Morocco Strategy in the Sahel: A New Front against Polisario

Achraf Bouzemouri

(Graduate from the Athens Webster University, where he received a graduate certificate in International and Regional Security, as well as Master of Arts in International Relations. He graduated with a Bachelor of arts in International Relations, his academic and research focuses on migration flows and energy security)

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Publication date: 12 July 2025

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The issue is highly sensitive for Morocco, indeed the Polisario Front, *Frente Popular de Liberacion de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio de Oro* is a Sahrawi nationalist movement that wants independence for "Western Sahara", a disputed territory in North Africa. It was founded in 1973, with the goal of ending the Spanish colonial rule in the region, however after Spain did withdraw from the area in 1975. The Polisario directed its claim at Morocco, that claims sovereignty of Moroccan Sahara. In recent years, the decades-long conflict with the Polisario Front, which is supported by Algeria beyond its borders, actively seeks a regional solution focused on Sahel stability. If, at first it seems like a geopolitical power-play in action, it is actually part of a delicate diplomacy, security cooperation, economic investment, and cultural engagement. The Moroccan strategy is to attempt to undermine international powers backing the Polisario, also Morocco established itself as an indispensable brick in Sahelian stability.

Morocco's security engagement across the Sahel, that involves Niger, Mauritania, Mali, and other structures, such as for decades, the Polisario. The Sahelian security relies on supply lines and political cover in remote regions north of the Sahel. Morocco's response is to take advantage of those logistical channels through intimate military and intelligence cooperation.

Indeed, Moroccan forces now regularly train local Sahelian militaries in border control, counterterrorism, and aerial surveillance. In Niger and Mauritania, Moroccan security experts have advised on airspace control to stop the Polisario convoys moving arms or personnel. Cooperation is often under the banner of counterterrorism, but the benefits are mutual. Morocco counters Polisario influence, while Sahelian states benefit from technical capacity to control militarily large territory. Security agreements also extend to shared intelligence, transnational controls, and harmonized legal frameworks.

In joint operations, Moroccan and local police forces shadow suspected Polisario cells, disrupting smuggling routes and financial networks. Rather than confront the Polisario head-on—particularly in Western Sahara, where confrontation might play into the Polisario's narrative—Morocco is systematically suffocating the movement elsewhere.

Security ties is Rabat's strategy to become a key economic partner in the Sahel. Morocco invests into Moroccan-built ports, roads, railway lines, and digital infrastructure in Sahel nations. The logic is to give Sahelian leaders a material incentive in aligning with Morocco. An example is Mauritania's port at Nouakchott. Moroccan firms have financed and constructed terminals, then trained local staff in logistics and customs. In Niger, Rabat assisted with power grids and telecommunications. These projects are not philanthropic, Morocco doesn't do it out of kindness, but as the economic guarantee for partnership between nations and policy perspectives concerning Polisario. By positioning itself as a development engine, Morocco cements favorable diplomatic ties within the Sahel. Governments benefiting from Moroccan contracts and job creation are unlikely to offer sanctuary to Polisario activists or hostile logistical networks. Foreign assistance from Morocco increasingly ties development packages to security collaboration.

Militarily and economically engaged, Rabat's take on diplomacy to cement its position inside regional bodies. Morocco has increased its presence in ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), participating in summits, defense forums, and joint statements. While Morocco is not an ECOWAS member, its surging economic footprint and military assistance have earned it a seat at the table. This diplomatic stance enables Rabat to influence regional policy on the Western Sahara crisis. Sahel governments typically avoid strong public stances on this sensitive issue, but now they reflect Moroccan concerns during UN General Assembly votes or African Union (AU) sessions. More importantly, Moroccan diplomats work to ensure that countries with little direct exposure to Polisario remain neutral or endorse Morocco's project.

Algeria, persists as the Polisario's primary external backer, saw its influence in the Sahel decrease. Rabat's diplomatic moves whether it's military workshops in Bamako, financial seminars in Nouakchott, or trade pacts in Niamey managed to dilute Algiers' appeal as an alternative regional influencer. The result is an emerging diplomatic consensus in the Sahel, viewing Morocco as the principal voice of Western Sahara, this challenges Algerian assumptions since the region is traditionally more sensitive to the Algerian sway.

Power politics alone can only go so far. Morocco envisions cultural affinity as a long-term solution to the Polisario problem. Moroccan cultural institutes have opened in Bamako and Nouakchott. Scholarships for Sahelian students to study in Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakech now number in the thousands annually. Moroccan television, music, and sports broadcasts are tailored to local audiences, showcasing a more open, economically dynamic, and modern Morocco. Rabat fosters high-profile academic and media engagements that recast Morocco not as a regional hegemon but as a peer committed to mutual growth. Moroccan universities offer dual-degree programs with African institutions. Moroccan journalists run training

workshops in Sahel capitals on investigative reporting and governance. The objective is to tie the countries culturally, and the Polisario's separatist narrative loses its emotional traction on younger generations. The most nuanced aspect of Morocco's approach is its calculated logistics. While reaching further in Niger and Mauritania, Rabat does not overextend, keeping its involvement calibrated to local politics, sometimes stepping back when domestic sentiment shifts. If social tensions rise or governments in partner countries pivot toward Algeria, Morocco adjusts its tone accordingly. Also, Rabat emphasizes international legal frameworks, including leveraging its official acceptance of autonomy under UN regulations. It continues to support UN-led negotiations while defending its operational tactics as required "defensive stabilization", and not offensive interference. *The result is that Rabat maintains credibility both at home and abroad, even as its Sahel footprint grows.*

Morocco's strategy is however not without risks. Its footprint may occasionally cause resentment among nationalist factions in Sahelian capitals when the perception of Moroccan investment becomes a *dependency*. When political instability intensifies in Mali or Burkina Faso, the supply lines from Morocco shift and adapt to shadow the new routes. Algeria remains credible in some circles. Its own military support to Sahel nations, especially Mali, remains a counterweight on the issue of the Sahel. Should tensions escalate between Algiers and Rabat, Morocco's Sahel strategy could be caught in a broader bipolar conflict that destabilizes the entire region. Finally, international attention remains the wild card, indeed if France, the EU, or the U.S. decide to reevaluate their own Sahel strategies for example by reducing military involvement or repricing aid, it causes a global recalibration of Rabat strategy by placing Rabat in a position of both increased responsibility and heightened scrutiny.

In summary, Morocco's approach toward the Polisario threat in the Sahel is neither simplistic nor impulsive. It is a strategic chess game that blends military cooperation, economic investment, diplomatic persuasion, and cultural outreach into a coherent regional model. The goal is not instant victory, it is cumulative advantage. Over the medium and long term, Rabat aims to transform the Sahel from a rear base for the Polisario into a zone of resilience aligned with Moroccan interests. The move tests traditional borders, Morocco cannot directly project power into Western Sahara without provoking a geopolitically fraught confrontation. So it plays elsewhere, quietly but decisively. By eroding Polisario networks and reshaping regional sentiment, Moroccan planners are proving that the battle for Western Sahara is as much about influence in the Sahel as it is about territorial integrity. The question for Morocco and its partners is whether this approach will hold steady through inevitable crises like coups, jihadi attacks, financial shocks, and Sino-Western competition. For now, Rabat appears to have the upper hand. But maintaining leverage in the Sahel is like maintaining sand in your hands, it requires constant recalibration, vigilance, and adaptability. Morocco's Sahel gambit is brilliant in scope. *Whether it remains stable enough to rewrite the broader dynamic over Western Sahara is the test ahead.*