Morocco's multiple diplomatic breakthroughs in gaining recognition of its sovereignty over the disputed region that began with Rabat's "Pivot to Africa", the Polisario Front ended its 29-year ceasefire with Rabat in November 2020 and resumed its policy of armed resistance.

While Algeria was preoccupied with mass protests by the *Hirak* movement during 2019, leading Algeria's aged and infirm President Bouteflika to resign in April and to the country's 12 December 2019 elections, Morocco's diplomatic juggernaut to obtain international recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara gained critical momentum. About 80 per cent of the contested territory, including the entire Atlantic coast, is under Moroccan

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control, while the remaining 20 per cent is controlled by the Polisario Front as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

A cavalcade of African nations have recently opened consulates in the Moroccan-controlled Sahara, after the Comoros became the first country to open a consulate in the regional capital Laayoune on 18 December 2019.¹ In February 2020, the political heavyweight Côte d'Ivoire became the seventh African country to open a consulate, with the total number of African consulates reaching fifteen by October 2020.²

As African and Arab solidarity with Algeria's opposition to Morocco's sovereignty claims eroded, tensions between Algiers and Rabat climbed. In May 2020, Morocco's Royal Armed Forces announced that it would be constructing military barracks in Jerada, 38 km from Algeria's border.³ Although the Moroccan military made clear that the facility was to have no offensive capabilities, Algerian media widely reported the action as an escalatory provocation by Rabat, invoking the memory of Morocco's border incursion that ignited the October 1963 "Sand War".⁴ The Algerian

media also reported that Algeria's People's National Army would build two border bases in response.⁵ The reports were never denied by Algiers.

The prospect of Algeria building bases on the border served to reinforce the long-held view among segments of Rabat's security circles that Algiers seeks Sahrawi independence in the Western Sahara to create a dependent client state that would provide Algeria an outlet to the Atlantic Ocean.

Morocco had already been wary of Algerian designs since General Saïd Chengriha was appointed Chief of Algeria's armed forces immediately following 23 December 2019 death of General Ahmed Gaïd Salah. The 75-year old Chengriha, who served during the Sand War, is an inveterate supporter of the Polisario Front and known for his inflammatory remarks against Morocco.

Then, on 1 November 2020, a popular referendum, in which only 23.7 per cent of Algeria's eligible voters participated,⁶ approved a series of constitutional amendments, including authorisation for the People's National Army to intervene outside Algeria's borders. Although Algeria faces threats from the unstable security environments

¹ "Comoros Opens a Consulate General in Laayoune", in *Yabiladi*, 18 December 2019, <https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/86828>.

² Ali Haidar, "Zambia and Eswatini Open Consulates in Laayoune", in *Sahara News*, 27 October 2020, <https://sahara-news.org/?p=2587>.

³ "FAR : Pas de construction de base militaire à Jerada, mais d'une caserne", in *Le Matin*, 30 May 2020, <https://m.lematin.ma/amp/article.php?id=338210>.

⁴ Ahmed Oul, "Le Maroc exerce de la provocation diplomatique envers l'Algérie", in *ObservAlgerie*,

25 June 2020, <https://www.observalgerie.com/?p=112732>.

⁵ "L'Algérie va construire deux bases militaires à la frontière avec le Maroc", in *ObservAlgerie*, 2 July 2020, <https://www.observalgerie.com/?p=113979>.

⁶ "Révision constitutionnelle : « le oui » l'emporte largement", in *TSA Algérie*, 2 November 2020, <https://www.tsa-algerie.com/revision-constitutionnelle-le-oui-lemporte-largement-2>.

in neighbouring Libya and Mali, the constitutional change was further cause for concern in Rabat.

On 4 November 2020, the United Arab Emirates became the first Arab country to open a consulate in the Western Sahara, further weakening Algeria's position. Two weeks later, Jordan announced its intention to open a consulate. On 14 December, Bahrain opened a consulate too, indicating the possibility that Saudi Arabia could follow suit in the not-too-distant future. In late December 2020, media reports began circulating that Egypt would open a consulate in the Western Sahara as well.⁷

The landmark 11 December 2020 decision of the United States to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, or the "Moroccan Sahara", was part of a broader diplomatic package brokered by Washington that included Morocco's normalisation of its relations with Israel. Morocco and the US also agreed to 1 billion US dollars weapons sale that would provide Morocco with four long-endurance MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones and JDAM precision-guided munitions.⁸

While the weapons sales will likely be approved before President Trump leaves office, future sales could face an uphill

battle under a Biden administration.⁹ Israel, however, could become an alternative supplier for Rabat, greatly enhancing its capabilities.

