



A Window for Diplomacy in Western Sahara

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What's new? Washington has signalled support for Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara as well as interest in resolving the conflict there. But Moroccan and U.S. hardliners are pushing to dismantle MINURSO, the dedicated UN mission, and label the pro-independence Polisario Front a terrorist organisation, which could undermine chances of a settlement.

Why does it matter? The conflict remains largely frozen, but Sahrawi refugees' frustration, an incoherent U.S. approach and attempts in some quarters to end MINURSO and ban the Polisario could restart hostilities. Without sustained diplomacy, renewed fighting could destabilise the region, perhaps even drawing Morocco and Algeria into direct confrontation.

What should be done? The U.S. should strongly back UN-led talks, while European countries should coordinate positions, protect MINURSO and reject unilateral moves by any party involved. Together, the U.S. and Europe should press Morocco and the Polisario to make reciprocal concessions within a framework of autonomy and a credible form of Sahrawi self-determination.

I. Overview

Signs that the Trump administration wants to revive talks over Western Sahara have raised hopes of ending the conflict there. For decades, Morocco has been pressing a claim to the territory in the teeth of resistance by the pro-independence Polisario Front. Dialogue has long been stalled. In April, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio expressed support for resuming it under the rubric of a Moroccan plan to grant the area autonomy. The UN Secretary-General's personal envoy, Staffan de Mistura, promptly proposed a new round of talks, outlining the principles that should guide them. Yet when the U.S. took no action, hardliners in Rabat and Washington began calling for the UN peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara to be dismantled and for the Polisario to be designated as a terrorist group. Fighting

remains at low intensity, but young Sahrawi refugees are growing frustrated and calling more loudly for stepping up the armed struggle. The U.S. should launch a diplomatic effort aligned with the UN envoy's plans, while urging Morocco and the Polisario to make concessions. European powers should unify their positions to reinforce the UN process.

The Trump administration has sent mixed signals on Western Sahara, creating expectations of renewed engagement in April but then failing to fulfil them for three months as shifting foreign policy priorities and bureaucratic turf wars slowed the momentum generated by Rubio's statement. It was only in July that the U.S. senior adviser for Africa, Massad Boulos, visited the region, making stops in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, where he held conversations about Western Sahara with both local and international officials.

In the vacuum that arose, hardliners in Washington and Rabat began to promote unilateral moves aimed at cementing Morocco's claim to the territory, such as closing down the UN mission, known as MINURSO, and proscribing the Polisario as a terrorist organisation. These ideas originated in right-wing U.S. think-tanks and Moroccan policy circles, and while neither the U.S. nor the Moroccan government has endorsed them, they could take root. The Polisario appears untroubled by the chatter, and so does its main state backer, Algeria, but European diplomats are alarmed. They warn that removing the peacekeepers could encourage Moroccan forces to occupy the UN buffer zone separating the Moroccan- and Polisario-controlled portions of Western Sahara, leading to greater friction that might even trigger a direct military confrontation between Morocco and Algeria, where many Polisario units have rear bases. Likewise, European Union and UN officials voice concern that a terrorism designation could fuel further violence in Western Sahara involving Morocco, the Polisario and Algeria.

Meanwhile, the UN seized on the Rubio statement to define the parameters of a hypothetical new round of talks. De Mistura, who had been discouraged by years of diplomatic inertia, re-emerged to stress that any autonomy proposal should be "genuine" and allow the Sahrawi people to exercise a "credible form of self-determination". These formulations, echoing language used by Rubio, were intended to anchor future negotiations in a framework that both Morocco and the Polisario can accept. The United Kingdom likewise capitalised on the opportunity, adjusting its previous neutrality about the terms of a settlement to describe Morocco's autonomy plan as "the most credible, viable and pragmatic basis" for resolving the conflict, while retaining explicit references to Sahrawis' right to self-determination. This statement aligned London more closely with Washington, as well as with Paris, Rabat's chief European backer.

For now, mutual restraint continues to limit the risk that hostilities between the sides will resume, almost five years after they last broke out. Morocco, the Polisario and their respective supporters share an interest in avoiding a bigger war. Yet tensions are bubbling beneath the surface. The Polisario has carried out occasional strikes inside Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, including high-profile rocket attacks in Mahbes and Smara, to broadcast its continued military capabilities. Morocco, for its part, has relied on drones to keep these strikes to a minimum but avoided full-scale retaliation. Both sides have largely refrained from targeting civilians and continue to allow UN monitors to work.

