



What Morocco's Break with Iran Means for the Gulf Crisis and the Post-JCPOA Future

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 873, June 22, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran's recent moves against Morocco's national sovereignty reflect its intention to continue on its path towards global domination by destabilizing pro-Western countries. Tehran is shifting its attention towards Africa, which is less on the Western radar following the American withdrawal from the JCPOA.

Morocco's decision to sever relations with Iran a week before President Trump announced his decision to withdraw from the JCPOA may not have been a complete coincidence. Iran's presence in North Africa has been increasing over time and grew yet more pronounced as the deadline approached for the expected American withdrawal from the JCPOA.

Iran, which is concerned about the future of its interests – global influence, access to natural resources, recruitment of new proxies, the training of existing proxies, and the relocation of illegal conventional and nuclear weapons research - has shifted its attention towards areas that have until recently attracted little scrutiny from the international community, particularly the US. Likewise, in the past few years, Iran has pushed for stronger relations with African countries, including South Africa and Algeria – working to counter Sunni influence through mosques and ideological overtures, but also funding infrastructure, concluding mutually beneficial deals, and arming Shiite [militias](#) in West Africa.

Rabat's break with Tehran came as a shock to much of the international community. Not many have followed events in North Africa and are aware of recent illegal maneuvers by the separatist group Polisario, which claims to represent the Western Sahrawi tribes. Polisario has long been known as a

smuggler of small arms to Mauritania and other countries in the region, and in the last decade has been implicated in drug smuggling.

Polisario's latest movements in the buffer zone violated ceasefire agreements from 1991. In a further violation, Polisario announced that it is moving its facilities closer to the Moroccan border wall. Recent reports about Polisario's role in terrorist attacks against civilians, mostly Moroccan [fishermen](#), are further discrediting the legacy of the group, which is heavily backed by Algeria, Russia, and Iran. Counterterrorism organizations that track activity in North Africa have determined that Polisario has established [links](#) with al-Qaeda in Maghreb (AQIM) as well as Iran's proxy, Hezbollah.

The dramatic developments that led to the diplomatic showdown with Morocco involved an Iranian diplomat. The cultural attaché to Algeria, Amir Moussavi, was apparently an [Iranian intelligence officer](#), and he allegedly used the Algiers Embassy to facilitate the transfer of weapons to the Polisario, arrange illicit meetings, and promote the spread of Iran's ideological influence.

None of these developments should have been a surprise to Western intelligence agencies or policymakers, who have been [tracking](#) Iranian and Hezbollah activity across Africa since at least the 1980s - albeit without taking active measures to counter this growing and unwelcome interventionism. The only truly new development is the expansion of the Iran-backed proxy into North Africa, possibly in conjunction with Russia, as it ramps up activity to facilitate operations like the transfer of weapons and the training of Polisario fighters.

Polisario separatists have received [military training](#) from Hezbollah in tunnels dug under Morocco's defense wall – training that included [urban guerrilla operations](#) against the Moroccan Royal Forces. Algeria has served as a conduit for the transfer of Iranian weapons. Algerian connections to Hezbollah go back to at least 2014, when the body of a Hezbollah operative was found in the wreckage of an Air Algerie plane.

Recently, Polisario leadership openly expressed [interest](#) in reinforcing a relationship with Iran and developing ties with Hezbollah, while denying that such connections already exist. [Iran](#), Hezbollah, and [Algeria](#) likewise denied their involvement. However, a Belgian outlet recently showed links between the groups, which have [similar](#) ideologies, methods (including [extensive](#) collaboration with [drug](#) cartels and [other](#) terrorist organizations), and goals (destabilizing state actors).

Hezbollah's activities, [thwarted](#) by Morocco, included an ideological outreach campaign on the Ivory Coast in 2018 in which the terrorists were attempting to convert Moroccans residing in that country. Similar ideological outreach has been seen all over West Africa. Hezbollah has likewise smuggled weapons to

other countries, although the Iranian cultural attaché's facilitation of the [delivery](#) of SAM-9, SAM-11, and Strela missiles appears to be a new phenomenon.

