



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



# The Historical Roots of the Conflict between Morocco and Algeria: Colonial Heritage and Western Sahara

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## Abstract

Through the study of the intertwined histories of Morocco and Algeria, this article reveals how shared history, colonization, and territorial rivalry have influenced relations between the two countries. It links contemporary tensions to colonial border policies implemented by France in North Africa, whose administrative decisions left unresolved territorial conflicts that remained after independence. As a result, these persistent issues contributed to the Sand War of 1963, an early clash that revealed the fragility of relations between the two newly independent neighbors. The article also recalls periods of solidarity and mutual support during resistance to colonial rule and the Algerian struggle for independence. Nevertheless, at the heart of Morocco–Algeria relations, rooted in linguistic, religious, and cultural bonds, lie enduring political disagreements between unity and division, particularly in diplomacy and regional cooperation.

Particular attention is given to the Western Sahara conflict, which has remained a central issue since the mid-1970s. The paper examines the emergence of the Polisario Front and its competing narratives of sovereignty with Morocco, and the involvement of international actors, with particular attention to the role of the United Nations in ceasefire monitoring and finding political solutions to avoid further conflicts.

**Keywords:** Morocco–Algeria relations; Western Sahara conflict; Polisario Front; Regional diplomacy; Postcolonial North Africa

## 1. Introduction: From the French Colonial Heritage to the Sand War

Across the Maghreb region, the relations between Morocco and Algeria have long revealed both historical intimacy and territorial conflict. Although the two neighboring countries share deep linguistic, religious, and social connections, their political relationship has frequently led to divisions over national priorities and unresolved historical disputes. Understanding this contradiction requires looking beyond current international relations and examining the historical transformations that occurred in North Africa's colonial period.

French colonization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries profoundly changed the region's territorial map. During the colonization of Algeria, it conquered certain parts of western Tunisia and eastern Morocco in order to create Greater Algeria, leaving behind, after the independence of Algeria, a legacy of border conflicts between the latter and its neighbors, in particular, Tunisia and Morocco. Borders imposed during colonial rule were often drawn to serve political interests rather than historical or social conditions. This left many uncertainties behind, which later turned into conflicts between newly independent states.

For Morocco and Algeria, these tensions quickly emerged at their shared border and led to the 1963 Sand War, which revealed how fragile their relations had become despite earlier support during the struggle against colonial rule. In

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other words, after Algeria's independence, border tensions remained, particularly around the cities of Tindouf and Colom Bechar, which are still under Algerian control. Even though promises were made to settle the border dispute between the neighboring countries amicably, inherited from colonization, the unresolved disagreements soon led to renewed tensions between the two states. Over the following decades, new regional challenges appeared, most importantly the dispute over Western Sahara, which made diplomatic relations and regional cooperation more difficult. The persistence of this issue shows how historical legacies, political interests, and regional dynamics continue to influence relations between states in North Africa.

Within this context, this paper examines the historical and political factors that have shaped Morocco–Algeria relations from the colonial period to the present day. Relying on historical analysis and regional developments, the article seeks to explain how past territorial arrangements and political changes still affect current diplomatic tensions as well as the possibilities for future cooperation.

#### Political and Military Support from Morocco to the Algerian Revolution (1954–1962)

**During the years of the independence struggle**, Morocco offered unwavering support to the Algerian Revolution Command Center throughout the period from 1954 to 1962. Moroccan territory hosted parts of the Algerian revolutionary leadership, served as a pivotal base for Algerian fighters, and provided them with material assistance and access to military resources, as well as military training facilities, in the eastern regions of the country. Medical aid was also part of this support. Several medical centers were available to the Algerian Liberation Army so that wounded fighters could receive medical treatment. At the same time, Morocco welcomed many Algerian refugees, granting them protection and asylum during the conflict. Support was not only practical but also diplomatic. Morocco raised the question of Algerian independence in international forums and argued for its political recognition during the struggle against colonial rule. This period of cooperation reflects the close ties that once linked the two countries and provides an important historical background for understanding the tensions that developed later.