Even so, tensions within the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria continue to rise. Younger activists and officials are openly questioning the effectiveness of the Polisario's strategy for achieving the movement's goal of independence and advocating for ramping up the fight with Morocco. There are also signs that Morocco may be working to settle the conflict unilaterally by seeking a UN General Assembly vote to remove Western Sahara from the UN list of non-self-governing territories.

An inconsistent U.S. approach, Sahrawi impatience and mounting calls from various quarters to dismantle MINURSO and/or brand the Polisario as terrorists could upset what has become a shaky equilibrium. To prevent a slide into worsening conflict, the U.S. and Europe should give diplomacy another chance with help from the UN envoy. They should sponsor a coordinated initiative to foster negotiations focused on achieving genuine autonomy for the disputed territory and a credible form of self-determination for the Sahrawi people, as De Mistura has proposed.

Washington's next moves will be particularly important. It should go beyond rhetorical gestures to develop a coherent strategy that encourages Morocco and the Polisario to return to the negotiating table, pressing Rabat to detail its autonomy proposal and the Sahrawi movement to show flexibility in its stance. It should avoid rushing to reform MINURSO, instead linking the prospect of changes to the mission to progress in talks. From their side, European governments should hammer out a common position that protects MINURSO's mandate, bolsters UN mediation and firmly rejects unilateral action, such as a U.S. terrorist designation for the Polisario. Only through sustained, harmonised engagement can the U.S. and Europe create the space necessary for the UN envoy to restart negotiations aimed at a just, lasting settlement of the conflict.

II. Contradictory Noises from Washington

The conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front is a half-century old. In 1975, Morocco and Mauritania divided Western Sahara between themselves after Spain, the colonial power, withdrew. In response, the Polisario, founded two years earlier to expel the Spanish, launched an armed struggle for independence with Algerian and Libyan support. Mauritania pulled out in 1979, leaving Morocco in control of most of Western Sahara, which it consolidated by building a sand berm that now separates areas held by Morocco, amounting to 80 per cent of the land, from the remaining part, which the Polisario considers its sovereign territory. A UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991 established a buffer zone between the two parts and promised a referendum on self-determination, to be monitored by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, or MINURSO. The plebiscite never took place.¹

Having further entrenched itself in the disputed territory, Morocco put forward an autonomy plan in 2007 backed by France and the U.S.² The Polisario promptly rejected it, as it did not include a self-determination vote. Instead, the movement reaffirmed its preference for the Baker II plan, drafted by former UN envoy James Baker and approved by the UN Security Council in 2003, which combined a five-year autonomy period with a self-determination referendum at the end, in addition to offering a series of economic and security guarantees for Morocco in case Sahrawis voted for statehood.³ Amid the deadlock, occasional protests took place in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, such as in Gdeim Izik near Laayoune, in 2010, when thousands of Sahrawis set up a camp to demand social, economic and political rights. The Moroccan military forcibly dismantled the encampment a few weeks later, triggering clashes. The troops also rounded up several Sahrawi activists, who remain in jail to this day.⁴

Despite the impasse, the ceasefire continued to hold until tensions flared again in November 2020, when the Polisario resumed fighting Morocco in reaction to Rabat's military takeover of the Guerguerat route – which leads south to Mauritania – inside the buffer zone. The

¹ Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY, 2010).

² “Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region”, UN, 11 April 2007.

³ “Letter dated 16 April 2007 from the Permanent Representative of South Africa to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council”, UN Security Council, S/2007/210, 16 April 2007; and “Peace Plan for Self-determination of the People of Western Sahara (Baker Plan II) [DRAFT]”, UN Peacemaker, 17 January 2003.

⁴ “Western Sahara: Long-Term Prisoners Await Justice”, press release, Human Rights Watch, 8 November 2022. There has been no new development since this release appeared.

next month, outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, undoing years of official U.S. neutrality. In August 2021, Algeria severed diplomatic ties with Morocco, citing the latter's normalisation of relations with Israel as well as its rejection of a referendum for Western Sahara.⁵ The conflict has continued, with Western Sahara still listed by the UN as a non-self-governing territory (meaning that, under Chapter XI of the UN Charter, the people in Western Sahara are not considered part of a sovereign state), its status officially disputed.⁶

A. *A Stuttering New U.S. Initiative*

The second Trump administration has picked up where the first left off. The U.S. recalibrated its policy under President Joe Biden, neither confirming nor revoking U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty and defining Rabat's autonomy plan as "serious, credible and realistic" rather than as "the only basis" for conflict resolution, as Trump had done in 2020.⁷ But the new administration has restated its full support for Rabat's position on both autonomy and Moroccan sovereignty.⁸ On 8 April, Secretary of State Rubio declared in a meeting with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita that Washington considered the kingdom's autonomy proposal to be "the only basis" for resolving the conflict. He also reaffirmed Trump's position in December 2020, when the president stressed the need for autonomy to be "genuine" and "mutually acceptable".⁹