The Moroccan Foreign Ministry claims to have provided detailed documentation of names, dates, and incidents to Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif in Tehran. Iran [has denied](#) receiving any such files. According to Morocco, the list of Hezbollah officials who have visited Tindouf camps in Algeria and reached out to Polisario [includes](#) Haidar Sobhi Habib, chief of Hezbollah's external operations; Ali Moussa Dakdouk, military advisor to Hezbollah; and Haj Abou Wael Zalzali, head of military training and logistics.

A number of states, including [Djibouti](#), [Romania](#), the [Gulf States \(GCC\)](#), and members of the [Arab League](#), all came out in support of Morocco's measures to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity from Iran's meddling. The US State Department issued a statement condemning Iran's support for Hezbollah and other terrorists across the region, [confirming](#) that its comments were in part a nod to Morocco's decision to sever relations with Tehran over its interference.

Michael Rubin, [commenting](#) on the pattern of Iran's engagement with destabilizing forces in various parts of the world, noted that the mullahs' problem with Morocco is ideological. Tehran seeks to add Morocco to the array of five weakened Arab countries it has already infiltrated or attacked through proxies.

Morocco's Foreign Ministry denied that its decision had anything to do with the JCPOA deadline, events in Syria, or pressure from the Gulf States. Indeed, its self-interest and national security considerations are at the center of its reaction to Iran's, Hezbollah's, and Algeria's collusion. However, Iran's involvement in North Africa is not a coincidence. It sought to capitalize on the lack of US attention to that part of the world, and to secure itself against incursions on its partnerships, illicit research, and sabotage of stable pro-Western countries ahead of the JCPOA deadline – which, as all signs indicated, would be the last one.

Equally noteworthy is the Iranian quest for friendly ports, its building of naval bases, and its interest in controlling strategic waterways. Morocco stands in the way of Iran's domination of the African coast.

As Ahmed Charai [pointed out](#), although Morocco is 4,000 miles west of Tehran, it is part of the "Iranian periphery" along with Libya, where the Iranians launched a campaign to radicalize the locals via ideological outreach. Iran's Quds Force Africa Corps is also backing the Shiite Islamist Movement in Nigeria, which has plotted terrorist attacks against Israeli and Saudi targets.

Charai views Morocco as part of a new and growing alliance against Iran – African and Asian countries containing majorities that have been angered by Iranian interference. Iran is particularly vulnerable now in light of the desire of European companies, such as [Total](#), to exit the market following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA.

This development also has the potential to hasten a resolution of the Gulf Crisis between Qatar and the Anti-Terrorism Quartet. Morocco has remained neutral in the crisis and has a good and seemingly strengthening relationship with Doha.

Qatar has expressed general support for Morocco's right to defend its national security interests, including its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

However, unlike Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain, which have worked for decades to counter an Iranian presence in Africa through a mixture of soft and hard influence, Qatar has not explicitly condemned Iran – in fact, its actions are benefiting Iran. Qatar's own presence in Africa recently expanded when it paired with Turkey on deals designed to coopt countries that had previously been staunch allies of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. These actions and Doha's growing closeness with Tehran may have raised red flags in Rabat.

Others [speculate](#) that whereas Morocco had previously lent certain sites in southern and eastern Morocco to Qatari individuals, there may now be evidence that Qatar has been reaching out to Polisario, which has used these sites as "[rear bases](#) for its activism." Indeed, in 2012, the president of the self-styled SADR ("Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic") asked the then-new Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, to mediate between Morocco and Polisario and [intervene](#) with Rabat on Polisario's behalf.

Ever since then, Qatar has been seen as having a strong and growing relationship with Morocco. The two countries signed 12 agreements in March reaffirming their strong cooperation on a variety of fronts. Qatar also appeared to be [targeting](#) Morocco's regional rival, Algeria, the chief backer of Polisario, on the international scene.

