The Algerian-Moroccan Conflict and the Question of the Western Sahara

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Abstract

This study investigates the Algerian-Moroccan conflict since Algeria's independence in 1962. At the core of their conflicts, the Western Sahara region, and the Algerian support the POLISARIO Front. I utilize a vector auto-regression analysis (VAR), and structural equations model (SEM) to determine the presence of an arm-race between the two countries. I utilize the Lewis. F. Richardson's model in order to determine the conditions for peace between the two rivals.

Key words: Algeria, Morocco, conflict, POLISARIO, Richardson, Western Sahara, Sand War.

Introduction

The long-standing conflict between Algeria and Morocco destabilized the sub-regional system of North Africa which, in turn, resulted into the formation of a regional bipolarity. Since their independence from colonial rule, the three Maghreb states (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) have interacted with foreign powers bilaterally rather than as integrated countries. Algeria chose nonalignment, pan Arabism, and revolutionary policies as the foundation of its domestic and its foreign policy. Morocco and Tunisia have pursued rational domestic policies, and cooperative international behaviors, and remain attached to the West (Europe and the United States). In 1956 the French government decided to grant independence to Morocco and Tunisia to concentrate on retaining control over Algeria. This move reduced the likelihood of the three people mounting a joint struggle to form a unified state. Immediately after Morocco's independence, King Mohamed V embraced the concept of North African unity, but in the form of irredentism (see Balta, 1990; Ibrahim, 2009).

In February 1961, after Mohamed V died, his Heir Hassan II began asserting Moroccan claims in Algeria. These claims include assuming control of the two regions east of Morocco: Tindouf and Colomb Béchar. This weakened the pan-Arabist left, which was advocated by the Algerian liberation movement victory in 1962, and supported by the Egyptian Nasserite revolutionary regime. Morocco's claims led to quarrels over the definition of the frontiers, which Rabat said the French had drawn in a way allocating territory to Algeria that had traditionally been controlled by tribes loyal to the Moroccan monarchy. Recently, this issue has been in the news after the French-Algerian writer Boualem Sansal made the same claim during an interview, which led to his arrest by the Algerian authorities upon his visit to his native country. This disagreement escalated into a series of border skirmishes, followed by open warfare in October 1963, which became to be known as the Sand War. Over the next 60 years, the two countries went through a cycle of détente and tension in their relationships. On June 15, 1972, they signed a border demarcation agreement recognizing that colonial-era boundaries were inviolable, a principle championed by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) across the continent. They also agreed to increase bilateral cooperation in all areas and referred to any outstanding disputes to joint commissions. However, the Western Saharan question soon sparked a major crisis in bilateral relations. Algeria recognized the POLISARIO's claim for statehood. In a show for solidarity, it expelled 45,000 Moroccans from the Algerian territory, after which Morocco severed diplomatic ties. Friction eased on the Western Sahara front as well as the 1991 UN-mediated Settlement Plan introduced a

ceasefire and created a buffer zone that divided the territory between Morocco (which was left in control of 80 per cent) and POLISARIO. However, the rapprochement cooled in 1994, following a spat over a shooting that killed two Spanish tourists at the Atlas-Asni Hotel in Marrakesh (see Lounnas & Messari, 2018; Andrew, 1970).

Under King Mohamed VI, whose reign began in 1999, Morocco remained close to its traditional Western patrons, particularly in the United States. In 2004, for instance, it began hosting the annual U.S.-led African Lion military exercises with a series of NATO and African partners. Since 2019, Morocco has encouraged the foreign government to open consulates in Laayoune and Dakhla in Western Sahara to signal the recognition of of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. POLISARIO has watched these developments with great concerns. Many within the movement argued that international diplomacy had led nowhere and called for a return to arms. On November 14, 2020, the POLISARIO renounced the ceasefire, and commenced a round of attacks on Moroccan positions. However, Morocco would score a diplomatic triumph during the last days of the the U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, when the United States recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in return for the Kingdom normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel. Relations between Algeria and Morocco are currently tense and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, mainly due to their differences over the Sahara issue. Thus it is likely to expect recurrent patterns of diplomatic strife and crises (see Zoubir, 2007).