But in a break with the first Trump administration (and its successor), Rubio also announced that Washington was ready to help resolve the conflict. In Trump's first term, the U.S. held contradictory positions. Between 2018 and 2019, during John Bolton's brief spell as national security advisor, it focused on pressing Morocco and the Polisario to restart talks and reach a settlement. Later, however, the administration reset its sights, recognising Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in return for Rabat's agreement to normalise relations with Israel. Under Biden, Washington was reluctant to push the parties to resume negotiations, preferring to freeze the dispute in order to contain any repercussions it might have for tensions between Algeria

⁵ Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°247, *Managing Tensions Between Algeria and Morocco*, 28 November 2024; and Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°227, *Relaunching Negotiations over Western Sahara*, 14 October 2021.

⁶ "Chapter XI: Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories", UN Charter, 26 June 1945.

⁷ "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita", U.S. Department of State, 20 March 2023.

⁸ "Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara", Trump White House Archives, 10 December 2022.

⁹ "Secretary Rubio's Meeting with Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita", U.S. Department of State, 8 April 2025.

and Morocco.¹⁰ Instead, it played an odd waiting game with the UN, whereby each side was expecting the other to take the initiative and quietly blaming the other for lack of progress. The Rubio statement seemed to move past this dissonance by claiming the facilitator's mantle for Washington. Yet the secretary of state shed no further light on what he planned to do.¹¹

It is still an open question: in the three months that followed, the Trump administration, arguably preoccupied with other foreign policy priorities and paralysed by squabbling, failed to act on Rubio's promise. In an 18 April interview with Al Arabiya, the U.S. senior adviser for Africa, Massad Boulos, announced his intention to visit Algiers and Rabat as part of efforts to bring an end to the Western Sahara conflict.¹² Yet, according to a U.S. diplomat, Trump's chief envoy Steve Witkoff blocked Boulos from travelling to North Africa, asserting ownership of the file for himself.¹³ The administration then clarified the lines of responsibility, putting Boulos in charge. He was preparing to make the trip in June, but he was forced to postpone it due to the outbreak of the Iran-Israel war.¹⁴

The internal struggles seemed to concern not only the attribution of roles but also the formulation of strategy. The same U.S. diplomat said the administration wanted to move quickly, as it considered resolving the Western Sahara conflict "a big opportunity".¹⁵ Its motives were unclear, the diplomat went on to say, but the appetite for making another "deal" after the high-profile agreement between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo seemed to be a key factor. But the White House did not tell the U.S. diplomatic corps how exactly to proceed. European diplomats in Rabat relayed that their U.S. counterparts were unable to explain Washington's thinking about the conflict for lack of guidance.¹⁶

It was only in late July that Boulos was able to make his first official visit to the region, limiting his trip to Algeria, where he discussed Western Sahara, among other matters, with President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.¹⁷ He reportedly also met with Moroccan and French officials in Paris.¹⁸ These conversations kick-started a new round of diplo-

¹⁰ Riccardo Fabiani, "Paving the Way to Talks on Western Sahara", Crisis Group Commentary, 20 July 2023.

¹¹ "Secretary Rubio's Meeting with Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita", op. cit.

¹² "Trump's adviser to Arabiya: Efforts to bring Morocco and Algeria closer and develop a vision for a solution in Libya", Al Arabiya, 18 April 2025 [Arabic].

¹³ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. diplomat, May 2025.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, UN official in a European capital, June 2025.

¹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. diplomat, May 2025.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Rabat, May 2025.

¹⁷ Riyadh Hamadi, "L'Algérie expose sa position sur les dossiers sensibles au conseiller de Trump", *Tout Sur l'Algérie*, 27 July 2025.

¹⁸ Mohamed Jaabouk, "Sahara : Paris a accueilli une réunion de coordination Maroc-France-Etats-Unis", Yabiladi, 1 August 2025.

matic activity ahead of the UN Security Council meeting on MINURSO renewal scheduled for October.

