JANUARY/FEBRUARY TRENDS

UN Envoy Staffan De Mistura continued consultations to revive the peace process, after a 29-year-long ceasefire collapsed in November 2020, as international pressure on Morocco and the Polisario Front to reach agreement faded. A growing gap between the Polisario leadership (which seeks independence for Western Sahara) and more radical activists came to the fore. Reported Moroccan artillery movement raised concerns.

TO WATCH
Civilian deaths on both sides could trigger retaliatory attacks; Israel’s military operations in Gaza could stoke anger within Polisario’s youth wing against Morocco, which has normalised relations with Israel.

Potential Consequences
Tit-for-tat attacks between Morocco on one hand and the Polisario and its main ally, Algeria, on the other, may increase the risk of a regional escalation, though major conflict is unlikely. Should it erupt however, it could divert resources away from migration control in both countries, fuelling irregular departures to Europe, and encourage the Polisario and Algeria to target economic infrastructure (such as phosphates) in Western Sahara and potentially in the south of Morocco, too.

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS AND MONTHS

1 A gradual escalation of hostilities could spark a broader conflict
Polisario could launch more attacks on Moroccan territory, targeting foreign economic interests; deadly attacks targeting civilians, intentionally or unintentionally, could flare, especially as younger members dissent with the leadership’s more moderate approach and may be tempted to escalate attacks.

Morocco will likely continue to use drones on Polisario-held territory, which could spark an accidental escalation, especially if Algerian nationals (who drive through the territory to transport goods to Mauritania) are killed.

2 A diplomatic standoff over the UN presence could fuel hostilities
The UN Special Envoy will likely continue to struggle to present a new plan, meaning no autonomy plan, no referendum and no ceasefire are on the table.

Polisario could show signs of frustration at a stalled UN process by suspending fuel and water resupply operations, via Morocco, of the UN mission in Polisario-held territory.

If the UN cannot operate/withdraws, Morocco could take over the UN buffer zone, which means they could be face to face with Algerian soldiers in Western Sahara and be targeted by the Polisario directly from Algerian territory.

TO WATCH
The envoy’s plan for the resumption of negotiations; build-up of troops along the sand berm; movement of heavy artillery in the Bir Gandouz area in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara.

Potential Consequences
A direct confrontation between Morocco and Algeria could take place in Western Sahara, potentially affecting those displaced near Tindouf, Algeria. It could also have broader repercussions on other Maghreb and Sahelian countries.

Methodology: The information provided above relies on our monthly global conflict tracker, CrisisWatch, and qualitative assessments provided by Crisis Group’s analysts based in or near conflict areas. The selection is not exhaustive, and should be read in conjunction with country/regional reports and other early warning products, all available at crisisgroup.org.