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The Morocco–Algeria dispute and Western Sahara

Samuel R. Ginn

Morocco faces two critical challenges that have direct effects on its national security and economic development. Decades of diplomatic disputes and spates of violence between Morocco and Algeria, stemming from the colonial and postcolonial periods, are intertwined with an ongoing conflict regarding Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This article examines the historical roots of both challenges and the complexities of their interconnectedness and presents conflict resolution strategies.

Introduction

Despite sharing historical and colonial ties, Morocco and Algeria evolved separately, becoming two nations with distinct economic, governmental, and social structures. Such differences came about due to the nature of their decolonization processes, Cold War affiliations, and governmental compositions, all of which have led to animosity, civil strife, and violent clashes between the two nations (Heggoy & Zingg, 1976; Ouheimmou, 2023). Regional rivalry was renewed by American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020. The resultant end of a nearly three-decade-long cease-fire between the two parties in that year has enhanced prospects for violence between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021). Threat of physical conflict and movement beyond the realm of diplomatic sparring became apparent through the deaths of three Algerian truck drivers in Western Sahara in November 2021 in a bombing the Algerian government has claimed was perpetrated by Morocco (Rachidi, 2022). The potential for further bloodshed places the lives of many Moroccans and Algerians in jeopardy, especially in border areas where disputes over land ownership and immigration have occurred. Such disputes have disenfranchised those living in border regions and are especially threatening for Algerians who make up approximately 7% of the immigrant population in Morocco (Ouheimmou, 2023). A lack of cooperation between the two countries has hampered responses to illegal immigration and heightened the potential for extremist spillover from Sahelian Africa, placing strain on government budgets.

Much of that budgetary strain is related to military spending, which rose to 3.9% of the Moroccan GDP and 4.8% of the Algerian GDP in 2022, levels that effectively reflect an arms race between the two

nations (Dworkin, 2022; Ouheimmou, 2023; World Bank, 2023a, 2023b). In terms of total expenditures, Morocco and Algeria accounted for approximately 74% of all military spending in the North African subregion in 2022 (Tian et al., 2023). Not surprisingly, the nations are purchasing armaments from their old Cold War allies to make up for the inadequacies present in their domestic defense industries, with Russia providing 65% to 75% of all arms sales to Algeria, a 129% increase from 2009 to 2018, and the United States reportedly fulfilling 91% of Moroccan arms purchases (Hekking, 2020; Hill, 2023; International Trade Administration, 2023). The worrying pace of escalation has its roots in the postcolonial and Cold War eras, creating a need to understand how to best ease the pressures of what these countries consider existential threats to their sovereignty. The development of domestic defense industries, strengthening of Algeria in the wake of the Ukraine War, and reliance on Cold War allies could lead to the detonation of a North African powder keg (Hill, 2023). Although the two nations are reliant on their Cold War patrons for arms, it is important to recognize self-determination, pride, fear, and sovereignty as key drivers of the ongoing tensions, with the disputes between Morocco and the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara the primary bone of contention from the Moroccan perspective.

The Sahrawi people are a predominantly Arabic-speaking, mixed ethnic group of Arab, Berber, and Sahelian makeup. Now mostly sedentary, they are a formerly nomadic people who lay ancestral claim to present-day Western Sahara, Southern Morocco, Southwestern Algeria, and parts of Mauritania. Due to their nomadic nature and the establishment of independent North African states that overlapped with Sahrawi ancestral homelands, as well as European colonialism, the Sahrawi people were both unable

to establish a state and were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyles in favor of sedentary styles of living by the 1930s. The fighting between Morocco and the Sahrawis over Western Sahara after the Spanish withdrawal in 1975 resulted in a major urbanization of the Sahrawis and drove many out of the region in favor of living abroad (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Sahrawis represent about 30% of the population in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, with the remaining 70% Moroccan settlers. The other major population concentration of Sahrawis is the Algerian town of Tindouf, around which several refugee camps have been arranged to house the Sahrawis in what they consider to be exile (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Skretteberg, 2008). Those Sahrawis who live in Moroccan Western Sahara are subject to human rights abuses and government surveillance and are prohibited from political activism that supports the Polisario Front, including flying or displaying flags of the Polisario Front or the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Amnesty International, 2021).