The Model

Newton's third law of motion, also known as the law of action-reaction, simply states, to every 'action there is a reaction equal in magnitude and opposite in direction. In the realm of political science, Lewis. F. Richardson's action-reaction/arm-race model emulates Newton's third law of classical mechanics. The Richardson's model epitomizes the dyadic arm-race between sovereign states in two differential equations

$$\frac{\partial x}{\partial t} = ly - \alpha x + g \dots (1)$$

$$\frac{\partial y}{\partial t} = kx - \beta y + h \dots (2)$$

The coefficients l and k measures each nation's reaction to its opponent's armaments, which Richardson (1960) referred to as "threat." Coefficients α and β measures each nation's reaction to its own armament, which Richardson (1960) called "fatigue and expenses." Coefficients g and h react to general "grievances" which are not dependent on the number of arms). Richardson's (1960) model concerns the general trends shared by all nations.

Data

I drew the political, and military data from the GlobalEconomy.com, which serves researchers, academics, investors, and others who need reliable political economic data on all members-states of the international system. The dataset includes over 500 indicators for all the 193 countries of the United Nations spanning the period from 1960 to the present (March 27, 2025). The sources include central banks, national statistical institutes, and multiple international organizations. GlobalEconomy.com was launched in 2012 at Georgia State University in Atlanta. The Following economic and political variables were obtained from the dataset.

Political variables include Electoral Democracy, which measures the extent to which political power is gained and exercised through free and fair elections; Participatory Democracy measures the protection of individual rights and freedom within a political system; Deliberative Democracy measures the quality of public deliberation and discourse;

Government Accountability measures the constraints on government power through requirements for justification for its actions and potential sanctions; Freedom of Expression measures the government's respect for press and media freedom, political discussion, and academic and cultural expression; Liberal Democracy measures the protection of individual rights and freedom of the political system; and women's empowerment is the average for 2022 based on 171 countries was 0.729 index.

Military Spending: includes expenditures on peacekeeping, defense ministries, paramilitary forces, and military space activities. Military and civil personnel, include retirement pensions, operations and maintenance, procurement, military research and development, and military aid. Defense and current expenditures for past military activities, such as for the the veterans' benefits, demobilizations, and conversion.

I developed the mutual Algerian-Moroccan grievances as a composite index 1) the Algerian grievances' variable is along the following dimensions: border dispute, The Green march event, military attacks, Sahara dispute, and Moroccan expansion in Africa 2) Similarly, I developed a composite index of grievances' variable for Morocco along the following dimensions: border dispute, Sahara dispute, Guerguerate stand-off, attacks on tourists, Algerian Pan-Arabism ideology, Algerian castigation of Moroccan-Israeli relations, the two battle of Amgala, and the Algerian support of the the PPOLISARIO Front. The index ranges from one to five where the value one indicates low grievances, and the value five indicates high grievances.

With reference to table 5. The Moroccan rate of defense spending at lag (1) is significant at the 0.05 level with p-value (0.043), coefficient (0.3681), and standard error (0.1822), while the Moroccan reaction to Algerian defense spending lag (1) is significant at (0.05) level with p-value (0.009), coefficient (0.0062), and standard error (0.0023). The Moroccan reaction to its own armament/fatigue was insignificant for all lags. Nevertheless, the Moroccan grievances vis-à-vis Algeria are significant at (0.05) level with a p-value (0.039), coefficient (0.1157) and standard error (0.0562). The explanatory Power of the model is (R-Squared= 0.878).

Graph 1. Algeria and Morocco Defense Spending (1970) – 2022)

With reference to table 6. The Algerian rate of defense spending at lag (1) is highly significant at the (0.01) level with a p-value (0.000), coefficient (1.0930), and standard error (0.1984), while the Algerian reaction to the Moroccan defense spending is insignificant at all lags. The Algerian reaction to its own armament/fatigue was highly significant at lag (1) with

p-value ((0.000), coefficient (0.0127), standard error (0.0029). Morocco's Algerian grievances are insignificant for all lags. The explanatory power of the model is (R-Squared = 0.899). Graph (1) corroborates the presence of action-reaction of military spending between Algeria and Morocco, particularly, during the period (2000 – 2020).

