Where is the Escalation of the Conflict between Algeria and Morocco Leading?

Relations between Algeria and Morocco have been tense for decades, with the border between the countries closed since 1994. One of the reasons for the tensions is disagreement over Western Sahara: Algeria has supported the Polisario Front for decades insisting on the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), while Morocco considers the territory its own. This dispute led Algeria to decide to cut off diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Morocco as of August 24.

Tensions between the two states have escalated so much that there has been increasing talk of a possible military scenario. A significant round of tensions came after November 3 when Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced that three Algerians had been killed in a brutal bombing of their trucks on a desert highway in Western Sahara. Isolated evidence pointed to the involvement of Moroccan forces stationed in Western Sahara. He promised that the deaths of truckers will not go unpunished and sent letters of protest to international bodies, including the UN, the African Union (AU), the League of Arab States (LAS), and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (to inform them of the extreme danger of the attack. The Algerian Parliament has pledged to support any measures against Morocco after the murder of the three citizens. MPs have not ruled out a military solution. Morocco's King Mohammed VI refused to comment on the situation around Western Sahara, stating that the issue was “non-negotiable.” The tensions with Algeria, he said, would not affect Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territories.
Against this background, the Polisario Front forces, in a statement by the Chief of Staff of the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA), Mohamed Al-Wali Akik, announced their readiness to proceed with the liberation of territories occupied by Morocco and the continuation of armed resistance on the ground. The Polisario Front military spokesman stressed that the recent Security Council Resolution No. 2602 extending the mandate of the UN mission in Western Sahara by a year was a great disappointment. The document adopted in October only called on the conflicting parties to resume UN-led negotiations without Morocco being imposed any conditions. As Akik pointed out, in the current situation, there is no choice but to escalate the war. The Sahrawis are more ready than ever to confront the Moroccan army, regardless of the strength of its allies and the quality of its weapons and technology.

Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra said the actions of Morocco's leadership were driven by expansionist policies. He made another accusation against the Kingdom in an interview with Algeria International. According to him, the constitution of the neighboring state contains an article referring to "existing borders" rather than legal borders. The diplomat pointed out that Rabat "has never recognized the Islamic Republic of Mauritania either." In doing so, Lamamra confirmed the fundamental differences between the two countries: Algeria is committed to "respecting the borders acquired at independence," unlike Morocco, which has taken expansionist measures.

Despite this escalation of conflict, on November 8, Moroccan authorities handed over to Algeria 12 criminals (11 Algerians and one Mauritanian) at the Zouj Belghal border post, who are wanted by the law enforcement authorities of Algeria and are on the international wanted list, suspected of being involved in drug smuggling. According to Morocco, the extradition took place within the framework of judicial cooperation agreements.

At the same time, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Burita reiterated his determination to end the conflict in Western Sahara, but stressed that the Kingdom would not give up its rights to the disputed territories. Burita commented on Mohammed VI, King of Morocco's recent speech on the 46th anniversary of the Green March. The monarch announced that the issue of Western Sahara was non-negotiable and reaffirmed Rabat's sovereignty over the territory. According to the diplomat, the Moroccan King's statement aims for a confident movement towards ending the artificial regional conflict. "Western Sahara as part of Morocco is an irreversible reality," said Nasser Burita and confirmed that the final decision on the issue lies "within the autonomy initiative." Rabat does not intend to consider other options. Earlier, Morocco advocated a political settlement of the regional dispute under the auspices of the UN.

However, the Polisario Front demands independence and the formation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Rabat, for its part, agrees only to the allocation of autonomy, having secured among other things support on October 30 from the US at the UNSC, which again described the Moroccan autonomy initiative as a "serious, credible and realistic" solution to the territorial dispute over Western Sahara.

Amid escalating conflict between Algiers and Rabat and a lack of adequate EU support to resolve the conflict, the Democratic People's Republic of Algeria has banned Spain from reselling gas to Morocco, which is supplied from the Republic through the Maghreb-Europe (GME) pipeline that runs through Moroccan territory. Moreover, Algeria is studying the issue of stopping gas flow through the pipeline to Spain and the EU. Madrid had to accept these terms against the backdrop of heavy energy dependence on blue fuel from the north of Africa. The Algerian government has invited Madrid to sign a new agreement for the supply of blue fuel through the second Medgaz pipeline connecting the two countries, where one of the main conditions of the deal is a ban on the resale of hydrocarbons to Rabat.

Spain and the EU have urged Algeria to continue operating the Maghreb–Europe Gas Pipeline (GME), fearing an energy crisis ahead of one of the harshest winters in recent years expected in Europe. However, the Algerian authorities have so far rejected these proposals, citing the hostile actions of Morocco. They explained their position that they are not going to work with a country that has seized the disputed territories of Western Sahara and refuses to withdraw troops from the occupied lands. Several MEPs have called Algeria's actions "gas blackmail" aimed at Morocco, fearing that the switch from GME to the Medgaz pipeline could adversely affect Europe ahead of the winter season.

In the said environment, Spanish gas and electricity company Naturgy intensified negotiations between Rabat and Algiers to extend the EU gas transportation agreement, trying to get the Algerian blue fuel deliveries through the Maghreb–Europe Gas Pipeline (GME) to the Iberian Peninsula resumed.

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