



# Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara

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**What's new?** The long-dormant conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the disputed Western Sahara territory is showing troubling signs of life. A Polisario blockade of a key artery in the UN-monitored buffer zone triggered a Moroccan military response, after which the Front called off a ceasefire and resumed attacks.

**Why does it matter?** Recent hostilities augur further escalation, especially absent international efforts to calm tempers and nudge parties back to talks. The Trump administration's recognition, as part of Rabat's normalisation accord with Israel, of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, which new U.S. President Joe Biden may choose not to reverse, further complicates things.

**What should be done?** Outside powers should take two steps to bring the sides back from the edge. First, the UN should appoint a new special envoy for Western Sahara, a post it has left vacant for almost two years. Secondly, Washington should move to encourage de-escalation and revive political talks.

## I. Overview

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After almost 30 years of compliance with a 1991 ceasefire, Morocco and the Polisario Front have resumed hostilities in Western Sahara, a disputed territory for which the Front seeks independence. On 13 November 2020, Morocco sent troops into the UN-monitored buffer zone to end Polisario supporters' three-week blockade of the strategic Guerguerat road. In response, Polisario withdrew from the ceasefire and renewed attacks on Moroccan military units. International reactions to the escalation have mostly been sympathetic to Morocco. The UN Security Council has remained silent. Rabat scored a major diplomatic victory on 10 December, when U.S. President Donald Trump recognised its sovereignty over Western Sahara. To avoid escalation, Morocco's international backers should push Rabat to accept the appointment of a new UN special envoy – a position vacant since May 2019 – without preconditions. The Biden administration, in close coordination with France, Russia and Algeria, all primary external stakeholders in the conflict, should press both sides to accept a truce and restart talks.

Just two years ago, things looked very different. Diplomacy seemed to be moving along, thanks to the August 2017 appointment of former German President Horst Köhler as UN special envoy. In April 2018, the UN Security Council reduced the time

between mandate renewals for the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) from one year to six months; the envoy thus reported more frequently on the situation to the Council, which upped pressure on both sides. Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania held two meetings that showed signs of progress. But Köhler's sudden resignation in May 2019 and the Council's October 2019 reversion to one-year MINURSO mandates halted the momentum. Since then, both Morocco and Polisario have placed preconditions on the appointment of a new envoy to replace Köhler, with Rabat's stricter requirements seemingly causing a stalemate.

Tensions started to build up in the Guerguerat area, where a road connecting Morocco to Mauritania through Western Sahara crosses the UN-monitored buffer strip separating Moroccan troops from Polisario fighters. Taking advantage of the diplomatic void left after Köhler's departure, Morocco invited several African and Middle Eastern governments to open consulates inside Western Sahara. In response, Polisario officials and activists promptly labelled the move a return to war. Civilian Polisario supporters (joined by gunmen) blockaded the main road through Guerguerat, establishing a camp in late October 2020 and sparking a resumption of hostilities. On 13 November, Morocco sent troops inside the buffer strip to remove the blockade. In response, Polisario initiated a low-intensity conflict with Morocco, even though Rabat reaffirmed its support for the ceasefire's continuation.

Most international actors supported returning to the ceasefire or fell in behind Morocco. At the same time, the UN Security Council refrained from discussing the flare-up, frustrating Polisario's goal of attracting world attention to its cause. Rabat saw the 10 December U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as additional vindication of its strategy. The Trump administration's move further antagonised pro-independence Sahrawis, especially Sahrawi youth, who have long been losing faith in a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

The conflict's low intensity cannot be an excuse for inaction. There is a modest but palpable risk of a gradual military escalation, which could further destabilise North Africa and the Sahel. Heavier fighting could be triggered by a military incident, Algerian interference – for example, stepped-up weapons transfers from Algiers to Polisario – or a shift in the independence movement's military tactics. To minimise this risk, Morocco's external allies – the U.S. and France – should push Rabat to accept without preconditions a new UN envoy tasked with negotiating a de-escalation that could yield talks about a truce.

Such an approach would work only if the U.S. and the UN Security Council take a more hands-on approach. The Biden administration may shy away from undoing Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. But even short of that, it could pursue other ways of reassuring Polisario, for example by reverting to Washington's earlier support for a semi-annual MINURSO mandate renewal. To avoid antagonising Morocco, UN Security Council resolutions should contain explicit reference to the need for a mutually acceptable arrangement to protect the Guerguerat road as a safe thoroughfare. These arrangements could usher in a new phase for diplomacy. The Biden administration should coordinate its position more closely and transparently with other countries with a stake in the conflict's outcome, namely France, Russia and Algeria. Better cooperation at this level could end the fighting and jump-start stalled peacemaking efforts.