Rabat's parade of diplomatic successes in late 2020 were not just met with simple acquiescence on the part of the Sahrawi population. On 13 November 2020, open hostilities broke out between the Morocco and the Polisario Front in Guerguerat after the Moroccan military forcefully opened the border crossing to Mauritania that had been blocked by Sahrawi activists. In response, the Polisario Front formally ended its decades-long ceasefire and began to engage in low-intensity conflict along the 2,700 km berm that separates the Moroccan and SADR-controlled regions of the Western Sahara.

Morocco, which built Africa's first high speed rail line in 2018, now seeks to extend the track through the Western Sahara to the Mauritanian border to create an Africa-to-Europe commercial transport corridor.¹⁰ The Polisario Front's resumption of hostilities has served as justification for Rabat to take control of Guerguerat and extend the berm to the Mauritanian border to secure the commercial crossing¹¹ – a

⁷ Mohamed Saied, "Egypt Denies Plans to Join States Opening Western Sahara Consulates", in *Al-Monitor*, 2 January 2021, <http://almon.co/3fcu>.

⁸ Patricia Zengerle and Mike Stone, "Exclusive-Trump Administration Moves Forward with \$1 Billion Moroccan Arms Deal", in *Reuters*, 11 December 2020, <https://reut.rs/2JU9uOc>.

⁹ Marianne LeVine, "Inhofe Slams Trump Administration on Western Sahara Policy", in *Politico*, 10 December 2020, <https://politico.com/3gAoBs1>.

¹⁰ Michaël Tanchum, "Morocco's Africa-to-Europe Commercial Corridor: Gatekeeper of an Emerging Trans-Regional Strategic Architecture", in *AIES Fokus*, No. 8/2020 (July 2020), <https://www.aies.at/publikationen/2020/fokus-20-08.php>.

¹¹ "Morocco PM Says Western Sahara Wall at Centre of Dispute Completed", in *Reuters*, 17 November 2020, <https://reut.rs/38Qy6l7>.

strategic gain for Morocco. With the position of Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Western Sahara remaining vacant since May 2019, the international response to Morocco's action has been relatively mute.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also tipped the scales in Morocco's favour. While causing national crises for both countries, Algeria has been worse affected by the pandemic. Ranking 173rd out of 195 by the Global Health Security Index,¹² Algeria's mainly state-run healthcare is characterised by its lack of modern hospitals and proper hygienic conditions, leading Algerians to often refer to hospitals as "*mouroirs*" (places for dying).¹³ By the time of the November flare-up at Guerguerat, Algeria's healthcare system had been completely overwhelmed by the pandemic, with reports of patients being asked to sleep on the floor and critical shortages of oxygen and medical equipment.¹⁴

The pandemic's impact has magnified Algeria's structural weaknesses as a hydrocarbon rentier state, with oil and gas sales accounting for 60 per cent of the state budget and 93 per cent of

Algeria's export revenues.¹⁵

Algeria's economy has been forecasted to contract by 5.5 per cent in 2020,¹⁶ forcing Algiers to reduce the planned investments by its state-owned energy company Sonatrach by 50 per cent.¹⁷ Even if energy prices recover sufficiently in 2021 to move Algeria's economy to positive growth, the oil price would still be far short of the 157.2 US dollars mark required for the state to balance its budget.¹⁸ Although the government has burned through much of its foreign reserves, Algiers has so far been wary of seeking support from the International Monetary Fund, leaving the government more vulnerable to increasing its dependence on China, Russia, Turkey, or one of the Arab Gulf states. On 11 October 2020, Beijing's China International Development Cooperation Agency signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement with Algiers to deepen Algeria's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁹

¹² Elizabeth E. Cameron, Jennifer B. Nuzzo and Jessica A. Bell, *Global Health Security Index. Building Collective Action and Accountability*, October 2019, p. 119, <https://www.ghsindex.org/report-model>.

¹³ Adel Hamaizia and Yahia H. Zoubir, "Algeria's Perfect Storm: COVID-19 and Its Fallout", in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/15915>.

¹⁴ Yousra Salem and S. Arslan, "Des médecins en détresse et des malades dans le désarroi", in *El Watan*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.elwatan.com/?p=684853>.

¹⁵ Hamid Ould Ahmed, "Algerian Economy Contracts 3.9% in First Quarter, Government Says", in *Reuters*, 25 July 2020, <https://reut.rs/32ST53F>.