For this reason, Doha's clandestine support for Polisario is seen by some analysts as a [stab in the back](#). If double-dealing is in fact taking place, it would be another instance of Qatar's widely criticized style of diplomacy, wherein it has tried to gain international legitimacy by welcoming Western states while simultaneously maintaining relations with terrorist organizations like Hamas and the Taliban.

Relations between Morocco and Qatar may have been strained as early as April, when [evidence](#) of Qatari individuals' ties to Polisario first surfaced. In addition, according to Saudi sources, Qatar's charity in Somalia [supports](#) Iran-backed terrorists. Iran has also organized a group of Somali fighters in Saudi-backed Sudan, which is part of the Arab coalition fighting Iran-backed Houthis in

Yemen. Sudan is one of the countries Qatar has been targeting for military deals jointly with Turkey.

At about the same time, Saudi Arabia [promised](#) Morocco that it would declare Polisario a terrorist organization in a major show of support for Morocco's territorial integrity. Thus, the issue of Sahara became yet another wedge between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, further [exacerbating](#) the Gulf Crisis.

Al Ahdath Al Mahribiya reports that Qatar's covert support for Polisario is another illustration of its intention to break into Africa and develop an independent foreign policy (possibly undercutting Saudi Arabia's influence at the expense of anyone aligned with it). The outlet criticized this move for benefiting militias in Libya at the expense of brotherly state actors. Polisario's connection to Hezbollah makes the organization complicit in international terrorism, against which the Anti-Terrorism Quartet has taken a strong stand.

Qatar meanwhile explicitly [thanked](#) Iran for its assistance during the Gulf Crisis, which runs counter to the official narrative that Qatar is held hostage to Iran's proximity to its gas field and that it is only the Gulf Crisis that has pushed Qatar towards furthering that relationship. Such public statements likely irk officials in Morocco who view Iran's role as that of an instigator, not as a source of assistance.

Qatar's reluctance to explicitly condemn Iran may also be due to the fact that Tehran and Doha are eyeing some \$1B [in trade](#). Doha appears to have acted in concert with Iran to [back](#) recent Hamas-led riots on the Israeli border, which earned Hamas a tongue-lashing from Sisi's administration in Egypt. This cooperation showcased the reach of Qatar's money, which irks members of the Anti-Terrorism Quartet and creates problems for them in different parts of the world.

Morocco's break-up with Iran creates an awkward situation for Qatar, which recently joined the other Gulf States and the US in sanctioning Hezbollah while simultaneously praising Iran's support vis-à-vis its Gulf rivals. It has not yet had to directly address the strange phenomenon of its alliance with a country that sponsors terrorist proxies such as Hezbollah. Similarly, Qatar's backing of the Hamas-led riots – jointly with Iran – calls into question its purported renunciation of support for terrorism in an MoU signed with the US.

Western Sahara, then, is becoming just another arena for Qatar's rivalry against Saudi Arabia and others. It seems that Doha may have been willing to prioritize its foreign policy ambitions – dominating Africa and dealing a blow to the Saudis – over its seemingly close relationship with Rabat.

Hezbollah's activities in Africa – especially with the Polisario, and with the explicit backing and facilitation of powerful state actors – are a threat to regional stability and US interests. Despite Morocco's bold step, the threat of Iranian support for terrorist organizations and separatist groups throughout the continent is likely to [grow](#) in the near future. Under pressure from the US and concerned about the future of European financial investment as well as facing domestic opposition to expenditures on foreign military adventurism, Iran will strengthen relationships with the likes of South Africa and look to make new allies, find ways of circumventing newly imposed US sanctions and potential losses in revenue, and garner "supplemental income" through weapons, drugs, and human and precious material trafficking.