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## II. An Increasingly Unsustainable Status Quo

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The conflict has its origins in Spain's withdrawal in 1975 from Western Sahara, then the largest of its remaining African colonies. Morocco and Mauritania both claimed the territory as their own. The Polisario Front sought its independence and had launched an armed struggle against Spain in 1973. On 7 November 1975, Moroccan King Hassan II rallied some 350,000 unarmed citizens to cross into Spanish-controlled areas to assert his country's claim. This Green March, as the king called it, forced Spain's hand – rather than order its soldiers to fire on the demonstrators, Madrid resolved to depart.

The November 1975 Madrid Accords officially ended Spanish control of Western Sahara and left around two thirds of the area to Morocco and one third to Mauritania. The pro-independence Polisario Front and Algeria both rejected the agreement. A war followed, in which Polisario notched early military successes, such as forcing Mauritania to withdraw in 1979, even as thousands of Sahrawis took shelter near Tindouf, in Algeria. In the following years, however, Morocco consolidated control over the majority of Western Sahara, thanks mainly to its construction of a system of defensive walls known as the “sand berm”.

In 1991, in what appeared to be a military stalemate, the two sides agreed to a UN-mediated Settlement Plan. This initiative introduced a ceasefire that divided the territory along the sand berm and established a buffer strip and a restricted zone to separate the two parties.<sup>1</sup> It also aimed to settle the dispute through a vote on self-determination, to be organised by MINURSO. Yet, due to Morocco's political manoeuvring and the two sides' divergent interpretations of the plan, the vote never took place. After various UN envoys failed in attempts to resuscitate the referendum, Morocco unveiled an Autonomy Plan in 2006 as its proposed compromise. Polisario views the autonomy plan as denying the Sahrawi population's right to self-determination. Numerous rounds of direct negotiations between Rabat and Polisario failed to produce a breakthrough.<sup>2</sup>

### A. Momentum Lost

The August 2017 appointment of former German President Horst Köhler as UN special envoy for Western Sahara injected new momentum into diplomatic efforts. Köhler held a series of exploratory meetings between late 2017 and early 2018. He then benefited from the UN Security Council's decision in April 2018 to renew MINURSO's mandate for six months instead of the customary one year.<sup>3</sup> As the Council's penholder on this issue, the U.S. (with John Bolton, who was personally invested in resolving the conflict, then serving as national security advisor) played

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<sup>1</sup> The ceasefire divided Western Sahara de facto between an area lying to the west of the sand berm controlled by Morocco (which corresponds to around 80 per cent of the territory) and a demilitarised zone to the east, which Polisario refers to as its liberated territories.

<sup>2</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°66, *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, 11 June 2007; and Jacob Mundy and Stephen Zunes, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2414 (2018).

the lead role.<sup>4</sup> The idea behind shortening the mandate was to put pressure on all sides by asking the envoy to report more frequently to the Council.

The U.S. was reportedly motivated by frustration with the lack of progress, MINURSO's increasingly open-ended nature and a general desire to make cuts to the UN's peacekeeping budget.<sup>5</sup> As a U.S. diplomat said: "It is time to see progress toward a political solution, and after 27 years, to stop perpetuating the status quo".<sup>6</sup> Despite resistance from other members of the Group of Friends of Western Sahara, namely France and Russia, the six-month renewal continued, with the aim of supporting mediation efforts, until October 2019.<sup>7</sup>

While Polisario welcomed the new approach as an opportunity to revive negotiations, Morocco appeared less keen to alter the diplomatic status quo.<sup>8</sup> To reassure Rabat, the U.S. and France introduced language in the April 2018 and subsequent UN Security Council resolutions that reflected its perspective. The text referred to the "need to achieve a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution", which Polisario and other observers considered an implicit endorsement of Morocco's 2006 Autonomy Plan.<sup>9</sup> The same resolution also included two separate operative paragraphs singling out Polisario for violating the ceasefire agreement in the Guerguerat area and planning to relocate the administrative functions of the de facto Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic to Bir Lahlou, inside Western Sahara.<sup>10</sup>

The negotiations nonetheless seemed to gather steam. Köhler organised a first round of talks in Geneva in December 2018. A former adviser to Köhler described the atmosphere as positive, with a "good and friendly" tone in the conversations.<sup>11</sup> It was the first UN-mediated round of talks between Morocco and Polisario in six years.

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<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, former adviser to UN Special Envoy Horst Köhler, Polisario Front diplomat, international NGO worker, November–December 2020. These sources agree that it was Bolton's appointment in April 2018 that contributed decisively to this shift in the U.S. position. Bolton has a longstanding commitment to resolving the Western Saharan dispute, reportedly because of his role as assistant to UN Special Envoy James Baker from 1997 to 2000. He saw MINURSO's endless renewals as unacceptable. See also Jacques Roussellier, "A Role for Russia in the Western Sahara?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former adviser to UN Special Envoy Horst Köhler, December 2020. See also Dulcie Leimbach, "John Bolton cracks the whip on the UN mission in Western Sahara", Pass Blue, 15 May 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Dibia Ike, "UN mission in Western Sahara renewed for only six months", *Africa News*, 1 November 2018.