The end of colonialism and the vagaries of independence

Prior to gaining independence, both Morocco and Algeria were colonial holdings, primarily of France; however, Morocco was divided into Spanish and French zones of influence, which were collaboratively ruled (Wyrzten, 2022). Following the French-imposed exile of Moroccan King Mohammed V in 1953, anticolonial sentiment grew among Moroccans, who demanded the king be returned to the throne. Demonstrations were violently suppressed, but mounting international pressure forced the French to bring King Mohammed V out of exile and begin negotiations for the relinquishment of their Moroccan claims between November 1955 and March 1956 (Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, 2023). The Spanish followed the French lead and gave up their possessions in the north of Morocco in April 1956, retaining the coastal enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla and the Spanish Sahara in the south, now known as Western Sahara (Figure 1). Moroccans experienced violent repression throughout the colonial period, but the transition of power was relatively peaceful, a stark contrast to the decolonization of its neighbor Algeria.

From 1954 to 1962, the French waged a brutal counterinsurgency operation against Algerian National Liberation Front guerillas, resulting in as many as 1,000,000 Algerian and 75,000 French and French ally casualties (Horne, 1978). The violent collapse of French rule, which fomented Algerian indepen-

dence in 1962, drove Algeria away from the West at a critical point in the still-developing Cold War. The importance of Algeria as a global hub connecting Europe to the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa gave the newly formed nation a chance to become an autonomous actor on the world stage by forging relationships with various countries and championing anti-imperialism and anticolonialism. During the war for independence, the Algerians received material and strategic support from several communist nations, but once they had won, the Soviets and the Chinese were the primary investors in Algeria (Katz, 2007).

Self-determination and military competition

Over the course of about one month in 1963, the Moroccans and Algerians made war on each other, marking the first clash of the young nations. The so-called Sand War resulted from Moroccan claims on Algerian territory. The Moroccans drove for Tindouf, but Moroccan King Hassan II prevented his troops from entering the town, fearing a major Algerian defeat would not only destroy any hopes of a positive relationship but also draw the attention of the United States and Russia. A cease-fire negotiation led by Haile Selassie of Ethiopia succeeded and officially ended hostilities in 1964. Between 1969 and 1970, the Moroccans and Algerians worked to define the borders in the sparsely inhabited desert regions, which the French left quite ambiguous during the colonial period and the Moroccans further muddied by denying attempts to properly demarcate the border (Saddiki, 2020). An agreement between King Hassan II and Algerian President Houari Boumédiène committed both nations to liberating the still-held Spanish Sahara, leading the Moroccans to mistakenly believe the Algerians supported Moroccan claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara. The town of Tindouf then became a springboard for Polisario Front separatist operations, but because it had remained within Algerian territory at the end of the Sand War, the Moroccans struggled to inhibit guerilla activity without violating Algerian sovereignty (Bidwell, 1998).

The Polisario Front, first formed in 1973 to combat the Spanish occupation of Western Sahara, is the primary faction of the Sahrawi nationalist movement and is considered the legitimate political representative of the Sahrawi people by the United Nations (Hughes, 2001; UN, 1979). After the Spanish withdrawal in 1975 and the ensuing Madrid Accords, Western Sahara was divided between Morocco and

Figure 1
Western Sahara and the Moroccan border berm



Source: Boukhars, 2012.

Mauritania, but the Sahrawi people, who had laid claim to the area, were not consulted during the process. Morocco, under King Hassan II, rallied around the seizure of Western Sahara and ignored international calls for a referendum and consultation with the Sahrawis, leading Algeria to evict 30,000 Moroccans living in Algeria (Hughes, 2001; UN, 1975). The Polisario Front, through its militant wing, the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army, engaged Morocco and Mauritania militarily. They soundly defeated the disorganized and demoralized Mauritanian military by 1978, resulting in a peace agreement in 1979 (Hughes, 2001).

