

# Proceeding with Caution in Western Sahara

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Brief Analysis

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**Given growing uncertainties in other North African states, Washington should avoid any sudden moves on the Sahara file even as it builds on the momentum of recent talks.**

**O**n April 29, the UN Security Council will vote on whether to extend the Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), a peacekeeping force established in 1991 following a fifteen-year war for control of the disputed territory between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front. The council will almost certainly renew MINURSO's mandate, either for six months as it has done since April 2018 or for a full year as was common up to that point.

The vote comes in the wake of revived talks between the key stakeholders, but also growing instability in Algeria and its eastern neighbors. Containing this instability remains a key U.S. interest in a region that faces ongoing threats from jihadist groups, poorly regulated migrant flows to Europe, and pressures stemming from deficient governance and unsustainable economic models. Given the political tumult in Algeria and the severe deterioration in Libya, the region can ill afford an outbreak of hostilities in Western Sahara, where MINURSO has been crucial to preserving relative calm.

## PEACEKEEPING AND POLITICS

**A**s its name suggests, MINURSO was originally established to maintain a ceasefire while the parties organized a referendum in which the indigenous Sahrawi community—whom Polisario claims to represent—would presumably choose between independence and integration into Morocco. The language of Security Council Resolution 690 implied linkage between MINURSO's peacekeeping function and the political process it was intended to facilitate, but the ensuing years saw little progress toward a referendum; instead, Morocco and the Polisario dug

into mutually exclusive positions through numerous unsuccessful rounds of negotiations.

In 1997, the UN formally decoupled MINURSO from the political process by naming a Personal Envoy for the Western Sahara, a direct appointee of the secretary-general tasked with seeking a political settlement. Successive resolutions have since renewed MINURSO's mandate while encouraging the envoy's work.

Another key development came in 2007, when Rabat proposed a plan to grant Western Sahara autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty—an idea the United States deemed “serious, realistic, and credible,” but which the Polisario and Algiers rejected. Informal talks occurred sporadically thereafter, petering out in 2012.

Last year, the Security Council shortened MINURSO's mandate to six months after Washington argued that the force's renewal should be contingent on political progress. Given the Trump administration's apparent conviction that long peacekeeping missions tend to perpetuate rather than resolve conflicts, U.S. officials reasoned that tying MINURSO's role to the envoy's efforts would force the parties back to the negotiating table. National Security Advisor John Bolton has repeatedly questioned MINURSO's merits, first as ambassador to the UN in the mid-2000s and more recently when he unveiled the administration's new Africa Strategy (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>) late last year.

## MOMENTUM AND MAYHEM

In December, Personal Envoy Horst Kohler hosted representatives of Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria, and Mauritania in Geneva for the first round of direct talks in six years. They produced few tangible results, however, and while the participants pledged to meet again shortly, Kohler was careful to lower expectations of a major breakthrough.

On March 21-22, Kohler convened a second round of talks after laying the groundwork via bilateral meetings with each party. Yet by the time those talks took place, Algeria was engulfed in a political crisis (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/algeria-on-the-brink>) stemming from a protest movement that called on President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to rescind his candidacy for a fifth term. Up to the last minute, it was unclear if Algiers would even manage to send a delegation to the talks, underscoring both the instability rocking Africa's largest country and the necessity of Algerian buy-in to any Western Sahara resolution. Unsurprisingly, the March meeting yielded little fruit beyond a commitment to continue discussions in the future.

Such discussions, if they do occur, will take place amid regional unrest on a scale not seen since early 2011. In Algeria, Bouteflika ultimately resigned on April 2, the state's security organs are maneuvering for control of the transition, and hundreds of thousands of protestors continue to demand wholesale replacement of the political, economic, and security structures governing the country since the 1960s (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/algerias-long-buildup-to-mass-protests>). Although presidential elections have been scheduled for July 4, the protests show no sign of letting up, and a recent speech by army chief of staff Ahmed Gaid Salah ominously suggested that the military would not permit them to continue indefinitely.

Meanwhile, Libya has been engulfed in violence since April 4, when eastern militia leader Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive to wrest the capital from the internationally recognized government. The operation prompted U.S. Africa Command to remove all of its troops from the country, and the fighting has caused over 250 deaths and 1,200 injuries, raising the specter of full-blown civil war in a nation with Africa's largest oil reserves.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

The administration's impulse to streamline peacekeeping missions and make them more effective is

understandable, but conditioning MINURSO’s renewal on elusive political progress could precipitate just the sort of military confrontation the force was created to deter. Limiting MINURSO’s peacekeeping abilities would heighten the sense of insecurity in Morocco, the Polisario, or both, raising the likelihood they would resort to military action. And given North Africa’s current volatility, any escalation in Western Sahara could plunge the region into greater instability.

To avoid this outcome and preserve the momentum of recent talks, Washington should endorse MINURSO’s renewal in the upcoming vote and take other confidence-building steps. Following the March talks, Kohler urged the delegations “to explore good faith gestures and concrete actions that go beyond the roundtable.” U.S. officials should take the lead in devising such measures and proposing them to Rabat and Algiers. Additionally, the administration should use consistent language when describing the U.S. position on the conflict, clearing up discrepancies between Washington’s previously stated stance on Morocco’s autonomy plan, Bolton’s remarks in December, and ensuing declarations by the State Department that seemed at odds with longstanding U.S. and UN emphasis on finding a mutually acceptable political solution. These inconsistencies have sown confusion among U.S. allies and undermined Washington’s ability to steer developments in a productive direction. The fragility of the local and regional situation also underscores the need to appoint a U.S. ambassador to Morocco, where lack of clarity on Washington’s stance has been especially damaging.

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## RECOMMENDED

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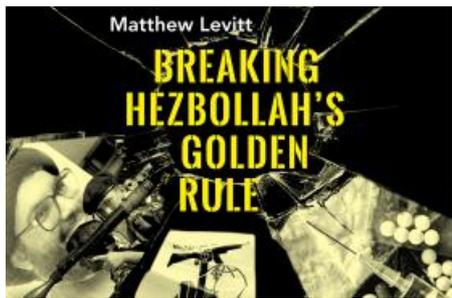
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