<sup>7</sup> "Western Sahara: Mandate Renewal", *Security Council Report*, 27 April 2018; and "La France souligne que le renouvellement de la Minurso pour seulement six mois 'doit rester une exception'", Maroc.ma, 28 April 2018. The Group of Friends of Western Sahara is an informal assembly comprising the U.S., France, the UK, Russia and Spain that aims to coordinate positions on the issue. France argued that one-year extensions were the best guarantee of MINURSO's stability, while Russia criticised the U.S. for its lack of consultation in the resolution's drafting. See also UN Security Council Meeting Record S/PV.8246.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interviews, French diplomat, Moroccan journalist, Rabat, February 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Polisario diplomat, international NGO worker, November and December 2020. See also UN Security Council Resolutions 2414 (2018) and 2351 (2017).

<sup>10</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2414 (2018). On 4 January 2018, a small group of Polisario military personnel entered the buffer strip in the Guerguerat area to establish a monitoring station, 500m from a MINURSO observation post. See "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", S/2018/277, 29 March 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former adviser to Köhler, December 2020.

Morocco got an important concession: the meeting was organised as a “roundtable”, with Algeria and Mauritania participating. Rabat considers the Western Sahara a regional issue and Polisario an Algerian proxy; it wanted Algeria and Mauritania at the table since they had both previously refused to join talks, saying the conflict is a bilateral issue between Morocco and Polisario about decolonisation.<sup>12</sup> A second meeting took place in March 2019, also in Geneva, but this time the mood was tense.<sup>13</sup> Neither meeting produced a breakthrough, but each allowed for continuation of talks, as highlighted in the joint communiqué issued at the second round’s conclusion.<sup>14</sup> The encouraging dynamic came to an abrupt end when Köhler resigned on 22 May 2019, citing health reasons.<sup>15</sup>

Following Köhler’s departure, both Morocco and Polisario rushed to set out conditions for the appointment of a new UN envoy. According to a Polisario diplomat, the movement merely wanted a “high-calibre, committed and neutral” person.<sup>16</sup> Officially, Morocco also demanded no more than a high-profile personality for the job.<sup>17</sup> Several pro-Polisario and non-partisan sources claim, however, that Rabat introduced more specific, and more stringent, conditions, rejecting any diplomat from a Scandinavian country (because of these countries’ alleged sympathy with the Polisario cause), Germany (because the experience with Köhler had shown Rabat how hard it was to push back against Berlin) or a UN Security Council permanent member state (to avoid undue political pressure on the negotiations).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, former adviser to Köhler, Moroccan diplomat, December 2020 and January 2021; Algerian diplomat, Algiers, December 2020. From the Algerian and Mauritanian perspectives, Morocco is an occupying power in Western Sahara and Polisario the representative of a colonised people with the right to self-determination. To participate in talks as anything but observers would be to accept, if tacitly, Morocco’s position that third parties have an interest in the territory’s final status and that something other than the Sahrawi people’s preference could determine that status.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former adviser to Köhler, December 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, MINURSO official, international NGO worker, November-December 2020. The March 2019 Geneva round ended with a joint communiqué that stated: “Delegations welcomed the new momentum created by the first roundtable meeting in December of last year and committed to continue to engage in the process in a serious and respectful manner. Delegations agreed that additional trust needed to be built”. According to the MINURSO official, Polisario officials signalled on the sidelines of the Geneva meetings that they were ready to discuss options previously considered taboo, such as Morocco’s 2006 Autonomy Plan. In his words, “Polisario officials recognised that a solution was going to be some form of Moroccan sovereignty, but what mattered to them were the details of the arrangement and international guarantees that the Moroccans would not go back on their commitment”. Polisario sources deny this claim, which they say does not reflect their official position. Crisis Group email correspondence, Polisario officials, March 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former adviser to Köhler, December 2020. Pro-Polisario sources and a Moroccan media outlet allege that it was Rabat’s pressure that pushed Köhler out, due to persistent disagreements over possible African Union involvement in the negotiations. Crisis Group telephone interviews, international NGO worker, European pro-Polisario activists, December 2020. See also Mohamed Jaabouk, “Sahara : Le Maroc a-t-il joué un rôle dans la démission d’Horst Köhler ?”, Yabiladi, 23 May 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Polisario diplomat, November 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Moroccan diplomat, January 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, international NGO worker, December 2020; U.S. diplomat, French diplomat, Rabat, February 2020. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Polisario diplomat, international NGO worker, November-December 2020. Moroccan diplomats deny that Rabat im-

These conditions have reportedly made it challenging for UN Secretary-General António Guterres to find a suitable replacement for Köhler.<sup>19</sup> Morocco's expectations shrank the pool of potential candidates. In addition, Western Sahara's reputation as an obscure and intractable conflict appears to have contributed to dissuading international diplomats from taking the job. As a former foreign minister approached for the position put it, "nobody wants to be associated with a diplomatic failure".<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, growing scepticism about the possibility of resolving the conflict pushed the UN Security Council to return to its traditional one-year renewals for MINURSO. Bolton left the Trump administration in September 2019 and, disillusioned with the situation, the next month Washington dropped its idea of a shortened extension, accepting France's longstanding demand for annual ones.<sup>21</sup> Despite Polisario, Russian and South African complaints, the language about a "realistic, practicable and enduring political solution", which was meant to reassure Morocco's fears related to shorter MINURSO mandates, remained in both the October 2019 and October 2020 resolutions renewing the mission.<sup>22</sup>