##### 1.1. The Era of Emir Abdelkader and the Battle of Isly

Morocco's support for Algerian resistance against French colonization can be traced back to 1844, when Emir Abdelkader sought Moroccan assistance in his war against the French. In response, Morocco engaged in the Battle of Isly to support him, but the forces were ultimately defeated. This defeat directly contributed to the later colonization of Morocco by France. To support him, Morocco went to war against the French colonizer during the Battle of Isly, where it was defeated. This event was the direct cause of the colonization of Morocco by France. However, after this defeat, the emir Abdelkader found refuge with the tribes of the north and the tribes of the Moroccan Rif and made himself many supporters. The author of the book *Al-Istiqsa* (History of Morocco Aqsa), Ahmad ibn Khalid al-Nasiri, states that when the emir Abdelkader despaired of defeating the French by his own means, he considered overthrowing the sultanate of Morocco and sitting on the throne of Fez, which constituted a threat to the authority of Sultan Abderrahmane [1]. The latter then withdrew his support from him, and Emir Abdelkader was forced to surrender to the French colonizer.

On the other hand, the writer Jorge Zaydan presents a different account, arguing that France persuaded the Sultan of Marrakech to confront Emir Abdelkader. According to this version, clashes took place between the two leaders, during which the latter remained victorious until 1847, when he ultimately chose to surrender to France [1]. However, this interpretation raises several questions. First, historical records indicate that the confrontations between the army of Emir Abdelkader and that of Sultan Abderrahmane occurred on Moroccan territory rather than in French-occupied Algeria. This leads to wondering why Emir Abdelkader was operating with his forces in Morocco when his primary struggle was against French occupation in Algeria. This situation appears to support the view of the historian Mohamed Naciri, who suggests that Abdelkader may have intended to challenge the authority of the Moroccan Sultan, although he had benefited from Moroccan assistance in the form of funds, troops, horses, and weapons. As a defeated state, Morocco was compelled to accept the peace terms imposed by France. In fact, this outcome may have had broader implications for the region. Had Morocco fallen under direct colonial rule at that time, it might not have been in a position to offer later support to Algerian resistance movements, potentially delaying the broader struggle for independence in North Africa. This episode highlights the long-standing ties between Morocco and Algeria in resisting colonial domination, as well as the complex interplay of political ambitions, regional loyalties, and international pressures that shaped the Maghreb during the nineteenth century.

Alliances and resistance across borders did not end with Emir Abdelkader but continued in later anti-colonial struggles in the region. History also mentions that Sheikh Bouâmama, a religious leader and anti-French resistance commander, fought against the French colonizer with the support of the Moroccans for twenty years, from 1881 until he died in 1908, when he was buried in the city of El Ayoun in Morocco. Sheikh Bouâmama founded, during his lifetime, a Sufi Zaouia (

Sufi religious brotherhood) (Zaouia Sid al-Sheikh) in eastern Morocco, which exists to this day, and a representation of this Zaouia is located in the west of Algeria, which confirms the strong and fraternal bond that unites the two brotherly peoples, despite the hostile policy of Algerian leaders towards Morocco.

### **1.2. The role of Algeria and Libya in the Creation of the 'Polisario' Entity**

After the liberation of the Moroccan Sahara in 1975 from Spanish colonization, the Algerian leaders, with the support of the former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, established an organization that brought together a few thousand Saharawi separatists called "The Polisario Front". They provided the group with arms, financial support, and political influence. In addition, they sought diplomatic support of several African and Latin American states, including South Africa, Cuba, and Venezuela, in order to gain international recognition for the Polisario Front as a representative organization advocating for the liberation of Saharawi people as well as their self-determination.

Algeria's support for the establishment of the Saharawi entity appears to have been motivated by a wish to enhance its regional role and presence. This policy allowed it to assert a presence in the area, maintain access to the Atlantic coast, and challenge Morocco's claims over Western Sahara. As Bernard Lugan observes, these actions effectively resulted in the establishment of a de facto protectorate over the region [2]. Moreover, he claimed that Algeria, which wanted, on the other hand, an independent "Saharawi State", saw in self-determination a way to obtain this official independence. For Algiers, it was indeed out of the question to let Morocco extend along the Atlantic coast and thus close all outlets from the Algerian Sahara to the ocean. Its policy was therefore to contest by all means the Moroccanness of Western Sahara and to support the fiction of the existence of Saharawi people having the right to self-determination, so that a mini-State could be built on which it could exercise a kind of protectorate [2].