Moroccan Algerian Mutual Grievances

Over the past decades, the land border between Morocco and Algeria has undergone through rounds of closure and opening. After its independence in 1956, Morocco made a claim to a part of the Sahara Desert, which was then within French Algeria. Moroccan attempts to seize the territory in 1963 led to a brief outbreak of fighting with Algeria which was called the "sand war". After a few weeks, the warring parties agreed to a ceasefire with the help of Ethiopia and Mali. Historically, Spain occupied Western Sahara from 1884 to November 6, 1975. Successful Moroccan diplomacy culminated in the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice affirming Moroccan rights to the territory. Consequently, the last Spanish soldier left the territory on February 26, 1976, under the pressure of 350,000 volunteers who marched toward the territory; that event was celebrated by Morocco as the Green March. (see James, 1990; Allison, pp.12-13).

Algeria never assented to the Moroccan control of the Western Sahara, consequently, a series of encounters between the two countries have continued to ravage the relationship between them, and the first battle of Amgala was one of the events that plagued their relationship. The battle of Amgala was fought on January 27-29, 1976 around the oasis of Amgala, Western Sahara about 160 miles west of the Algerian border. The clash began when the units

MOROCCO	Coefficients	St. Error	P-value
$\frac{dx}{dt}$	L1 0.3681	0.1822	0.043*
	L2 0.3525	0.1914	0.066
	L3 0.1090	0.1753	0.534
l	L1 0.0062	0.0023	0.009*
	L2 -0.0036	0.0025	0.153
	L3 0.0017	0.0024	0.480
α	L1 -0.0079	0.0119	0.505
	L2 -0.0130	0.0119	0.275
	L3 -0.0064	0.0108	0.275
h	L1 0.1157	0.0562	0.039*
	L2 -0.0526	0.0644	0.414
	L3 0.0933	0.0574	0.104
Constant	-0.1.856	0.8961	0.038*
R-Sq.	0.878		
Observations	50		

Table 5. Morocco - Algeria Action-Reaction Model; Vector Auto-regression Analysis (VAR) T-series (1970-2022)

ALGERIA	Coefficients	St. Error	P-value
$\dfrac{dy}{dt}$	L1 1.0930 L2 −0.2233 L3 0.3376	0.1984 0.2606 0.1941	0.000** 0.392 0.082
k	L1 0.0155 L2 0.0017 L3 0.0033	0.0086 0.0095 00086	0.072 0.851 0.694
β	L1 −0.0127 L2 0.0020 L3 −0.0074	0.0029 0.0036 0.0034	0.000** 0.577 0.030
g	L1 0.0344 L2 0.0283 L3 0.0885	0.0648 0.0630 0.0608	0.595 0.653 0.145
Constant	−5.454	1.210	0.211
R−Sq.	0.899		
Observations	50		

Table (6). Algeria - Morocco Action-Reaction Model; Vector Autoregression Analysis (VAR) T-series (1970-2022

of the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces attacked the units of the Algerian Army on January 27. The Algerian withdrew from the skirmish after fighting for 36 hours. Morocco had controlled most towns in their assigned sectors by the end of January 1976. Consequently, thousands of Sahrawi nomads were fled to Algeria. In defense of its stance, Algeria claimed that their troops were providing food and medical supplies to refugees in Amgala, while Morocco said that Algerian troops were heavily armed and were aiding POLISARIO. After another encounter at Amgala in February 1976, there was no further engagement between the Algerian and Moroccan troops.