Morocco and Algeria clashed directly over the issue in 1976 in the oasis town of Amgala in Western Sahara. The Algerians were reportedly using the town as a staging area for Western Saharan refugees, but the Moroccans claimed there were heavily armed Algerian regulars in the town, including surface-to-air missile systems intended to inhibit Moroccan air operations. As a result of a two-day Moroccan attack, the

Algerians and Sahrawis were forced to withdraw. Algerian President Boumédiène argued that his country was, as a champion of the Non-Aligned Movement, primarily concerned with the self-determination of the Sahrawi people, who he said were suffering genocide at the hands of the Moroccans. Accordingly, the Algerians began supplying arms to the Polisario Front. Morocco had started to consolidate its land claims in Western Sahara, but the town of Amgala changed hands again, the result of a Polisario raid in which the Moroccans were soundly defeated. King Hassan II claimed that the Algerians had participated in the raid, or at least supported the Polisario troops with heavy weaponry, but the Algerians denied this claim (Hughes, 2001). On March 6, 1976, the Algerians recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, leading Morocco to end diplomatic relations with Algeria (Rachidi, 2022). With both sides thoroughly divorced from the idea of cooperation, relations remained strained through the end of the Cold War, and Algeria continued to supply the Polisario Front with

arms and equipment to pursue their struggle, until a 1991 cease-fire was called (Hughes, 2001). Algeria closed the border with Morocco entirely in 1994 in the aftermath of a violent attack in Marrakech that the Moroccans blamed on the Algerians (Sadiki, 2020). The closed border arrangement, although porous, exists today and hinders relations and trade between the two countries, resulting in a 2% growth loss for the economies of both nations, equivalent to an annual loss of \$16B, according to the International Monetary Fund (Elkins, 2020).

After consolidating control over much of Western Sahara by the mid-1970s, Morocco constructed a series of six barrier walls with the help of international technical advisors and military engineers. Construction began in 1980 and ended in 1987 with the completion of earthen berms totaling 1700 miles in length, dotted with defensive fortifications and outposts, and protected by one of the longest continuous minefields in the world on the eastern side, as shown in Figure 1 (Landmine Action, 2012; Saddiki, 2020). While fighting with the Polisario Front continued until 1991, the Western Sahara berm solidified Moroccan control over 80% of the territory and ended what hopes the Polisario Front had of a military solution.

Current state of affairs

The current problem reveals itself as one of self-determination without a clear solution to the fighting. Without increased support from the Algerians, the Sahrawis have no hope of changing the existing arrangement in a military context and are only able to act in what they claim to be self-defense. UN-led negotiations have stalled, with the Moroccan vision for the development of Western Sahara and the possibility of autonomy causing disagreements about who is eligible to vote in referenda (Lederer, 2021). The UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which monitors the conflict and conducts mine-clearing operations, has identified five zones within Western Sahara. The first is what amounts to a 5-km-wide demilitarized zone east of the Moroccan berm. On either side of the demilitarized zone are 25-km-wide restricted zones, which are bordered by zones of limited restriction that make up the remainder of Western Sahara. The five zones are observed by 468 UN personnel based out of Laayoune, the largest town in Western Sahara on the Moroccan side of the berm, with a satellite office in Tindouf. The initial UN mandate was established in April 1991, for maintenance of the cease-fire, reduction of Moroccan troop concentrations, separation of Moroccan and Polisario troops, freeing of Western

Saharan political prisoners, identification and registration of referendum voters, and facilitation of a free referendum (UN, 2023; UN Peacekeeping, 2023). The mandate has been renewed repeatedly since 2010 due to continued hostilities and the failures of referendum negotiations (Security Council Report, 2023).