B. Pressure Mounts on MINURSO

Meanwhile, other political winds have buffeted U.S. Western Sahara policy. Starting in 2024, writers in Washington's right-wing circles, along with hardliners in Morocco, tried to cajole first the Biden administration and then its successor into dramatically reforming or even shutting down MINURSO. In a series of articles, commentators mainly at conservative U.S. think-tanks and Moroccan media outlets argued that Morocco's de facto control of most of Western Sahara and growing international support for its autonomy proposal meant that the conflict was over, for all intents and purposes, making MINURSO redundant or, at best, in need of a makeover.¹⁹ For the U.S. right, these articles fit with calls for radical cuts to the UN peacekeeping budget worldwide; for Moroccan writers, they reflected widespread sentiment supporting the government's position.

Though distinct in origin, these views converged to feed into a debate inside the State Department about whether the U.S. should seek to terminate MINURSO before or only after the parties reach a U.S.-brokered deal.²⁰ In April, the White House Office of Management and Budget proposed eliminating funding for UN peacekeeping missions.²¹ But the Trump administration's stance on peacekeeping has been less uniformly hostile than on other UN activities, backing some mandate renewals while pressing for mission reforms and closures, such as in Kosovo and, eventually, Lebanon. At the same time, it announced plans to halt future funding for peacekeeping and even rescind contributions already appropriated for 2024 and 2025.²²

In the following months, U.S. officials floated several options for reforming MINURSO, as they tried to reconcile the desire to reduce spending on peacekeeping missions with their goal of fostering a resolution of the conflict. In August, a U.S. delegation visited the mission's headquarters in Laayoune to discuss with UN officials its contri-

¹⁹ See Michael Rubin, "It is time to end the UN mission in Morocco", American Enterprise Institute, 25 October 2024; Sarah Zaaimi, "Why it's time to terminate the UN's dysfunctional mission in Western Sahara", Atlantic Council, 9 April 2025; Eugene Kontorovich, "Next, defund the United Nations", The Heritage Foundation, 2 May 2025; Mohammed Loulichki, "Towards autonomy for the Sahara: A dynamic under way", Policy Center for the New South, 28 April 2025; and Mohammed Jaabouk, "Bachir Dkhil: 'MINURSO no longer has a role to play in the Sahara'", Yabiladi, 7 April 2025.

²⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. diplomat, May 2025.

²¹ "Trump administration proposes scrapping UN peacekeeping funding", Reuters, 15 April 2025.

²² Crisis Group Special Briefing N°13, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025-2026*, 9 September 2025.

bution to managing the conflict.²³ A few weeks before the scheduled October UN Security Council meeting on MINURSO, the U.S. was still considering several options, including drawing down the mission or turning it into a Special Political Mission, which would be tasked with assisting talks but no longer with monitoring the ceasefire on the ground.²⁴

The Moroccan government has never presented termination of MINURSO as its official policy, despite support for closure expressed by several senior figures. While many Moroccans blame the UN for lack of progress in resolving the conflict, not everyone believes that the time is right to pull the plug on the mission prior to a settlement.²⁵ A Moroccan official said some of his colleagues are hostile to MINURSO, but added that he does not agree with this view.²⁶ Likewise, a former Moroccan official underlined that, even though he considered MINURSO useful only for its reporting to the UN Security Council on developments on the ground, “Morocco does not officially call for an end to the mission”.²⁷

The Polisario, for its part, has seemed unfazed by the MINURSO debate, but European officials have expressed concern about what might happen should the mission close. Since hostilities resumed in 2020, the Polisario has been carrying out mainly hit-and-run attacks from the UN-monitored buffer zone on Moroccan military posts. While Front officials dismiss the risks of sending MINURSO home, arguing that it would not change their struggle, European diplomats worry that the mission’s end could push Morocco to seize both the buffer zone and the area that the Front considers liberated, as the kingdom already threatened to do in 2022.²⁸ Moroccan troops would then be exposed to Polisario attacks coming directly from Algerian territory, which in turn could prompt Morocco to go into hot pursuit, putting its troops in direct confrontation with Algerian forces.²⁹

C. *Threats to Designate the Polisario Front as Terrorists*

Another campaign has started to gain traction, focused on pushing U.S. officials to designate the Polisario Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). A stream of articles by Moroccan commentators, published mainly by right-wing U.S. think-tanks, has called for this measure on the basis of the Polisario’s alleged links to Iran and Hiz-

²³ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. diplomat, September 2025.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former and current Moroccan officials; international affairs researchers, Rabat, May 2025.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Moroccan official, Rabat, May 2025.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, former Moroccan official, Rabat, May 2025.

²⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Polisario officials, May-June 2025. Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Rabat, May 2025.

²⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Managing Tensions Between Algeria and Morocco*, op. cit.

zbollah in Lebanon, as well as the threat the Front supposedly poses to North African security.³⁰ In June, this pressure succeeded in convincing Republican Representative Joe Wilson to co-sponsor a bill with Democratic Representative Jimmy Panetta that would classify the Polisario in this way.³¹ Since then, observes a U.S.-based analyst, a lobbying push led by Morocco has gradually gathered momentum in Washington.³²

The allegations against the Polisario are based mostly on circumstantial evidence or hard-to-prove claims, and the Front, Iran and Hizbollah have all in the past denied any official collaboration.³³ For example, the late 2024 claim that Syrian rebels advancing upon Damascus had apprehended a group of Sahrawi fighters defending Bashar al-Assad – whose deposed regime was an Iranian and Hizbollah ally – rests upon a single document allegedly recovered from the headquarters of an Assad regime intelligence agency.³⁴ To date, there are no videos or photos of the Sahrawis who are supposedly in the new Syrian authorities' custody. No other compelling evidence has emerged that would demonstrate the existence of operational ties between the Polisario, Iran and Hizbollah. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that Algeria, always sensitive about sovereignty, would allow external powers to establish close military cooperation with a group that operates from Algerian territory.

On the question of an FTO designation, too, Polisario and Algerian officials have exhibited a certain detachment, while European and UN diplomats have seemed more concerned about potential consequences. Polisario officials downplay this threat to their organisation, stating that the allegations are not credible and that, in any case, an FTO designation would not affect their struggle. "Other national liberation movements like the Palestine Liberation Organisation and

³⁰ See Cherkaoui Roudani, "Will the world finally dare to confront the Polisario threat?", *Modern Diplomacy*, 20 April 2025; Zineb Riboua, "The strategic case for designating the Polisario Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization", Hudson Institute, 18 April 2025; Ahmad Sharawi and Mariam Wahba, "Iran's foothold reaches into North Africa", Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 17 April 2025; Wissam El Bouzdaini, "It is time to recognize the Polisario Front as a Trans-National terror threat", Middle East Forum, 27 April 2025; and Amine Ayoub, "Why America must wake up to Iran's terror proxy in North Africa", *Ynet*, 19 April 2025.

³¹ Post on X by Joe Wilson, @RepJoeWilson, 26 June 2025; and "H.R.4119 – Polisario Front Terrorist Designation Act", U.S. Congress, 24 June 2025.

³² Crisis Group correspondence, U.S.-based analyst, September 2025.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, Polisario officials, Tindouf, March 2025. See also "Iran denies Moroccan accusations of supporting Polisario Front", Al Jazeera, 2 May 2018; and "Hezbollah denies Morocco's claims of its ties with Polisario Front", *Middle East Monitor*, 29 May 2018.

³⁴ Mohammed Jaabouk, "Syrie: Des combattants du Polisario arrêtés par les forces de l'opposition", Yabiladi, 7 December 2025; and "Leaked document exposes Algeria and the Polisario Front's involvement in supporting the Assad regime (photo)", Hibapress, 11 December 2024 [Arabic].

Algeria's National Liberation Front have been called terrorist before", a Polisario official said, adding that "the Sahrawis have nothing to lose".³⁵ An Algerian diplomat was equally unflustered, believing that "the U.S. will not designate the Polisario as a terrorist organisation" because such a step would sabotage its own efforts to negotiate a settlement.³⁶

Yet the possibility of designation risks fuelling the conflict. European diplomats and UN officials worry openly about escalatory impact, arguing that a designation could undermine the UN negotiating framework, harden the Polisario's stance and take the conflict into uncharted territory.³⁷ Judging by experience with FTO designations elsewhere, there is a danger that this measure would severely disrupt humanitarian aid to the camps, as agencies and NGOs would find it legally near-impossible to keep working there. It would also hinder UN-led peace efforts by making engagement with the Front legally difficult and politically toxic. Rather than weakening the Front, the move would likely empower its hardliners, complicating efforts at reaching a negotiated settlement.³⁸

Both MINURSO's termination and a terrorism designation would lower the chances of resuming talks while removing the Front's incentives to keep the level of violence in check. While the proponents of these two proposed measures frame them as pragmatic steps toward ending the conflict, the likely result would be escalation, regional destabilisation and erosion of the limited but still vital negotiating channels.