Iran has been involved in Africa for decades, and its ventures into North Africa predate the recent incident with Polisario. Tehran has been training and planting [spies](#), Palestinian terrorist groups (in South Africa), and weapons for its shadow war against the West. In 2014, Kenya, which has a growing bilateral relationship with Iran, arrested IRGC operatives with fake Israeli passports who were allegedly planning terrorist attacks against US, Israeli, and British targets. In 2015, in a similar incident, two purported Iranian [assets were also arrested](#). Iran's [ideological influence](#) in Africa through its funding of hospitals, schools, universities, and mosques increased after Riyadh severed relations with Tehran following an attack on its embassy. It has also increased its [trade](#) with African countries 23% in just the past year.

Even Morocco's Islamist parties [warned](#), as late as October 2017, of Iran's backing of Shiite militias in Sunni North Africa. Iran's foreign minister paid the region a visit in June of that year, meeting with heads of state in Tunisia, Mauritania, and Algeria – all states that have been roiled by Sunni jihadists and militias and are at risk of increasing destabilization.

In 2009, Iran took over a Mauritanian hospital formerly patronized by Israel. Mauritania is now swarming with jihadists and ripe for the picking, despite having received a significant amount of foreign aid from the US over the years for national security and defense. Senegal, Guinea, Nigeria, and Mali were also part of the visit. Iran's Shiite movement has been targeting those countries in various ways for many years.

As it has failed to build up its own infrastructure, Iran has few options for self-aggrandizement other than to attack stable and pro-Western countries such as Morocco, inflicting security and economic damage however it can. Many analysts [recognize](#) that Morocco is using this opportunity as leverage to grow its relationship with the US, which would include the US openly embracing Morocco's autonomy plan to weaken Polisario. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA and pressure on European companies to stop doing business with Iran might likewise hinder Iran's funding for engagement in foreign conflicts and

colluding with local separatist and terrorist groups in various parts of the world.

Still, Russia's backing of states like Algeria and its entanglement with European investors may give a temporary lifeline to Iran's ambitions due to the close alliance between Moscow and Tehran and their pursuit of similar goals. A stronger alliance between the US and Morocco will go a long way towards countering the plans of these aspiring hegemonies. Morocco can provide religious training to African and European imams, countering Iran's ideological peddling; engage in stronger economic relations with other African states, as it is striving to do after rejoining the African Union; and become a cultural bridge between the US and Africa, creating an additional bulwark against Iran's ideological influence and military hegemony. Along with the US, Europe, and the Anti-Terrorism Quartet, Morocco is looking to build a strong fortification that can help protect the continent from the spread of Iran-backed jihadist groups and criminal enterprises.

Iran's efforts will look successful only regarding poor, weak, and failing states. A strong, stable Morocco is a threat to its plans to co-opt Africa and destroy US, French, and Saudi alliances and business potential. It will use Hezbollah as well as state proxies to strengthen Morocco's enemies, grow more terrorist entities, and recruit ideological allies in Morocco's backyard, as well as in more vulnerable places. And it will seek to create forces similar to Hezbollah that could be used to attack Western targets and sow discord among allies, all the while using Africa for clandestine and illicit activities.

Now is the time for the US to turn towards Africa. It needs to show strong and public backing to Morocco and other allies who are taking on Hezbollah and other adversaries. The US should treat Hezbollah cells and partnerships in Africa as part of the same threat to its own security interests and the interests of its allies as the extensive Hezbollah presence in Latin America, parts of Europe, and the Middle East.

Iran's outreach to African countries has had an impact. South Africa already [withdrew](#) its promised support for Morocco's 2026 World Cup bid because of its own close political and economic ties to Iran. Iran's impact on African politics and security issues can be every bit as destabilizing as its pattern of terror and oppression in the Middle East. The JCPOA withdrawal is an opportunity for the US to strengthen its relationships with allies in Africa and go jointly after funding for Hezbollah, Tehran, and their partners in Africa and elsewhere. Now is the time to uncover the likely presence of clandestine conventional and nuclear weapons research and other illicit activities detrimental to global security, stability, and freedom.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family