## B. *Developments on the Ground*

In parallel to Köhler's resignation and the UN Security Council's return to its traditional diplomatic tack, Morocco accelerated its creation of facts on the ground. Rabat's chief move was to invite friendly African and Middle Eastern states to open consulates in Western Sahara. The first country to take this step was Côte d'Ivoire, which inaugurated its honorary consulate in Laayoune in June 2019.<sup>23</sup> The Comoros followed suit, opening the first foreign consulate-general in Western Sahara in December 2019.<sup>24</sup> In the following months, a cascade of African governments did the same.<sup>25</sup> On 4 November 2020, the United Arab Emirates became the first Arab country to open a consulate in Western Sahara.<sup>26</sup> From Rabat's perspective, these diplomatic representations helped confirm its claim to sovereignty over the territory.<sup>27</sup>

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posed any such conditions. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Moroccan diplomats, December 2020 and January 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, MINURSO official, international NGO worker, French diplomat, Polisario diplomat, November-December 2020 and January-February 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former foreign minister, November 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interview, French official, February 2020. A former adviser to Köhler and Polisario sources indicated that Bolton's September 2019 resignation was a key factor behind this shift. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former adviser to Köhler, Polisario diplomat, international NGO worker, November-December 2020. Russia and South Africa objected to this decision, because they considered it a unilateral move without consideration for progress in the peace process. See UN Security Council Meeting Record S/PV.8651.

<sup>22</sup> UN Security Council Resolutions 2494 (2019) and 2548 (2020).

<sup>23</sup> Fahd Iraqî, "Maroc : El Imam Maelainin, un notable sahraoui pour représenter la Côte d'Ivoire à Laayoune", *Jeune Afrique*, 1 July 2019.

<sup>24</sup> "Maroc : les Comores ouvrent un consulat à Laayoune", *Jeune Afrique*/AFP, 20 December 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Between January and October 2020, the following African countries opened consulates in Western Sahara: Gambia, Gabon, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire (this time opening a general consulate), the Central African Republic, Sao Tome and Principe, Burundi, Djibouti, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Eswatini and Zambia.

<sup>26</sup> "UAE inaugurates consulate in Morocco's Western Sahara", *The National*, 4 November 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Moroccan diplomat, Moroccan journalist, December 2020.

Polisario Secretary-General Brahim Ghali protested the consulate openings, calling them a “breach of the international legal status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory”.<sup>28</sup>

The consulate openings were the fruit of an ambitious Moroccan strategy to deepen political and economic links with sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past years, Rabat has significantly increased its investment in and trade with the rest of the continent, particularly West Africa.<sup>29</sup> In 2017, Morocco rejoined the African Union (AU). Rabat had quit the Organisation of African Unity (the AU’s predecessor) in 1984 in protest over the body’s admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, as Polisario calls its de facto state east of the sand berm. On its entry into the AU, Morocco vowed to work to expel Polisario’s proto-state from the body’s ranks.<sup>30</sup> Rabat has used its newfound ties to lobby individual African governments to drop their recognition of the de facto Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.<sup>31</sup>

In parallel to this diplomatic offensive, Morocco approved two laws in January 2020 to delineate its territorial waters and an Exclusive Economic Zone off the Western Saharan coast. Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita indicated that this legislation aimed partly to reaffirm Morocco’s sovereignty over “its actual borders, maritime and terrestrial”.<sup>32</sup> Polisario rejected the move.<sup>33</sup>

Faced with a stalemate at the UN and in response to Morocco’s moves to create facts on the ground, the Polisario Front started to reassess its options. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic’s then-prime minister, Mohamed al-Wali Akeik, a prominent critic of the diplomatic impasse, repeatedly denounced international neglect of the conflict and called on the movement to resume hostilities with Morocco.<sup>34</sup> He also criticised the ceasefire, suggesting that negotiations should take place in tandem with fighting.<sup>35</sup>

Frustrated with the diplomatic deadlock, many Sahrawis, especially women (camp administrators and teachers) and young camp dwellers, lost faith in negotiations and

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<sup>28</sup> “Situation in Western Sahara”, Report of the UN Secretary-General, S/2020/938, 23 September 2020.

<sup>29</sup> See Isabelle Werenfels, “Maghrebi Rivalries over Sub-Saharan Africa”, SWP, November 2020; and Youssef Tobi, “Morocco’s Strategy in Africa: Rooting Back”, RUSI, 23 May 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Roussellier, “Morocco Brings the Western Sahara Issue Back to the AU”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 January 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Around the world, a total of 31 states have cancelled and eight have suspended their recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Of these, twelve African countries have cancelled and three African states have suspended their recognition. The Universidade de Santiago de Compostela provides a reliable roundup on its SADR Recognitions website.