III. A Wave of Support for the Autonomy Plan

The renewed U.S. interest in bringing an end to this conflict has galvanised diplomatic action, above all at the UN and in Europe. Though the pro-Morocco campaigns have cast a shadow over the possibility of restarting negotiations, Rubio's statement seems to have given the UN envoy, De Mistura, a new lease on diplomatic life. In his October 2024 briefing to the UN Security Council, frustrated with the intransigence of both Morocco and the Polisario Front after three years in his role, De Mistura had alluded to the possibility of resigning in six months if the parties continued to resist making progress toward resolving the

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Polisario official, Tindouf, March 2025.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Algerian diplomat in European capital, July 2025.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Rabat, May 2025; former and current UN officials based in European capitals, May-June 2025.

³⁸ Crisis Group has previously written about cases where FTO designations have had unintended harmful consequences. See, for example, Crisis Group Statement, "The U.S. Should Reverse Its Huthi Terror Designation", 13 January 2021; and Dareen Khalifa and Noah Bonsey, "In Syria's Idlib, Washington's Chance to Re-imagine Counter-terrorism", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 February 2021.

conflict.³⁹ But after meeting with State Department official Lisa Kenna in April, he seized the opportunity created by Rubio to relaunch his own efforts.⁴⁰

In a closed-door briefing to the UN Security Council in April, De Mistura welcomed the promised U.S. re-engagement and proposed parameters for fresh negotiations. He laid out the need for autonomy to be “genuine” and “mutually acceptable”, echoing the U.S. secretary of state, and for the Sahrawi people to exercise “some credible form of self-determination”. Within this framework, De Mistura believed it would be possible to resume talks and, eventually, reach an agreement ending the conflict.⁴¹

Yet Washington and the UN do not appear to be perfectly aligned on how to tackle conflict resolution in this case. A UN official indicated that the Trump administration, in a departure from its predecessor, drew “a clear division of labour: [recognition that] they need to create the space for the UN to mediate”, with Washington’s facilitation paving the way for the envoy’s future mediation.⁴² A U.S. official was less sure about this point, highlighting that Washington “was not exclusionary of the UN nor reliant on them” in its desire to address the Western Sahara issue.⁴³

The precise content of the autonomy plan is also uncertain. Despite international pressure to flesh out the proposal, Rabat has refused to do so. De Mistura has repeatedly called on Morocco to elaborate on the four-page proposal it released in 2007.⁴⁴ European diplomats equally have exhorted Rabat to clarify its proposal, as they feel that the original paper is too short on detail to be given serious consideration.⁴⁵ Moroccan officials counter that the particulars should be negotiated with the Polisario and that laying them out unilaterally at this stage would risk spoiling such talks.⁴⁶

Despite the autonomy plan’s ambiguities, others have joined the UN in taking advantage of the Trump administration’s apparent shift to try closing the Western Sahara file. In June, the UK became the third

³⁹ “Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara Staffan de Mistura. Security Council Consultations – Briefing”, 16 October 2024.

⁴⁰ Ouardani Issa, “US to De Mistura: ‘Autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution’”, Yabiladi, 11 April 2025.

⁴¹ “Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara Staffan de Mistura. Security Council Consultations – Briefing”, UN, 14 April 2025.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, May 2025.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, U.S. diplomat, New York, September 2025.

⁴⁴ “Letter dated 11 April 2007 from the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council”, UN Digital Library; and Mohamed Jaabouk, “Sahara: De Mistura asks Morocco to detail its autonomy plan”, Yabiladi, 16 April 2025. De Mistura has also asked the Polisario Front to elaborate its position.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Rabat, May 2025.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Moroccan officials, Rabat, May 2025.

permanent Security Council member to express full support for the plan, after the U.S. and France. Yet while Washington has called the plan “the only basis” for resolving the conflict and recognised Rabat’s sovereignty over Western Sahara, London’s language was more guarded, calling autonomy “the most credible, viable and pragmatic basis” for peace, mentioning the Sahrawi people’s right to self-determination and eschewing reference to Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory.⁴⁷ A British official confirmed that this wording was intended to highlight the country’s support for Rabat’s position while avoiding a rupture with the UN and international law.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, a Moroccan diplomat said the UK’s stance marked a major victory for Rabat, consolidating Western support for autonomy under the kingdom’s writ.⁴⁹

London’s declaration was part of a new wave of endorsements of the autonomy plan. A few days beforehand, Kenya shifted its position in support of autonomy.⁵⁰ Days later, Ghana did, too.⁵¹ In July, Portugal followed suit.⁵² That same month, the former South African president and uMkhonto weSizwe party leader, Jacob Zuma, broke with his country’s pro-Polisario consensus by calling autonomy the only solution to the conflict.⁵³ In the days that followed, the ruling African National Congress reaffirmed South Africa’s solidarity with the cause of Sahrawi independence, but Zuma’s statement was noteworthy nonetheless.⁵⁴

