

## Morocco and the conflict in Western Sahara

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The conflict of the control over Western Sahara between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front has been going on for almost five decades, with no ability of the parties to reach a political solution.

Western Sahara is a vast, sparsely-populated desert region in Northwest Africa. It is bordered by Morocco in the North, Algeria in a small northeastern patch, and Mauritania in the East and South. It also has a long coast with the Atlantic Ocean in the West and Northwest. It is a region rich in phosphates and other minerals and has a lucrative fishing industry on its Atlantic coast.



Since November 2020, three political and military developments have taken place and have a major impact on the future of the conflict and the security and stability of the region.

**On November 13, 2020**, the Polisario Front, Western Sahara's independence movement, broke the 1991 cease-fire agreement and declared a “state of war.”

**In December 2020**, the Trump administration recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

**On March 18, 2022**, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez’s issued a letter backing Morocco’s plans to give limited autonomy to the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

Brahim Ghali has been leading the Polisario front since 2016 and also serves as president of the Sahrawi Democratic Arab Republic, a self-declared state. In April 2022, the Polisario Front, said it was severing ties with Spain after Madrid backed Morocco's plan giving autonomy to the former Spanish colony.<sup>1</sup>

Algeria, the main supporter of the Polisario Front, has referred to the Spanish shift on Western Sahara as a “historical betrayal” of the Sahrawi people and recalled its Madrid representative for consultations.<sup>2</sup>

Algeria is Spain’s leading natural gas supplier, accounting for nearly half of the natural gas consumption. On June 8, 2022, Algeria has suspended, its 20-year-old treaty of friendship, good neighborliness and cooperation with Spain.<sup>3</sup>

The changes in US and Spanish positions regarding the solution of the conflict in Western Sahara are a significant achievement for Moroccan diplomacy but these achievements increase tensions between the Polisario Front and Morocco and between Morocco and the main sponsor of the Polisario Front - Algeria.

## **Background**

The region of Western Sahara became a Spanish colony after the Berlin conference in 1885. Morocco considers swathes of the former Spanish colony to be its sovereign territory.

After the Spanish withdrawal from Western Sahara in 1976, Morocco annexed the territory. Morocco controls some 80 percent of the territory, which has mineral reserves and access to rich Atlantic fisheries, as well as providing a strategic trade route linking Morocco with West African markets.

In response, the Polisario Front (PF) declared the independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic within the 252,000 square kilometers of Western Saharan territory.

Since 1976, Morocco and the Polisario Front have been locked for decades in a bitter struggle over Western Sahara.

In 1991, Morocco agreed to a ceasefire with the rebels of the Polisario Front (PF) but tensions have remained as the parties never agreed on a political solution.

### **Solutions to the Western Sahara crisis**

Two leading solutions have been considered to overcome the stalemate, which has fueled uncertainty and armed conflict.

The UN sees the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, as a "non-autonomous territory". The solution, expressed by the UN in 1991, is to complete the decolonization process with a referendum on the self-determination of the Sahrawi people.

The Moroccan proposal - claimed and formally presented by Morocco in 2007, is to grant limited autonomy to the region, which would remain under the Morocco's sovereignty.

The proposal has been rejected by the Sahrawi independence movement, the Polisario Front, which demands full independence from Morocco.

### **Back to state of war – the "Guerguerat incident"**

Despite the 1991 cease fire agreement, the conflict with Polisario Front has disrupted trade, with protesters blocking roads that connect Morocco to Mauritania.

It was one such protest that caused the recent incident near Guerguerat, where on October 20,2020, Sahrawi demonstrators prevented trucks from driving from Morocco to Western Sahara and onwards to

Mauritania. In response, Morocco threatened to remove the protesters by force.

On November 13, 2020, Moroccan soldiers entered the United Nation's buffer zone near Guerguerat that separates Western Saharan territory controlled by Rabat from the "liberated zone" controlled by the Polisario Front, in contravention of the 1991 ceasefire agreement.

