

Violence Erupts in Western Sahara

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Brief Analysis

If the long-frozen conflict descends into full-blown war, it would undermine U.S. interests in one of the few relatively stable corners of the Arab world.

On November 13, Morocco launched a military operation to unblock the flow of goods along a road extending from Mauritania into Western Sahara. The move came three weeks after the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a movement advocating independence for the Moroccan-controlled territory, blocked the road and prevented several hundred trucks from entering Western Sahara via Mauritania. On November 14, the Polisario declared that a thirty-year ceasefire had effectively ended and the group was now at war with Morocco.

So far, no casualties have been reported, but the eruption of violence represents a significant deterioration in one of Africa's longest-running frozen conflicts. Coming on the heels of former defense secretary Mark Esper's trip to the region, the hostilities could draw two North African states into war—one a close U.S. ally, and the other a potential security partner looking to diversify its longtime alliance with Russia.

VACUUM LEAVES ROOM FOR ESCALATION

In what is perhaps a testament to the ceasefire's long-term success, few Americans are aware of the dispute over Western Sahara, an area nestled between the internationally recognized borders of Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco. The sparsely populated, mineral-rich territory was a Spanish colony until 1975, then came under Moroccan and Mauritanian administrative control. This transfer spurred the Polisario—a group formed two years prior and claiming to represent the indigenous Sahrawi community—to shift its armed rebellion from the colonial power to the new authorities. Mauritania withdrew in 1979, but Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario remained at war until a ceasefire was imposed by the UN in 1991. By that point, Morocco had annexed nearly 80 percent of the territory, and several thousand Sahrawis were living in refugee camps in the Tindouf border area of

Algeria. The UN estimates that 173,600 Sahrawis currently live in Tindouf, while the population of Western Sahara stands at roughly 650,000, a mix of Sahrawis and Moroccans who have settled there since 1975.

The 1991 agreement called for a referendum to determine whether the territory would attain independence or be integrated into Morocco. It also established a UN peacekeeping force, the Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), to temporarily monitor the buffer zone separating the area of Moroccan control from Algeria and Mauritania. Due to disagreements over voter eligibility requirements and periodic eruptions of violence, however, the referendum never took place, and MINURSO's deployment continued.

In 2007, following various unsuccessful rounds of negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario, Rabat proposed a plan to grant Western Sahara autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. The United States deemed this initiative "serious, realistic, and credible," but the Polisario and Algeria rejected it. In the ensuing decade, the UN continued to renew MINURSO's mandate, calling on the parties to refrain from any action that would change the status quo or undermine the work of the 450-person peacekeeping force (divided evenly between uniformed and civilian personnel).

A diplomatic breakthrough came in December 2018, when UN envoy Horst Kohler hosted a meeting in Geneva with representatives from Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and the Polisario—the first round of direct talks in six years. A second meeting in March 2019 yielded little progress, in part because Algeria was engulfed in a domestic political crisis following the outbreak of mass demonstrations against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. And when Kohler resigned that May for health reasons, Western Sahara was left without a UN envoy.

The lack of sustained UN diplomatic engagement over the past eighteen months has been compounded by the power vacuum in Algeria—most recently, Bouteflika's successor, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, was transferred to Germany for reported COVID-19 treatment. This situation turned what otherwise might have been a routine flare-up into a combustible showdown. In keeping with its pattern of behavior over the years, the Polisario sent civilians to disrupt traffic and protest Morocco's presence late last month, just days before the UN Security Council's scheduled vote on MINURSO's renewal. This time, however, the UN's reduced diplomatic capacity to mitigate the fallout paved the way for a more forceful Moroccan response.

At present, Rabat appears to have the upper hand: the Polisario is not a formidable military opponent (though Algeria presents a considerably more serious threat), and the kingdom enjoys relatively broad international support for its territorial claims after several years of diplomatic advancement on that front. The African Union—which Morocco recently rejoined after leaving thirty years ago in protest of the body's decision to recognize Sahrawi independence—issued a strikingly neutral statement on the kingdom's latest military operation, merely calling for restraint. And several Gulf Arab states quickly came to Morocco's defense—a rare expression of unity from an otherwise fractured group.

PATHS TO DE-ESCALATION

Despite this support, Morocco does not have an interest in seeing the hostilities continue. The same may not be true for the Polisario and Algeria, however. The former might find a confrontation useful for shoring up its legitimacy in the refugee camps, while the latter may want to deflect public attention away from an unpopular government and toward the emotive Sahara issue.

Yet the region as a whole can ill afford another conflagration, especially given the increasing lawlessness of the Sahel to the south (where U.S. Special Forces recently rescued an American hostage from one of the many armed groups roaming the area), the continuing political and economic crisis [undermining Algeria's stability](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/corona-in-the-casbah-the-pandemics-destabilizing-impact-on-algeria) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/corona-in-the-casbah-the-pandemics-destabilizing-impact-on-algeria>), and the [ongoing conflict in nearby Libya](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-the-ceasefire-in-libya>). A war would also draw Morocco and Algeria's attention and resources away from critical security tasks that the United States has a strong interest in preserving, from containing regional terrorist threats to managing migrant flows bound for Europe.

Now that the Western Saharan roadblock has reportedly been lifted, Washington should urge Morocco to exercise restraint while asking Algeria to prevent any further Polisario mobilization. A personal appeal by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo could go a long way toward defusing the situation, as could other elements of U.S. leverage. For example, as [America's strongest and oldest ally in the region](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/twenty-years-under-king-mohammed-vi-part-1-domestic-developments) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/twenty-years-under-king-mohammed-vi-part-1-domestic-developments>), Morocco will presumably not want to begin its engagement with the incoming Biden administration on a sour note. Washington should therefore make clear that continued violence will kill any chance for eventual American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

U.S. leverage in Algeria is more limited, but even there Washington can capitalize on the government's expressed desire to cultivate deeper relationships with other partners besides its longtime ally in Moscow. Algiers recently requested an increase in the number of military officers it could send to the United States as part of the Defense Department's International Military Education and Training program. Washington should make clear that such engagement will not continue unless the country reins in the Polisario and refrains from further inflaming the situation. Finally, the latest eruption underscores the need to appoint a new UN Personal Envoy for Western Sahara.

Sarah Feuer is the Rosenbloom Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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