¹⁶ International Monetary Fund (IMF) Datamapper: *Algeria - Real GDP Growth*, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/DZA.

¹⁷ "Algeria to Cut Spending and Energy Investment, Delay Projects", in *Reuters*, 22 March 2020, <https://reut.rs/2J9MmaK>.

¹⁸ Souhail Karam and Aberer Abu Omar, "Economic Reckoning Is Coming for Algeria", in *Bloomberg*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-20/economic-reckoning-is-coming-for-arab-world-s-last-debt-recluse>.

¹⁹ "Algeria, China Ink Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement", in *APS*, 11 October 2020, <http://www.aps.dz/en/economy/36083>.

In contrast to Algeria, Morocco's healthcare system ranks 68th out of 195 in the Global Health Security Index and the fourth highest in Africa.²⁰ Nonetheless, according to the World Health Organisation Morocco's shortage of medical staff are estimated to stand at approximately 32,000 doctors and around 64,000 nurses.²¹ To avert a large scale-disaster, Morocco setup six field hospitals and has resorted to temporary confinements in areas where the medical system was close to being overwhelmed.²²

Morocco is scheduled to hold general elections in 2021. With popular dissatisfaction over Morocco's handling the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely the monarchy and the government will highlight its nation-building project in the Western Sahara to mobilise Moroccan nationalism and shore up loyalty to the monarchy.

Algeria, which places a priority on its strategic autonomy, faces a difficult set of policy choices. If Algiers significantly ratchets up its support for the Polisario Front, it would alienate Algeria's European partners. Any escalation with Morocco would require Algeria to deepen its security cooperation with either Turkey or Russia. Yet, Moscow and especially Beijing have

been seeking a greater economic role in Morocco's development and neither would be enthusiastic about an escalation in tensions. Ultimately, however, neither Algeria nor Morocco can afford a total rift given the mutual threats they face from militant groups based in the Sahel.

At the same time, providing limited support to the Polisario Front to restrict Morocco's gains will continue to prove less and less effective. As in Guerguerat, low intensity conflict will provide Morocco with the justification to use hard power instruments. Continuation of the status quo will result in Morocco deepening its control of the Western Sahara without creating any framework for the Sahrawi to exercise wide autonomy or providing incentives for Algeria in terms of commercial connectivity and economic cooperation. Facing a closing window of opportunity, Algeria could turn further toward Turkey and Russia in the absence of an alternative.

This critical junction is also an inflection point that could provide the opportunity to reorient the whole conflict towards more cooperation – if the more neutral countries of the European Union, such as Italy and Germany, step up to play a conciliating role, perhaps in coordination with Egypt.

It would behove Morocco to be magnanimous following its recent gains. Rabat can start by offering to work with Algeria and relevant international actors to provide relief for the challenging living conditions facing the Sahrawi, made more direr

²⁰ Elizabeth E. Cameron, Jennifer B. Nuzzo and Jessica A. Bell, *Global Health Security Index*, cit., p. 233.

²¹ Ahmed Eljehtimi, "Moroccan Medics Protest Over Conditions, Staff Shortages As Pandemic Surges", in *Reuters*, 14 September 2020, <https://reut.rs/3bV2WbI>.

²² Reda Zaireg, *Covid-19 Pandemic Case Study: Morocco*, Washington/Brussels, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, December 2020, <https://eu.boell.org/en/node/7839>.

by COVID-19. Rabat would also be well-served by incentivising Algiers with opportunities to participate in Morocco's developing commercial connectivity.

For its part, Algeria needs to join talks between Morocco and the Polisario Front to secure future autonomy arrangements for the Sahrawi. By utilising its status as the SADR's *de facto* guarantor, Algerian engagement could incentivise Rabat to provide an optimal level of autonomy for the Sahrawi people. At the same time, Algeria's diplomacy would benefit from demonstrating some flexibility, coming to terms with the fraying status quo and the changing regional and international context, understanding that sticking to old positions is unlikely to serve its interests, or those of the Sahrawi people. Bridging proposals or compromises should instead be pursued, as these could provide benefits to all sides and simultaneously help improve Algeria's relations with regional and international states as well.

In combination with the precarious ceasefire in Libya, 2021 will be a crucial year for the Western Maghreb. Constructive interaction between Rabat and Algiers, facilitated by countries trusted to act as even-handed brokers, will determine whether the Western Maghreb's trajectory will be toward greater cooperation or greater conflict.

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