

Policy Alert

Escalating Tensions in Western Sahara

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As the Security Council prepares to vote on extending the peacekeeping mission, a mounting war of words between the conflict's three parties warrants a careful U.S. response.

On April 1, Morocco lodged a formal complaint with the UN Security Council regarding the Algeria-backed Polisario Front. The group was accused of moving military units into the northeastern and southwestern portions of a UN-monitored buffer zone separating Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara from Algeria and Mauritania. Although the flare-up has remained on the rhetorical level so far, the possibility of armed conflict cannot be dismissed given the past clashes and decades of bitter tensions between Rabat, Algiers, and the Polisario.

AN UNRESOLVED CONFLICT

The buffer zone was established as part of Morocco's 1991 ceasefire agreement with the Polisario, a group claiming to represent the indigenous Sahrawi community. Drafted after the two sides had fought a fifteen-year war over the disputed territory, the agreement called for a referendum to determine whether the Sahrawi would opt for independence or integration into Morocco. The accord also installed a peacekeeping force known as the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

In 2007, with the conflict still largely frozen in place, Rabat proposed a plan for Sahrawi autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, which the United States deemed "serious, realistic, and credible." Algeria continued to support the Polisario, however, rejecting any proposal short of independence. Since then, little progress has been made on resolving the conflict. The referendum has yet to take place, Morocco's control of the disputed territory has deepened, and periodic eruptions of violence have occurred.

Regarding the current diplomatic showdown, Morocco's UN ambassador Omar Hilale has characterized the alleged Polisario deployment as a "casus belli," while Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita warned that if the UN did not force the group to withdraw, Morocco would take control of the buffer zone. Rabat apparently delivered the same message to Algiers. Reports that up to twenty-six victims of an Algerian military plane crash earlier today were Polisario members will likely add to the perception that Morocco's longtime adversary continues to support the group. The Polisario quickly pushed back—in an April 2 letter, the group's own representative to the UN, Ahmed Bukhari, characterized Morocco's accusations as "unfounded and false," arguing that the kingdom seeks to change the status quo in the buffer zone. (Two days after the letter was received at the UN, the group announced that Bukhari had passed away after a long illness.)

The UN's initial response to these claims has been less than definitive. On April 2, spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters that MINURSO had not observed any "movement of military elements into the northeast territory." Yet a report issued by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres four days prior urged the Polisario to withdraw a civilian monitoring post it had established in the southwest Saharan town of Guerguerat in January—a move that likely violated the UN's April 2017 agreement calling for Moroccan and Polisario forces to withdraw from the town. The report also recommended extending MINURSO's mandate through May 2019, a decision on which the Security Council will vote later this month. Meanwhile, Morocco has reportedly presented the UN with satellite images from late March indicating Polisario construction work in the buffer zone. As of this writing, the UN has said it will continue studying the matter; no action has been taken.

U.S. INTERESTS AT STAKE

The United States has ample reason to prevent one of the few remaining areas of relative stability in the Arab world from spiraling into war. An outbreak of hostilities in the Sahara could rattle Morocco, a longtime U.S. ally and counterterrorism partner. At the very least, it would undermine Rabat's years of quietly budding counterterrorism cooperation with Algeria.

Western Sahara—a vast, lightly populated desert area with potentially rich mineral resources—is not well-known to most Americans, but the decades-old dispute over the territory is a deeply emotive issue for regional leaders. As such, the growing tensions merit a careful response from Washington.

Whenever Morocco has perceived American support for its position to be thin or wavering, the bilateral relationship has suffered, and Washington has lost leverage in its efforts to prevent deterioration on the ground.

In recent weeks, Moroccan officials have expressed deep concern that the U.S. position may be shifting. Therefore, the Trump administration's overarching aim should be to find the diplomatic sweet spot, reassuring Rabat while refraining from initiatives that any of the parties could interpret as one-sided enough to warrant violence.

On April 3, after Acting Secretary of State John Sullivan held talks with Foreign Minister Bourita in Washington, the State Department reaffirmed the U.S.-Morocco alliance and expressed America's "commitment to United Nations-led efforts to find a peaceful, sustainable, and mutually acceptable political solution" to the Western Sahara dispute. The administration should now consider repeating its positive view of Morocco's 2007 autonomy plan, which would likely make Rabat more receptive to confidence-building measures aimed at reducing tensions and bolstering MINURSO. In parallel, U.S. officials should privately urge Algeria and Morocco not to lose sight of their shared regional security challenges, which could worsen if hostilities erupt over Western Sahara.

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