In response, the Polisario Front broke the 1991 cease-fire and declared a "state of war" and warned that thousands of volunteers in the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) were willing to fight.<sup>4</sup>

Abdelkader Taleb Omar, the group's envoy in Algiers said that the Polisario Front is engaged in "a war of attrition», even if Morocco "refuses to recognize that there's a war." <sup>5</sup>

Since the Polisario's announcement of resumption of hostilities in 2020, most of the organization's attacks have been directed against positions and patrols of the Moroccan army along the barrier established by Morocco along the border in the Western Sahara. Here are some examples of Polisario Front attacks:

**On May 24, 2022**, the Polisario Front's "army chief" Mohamed Ouali Akeik has threatened Morocco with terrorist attacks, saying that the southern Moroccan cities of Laayoune and Dakhla are "legitimate" targets for the Polisario Front. The Polisario member added that the "war "with Morocco will extend to southern provinces with the aim of striking "Moroccan targets without affecting civilians." <sup>6</sup>

**On April 22, 2022**, the Polisario Front attacked, Mauritanian gold miners who were aboard a vehicle with five other miners in a buffer zone in West Sahara. Polisario members chased the Mauritanians' vehicle and fired gunshots, injuring two of them before confiscating their car.<sup>7</sup>

**On January 16, 2022**, the Polisario Front, said it launched attacks against Moroccan soldiers near Awsard. The separatist movement added that its detachments targeted Moroccan army forces in several other towns in Al Mahbes sector.<sup>8</sup>

**On January 23, 2022**, the Polisario Front said it launched an overnight attack on the Guerguerat area. The statement also reported attacks along the security wall.<sup>9</sup>

**On February 11, 2022**, The Polisario Front said it had killed 12 Moroccan soldiers, including two senior officers, since February 1, 2022, in its struggle for independence for Western Sahara.

"Twelve soldiers have died in attacks over several days in February, and all the information is documented," said Abdelkader Taleb Omar, the group's envoy in Algiers.<sup>10</sup>

The Sahrawi press agency (SPS) had earlier reported 12 Moroccan soldiers had been killed in Polisario attacks between February 1 and February 8 along the "sand barrier" separating Moroccan and Polisario-controlled parts of the territory. SPS also published what it said was a list of the soldiers' names and ranks, which the Polisario envoy confirmed was correct.<sup>11</sup>

Moroccan news websites have cited security sources as saying the military had carried out drone strikes against "armed Polisario elements". Rabat has not officially confirmed the losses and the operations.<sup>12</sup>

Morocco responds to Polisario Front attacks primarily by operating drones to gather intelligence about Polisario Front forces and to attack their bases in in Western Sahara.

### **The Trump administration – "Abraham Accords"**

In December 2020, the Trump administration – under the spirit of the Abraham Accords – recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara territory in return for the kingdom officially recognizing Israel.

That position was confirmed by Trump's successor, Joe Biden, specifically by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, during a five-day visit to Morocco and Algeria in March 2022.<sup>13</sup>

Meeting with Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita during her stay in the country, Sherman stressed that the US still views Morocco's "serious, credible, and realistic" autonomy plan as potentially the most optimal "approach to meet the aspirations of the people of the region."<sup>14</sup>

Historically, U.S. policy toward Western Sahara prior to the Trump administration had strayed little from the international consensus and the

U.N. plan for a referendum, formally supporting neither Morocco's nor the Polisario Front's claim to the territory.

When the Moroccan government proposed a plan for regional autonomy for Western Sahara, the Obama administration called the plan "realistic and credible" and claimed it could enable the Sahrawi people to "run their own affairs in dignity."

Otherwise, the United States continued to encourage U.N. negotiations between Moroccan authorities and Sahrawi leaders.<sup>15</sup>

### **The shift in Spanish position**

Morocco is important for Spain for several reasons:<sup>16</sup>

The Spanish territorial enclaves in the North of Morocco of Ceuta and Melilla. Both territories are geographically sensitive and an important source of economic activity in the region.

Morocco is a key partner of Spain in prevention of illegal migration.

Morocco is a key partner of Spain in prevention of Islamic terrorism.

On March 18, 2022, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's issued a letter backing Morocco's plans to give limited autonomy to the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

It was a part of a bigger deal with Morocco that includes an agreement on migration and Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla management.