These historical ties illustrate the long-standing territorial and political interconnections in the region, which continue to inform contemporary disputes and influence interstate relations. The role of Algeria and Libya in supporting Saharawi separatists thus reflects a combination of historical tensions and regional power dynamics. Their sponsorship not only sustained the military and political efforts of the movement but also reinforced a long-term geopolitical stalemate in Western Sahara that has persisted for decades. As a result, this continued support became a central factor shaping relations between Morocco and Algeria and continues to influence political dynamics in North Africa today.

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## **2. Evolution of the Moroccan Sahara Conflict since its Colonization by Spain**

The Moroccan Sahara was under Moroccan sovereignty until 1884, when Spain colonized the southern region, known as Rio de Oro. In 1920, Spain extended its occupation to Saqia El Hamra in the north, as well as Tarfaya and Sidi Ifni. Over time, some of these territories were returned to Morocco: Tarfaya in 1958 and Sidi Ifni in 1969.

After the establishment of the Polisario Front in 1973, the United Nations General Assembly, on 13 December 1974, requested an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice. It was to determine whether Western Sahara (Rio de Oro and Saqia El Hamra) had been a territory without a sovereign at the time of Spanish colonization, and if there had been any legal ties existing between the territory, the Kingdom of Morocco, and Mauritania. On 16 September 1975, the Court concluded that Western Sahara was not terra nullius and recognized historical legal ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and some local tribes.

Following this, Morocco organized the Green March on 6 November 1975, in which approximately 350,000 Moroccans peacefully crossed the border to Western Sahara. Shortly afterward, the Madrid Agreement (14 November 1975) outlined sharing the territory between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania. On 27 February 1976, the Polisario Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) with Algerian support. Between 1976 and 1980, the movement carried out military operations against Moroccan and Mauritanian forces, while thousands of refugees settled in Tindouf, Algeria.

In 1979, Mauritania withdrew from Western Sahara then Morocco announced that the territory had historically belonged to the kingdom and reestablished control. Representatives of the Oued ed Dahab tribes pledged allegiance to King Hassan II on 14 August 1979. Morocco later proposed a referendum for the Sahrawi population in 1981, but it was difficult to proceed owing to disagreements over eligible voters. The Polisario Front gained recognition by the Organization of African Unity in 1982, prompting Morocco to withdraw in 1984, as it considered the decision to be biased.

From 1975 to 1991, Morocco and the Polisario Front were involved in armed conflict, with Algeria providing support to the latter at various stages, notably in the battles of Amgala 1, Amgala 2, and Kelta Zemmour. The war ended in 1991

after the United Nations intervened to resolve the conflict in the Moroccan Sahara and established the MINURSO mission to enforce the ceasefire, repeatedly violated by the Polisario. The United Nations has organized several rounds of negotiations between Algeria on the one hand, and Morocco on the other hand, but Algeria's refusal to engage constructively in negotiations has delayed a definitive solution to the issue. Because an agreement on Morocco's proposed referendum could not be reached, the deadlock has mainly been caused by disagreements over who is eligible to vote, both in the Tindouf camps and in the Moroccan-administered Sahara.

In 2006, Morocco presented an autonomy plan for the Sahara under its sovereignty. The UN Security Council recognized the proposal in 2007 as a serious basis for negotiation. In 2017, Morocco rejoined the Organization of African Unity, and in 2025, the UN Security Council adopted the autonomy initiative under Moroccan sovereignty as the only solution to the Sahara conflict. Morocco's patient diplomacy succeeded in gaining broad international support from the majority of countries that had previously voted in favor of Algeria, though Algeria has yet to show approval of the resolution.