Algeria and the Polisario responded cautiously to the UK’s nuanced language. While expressing “regret” at London’s shift, Algeria noted that the UK had not gone so far as to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara – a red line.⁵⁵ Likewise, a Polisario official expressed appreciation for British diplomacy, saying, “We engaged with them for weeks before they took their position and they listened to our basic demands: including self-determination and avoiding any recognition of Moroccan sovereignty” in their communiqué.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ “UK-Morocco Joint Communiqué: Strategic Dialogue 2025”, UK Government, 1 June 2025.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, UK diplomat, July 2025.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Moroccan diplomat, European capital, July 2025.

⁵⁰ Ahmed Eljechtmi, “Kenya backs Morocco’s autonomy plan for Western Sahara, joint statement says”, Reuters, 27 May 2025.

⁵¹ Ahmed Eljechtmi, “Ghana endorses Morocco’s autonomy plan for Western Sahara”, Reuters, 6 June 2025.

⁵² Sergio Goncalves, “Portugal signals support for Morocco’s autonomy plan for Western Sahara”, Reuters, 22 July 2025.

⁵³ “Zuma endorses Morocco’s Sahara autonomy initiative”, APA News, 16 July 2025.

⁵⁴ “‘Zuma has no mandate’: SA Government slams use of national flag in Morocco”, ZA South Africa, 7 August 2025.

⁵⁵ “Communiqué”, Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 June 2025.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Polisario official, June 2025.

As a result, the UK became one of the few European countries that has the ear of officials on both sides of the conflict and says it is willing to use its political capital to advance a settlement. London has tried to leverage its position to rejuvenate diplomacy, as highlighted in an August meeting between UK Foreign Office Undersecretary Hamish Falconer and Polisario Foreign Minister Mohamed Yeslem Beisat.⁵⁷

While the UK's new position helped keep the momentum going for Morocco's diplomatic campaign, it also highlighted once again differences in Europe. Most European countries generally back Rabat in its stance, but their stated positions on the autonomy plan vary a great deal. France has been Morocco's most fervent supporter. Relations between Paris and Rabat had deteriorated in 2021-2022 over French visa restrictions, spyware allegations and, above all, France's refusal to go beyond calling the autonomy plan a "serious and credible basis" for peace. With a view to boosting European energy security and establishing new partnerships in the Sahel as France wound down its military mission in Mali, French President Emmanuel Macron was also attempting a rapprochement with Algeria. But that initiative stalled, and he pivoted back to Morocco.⁵⁸ The denouement came in July 2024, when France endorsed the autonomy plan as "the only basis" for resolving the Western Sahara question. Algiers promptly recalled its ambassador from Paris.⁵⁹

Other European countries also bowed to Moroccan pressure, mainly to protect their ties with a country they consider a key partner for managing northward migration and maintaining regional stability. In 2022, Spain adjusted its language on the autonomy plan, after it went through a crisis like France's in relations with Morocco.⁶⁰ Germany, too, had a diplomatic spat with Morocco but now considers the autonomy plan "a good basis" for conflict resolution.⁶¹ Italy simply compliments Morocco for "serious and credible efforts" to end the dispute, so as not to alienate Algeria, which it relies upon for energy supplies.⁶²

⁵⁷ Daniel Hilton, "UK hosts top Polisario official after backing Morocco's Western Sahara plan", *Middle East Eye*, 8 August 2025.

⁵⁸ Brahim Oumansour, "Visite d'Emmanuel Macron en Algérie : entre enjeux mémoriel, énergétique et stratégique", Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques, 31 August 2022.

⁵⁹ "Sahara : le texte intégral de la lettre d'Emmanuel Macron au Roi Mohammed VI", *Le Desk*, 30 July 2025; and "France-Maroc : les raisons du réchauffement diplomatique", TV5 Monde, 27 February 2025.

⁶⁰ "Déclaration conjointe", Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 April 2022; "L'Espagne et le Maroc mettent fin à une brouille diplomatique majeure liée au Sahara occidental", *Le Monde*, 18 March 2022.

⁶¹ "Joint Statement on the Moroccan-German Strategic Dialogue", German Federal Foreign Office, 28 June 2024; Nina Kozłowski, "Maroc-Allemagne : fin officielle de la crise diplomatique", *Jeune Afrique*, 17 February 2022.