In November 2020, Morocco launched a military operation into Guerguerat at the southern edge of Western Sahara. The Moroccans claimed the Polisario Front was inhibiting free movement of Moroccan citizens and agricultural exports to Mauritania, the only land border by which Moroccans can leave the country without a visa. Guerguerat lies within the restricted UN zone, meaning the Polisario Front considered the movement of Moroccan troops into the area a cease-fire violation. The Moroccans see the town as vital to the regulation of sub-Saharan migration through Morocco and into Europe, which gives the Moroccans tacit backing of the Europeans for its actions. Critics stated that the UN was neglecting its duties in Western Sahara, and Algeria issued a statement condemning Moroccan violations and reaffirming its support for the Sahrawi people, while also advocating for a negotiated settlement (*Morocco troops...*, 2020). In July 2021, Moroccan permanent representative to the UN Omar Hilale made a statement that seemingly reversed the Moroccan stance on self-determination, while still denying Sahrawi claims. Hilale advocated for the right of an Algerian separatist movement in the Kabylia region to achieve self-determination and separate from Algeria. This is a sentiment that both highlights Moroccan hypocrisy and outraged the Algerians, who recalled their ambassador, ended diplomatic relations with Morocco, and closed Algerian airspace to Moroccan aircraft. Polisario Front fighters, appearing to become restless in the face of diplomatic failures, have launched sporadic attacks against Moroccan border outposts, indicating a willingness to step up the level of violence (Dworkin, 2022).

The Western Sahara conflict seemingly remains intractable, with the Moroccans willing to maintain the status quo, confident they can safely develop the territory behind their border wall while suppressing Sahrawi activists through harassment, detentions and arrests, torture, and raids on activists (Amnesty International, 2021). Solutions must be focused on the possibility of Moroccan–Algerian cooperation, something that is difficult in the context of Western Sahara, as the Moroccans want the Algerians at the negotiating table because they believe the Polisario Front is a function of Algerian statecraft, while the Algerians want the Sahrawis to advocate for them-

selves as sovereign agents. Further complications entail broader Morocco–Algerian border and trade issues, which are costing both nations a great deal of growth and security. Resolving the Western Sahara conflict, although separable, will necessarily entail resolution of what Moroccans perceive as a larger Algerian problem.

The Moroccan–Algerian problem

The current lack of cooperation between Algeria and Morocco is detrimental to the economies and peoples of both nations. Each country has resources the other needs: the Moroccan agricultural economy requires Algerian oil, and the Algerian petroleum economy needs Moroccan foodstuffs (Elkins, 2020). Despite the closed border arrangement, a burgeoning cross-border, black-market trade in food and oil has sprung up, demonstrating that the impetus for trade exists and could provide a common revenue stream for both nations. The illicit nature of this trade also opens opportunities for goods other than food and oil, commonly Moroccan marijuana and Algerian counterfeit cigarettes but increasingly narcotics, weapons, and people destined for Europe, to become highly sought-after commodities, further entrenching the trade as an illegal operation that is aided by the lack of cooperation between Morocco and Algeria (Boukhars, 2019; Global Organized Crime Index, 2023a, 2023b).

Cross-border trafficking has become an accepted fact of life for two governments that otherwise would face an alternative prospect of civil unrest, terrorism, and religious extremism. Corruption also enriches local officials and revives depressed border towns, creating further incentives for Moroccan security forces to turn a blind eye to smugglers, as long as the traffickers refrain from engaging in the arms trade (Boukhars, 2019). Since the 2011 Arab Spring and the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya into near-anarchy, Morocco took steps to enhance border security for fear of proliferation of arms, terrorism, and human trafficking along existing smuggling routes. However, these measures, while partially effective at reducing illicit trade, were taken unilaterally, causing land disputes and merely altering the methods, routes, and products being smuggled, pushing fuel smugglers to traffic in narcotics and humans. Cities in Eastern Algeria serve as stepping-off points for illegal sub-Saharan immigrants who typically cross into Algeria from Niger. The flow of illegal immigration into Morocco has increased since the “regularization” of more than 25,000 illegal immigrants by order of Moroccan King Mohammed