<sup>32</sup> “Le Maroc intègre les eaux du Sahara occidental à son espace maritime, colère du Polisario”, France Info, 23 January 2020; and Javier Otazu, “La delimitación de las aguas territoriales marroquíes en ocho puntos”, *La Vanguardia*, 22 January 2020.

<sup>33</sup> “Le Maroc étend son emprise aux eaux territoriales du Sahara occidental”, Radio France Internationale, 24 January 2020.

<sup>34</sup> “Situation in Western Sahara”, Report of the UN Secretary-General, S/2019/787, 2 October 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Gorka Andraka, “Mohamad Elouali, primer ministro de la RASD: ‘Si no hay guerra a nadie le pre-ocupa lo que ocurra com el pueblo saharauí’”, *El Salto*, 15 December 2019. His views on the ceasefire were shared by other Polisario officials, such as Omar Mansour. Gemma Saura, “La Guerra tienta a los saharauis”, *La Vanguardia*, 29 December 2019. It remains unclear if this position has majority support within the Polisario Front.

criticised the lack of turnover among the organisation's leaders.<sup>36</sup> The dearth of employment opportunities for often highly educated young people contributed to their growing disillusionment. Pressure grew on the ageing Polisario leadership to resume fighting.<sup>37</sup>

A milestone was the Polisario Front's fifteenth congress, which took place in December 2019 in Tifariti, inside Western Sahara. Over several days, debate focused on how to react to deteriorating political conditions, with activists divided between supporters of military action and defenders of diplomacy. While the former lobbied for immediately setting a date to resume hostilities, the latter argued that the front was in no position to carry out a military offensive.<sup>38</sup> Secretary General Ghali, who was re-elected at the congress, trod a fine line, reaffirming the movement's commitment to diplomacy but also threatening to "reconsider its engagement in the peace process".<sup>39</sup>

### III. Back to War

#### A. *The Ceasefire Ends in Guerguerat*

Eventually, the Polisario Front's tensions with Rabat and within its own movement found an outlet in skirmishes over the Guerguerat road, which connects Morocco and Mauritania through Western Sahara, cutting through the UN-monitored buffer strip. Since Rabat paved this desert road in 2016 (and deployed gendarmes inside the buffer zone in violation of the ceasefire), it has emerged as the most sensitive attrition point between the two sides, with incidents recurring every year since then.<sup>40</sup> Thanks to Morocco's growing trade ties with Mauritania and other parts of West Africa, the road has become increasingly important, and therefore sensitive, for Rabat. From its side, Polisario rejects what it sees as a unilateral amendment to the ceasefire, as the road opens a breach in the buffer zone that was not included in the 1991 agreement.<sup>41</sup> According to MINURSO, the period between October 2019 and May 2020 saw an increase in the number of demonstrations by pro-Polisario civilians and military incursions in this area, which Morocco repeatedly protested to the UN.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, international NGO workers, November 2020. Former Prime Minister al-Wali Akeik has also acknowledged the growing gap between Sahrawi youth and most Polisario officials, promising gradual change within the organisation's ranks. See Andraka, "Mohamad Elouali, primer ministro de la RASD", op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, international NGO workers, November 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Jose Carmona, "Espejismos de guerra en el Sáhara", *Público*, 20 December 2019; and Andraka, "Mohamad Elouali, primer ministro de la RASD", op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> "Brahim Ghali to Guterres: UN must do more to restore the confidence of our people in the UN peace process in Western Sahara", Sahara Press Service, 30 December 2019.

<sup>40</sup> See Hannah Armstrong, "The Youth Movement in Sahrawi Refugee Camps", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 April 2018. See also "Situation in Western Sahara", Reports of the UN Secretary-General, S/2017/307, S/2018/277, S/2018/889, S/2019/282, S/2019/787.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Moroccan diplomat, Moroccan journalist, Polisario diplomat, November-December 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, MINURSO official, November 2020. See also "Situation in Western Sahara", S/2020/938, op. cit.



Matters reached breaking point on 21 October 2020, when a group of pro-Polisario civilians set up camp and blocked traffic along the Guerguerat road. A small number of Polisario fighters, whose presence constituted a violation of the ceasefire, joined them.<sup>43</sup> Unlike in previous incidents, the protesters rejected MINURSO's mediation attempts, complaining about the UN's disinterest in the conflict.<sup>44</sup> For two weeks, Morocco lodged protests with the UN secretary-general and MINURSO about the blockade. Then, following King Mohamed VI's speech on the Green March's 45th anniversary, Morocco began to mobilise troops inside the 30km-wide restricted area, also violating the ceasefire.<sup>45</sup> After a failed last-minute mediation attempt by the UN secretary-general, the troops entered the buffer strip on 13 November to reopen the road.<sup>46</sup> While both sides fired heavy weapons, there were no casualties, as civilians and Polisario fighters retreated almost immediately.<sup>47</sup> On 14 November, Polisario declared an end to the ceasefire and a resumption of hostilities with Morocco.<sup>48</sup>