According to Rachidi (2022), in November 2020, three Algerian truck drivers on their way from Mauritania were killed during a bombing in the Western Sahara. This incident which was attributed to Morocco by Algeria raised fears of a direct military collision for the first time in decades. The land border between Morocco and Algeria has already been closed since 1994 at the behest of the Algerian regime, at the outset of the Moroccan's accusation of Algerian secret services for the terrorist attack in a hotel in Marrakech. Moroccan's influence in Africa, which begrudged Algeria, and Moroccan diplomacy in Africa, relies on a religious dimension that is proving to be just as important as economics. Morocco uses its material and spiritual resources as represented by the Sufi brotherhoods. The active reanimation of the Tidjanyya brotherhood (whose influence cover the Sahel and beyond), via its Moroccan branch; the tomb-mausoleum of its founder is situated in the Moroccan city of Fez and is one of the instruments used by Morocco in its effort to combat Algerian attempts to rehabilitate the brotherhood for the same intent ((see Mohammed, 2023).

According to (ibid), the long dormant conflict between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front over the disputed Western Sahara territory had been resumed after a POLISARIO blockade of a key artery in the UN monitored buffer zone. The blockade triggered a Moroccan military response by deploying troops into the UN-monitored buffer zone to end the three-week POLISARIO blockade of the strategic Guerguerate road. According to Yousef Cherif (2023), the Abraham Accords, signed in December 2020, in which Morocco's normalized relation with Israel is considered by Algeria as a direct threat to their country. Morocco has been utilizing its traditional amicable relationship with Israel as a leverage in its competition with Algeria for the Maghreb and Sahel's Hegemony. Thus, while Algeria was preoccupied with its internal problems, including combating radical Islamic armed groups between the 1990s and the 2010s, Morocco consolidated its domestic stability, built a strong economic system, developed a large network of partners throughout West Africa, and promoted a working

democracy. Moreover, after signing the Abram Accord, Morocco received global recognition for its control of the Western Sahara. In its attempt to discredit Morocco, Algeria revamped many elements of its pan-Arabist propagandist techniques. In early 2020, Algeria hosted meetings of the main Palestinian factions: Fatah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. By sharing the stage with representatives of the Palestinian factions, the Algerian President Abdel Majid Tebboune projected himself as the Classic Arab leader who would challenged the Moroccan ties with Israel. Eventually, the Moroccan-Israeli affinity was being ingrained for a long time before the Abraham Accords by King Mohammed-V (rule 1957-1961).

As shown in Figure (5) and Table (5) that represent the structural equation analysis of the mutual grievances between Algeria and Morocco. There is a positive and highly significant covariance between the Moroccan and Algerian grievances: covariance (+2.7), p-value (0.000), and standard error (0.705). Thus, the grievances of Algeria and Morocco moves together in the same direction. The only variable that irritates Morocco and aggravates its grievances is the Algerian Press with a coefficient (9.6), standard error (2.949), and p-value (0.001). The remaining variables: deliberative democracy, egalitarian, and defense spending had no significant influence on the Moroccan grievances. On the other hand, all variables, except the deliberative democracy of Morocco, influence the Algerian grievances. Moroccan egalitarian democracy has a negative and significant impact on Algerian grievances, with coefficient of (-64.00), standard error (23.63), and p-value (0.007). The Moroccan freedom of press has a positive and significant impact on Algerian grievances with a coefficient (20.27), standard error (8.288), and a p-value (0.014). Finally, Moroccan defense spending has a positive and significant impact on Algerian grievances with coefficients (0.0649), standard error (0.026), and p-value (0.002).

	Coef.	Std.Err	P-value
Structural			
MarH			
AlgDeliberation	-5.654	10.803	0.601
AlgEgalitarian	2.404	7.654	0.753
AlgPress	9.607	2.949	0.001
AlgMilitary	0.0008	0.0050	0.859
Constant	10.591	1.0369	0.000
GAlg			
MorDeliberation	46.003	37.118	0.215
MorEgalitarian	-64.009	23.631	0.007
MorPress	20.272	8.2885	0.014
MorMilitrary	0.0649	0.0206	0.002
Constant	3.181	2.049	0.121

