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Stronger together

Relations between Algeria and Morocco have been marred by several crises in recent decades. But common environmental challenges require joint efforts

As the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Morocco in early September unfolded, one notable aspect of the response to the devastation was the geopolitical element of aid and disaster relief. Specifically, what drew attention was Algeria's offer of assistance and whether it might signal an implicit desire to reduce tensions between the hostile neighbours. Yet, mistrust between the two continues to run high, and a single gesture of offering support is unlikely to undo decades of animosity. Moreover, while neither Morocco nor Algeria is likely to escalate the situation into an active conflict, both are able to gain domestic support, as well as geopolitical advantages, by leveraging their strained diplomatic relations. If addressed correctly, shared environmental challenges may offer a potential way out of this regional 'tension game'.

Institutionally, there appears to be a greater willingness to de-escalate on the Moroccan side. The country's response to the alleged shooting of French-Moroccan tourists by the Algerian coast guard on 31 August provides insights into its stance on the issue. The Moroccan government has emphasised the importance of allowing the judicial process to take its course in order to establish the facts, thereby taking the steam out of the predictions of a sudden descent into conflict. At the same time, however, the government is keen to avoid appearing weak or overly conciliatory in its response, especially in the face of what the public might view as provocative or inflammatory rhetoric or actions by Algeria. Meanwhile, the latter's leadership has reportedly rejected offers of mediation from various parties. Both countries see regional and domestic advantages in sustaining heightened tensions.

Rally 'round the flag

Inherent in the escalation of tensions has been an effort by both governments to win over public opinion. The Algerian leadership is eager

to demonstrate its vigilance both domestically and regionally, and, more importantly, to showcase the constant need for a strong military. The August 2021 diplomatic break with Morocco took place in a context still dominated by the political aftershocks of the 2019 Hirak protests movement and the subsequent political transition that led to the election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboun. The political role of the military was a topic of discussion during this period of social and political contestation, which was not only part of the protests but also involved a reckoning about the role of various actors, including the powerful military apparatus. While the post-Hirak changes did not diminish the important role that the military leadership continues to play in Algerian politics, they did call for a reminder to the public of the institution's importance to the country. This is where suspicions regarding Morocco become an important domestic factor. Without a clear and persistent external threat (with Morocco historically serving as an example, given the 1960s Sand Wars), the case for a dominant military institution becomes less compelling.

Both Morocco and Algeria remain authoritarian regimes – although exactly *how* authoritarian they are could be debated – and are not blind to the opportunity that the perception of an external threat presents. It helps solidify public support for the leadership, uniting citizens around a common cause. It also deprioritises pressing domestic governance issues – from service delivery to civic freedoms – by creating the impression of a more existential threat. While diplomatic tensions were initially still viewed as a manufactured crisis by the population, this perception gradually shifted, as both governments flung verbal attacks at each other in the press and ignited nationalist and chauvinistic sentiments on social media over issues such as cultural heritage, sports and even foreign policy, gradually demonising one another.

Geopolitical dimensions

Beyond domestic politics, there is an important external and regional dimension to the ongoing tensions. The Algerian military and civilian leadership's suspicion of Morocco has run long and deep, rooted in divergent political ideologies and foreign policy priorities. The two regimes could not have followed more different political paths. One is a military-dominated leadership, supportive of revolutionary ideals and Third-Worldism. The other is a monarchical elite close to Western liberal ideologies. But perhaps more than anything else in recent developments, Morocco's bilateral relationship with Israel has raised Algerian fears and moral disapproval. Algeria – a champion of the Palestinian cause – views Morocco's normalisation of relations with Israel as a betrayal and a sell-out to the Zionist entity.

In the face of such deep division, international partners find themselves caught between these competing sides.

The Algerian regime is also concerned about the impact of the budding bilateral relationship on its military supremacy in the region. Algeria's military is one of the largest in Africa and the most powerful in the Maghreb. In 2023, military spending reached 10 per cent of Algeria's GDP. Militarily, Morocco understands that it cannot compete in terms of sheer volume, whether in spending or manpower. And so, it seeks to bridge this disparity in other ways. The country is building a powerful arsenal of drones and air defences, capable not only of shielding against any immediate attack by the Polisario but also of standing up to Algerian capabilities.

Connected to this is the perception in Algiers of the need to curb Rabat's growing momentum in the Western Sahara territorial dispute. Undoubtedly, Morocco's recent efforts to secure bilateral recognition for its sovereignty claims in the Western Sahara from key allies have dealt a blow to the already stymied negotiation process at the UN. With each international recognition and every voicing of support for Morocco's proposed autonomy plan, Algiers sees diminished chances of continuing to support the Polisario Front and the claims of Sahrawi refugees to their territory. As the process continues to settle in favour of Morocco, Algeria is growing increasingly fearful of a more empowered geopolitical rival to its west.

Shared environmental challenges

In the face of such deep division, international partners find themselves caught between these competing sides. Europe is eager to maintain positive relations with both Morocco and Algeria, as each represents a strategic partner in areas such as renewable and fossil fuel energy, security and counter-terrorism, migration and a range of other issues spanning not only the Mediterranean but well into the Sahel and Sahara. Promoting pragmatic partnerships in this context is crucial, as is emphasising the need for regional action. While the two countries may not see eye to eye on foreign policy issues, and mutual mistrust continues to run high, recent examples have shown that action on more pragmatic issues can pave the way for regional cooperation.

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An example can be found in the area of energy and climate. Both Algeria and Morocco possess tremendous potential for developing their

brunt of the impacts of climate and shifting weather patterns.

renewable energy sectors, and as the scale of production and export increases, they stand to gain more by working together. In the context of the energy transition, Morocco, as an energy importer, has strong incentives to further expand its already impressive renewables sector, thereby reducing dependency on energy imports. For Algeria, the incentives are different; although the country ranks as the 7th largest producer of gas and may not seem to require significant investment in renewables, its domestic consumption is taking up more and more energy — energy, that it would otherwise export. Moreover, the green transition will sooner or later require Algeria to transition to cleaner energy sources. In this regard, Algeria, too, needs to expand its renewable sector, as this would help offset its rising domestic consumption.

More crucially, Algeria and Morocco are among those bearing the brunt of the impacts of climate and shifting weather patterns. As is well-known by now, these threats – which are increasingly turning into disasters – do not take into account state borders or tense diplomatic relations. Therefore, addressing them requires global and regional initiatives. With growing recognition of these shared dangers among affected populations, this should lead to coordinated and cooperative government action — even between traditionally hostile neighbours.



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