

POLITICS

Morocco cuts ties with Iran over Sahara dispute

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Morocco has accused the Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah of arming the Western Sahara independence movement. The Polisario Front has been fighting Moroccan forces in an area Sahrawi refugees claim as home.

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Image: picture-alliance/dpa/M. Messara

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The Moroccan government has severed diplomatic ties with Iran for supporting the Polisario Front, a movement hoping to carve out a state in the

contested Western Sahara, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita said on Tuesday.

Bourita accused the Iran-backed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah of delivering a "shipment of weapons" to the Polisario Front via an "element" at the Iranian embassy in Algeria.

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"Morocco has irrefutable proof, names and specific actions to corroborate the complicity between the Polisario and Hezbollah," said Bourita.

The government took the decision "in response to Iran's involvement, through Hezbollah, in allying itself with the Polisario over the past two years in order to target the security and higher interests of Morocco."

UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash backed Morocco's decision on social media, tweeting that his country will stand with Morocco "against Iranian interference in its internal affairs."



rebels have fought a decades-long insurgency against Morocco in a bid to gain control of
Sahara

Image: picture-alliance/AP Photo/S. Djarboub

'Baseless'

But Hezbollah has rejected Morocco's claims that it provided arms to the Western Sahara independence movement, saying Rabat was using "baseless arguments" to serve another agenda.

"It is regrettable that Morocco has resorted to raising these false accusations under US, Israeli and Saudi pressure," Hezbollah said in a statement. "The Moroccan Foreign Ministry should have sought a more convincing pretext to cut ties with Iran."

Over the past decade, relations between Morocco and Iran have been rocked by regional tensions, with Rabat often siding with Saudi Arabia in conflicts. In 2009, Morocco severed diplomatic ties with Iran for allegedly questioning Sunni rule in Bahrain, a Gulf country home to a Shiite majority.

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From colony to conflict

In 1975, when Spanish colonial forces withdrew from Western Sahara, Morocco deployed forces to lay claim to the phosphate-rich territory. But the offensive prompted an insurgency by Sahrawi rebels, who came to be known as the Polisario Front.

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Morocco took control of the territory shortly before a UN-brokered ceasefire went into effect in 1991. Rabat considers Western Sahara an integral part of its territory, while Sahrawi refugees in neighboring Algeria consider it their homeland.



has pressured Morocco to end the conflict and bring about peace in the contested territory

Image: Getty Images/AFP/F. Batiche

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