Spain's move came after relations with Morocco hit a new low in May 2021, when Spain gave medical treatment to the leader of the Polisario front, Brahim Ghali.

Morocco used migrants as a weapon and retaliated with opening its borders to the island of Ceuta, where roughly 10,000 migrants arrived in the island in a few days.

Until recently, Spain has been aligned with the UN on the Western Sahara dispute, supporting a referendum as the most acceptable solution to end the current stalemate.

Madrid's shift strengthens its bilateral relationship with Rabat. The announcement of the content of the Spanish prime minister's letter by

the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs was followed by diplomatic gestures and agreements.

After the letter, Prime Minister Sanchez visited Morocco and the kingdom reconfirmed commitments to control its borders and refrain from laying claims to Ceuta and Melilla.<sup>17</sup>

Rabat has returned its ambassador to Madrid, and Prime Minister Sanchez visited Morocco, where a “new page” in the two countries’ relations was declared. During the visit, both countries announced that the traffic of passengers and goods on sea and land crossings had been resumed, a critical measure to revitalize the struggling economies of Ceuta and Melilla. Madrid has reassured Rabat that Morocco could use the Spanish regasification plants.

The EU High Representative on Foreign Affairs, former Spanish diplomat Josep Borrell, said on March 21, 2022 that Sanchez’s letter does not clash with the EU’s position on Western Sahara.

“The solution must come from an agreement between the parties within the framework of the UN resolution. This is the European position, and from what I have read in the letter sent by Spain, it does not contradict it,” he said.<sup>18</sup>

### **The regional dimensions of the conflict over the Western Sahara**

The conflict over control of Western Sahara is not only a local conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front that demands independence for Western Sahara but also integral part of the regional power struggles between Morocco and Algeria.

The rivalry between Morocco and Algeria goes back decades, but it has taken a dramatic turn for the worse in the last year.

The confrontation between Morocco and Algeria is complex and multidimensional and focuses on four major issues in dispute:

**The territorial dispute** - the Moroccan government is claiming portions of Algeria’s Tindouf and Bechar provinces that French colonial administrators had awarded to Algeria.

October 1963 marks the first major outbreak of violent conflict between Algeria and Morocco, resulting largely from the Moroccan government's claim to portions of Algeria's Tindouf and Bechar provinces.

Moroccan attempts to seize the territory in 1963 led to fighting between the two countries that was dubbed the "sand war". After a few weeks of fighting the parties agreed a ceasefire.

**The " Strategic Corridor"** - Algeria has a common border of several kilometers with Western Sahara and the establishment of an independent state controlled by the Polisario Front will allow Algeria to create a strategically important trade corridor from the Tindouf region to the Atlantic coast.

**The ideological conflict** - ideological differences between Morocco's conservative monarchy and Algeria's prominent role as a supporter of third-world revolutionary movements.

**The geopolitical rivalry** - for the leading role in the region.

### **The conflict in Western Sahara**

Since 1975, the dominant issue between the two countries has been the conflict in Western Sahara. After the former colonial power Spain withdrew its forces and handed control of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania, Algeria threw its support behind the local Sahrawi people's claims for self-determination and the Polisario movement fighting on their behalf.

Once Morocco seized the bulk of Western Sahara, Algeria began support the Polisario Front. Algeria assists the Polisario front in several areas:

Provides shelter to the leaders of the Polisario Front and its fighters.

Provides weapons and ammunition to the Polisario Front.

Hosts thousands of Western Sahara refugees in 5 refugee camps in the Tanduf area near the border with Western Sahara.

Gives the Polisario Front political support in the international arena.

Algeria has also been a leading diplomatic supporter of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the state proclaimed by Polisario in 1976.



With Algerian backing, Polisario was able to cause serious problems for Moroccan forces in Western Sahara, but the conflict stabilized in the mid-1980s following Morocco's construction of an enormous wall, along the boundary of the territory it controlled.

The diplomatic relations, which Morocco had broken off in 1976, were re-established in 1988.

In 1994 Morocco accused Algeria of involvement in a terrorist attack in Marrakesh and imposed a visa requirement on Algerians visiting Morocco, Algeria closed the border between the two countries and it has never reopened.

