

Morocco-Algeria in bitter dispute that threatens US hopes for regional anti-terror cooperation

A Saharan stand-off may become a U.S. problem.

A nasty spat between Algeria and Morocco over the disputed region of Western Sahara has boiled over anew, as Morocco recalled its ambassador, angry protesters tore down an Algerian flag, and a Moroccan magazine called for land grabs.

When Morocco's King Mohammed VI meets with President [Barack](#) Obama during his visit to the U.S. next week, the monarch will be looking for greater U.S. support as it feuds with regional rival Algeria. The two neighbors are jockeying for position in a dispute that leaves little space for the cooperation against al-Qaida in North Africa that Washington and its allies want.

Morocco has long made gaining international recognition for its 1975 annexation of the former Spanish territory on Africa's Atlantic coast a top diplomatic priority. With Algeria backing the movement seeking independence, the two countries have been at loggerheads for decades.

Last month, Morocco temporarily recalled its ambassador — a major escalation that one former Algerian diplomat called an attempt to gain U.S. backing for its claim to Western Sahara.

"It was surprising and disproportionate," Abdelaziz Rahabi told The Associated Press, arguing the move was designed to dominate the scheduled visit of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry this week that has since been postponed.

The U.S. priority in the region, however, has increasingly focused on fighting terrorism, with al-Qaida's North Africa branch morphing into a Sahara-spanning organization with an elusive presence from the borders of Morocco to Libya. With the two most powerful militaries in the region at each other's throats, building any kind of regional cooperation — especially to [support](#) weaker states like Niger, Mauritania and Chad — has been impossible.

Morocco has proposed wide-ranging autonomy for Western Sahara, but the Polisario Front, the pro-independence nationalist movement, insists that local people have the right to a referendum on the territory's future as set out in a 1991 U.N.-brokered cease fire agreement that ended 15 years of fighting.

Algeria has backed the Polisario's claims and provides the group with a haven. It says it is in support of the principle of self-determination; Morocco says it is just a cynical ploy for regional domination.

Morocco withdrew its ambassador on Oct. 30 for four days of consultation after Algeria reiterated its stance that a U.N. observer mission in the region should include human rights monitoring. Morocco has been under fire from human rights groups who say abuse is widespread, but it sees such a move as a threat to its sovereignty.

The Moroccan press savaged Algeria as attempting to dominate the whole region, with the weekly Maroc Hebdo, which often reflects the official position, running a front page story Nov. 1

demanding the return of several border towns it alleged had been "occupied" by Algeria back to the 1960s.

Crowds gathered in front of Algerian diplomatic missions. In Casablanca, a Moroccan man succeeded in scaling the consulate and tearing down the Algerian flag despite the presence of local police.

Part of the problem for Morocco is that Algeria and the Polisario Front have the force of international law on their side and so Morocco has to struggle harder to explain its position.

It also has to [deal](#) with the fact that the Security Council is increasingly considering the issue of human rights. In April, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., Susan Rice, attempted to add human rights monitoring to the U.N. mission there, provoking howls of protest from Morocco.

The proposal was eventually dropped but bruised relations between the two countries.

"Human rights is slowly but surely becoming more important in security council discussions," said Carne Ross, former head of the Middle East section at Britain's U.N. mission and now part of a group that advises the Polisario. "When I was a diplomat at the security council 10-15 years ago people just didn't talk about human rights in general, and now they do. And that's been a long term shift in how the security council talks and the Moroccans do not come out well in it."

Mustapha Naimi, a Moroccan expert on the Sahara, explained that Morocco faces an uphill struggle with international community to show them that its autonomy proposal is really the best solution for the people rather than a referendum for self-determination.

"It is the official position of the U.N. to this day, so Morocco is on the defensive," he said. "To overcome this problem, Morocco has to play all of its cards and come out very strong against Algeria."

The latest dispute with Algeria is to prepare the way for new Moroccan initiatives on the Western Sahara before the scheduled visit by the country's king to the U.S. he said, by highlighting the dispute, attempting to discredit Algeria's role and then presenting new solutions.