

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.

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.

Algeria could step up its retaliatory steps against Morocco, potentially fuelling a direct military confrontation.

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.

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.

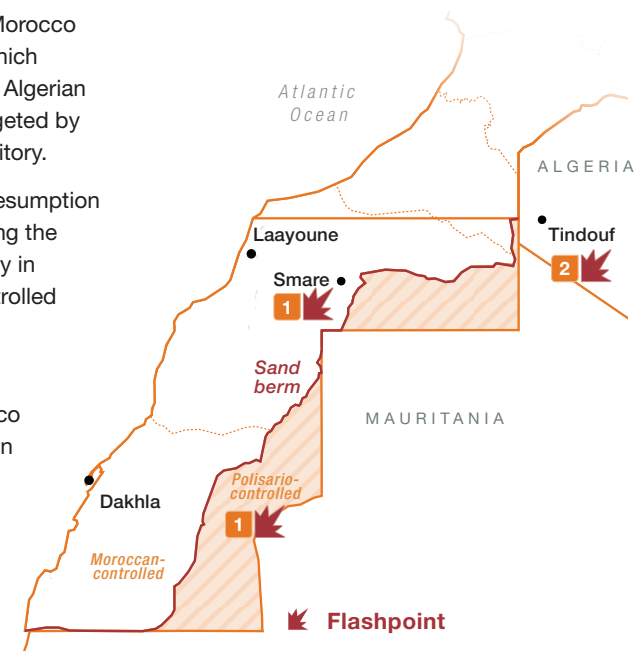
Polisario could show signs of frustration at a stalled UN process by suspending fuel and water resupply operations, via Morocco, of the UN mission in Polisario-held territory.

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.



Published March 2024 – 2nd edition

On the Horizon offers a snapshot into emergent conflicts and crises in the next three to six months in a clear, accessible format, identifying triggers, key dates to watch and potential behaviour of conflict actors, to support global conflict prevention efforts.



INTERNATIONAL
**CRISIS
GROUP**