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### **3. The Achievements of Morocco in the Sahara**

Since the recovery of the Moroccan Sahara in 1975, Morocco has worked towards the development of its southern provinces in administrative, economic, and social sectors, as well as in health (CHU, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy) and education (Faculties and Multidisciplinary Universities), as a way to bring them in line with the development of the rest of the kingdom. These efforts began in the years following the recovery and expanded further after the 1991 ceasefire, which brought greater stability to the region following the conflict with the Polisario Front. It has since launched major development projects, including the highway linking Tiznit to Dakhla over a distance of 1,055 km so as to bring northern and the southern Morocco closer. It also built the ports of Tan-Tan and Laayoune and is currently developing the Atlantic port of Dakhla, a major project supporting economic, social, and logistical growth. At the same time, airport infrastructure in Laayoune, Dakhla, and Smara has been enhanced to improve regional connectivity.

With a clear aim of strengthening economic growth in the southern regions, Morocco has established several industrial zones. In the region of Guelmim-Oued Noun, often seen as the gateway to the Moroccan Sahara, four industrial zones have been created, covering a total area of 198.40 hectares. Whereas in Laayoune-Sakia El Hamra, three industrial zones were on an area of 340.50 hectares for the purpose of attaining economic growth in the fisheries, food industry and renewable energy sectors. Similarly, in Dakhla-Oued Eddahab, five industrial zones covering 329 hectares have been developed to encourage investment, support local production, and create new economic opportunities in the region.

The Kingdom, therefore, continues to develop all parts of its territory, including the Sahara, with steady and determined progress. Even without oil and gas resources, this development relies on national expertise, the efforts of its citizens, and a balanced management of the country's potential, while ensuring stable relations and avoiding tensions with neighboring states.

#### **3.1. Diplomatic and Political Challenges in Moroccan-Algerian Relations**

Despite Morocco's constant efforts to seek reconciliation with its Algerian neighbors to open borders and be in good terms, since the reign of Chadli Bendjedid, Bouteflika and others, the Algerian authorities have often resisted these initiatives. Instead of focusing solely on the development of their country, they have frequently taken actions that counter Morocco's influence. Its leadership has allocated significant resources to secure political support abroad, while the country continues to face economic and social challenges more than sixty years after independence. Its leadership has deployed significant resources, like oil wealth, to secure political support abroad, while the country continues to face economic and social challenges more than sixty years after independence.

This rivalry has gone beyond traditional diplomacy when Algeria has actively used media outlets, including audiovisual and print channels, as well as social networks, to spread false information about Morocco, promote propaganda, and spread hatred between the peoples of the two nations. This has undermined the historic connections of family, culture, and religion that connect Algerians and Moroccans, while also seeking political support in parts of Africa and Latin America for its position on the Moroccan Sahara.

#### **3.2. Conclusion: Beginnings of Hope for the Settlement of the Algerian-Moroccan Conflict**

In light of the historical evolution of Algerian-Moroccan relations and recent diplomatic initiatives, this paper has examined the political, territorial, and ideological sides that have shaped tensions between the two countries, mainly regarding the Moroccan Sahara issue. The study demonstrates that the attempt to resolve the conflict could foster regional unity, long-term peace, and pave the way for a cooperative and prosperous Maghreb. Despite decades of tension, deep historical, cultural, linguistic, and familial ties between Moroccans and Algerians will never be apart as

they have been rooted for millennia and provided the essential foundation for unity, offering a strong path for reconciliation. Moving beyond division thus requires overcoming historical divisions that have long created barriers, recognizing historical solidarity, and rebuilding trust between the two countries on pragmatic foundations that are clearly oriented toward the future. This calls for reviving the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) as an effective framework for development, economic integration, and cooperation, not only between Morocco and Algeria, but also with global partners, including the European Union, the United States, the BRICS, and the Eurasian region.

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## **Compliance with ethical standards**

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### *Disclosure of Conflict of Interest*

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### *Statement of Ethical Approval*

This study is based exclusively on publicly available documents and secondary sources. It does not involve human participants or animals and does not require ethical approval.

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