VI in 2014 in an attempt to combat human trafficking and ease policies on asylum seekers (Boukhars, 2019; Saddiki, 2020; Schuettler, 2017). Morocco is a highly sought-after transit country because of already-established drug smuggling routes into Europe and the fact that Morocco shares the only African land border with a European country: Spain’s Ceuta and Melilla exclaves, both located along Morocco’s Mediterranean coast. Other products crossing from Algeria into Morocco include amphetamines, psychotropics, and counterfeit prescription drugs, the last of which are the leading cause of poisoning in Morocco, demonstrating a distinct health threat to the Moroccan public (Boukhars, 2019). Morocco and Algeria are taking their own steps to curb the illegal trade across their borders, but their security forces are not collaborating, resulting in limited success. Smugglers and traffickers, in turn, have been free to work within the blind spots created by the essentially nonexistent communication between Morocco and Algeria.

Under the current system, goods traded between Morocco and Algeria must first travel to the port of Marseille, France. If Morocco and Algeria traded directly with each other, rather than giving in to their divisive regional rivalry, their economies would have doubled in size between 2005 and 2015, according to the World Bank. Instead, with a focus on building barriers and unilaterally securing borders during that period, the Moroccan economy has grown by only 37% (Mhidi, 2017). The slowed rate of growth is unable to tame high rates of unemployment among young people, especially in the border regions of Northeastern Morocco, where approximately 70% of the economy depends on the informal sector. Efforts made by the Moroccan government at securing the border with Algeria and the closure of smuggling routes put young people, whose only economic opportunities lie in the black market, out of jobs. Without opportunities provided to them in the formal sector by the government, young people and their families are often forced into poverty, resulting in protests and civil unrest (Boukhars, 2019). Until Morocco and Algeria set aside their disputes, people on both sides of the border will continue to suffer. Ever-increasing flows of people and illegal products, along with the spread of civil unrest and extremism, could be countered more easily if Morocco and Algeria collaborated with a comprehensive security strategy. Trafficking will continue, but a united front would help reduce security risks and promote economic growth for both countries. By bringing existing trading into the formal sector, young people will not need to engage

in the black market, and the resultant revenues will revitalize the neglected border regions. This current situation also affects the security of sub-Saharan and Sahelian African nations, in that the elusiveness of an agreement between Morocco and Algeria has direct negative consequences for broader African security prospects (Boukhars, 2012).

Addressing the Algerian problem

A framework for security and trade resolutions already exists. The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), formed in 1989 and made up of Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, is the most promising organ for cooperation. Despite its existence and great potential, with the International Monetary Fund estimating that a revival of the AMU would establish a North African market of 100 million people, the AMU failed to overcome the regional rivalries, and its presidential council has not met since 1994, although the Tunisian and Mauritanian presidents demonstrated interest in reviving the bloc (Dursun, 2021; Elkins, 2020). However, the AMU's website shows that the organization is still active in African politics, sending a delegation to the 44th Session of the Executive Council of the broader continent-wide African Union (AU) in February 2024 (AMU, 2024). As such, the possibility for economic reconciliation clearly still exists with the AMU's framework, and the organization should be used by the UN as a means of establishing more substantial trade and security arrangements (Saddiki, 2020).

The AMU is rooted in the postcolonial identities of the Maghreb states, thereby serving as common ground for the Morocco and Algeria to navigate their differences. Similarly, the use of the "Arab" identifier in the name must either be embraced or discarded in the face of rising support for "political Islam and politicized Berberism" (de Larramendi, 2008, p. 180). A discussion surrounding the Maghrebi identity can open a gateway for the Moroccan and Algerian governments to accept that the people they are supposed to represent are more similar than not, helping to ease tensions and promote collaboration between the governments of the two nations and their peoples. The Algerian civil war and accusations of Moroccan support for Algerian Islamists were major factors that halted the progress of the AMU in the 1990s, but the subsiding of the conflict allows for a more stable regional platform of negotiation. Ongoing instability in Libya presents a major challenge to the revival of the AMU, but a sign of success for the organization and for the revitalizing of Moroccan–Algerian relations might be to develop region-

ally focused economic and security solutions to the challenges of Islamic extremism, black-market trade, and governmental instability (de Larramendi, 2008).