In the following weeks, the Polisario's military arm, the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army, repeatedly attacked Morocco's defensive positions along the sand berm, usually from a distance and with limited effect.<sup>49</sup> The Moroccan army's response has remained limited, with no attempt so far to chase enemy units or carry out a major operation. While Morocco denies incurring any casualties, UN sources indicate that at least two soldiers lost their lives during the first week of fighting.<sup>50</sup>

Morocco's relative restraint clashes with the strong Sahrawi mobilisation both in the refugee camps and abroad. Rabat's strategy has been to declare its continuous support for the 1991 ceasefire and minimise the significance of the military clashes, in what amounts to a "nothing to see here, keep moving" approach.<sup>51</sup> Yet the return to war has energised Sahrawi youth in the camps and abroad, and Polisario has reactivated its international solidarity networks to attract attention to the conflict.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, MINURSO official, November 2020. The group was composed of fifteen to twenty fighters equipped with four vehicle-mounted weapons (two machine guns and two anti-aircraft guns). Polisario argued that the fighters were present to protect the civilians.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, MINURSO official, November 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, MINURSO official, Moroccan diplomat, Polisario diplomat, November-December 2020. According to a Moroccan diplomat, Rabat made the decision to intervene right after the king's speech. See "Le Discours de SM le Roi Mohamed VI à l'Occasion du 45ème Anniversaire de la Marche Verte", *EcoActu*, 7 November 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, MINURSO official, Moroccan diplomat, Polisario diplomat, November-December 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, MINURSO official, Moroccan diplomat, Moroccan journalist, November-December 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, MINURSO official, Polisario diplomat, November 2020. See "Polisario leader says Western Sahara ceasefire with Morocco is over", Reuters, 14 November 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, MINURSO official, Polisario diplomats, November 2020. See also the daily communiqués published by the Sahara Press Service and detailing the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army's attacks along the sand berm. A MINURSO official talked of satellite imagery showing around 240 shell craters, measuring up to 14m in diameter each, in an area near the border with Algeria. The official said that these craters were evidence of Moroccan shelling in response to Polisario's attacks.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, MINURSO official, November-December 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, MINURSO official, Moroccan diplomat, November-December 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, European pro-Polisario activist, December 2020.

A Sahrawi activist claimed that youth in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara tried to take to the streets to show their solidarity with Polisario, but that Moroccan security forces quickly suppressed the attempts.<sup>53</sup>

### B. *All Quiet on the International Front*

Despite Polisario's mobilisation, most international reaction to the events in Western Sahara has either reflected support for a swift return to the ceasefire and/or fallen in line with Morocco's position. The French foreign affairs ministry expressed its concern with the situation, while praising "Morocco's attachment to the ceasefire".<sup>54</sup> Spain and Russia called for both parties to comply with the ceasefire, while the U.S. remained silent until 8 December, when then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo commented that the conflict "ought not be resolved through military means, but through a set of conversations".<sup>55</sup>

Neighbouring countries have similarly reacted with caution in order to avoid fueling hostilities. Algeria, an important actor in the conflict through its support for Polisario, carefully called on both sides to exercise restraint.<sup>56</sup> Algerian diplomats say this approach reflects their desire to avoid a military escalation that could further destabilise the region.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Mauritania called on both parties to show restraint and respect the ceasefire.<sup>58</sup>

For its part, the UN Security Council has remained inactive about the military situation in Western Sahara. It convened only a single consultative meeting behind closed doors on 21 December, more than a month after the resumption of hostilities.<sup>59</sup> The lack of action has suited Morocco but angered Polisario officials, frustrating their wish for international attention to the cause.<sup>60</sup> A French official explained the Security Council's inaction by the clashes' low intensity, as thus far the fighting has

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<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sahrawi NGO activist, November-December 2020. A Sahrawi activist also claimed that the Moroccan police persecuted Polisario supporters in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara, in particular arresting and harassing a twelve-year-old student for wearing a Polisario flag on her dress in school. This person said other Sahrawi activists have gone into hiding. Moroccan diplomats and journalists denied these allegations. Crisis Group interviews, Moroccan diplomat, Moroccan journalist, December 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, French diplomat, November 2020. See also "Sahara Occidental – Extrait du point de presse (17 novembre 2020)", French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 November 2020.

<sup>55</sup> "Support for UN in guaranteeing ceasefire in Western Sahara", Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 November 2020; "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the developments in Western Sahara", Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 November 2020; and Latifa Babas, "Guerguerate: Mike Pompeo says the conflict has to be resolved through a set of conversations", Yabiladi, 8 December 2020.

<sup>56</sup> "L'Algérie déplore vivement les graves violations du cessez-le-feu dans la zone d'El-Guerguerat au Sahara Occidental", Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 November 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Algerian diplomats, Algiers, December 2020.