### **The recent crisis between Algeria and Morocco**

Algeria considers the conflict over Western Sahara a part of the long-term strategic goal to become a dominant regional power.

In response to Algerian support for Polisario, Morocco launched a campaign promoting the cause of the separatist movement in Algeria's Kabylia region.

In July 2021, Morocco's UN ambassador, Omar Hilale, distributed a note saying that "the valiant Kabyle people deserve, more than any other, to fully enjoy their right to self-determination."

Since August 2021, Algeria has severed diplomatic relations with Morocco, cut off gas shipments that previously ran through Morocco to Spain, and closed its airspace to Moroccan planes.

In October 2021, the Algerian president ordered the end of commercial relations between SONATRACH (the national oil company) and ONEE, the Moroccan state-owned power utility.

Since 1996, Algiers has exported around 10 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas to Spain through this pipeline per year. As part of the deal, Morocco received about 1 bcm per year in transit fees, which accounted for over 90 percent of the country's needs.<sup>19</sup>

In November 2021, a commercial convoy of Algerian lorry drivers travelling through the Polisario-controlled part of Western Sahara was hit by an apparent bombing attack, killing three men. Algeria accused Moroccan forces of killing the Algerian citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune visited on June 3, 2022, the Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali at a military hospital in Algiers, following his return to Algeria after six weeks of medical treatment in Spain. Tebboune described the visit as "his duty" and reaffirmed his support for Ghali's cause.<sup>21</sup>

### **Summary**

Morocco's diplomacy has enjoyed two significant achievements in the last two years:

The American recognition of Morocco's control of the Western Sahara and the change in Spanish policy that today also favors the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara and the granting of limited autonomy to the people of the Western Sahara.

Morocco's accession to the "Abraham Accords" and the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel also contributed to the strengthening of Morocco's international status.

The resumption of hostilities by the Polisario Front does not pose a significant military threat to Morocco's ability to enforce its sovereignty over Western Sahara.

The main threat is that the military activity of the Algerian-backed Polisario Front could lead to a direct confrontation between the Algerian and Moroccan armies. ***A military confrontation between the countries could have devastating effects on the stability and security of the Maghreb.***

***A large-scale war between Morocco and Algeria could hurt oil and gas supplies from Algeria to Europe during a sensitive period of dealing with the effects of sanctions on Russia's oil and gas exports, following the war in Ukraine.***

***A war between the two countries could also lead to an increase in illegal immigration from the Maghreb to Europe for all its implications.***

Although there are reasons to think that the standoff between Algeria and Morocco may remain contained. Both countries have incentives to avoid open conflict, including a pressing need to focus on domestic economic concerns. The international community must act quickly and decisively in order to prevent an escalation between Morocco and Algeria.

**Notes:**

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- <sup>1</sup> Algerian President visits Polisario chief Ghali at hospital in Algiers, Africanews. June 3 2022.
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- <sup>5</sup> Polisario Says Killed 12 Moroccan Troops This Month, AFP, February 11, 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> Senior Polisario Member Threatens Terrorist Attacks in Southern Morocco, Morocco world news, May 24, 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> Polisario Attacks Mauritanian Miners in New Ceasefire Breach, Morocco world news, April 22, 2022.
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- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Teresa Noguiera Pinto, the fight goes on over Western Sahara's status, GIS, May 16, 2022.
- <sup>14</sup> Safaa Kasraoui, Western Sahara: US Support for Morocco's Position on Full Display in Latest Spending Bill, Morocco world news, March 16, 2022.
- <sup>15</sup> Amit Dadon, Janna Ramadan, Western Sahara, the Biden Administration and Human Rights, Lawfare, September 21, 2021.
- <sup>16</sup> Eleonora Vasques, US open to Western Sahara options as Morocco steps up lobbying effort, Euroacti8vf.com, April 20, 2022.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Dworkin, North African standoff: How the Western Sahara conflict is fueling new tensions between Morocco and Algeria, April 8, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Algerian President visits Polisario chief Ghali at hospital in Algiers, Africanews. June 3 2022.