

Delicate Diplomacy in Western Sahara

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As the UN mulls the future of the peacekeeping mission, Washington should proceed cautiously in encouraging negotiations to avoid undermining essential alliances.

In the coming weeks, the UN Security Council will vote on whether to extend the mandate of the Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the peacekeeping force that has been monitoring a buffer zone separating Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara from Algeria and Mauritania since 1991. That year, a ceasefire agreement was reached following a fifteen-year war for control of the disputed territory between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a group claiming to represent the indigenous Sahrawi community. While MINURSO's mandate will almost certainly be renewed, recent diplomatic momentum suggests that the situation may be entering a new phase.

The outcome of this momentum holds implications for U.S. interests in the region, which include maintaining the stability of Northwest Africa, containing terrorist threats emanating from the Maghreb and its southern flank, and ensuring maritime security for the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea. Deterioration in Western Sahara would undermine those interests and destabilize surrounding states, especially given the uncertain succession scenario next door in Algeria, ongoing jihadist threats across North Africa and the Sahel, and Russia's efforts to extend its influence across the region. As such, Washington should aim for the sweet spot of encouraging diplomatic progress without undermining alliances that are essential to this progress.

NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL

The original rationale behind MINURSO's creation was to bolster the ceasefire while the parties laid the groundwork for a referendum in which the Sahrawi would presumably choose between independence and integration into Morocco. That referendum has yet to take place due to several obstacles, including disagreement over whether full-scale independence should be offered as a ballot option, lack of consensus on eligibility requirements for voter participation, and periodic eruptions of violence.

From the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, Morocco and the Polisario held various unsuccessful rounds of negotiations, some brokered by the United States and others conducted under UN auspices. In 2007, Rabat proposed a plan to grant Western Sahara autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. The United States deemed this proposal "serious, realistic, and credible," and France concurred, but the Polisario and Algeria rejected it. In the ensuing decade, with the conflict largely frozen, the UN continued to renew MINURSO's mandate at one-year intervals, likely recognizing the force's contribution to the region's relative stability.

MINURSO's mandate was renewed once again last April, but this time for six months only, reportedly at Washington's urging. In a statement following the UN vote, a U.S. representative noted "There can be no more business as usual," implying that the shortened timeline was intended to nudge the parties back to the negotiating table. This shift aligns with the Trump administration's general strategy of disrupting the status quo, including in matters of diplomacy. Moreover, national security advisor John Bolton had expressed frustration with the stalled Sahara referendum during his 2005-2006 term as ambassador to the UN, citing MINURSO as an obstacle to resolving the dispute rather than an instrument of stability.

The April renewal was followed by two other noteworthy developments. First, Morocco cut diplomatic relations with Iran in May, alleging that the country had helped Hezbollah provide financial and logistical support to the Polisario through the Iranian embassy in Algiers. Rabat did not publicly disclose its evidence for this accusation, though prominent Hezbollah figures have previously been found [operating in Morocco](#). This is not the first time Rabat has severed ties with Tehran, but the latest breach aligned quite conspicuously with Washington's recent push to isolate the Iranian regime.

Second, on September 29, UN special envoy Horst Koehler announced plans to relaunch direct negotiations on the Sahara dispute. After visiting the region and consulting with U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs David Hale, Koehler formally invited representatives from Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and Western Sahara to negotiations in Geneva scheduled for December 5-6. All four parties accepted the invitation, and if they show up in December, the talks will mark the first round of multilateral negotiations in over a decade.

WEIGHING RISKS AND REWARDS

How U.S. officials interpret these developments will likely determine how they proceed with the next MINURSO renewal vote and beyond. The Trump administration might be tempted to read Morocco's severing of ties with Iran as validation of its own "tough love" approach; indeed, the kingdom may have sought to demonstrate common cause with the United States in order to forestall an unfriendly stance on Western Sahara. Likewise, Washington could argue that Koehler's evident momentum toward direct negotiations vindicates the decision to shorten MINURSO's mandate. Yet regardless of whether recent developments can be attributed to that decision, the administration should focus on devising a diplomatic strategy for the coming months that considers not only the ostensible benefits of pushing to alter the status quo, but also the attendant risks that could impede peaceful resolution of the dispute and undermine broader U.S. interests.

These risks would come to the fore if the administration adopts a policy that any of the parties sees as blatantly one-sided—a situation that could spur aggrieved actors to violence. For all the understandable frustration over the lack of progress, a new eruption of armed conflict in one of the few remaining corners of relative stability in the Arab world would quickly make Washington nostalgic for the decades of fragile calm.

To minimize such risks, Washington should reassure its allies in Rabat—where Western Sahara remains a highly emotive issue—that U.S. support for recent diplomatic initiatives will not undermine the bilateral relationship. History suggests that whenever the kingdom perceives a wavering in America's position, the result is damaged U.S.-Moroccan relations, an uptick in armed activities by the Polisario and its Algerian patrons, and reduced U.S. leverage in steering each side away from violence.

The delicate nature of the current situation also underscores the need for Congress to confirm the administration's nominee for ambassador to Morocco. Likewise, while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has discussed the Western Sahara issue with Moroccan foreign minister Nasser Bourita, a more consequential move would be to invite King Mohammed VI to the White House. This would signal that the United States intends to nurture its relationship with a key ally even as it pursues a long-sought diplomatic breakthrough.

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