<sup>58</sup> "Mauritania calls on the two parties on its northern border to show self-restraint and for the logic of wisdom to prevail", Mauritanian News Agency, 13 November 2020 (Arabic).

<sup>59</sup> Michelle Nichols, "U.N. Security Council talks Western Sahara after Trump policy switch", Reuters, 22 December 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Moroccan diplomat, Polisario diplomats, November-December 2020.

posed no threat to regional peace and security.<sup>61</sup> Even South Africa, a Polisario supporter, which assumed the UN Security Council presidency in December, indicated it had no plans to take the matter to the Council, its diplomats arguing that they would expect any outcome to favour Morocco.<sup>62</sup>

### C. *U.S. Recognition of Moroccan Sovereignty over Western Sahara*

In this already favourable international environment, Rabat scored a major diplomatic victory on 10 December, when President Donald Trump announced on Twitter the U.S. official recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.<sup>63</sup> In return for recognition, Morocco agreed to resume diplomatic relations with Israel, starting by reopening their respective liaison offices and possibly leading to full diplomatic representation at a later stage.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the U.S. offered to sell \$1 billion worth of drones and precision-guided weapons to Morocco.<sup>65</sup> The link to diplomatic normalisation with Israel means that, despite bipartisan calls to undo this move, the Biden administration will find it hard to reverse U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty without jeopardising Rabat's ties with Israel.<sup>66</sup>

Several governments responded negatively to Trump's announcement. Russia condemned it as a violation of international law.<sup>67</sup> Spain reiterated its commitment "to the UN principles and resolutions" on this dispute.<sup>68</sup> Algerian Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad condemned the normalisation with Israel and rejected U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, calling for the application of international law and defending Polisario's military actions as "legitimate self-defence".<sup>69</sup>

France's position was more nuanced. A French official and a former diplomat said the Trump announcement has created a problem for Paris, as U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara contradicts international law and UN Security Council resolutions. They also worry it could encourage Morocco to press France to make a similar declaration.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, they say, Paris could find in

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, French official, November 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, South African diplomat, December 2020.

<sup>63</sup> "President Donald J. Trump Has Brokered Peace Between Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco", Trump White House Archive, 11 December 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Moroccan diplomat, December 2020. Morocco and Israel opened liaison offices in 1994 but Morocco broke off all relations in 2000 in response to the second intifada in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.

<sup>65</sup> Patricia Zengerle and Mike Stone, "Exclusive: Trump administration moves forward with \$1 billion Moroccan arms deal", Reuters, 11 December 2020.

<sup>66</sup> "Inhofe, Leahy Lead 25 Colleagues to Urge Biden to Reverse Misguided Western Sahara Decision", official website of Senator James M. Inhofe, 17 February 2021.

<sup>67</sup> "Moscou condamne la décision américaine de reconnaître la souveraineté marocaine sur le Sahara Occidental", AFP, 11 December 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Mariela León, "España enarbola resoluciones de la ONU sobre el Sáhara Occidental ante el espaldarazo de Trump a Marruecos", Cambio16, 13 December 2020.

<sup>69</sup> "Sahara occidental: l'Algérie condamne des 'manoeuvres étrangères' visant à la déstabiliser", France 24, 12 December 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, French official, former French diplomat, February 2021.

the announcement an opportunity to relaunch the Moroccan Autonomy Plan as the basis for a permanent solution to the conflict.<sup>71</sup>

Polisario officials rejected the Trump announcement as an unacceptable violation of international law.<sup>72</sup> A Sahrawi NGO activist in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara spoke of the local population's complete loss of faith in the international community and growing risks of violent unrest.<sup>73</sup> Yet while the movement saw the announcement as a setback for their cause, they also grasped the opportunity to draw renewed global media attention to the long-forgotten conflict.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, with the Biden administration assuming office in the U.S., Polisario diplomats expressed guarded optimism about the possibility of reversing the decision and getting the UN involved in mediating an end to the conflict.<sup>75</sup>

In the announcement's aftermath, Morocco announced its decision to keep troops in Guerguerat indefinitely, rejecting the possibility of negotiating a future withdrawal. Rabat announced this new position to all interested parties, including in an official letter to the UN secretary-general.<sup>76</sup> The Moroccan military presence is designed to protect the passage of goods across the border with Mauritania, but it represents a violation of the ceasefire agreement, which prohibits armed forces from either side entering the restricted area, and it contradicts Rabat's official stance of compliance with the accord. As a result, Polisario has made clear that it will refuse to enter any future ceasefire negotiations under these conditions.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, on 24 January 2021, for the first time since the ceasefire ended, pro-Polisario forces shelled the Guerguerat area and threatened to escalate the conflict by widening the scope of their operations.<sup>78</sup>

#### **IV. Time for Re-engagement**

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The Western Sahara conflict's low intensity should not be cause for inaction. The danger of a major military escalation between Morocco and the Polisario Front is modest, but not negligible. Polisario's strategy of shelling from a distance risks a chance strike that could cause higher-than-expected Moroccan casualties, in turn triggering a retaliation in the form of an offensive aimed at Polisario's rear bases. It would be wrong to assume that Algeria will remain neutral. Algeria supports Polisario's military strategy of attrition.<sup>79</sup> While there is no evidence of new weapons transfers

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<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, French official, February 2021. See also "Maroc-Israël – Q&R – Extrait du point de presse (11 décembre 2020)", French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 December 2020.