The Western Sahara problem

The Western Sahara problem, although linked to the Algerian problem, presents a different set of security and governmental issues to Morocco. Similar to the issues of black-market trade along the Morocco–Algeria border, the buffer zone not covered by the Moroccan berm and the neighboring regions of Northern Mauritania and Southwestern Algeria have become havens for drug smugglers and weapons traffickers. Islamic extremist groups spreading northward from the Sahel region have formed connections with organized criminal elements and the Sahrawis living in the Tindouf refugee camps (Boukhars, 2012). A recent study found that poverty is the driving factor behind young Sahrawis breaking ranks with the Polisario strategy of nonviolence and most certainly creates incentives to engage in illegal dealings with criminals and extremist groups (Chikhi, 2017). According to Anouar Boukhars (2012, pp. 5–6), "Sahrawis are increasingly socially isolated, lack direction, and have no prospects in sight. They feel abandoned by their aging and out of touch leadership, and turning to criminal networks becomes a way of turning against a regime that has failed them and an international community that pays lip service to their sufferings"; thus, there is a sense that the time for a negotiated settlement between Morocco and the Sahrawis is running out. Extremist involvement in black-market trade and a proliferation of weapons from war-torn Libya and sub-Saharan Africa have increased instances of violence and criminal behavior among Sahrawis. Drug smuggling and kidnapping have proved highly lucrative and are potentially inspired by extremist tactics. The Polisario Front and the Algerians officially deny Sahrawi involvement in militant and criminal activity. In 2011, Moroccan security forces uncovered a cell of 27 men near the town of Amgala, part of the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Thirty Kalashnikov rifles, several handguns, and two antitank rocket launchers were seized during the raid, illustrating both the severity of the arms smuggling issue and potential for significant escalation from knife attacks that occurred two months earlier, in November 2010, that saw 11 Moroccan security officers killed (Boukhars, 2012; Goodman & Mekhennet, 2011).

While the Sahrawis are not particularly prone to religious extremism, the disaffection with the status quo and interactions with criminal and extremist ele-

ments threaten the negotiating power of the Polisario Front. After the resumption of hostilities in 2020, the Polisario Front reported the deaths of four Polisario fighters, including a commander, by a Moroccan drone strike in April 2021 (Congressional Research Service, 2021; *Polisario Front's commander...*, 2023). Time is on the side of the Moroccans, who can afford to wage a low-intensity campaign of suppression against a rapidly fracturing independence movement, whereas unity, and thus their power, appears to be slipping away from the Sahrawis. The situation has become increasingly perilous, with the possibility of splinter groups or individual Sahrawis seeking to renew the violence, making use of connections with Islamic extremist groups as allies of convenience.

Addressing the Western Sahara problem

To inhibit developments like religious extremism and violent outbursts among the Sahrawis, the Moroccan government must demonstrate its willingness to make good faith efforts at negotiating with the Polisario Front. Ending the political persecution and civil rights abuses of Sahrawis within the Moroccan-controlled zone of Western Sahara and a hiatus on drone strikes in the Polisario-controlled areas will help to ease tensions. The Moroccans may be content to allow the Polisario Front to splinter, but it would not be in their long-term interest to encourage disunity among the Sahrawis, given the existing black-market connections and tangential extremist acquaintances they have made. However, without credible commitments from the Polisario Front, the Moroccans would be ceding their position of strength on their side of the wall without any benefit. The Polisario Front must then commit to halting political agitations and demonstrations. Additionally, the Polisario Front must bring the Algerians to the negotiating table to affirm that while the Polisario Front is not a paramilitary organization under the control of Algeria, its status as a government in exile makes them beholden to certain policy desires of their host country. With each party making some concessions—the Moroccans easing pressure on political activists and halting drone strikes, the Polisario Front pausing disruptive demonstrations, and the Algerians accepting some responsibility for their role in perpetuating the dispute—the possibility of cooperation could be opened, both in the case of the Western Sahara question and between Morocco and Algeria directly.