Table 7. Structural Equation Analysis (SEM) of Algerian-Moroccan Mutual Grievances with respect to Deliberative and Egalitarian Democracies, Freedom of Press, and Defense Spending (1970 – 2022).
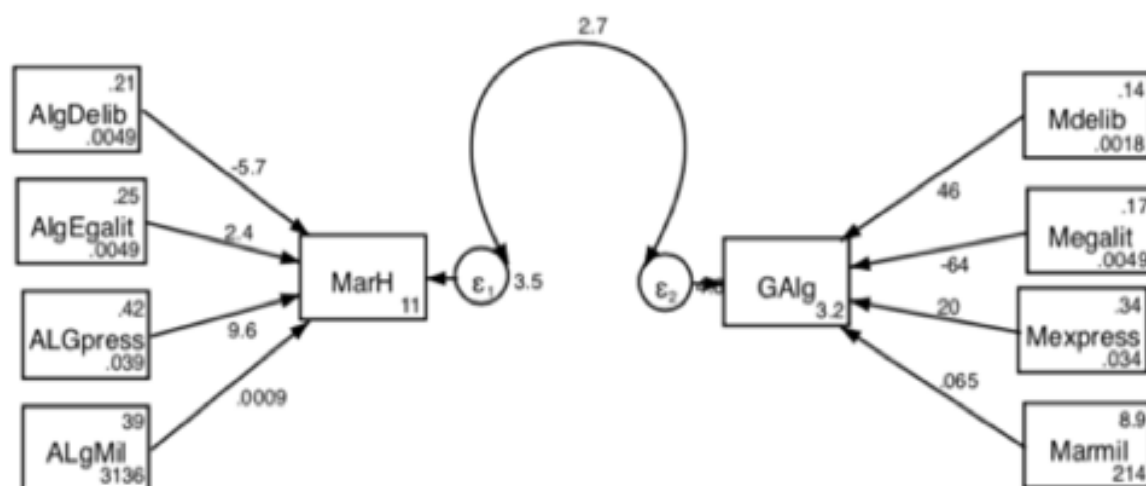
Figure 5. Structural Equation Mode of Mutual Algerian-Moroccan Grievances in relation to Political Variables

Conclusion

Interstate conflicts in the MENA pose a heavy burden on political and economic development processes. As illustrated in the Algerian-Moroccan conflict in this study, the dyadic conflict incurs political, economic, and psychological impacts on both countries. Robert Jervis's *Perception and Misperception in International Poli*tics, and Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast, and Slow s*eek for us to learn to recognize situations in which systematic errors, known as biases recur predictably under particular circumstances. These biases induce mutual perceptions and misperceptions among countries. One of the key ideas articulated by Jervis (ibid) is the spiral model: when a state engages in military build-up, another state takes this as a sign that is more aggressive and expansionist. The spiral model between Algeria and Morocco increases mutual misperceptions and suspicions, increases the arm race, and probably leads to war.

In the Richardson's two differential equations, the last two terms g and h pertains to the Algerian-Moroccan mutual grievances. These grievances could exacerbate the conflicts between the two countries. Therefore, the loud voices in traditional and social media that have taken aggressive tones toward each other should be regulated. Social media platforms have seen non-professional conductance by propagating false information and harassing propaganda. For example, since 2017 a network of Moroccan by the name "Moorish" disparaged Algeria and glorified violence against it, which provoked Algeria to founding a mirror image of the Moorish. Therefore, it is imperative to promote reconciliation between these two countries. Yousef (2023) suggests mending the relations between them via the mediation of the Arab League, Arab Parliament, and the Arab Inter-parliamentary Union. Another strategy according to (ibid) is to study the existing problems of the two countries at the level of scientific research. I suggest engaging psychological institutions to offer programs that reduce the misperceptions surrounding the grievances of the two countries. Algerian incumbents should have listened to the Algerian thinker Boualem Sansal instead of persecuting and jailing him. Boualem declared an objective opinion of territorial disputes between the two countries. His opinion might be a step forward in clarifying some of the dark spots of the conflict.

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