<sup>72</sup> "W. Sahara 'does not belong' to Morocco, says Polisario Front, blasting Trump declaration", France 24, 11 December 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Sahrawi NGO activist, December 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, MINURSO official, December 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Polisario diplomat, January 2021. See also Habibullah Mohamed Lamin, "Polisario hopes Biden will cancel Trump's Western Sahara deal. If not, there's always war", *Middle East Eye*, 17 December 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Moroccan diplomat, MINURSO official, January 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Polisario diplomat, January 2021.

<sup>78</sup> "Sahara : le Polisario promet 'l'escalade' avec le Maroc", AFP, 24 January 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interview, Algerian diplomat, Algiers, December 2020.

from Algeria that could upgrade the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army's capabilities, Algiers could resort to such transfers in the event of a flare-up that kills a large number of Polisario fighters, for example.<sup>80</sup> This move would have regional implications.

International neglect of the conflict could likewise have long-term implications for regional stability. Without a diplomatic solution, disaffected Sahrawis, particularly youth, could force the Polisario Front to change tactics. It might strike military installations in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara or inside Morocco, instead of limiting itself to targets along the sand berm, as it has almost exclusively done thus far.<sup>81</sup> Such an escalation would destabilise North Africa and the Sahel, with unforeseeable consequences for U.S. and European interests.

The appointment of a UN special envoy to Western Sahara is a necessary start. If Morocco has imposed preconditions on the appointment, the U.S. and France need to push Rabat to drop them. A new special envoy will not himself or herself be able to halt the fighting. Polisario officials have made clear that they want a reset of the peace process terms before considering a new ceasefire.<sup>82</sup> Still, while a complete reset might be unrealistic, were the UN to re-engage, an envoy might be able to negotiate a temporary de-escalation that would pave the way for talks about a truce. In turn, this let-up would allow for the resumption of Morocco-Polisario negotiations (with Algerian and Mauritanian participation) on the status of the entire disputed territory.

This approach would work only if the U.S. and the UN Security Council significantly ramp up efforts to resolve the conflict. Despite some bipartisan voices calling for a reversal, the Biden administration may judge it too politically difficult to undo Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Still, it could pursue ways to reassure Polisario that there is a viable path forward, and win over those officials who reject a truce and want to negotiate and keep fighting at the same time.<sup>83</sup> For example, the U.S. could revert to its earlier support for renewable, six-month MINURSO mandates and modify the language regarding "a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution" that Polisario sees as endorsing Morocco's 2006 Autonomy Plan in future UN Security Council resolutions to mollify the Front. To avoid antagonising Morocco, these changes could go hand in hand with explicit reference to the need for a mutually acceptable arrangement to protect the Guerguerat road's safety.

A truce, backed by a revised UN Security Council approach to the conflict, could usher in a new phase. UN Special Envoy Köhler's tenure, while truncated, is a reminder that constant international pressure on both sides can get things moving. For that to happen again, the Biden administration will need to coordinate its position more

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<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, MINURSO official, December 2020.

<sup>81</sup> On 9 February 2021, the Polisario Front claimed to have carried out an attack in Ouarkiz, inside Morocco, killing three soldiers. If confirmed, it would be the first Polisario operation on Moroccan territory in more than 30 years. Rabat denied the story. "Le Front Polisario affirme avoir tué trois militaires marocains", *Le Monde*, 10 February 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Polisario diplomats, November-December 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Polisario diplomat, December 2020. Other officials, such as Bashir Mustapha Sayed, share this position. See "La guerre de libération s'est déclenchée et ne s'arrêtera jusqu'à finir une fois pour toutes avec l'occupation marocaine" (Responsable sahraoui), Sahara Press Service, 2 December 2020.

closely and transparently with the other members of the Group of Friends of Western Sahara, namely France and Russia, as well as Algeria. Only joint international pressure can push Morocco and the Polisario Front to resume talks.

## **V. Conclusion**

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International neglect of Western Sahara, exacerbated by the foreign media's lack of interest, risks ratcheting up military tensions that have so far remained contained. Complacency toward this long-frozen conflict has led world powers to underestimate the possibility of an escalation and created the conditions for the uneasy standoff to degenerate into low-intensity war. The UN Security Council needs to act now. The cost of delaying action is difficult to estimate, but the situation is volatile and could rapidly get worse.

**Rabat/Algiers/Brussels, 11 March 2021**

Appendix A: Map of Western Sahara





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