The inclusion of African nations, through the continent-inclusive AU in conjunction with the UN MINURSO mission, will help make the negotiations

a public and multilateral affair and allow each party to choose from a pool of neutral representatives to join the negotiations. For example, each party directly involved in the dispute could nominate an AU-vetted mediator to form a three-member panel to guide the discussions and navigate through potential deadlock. The UN should also earmark funds for the demining of the eastern side of the protective berm, another tangible demonstration of détente. Allowing the berm and Moroccan troops to remain in place will balance the demining process. Additionally, the Polisario Front should allow the UN to impound remaining heavy military equipment in their stockpiles, such as tanks, armored cars, and infantry fighting vehicles. This impounding represents a tangible concession on the part of the Polisario Front, temporarily giving up their offensive capabilities but not prohibiting them from reclaiming their equipment should the negotiations allow for a Sahrawi gendarmerie.

Once each side has given some, the negotiations must address the question of whether autonomy or independence is the end goal. The Moroccans see Western Sahara as an integral part of their territory that was severed by colonial powers and is now kept from them by those same powers in the name of Algeria and the Polisario Front. Hence, the Moroccans are willing to offer autonomy and nothing more. The Polisario Front, seeing themselves as a distinct people from the Moroccans, will accept nothing less than full independence. A modified approach is best taken at this point. The Polisario Front must be willing to accept autonomy in the short term for the possibility of independence in the long term. It is still unclear whether Western Sahara is economically viable without Moroccan subsidies and investment, and the Polisario Front government would be ill equipped to deal with a fully independent nation immediately. Using the framework of the AU Agenda 2063, which includes language about self-determination—“An Africa of Good Governance, Democracy, Respect for Human Rights, Justice and the Rule of Law” and “A Peaceful and Secure Africa”—the process of autonomy and the inclusion of the Sahrawis must be democratic and completed through the AU in order to demonstrate that African problems can be solved peacefully by Africans (AU, 2024). The stabilization of the Western Sahara dispute would contribute to longer-term regional stability and serve as a guide for unstable countries in North and West Africa.

The process of autonomy must be progressive. Setting goals and milestones, such as registration of Sahrawis on tribal rolls, establishment of local Sahrawi governing bodies, and creation of a Sahrawi

gendarmerie under the supervision of the Moroccan military, all serve the ultimate goal of a vote on independence certified by neutral observers from international and African civil society organizations. Those eligible for voting would be Sahrawis registered on tribal rolls and Moroccans who have lived at permanent residences in the territory of Western Sahara for a predetermined amount of time. This would give Moroccans the opportunity to retain Western Sahara through a democratic process, while the possibility of independence remains ever-present should the Sahrawis gain enough support. The main concern with such solutions is whether an autonomous region that is established and operates on democratic ideals would survive in a nondemocratic state like Morocco. Because the levers of government do not operate independently of the king, the Moroccans cannot guarantee that an autonomous Western Sahara or its government would not be dissolved. This lack of institutional independence, especially a nonindependent judiciary, is the major roadblock to finding a resolution to the Western Sahara question. The establishment of an African coalition through the AU must be designed to at least observe the development of local government, if not form it, and the interaction between the Moroccan state and the autonomous Western Saharan government. Considering Moroccan reliance on the financial benefits involved in keeping Moroccans in places of high administration in Western Sahara, new government formation is unlikely without major Moroccan government reform; thus, the Western Sahara question necessarily threatens the existence of the Moroccan monarchy (Khakee, 2011).

Conclusion

Despite the dismal outlook, even minimal Moroccan collaboration with the Sahrawis and the Algerians would help defrost the relations between all parties. The benefits of better Morocco–Algeria relations become immediately obvious both for security and economics. Engagement on security and bilateral reforms of customs administrations would reduce illegal immigration, drug smuggling, and corruption. Reopening the Morocco–Algeria border would also decrease security expenditures for both nations, freeing up funds to revive depressed border towns and create job opportunities for the broader Moroccan population. There are options available to resolving the two major issues facing Morocco today, but the government must be willing to give a little to benefit from and promote trade, security, and the rise of the Global South in Northern Africa.

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