⁶² "Sahara Occidentale, l'Italia riconosce gli sforzi 'seri e credibili' del Marocco", *La Presse*, 6 July 2023; Pietro Malesani, "Italian Foreign Policy and the Western Sahara: Balancing Relations with Morocco and Algeria", Istituto Affari Internazio-

Though European countries wish to close the gaps among their various positions and advance a settlement of the conflict, they have struggled to improve coordination on the Western Sahara file. Renewed fighting in the disputed territory could certainly threaten their interests. But with Algeria and Morocco continually sparring for support from Europe, major European governments tend to wind up choosing one or the other. Thereafter, they generally put a higher priority on maintaining smooth bilateral relations with either Algiers or Rabat than on trying to find common ground on Western Sahara. While several European diplomats expressed unhappiness with this situation, they indicated that no government is prepared to take on the responsibility of harmonising these positions, as doing so would mean becoming exposed to dual pressures from Morocco and Algeria that could only heighten tensions and even undermine European interests in the region.⁶³

Algeria, for its part, has continued to champion the Sahrawis' right to self-determination but shown a degree of flexibility in how to demonstrate its support. It has resisted becoming a direct party to the conflict, but it considers itself a concerned regional power. Algiers sees Western Sahara as a Moroccan colony. It regards the Polisario as the sole legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, who it believes should be able to exercise their right to self-determination through an independence referendum.⁶⁴ But Algeria refrains from imposing its preferences for a solution on the Front. It remains open to discussing other options, including territorial partition and the Baker II plan, which it sees as compatible with the principle of self-determination.⁶⁵

IV. An Uneasy Quiet in Western Sahara

At the front, the familiar low-intensity conflict has continued, with occasional more-serious-than-usual incidents. The Polisario's freedom of manoeuvre has remained limited by Moroccan air superiority, established through drones, which chase and destroy the Front's units

nali, 7 December 2022. Italy is a partial exception among European countries, having refused so far to change its language on the autonomy plan, in part because it has grown closer to Algeria. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Rome has been replacing the Russian gas it once purchased with Algerian gas. Over time, the bilateral relationship has evolved, with Italian and Algerian officials having regular exchanges and cooperation coming to encompass other economic and cultural matters, as well as security.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Rabat, May 2025; European diplomats, Rabat and Brussels, May-July 2025.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Algerian diplomat, Brussels, July 2025.

⁶⁵ "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara", UN Security Council, 19 February 2002.

inside the UN buffer zone after each Polisario attack.⁶⁶ A Polisario security official said Morocco's advantage in this respect will only be "temporary", as the group has "no means of countering drone strikes" at present but is "looking for solutions".⁶⁷

The conflict remains governed by implicit rules of the game. Neither side has an immediate interest in heating it up. Polisario officials say they have made a conscious effort to keep the fighting within tacitly agreed-upon bounds, wishing to avoid escalation that would do little to advance their cause.⁶⁸ Morocco seems to have done the same. Both sides have tried to spare civilians, for example, though Rabat has struck Mauritanian and Sahrawi artisanal gold miners near the buffer zone on at least one occasion.⁶⁹ Morocco and the Polisario also continue to accept the presence of MINURSO observers, with the kingdom remaining officially committed to respecting the buffer zone.

Despite this controlled status quo, the Polisario has occasionally carried out strikes inside Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara that were likely intended to show Rabat, as well as external observers, that it can still do serious damage. In November 2024, a Front unit fired upon the area of Mahbes near a civilian gathering celebrating the 49th anniversary of the Green March, as Morocco dubs its 1975 takeover of Western Sahara. While the explosions caused no casualties, video clips showed them triggering panic.⁷⁰ The following June, the Polisario attacked the city of Smara, again without inflicting casualties but terrifying the population.⁷¹ In the words of a Polisario official, "These attacks are a message to Morocco and its public opinion: there is a war from which you cannot hide".⁷²

The Polisario leadership's choice to hew to a low-intensity war has remained controversial within the ranks, with younger Sahrawis and even some officials agitating for a stepped-up armed struggle.⁷³ Recognising such discontent, a Polisario security official cautioned that "despair could push the youth to resort to sabotage and explosions,

⁶⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Managing Tensions Between Algeria and Morocco*, op. cit.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Polisario official, Tindouf, March 2025.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Polisario officials, February-June 2025.

A Sahrawi activist summed up his side's restraint by acknowledging that "in every war there are rules of engagement". Crisis Group interview, Tindouf, March 2025.

⁶⁹ Mohammed Jaabouk, "Sahara : Deux orpailleurs mauritaniens tués à l'est du Mur des Sables", Yabiladi, 17 May 2025.

⁷⁰ Rym Bousmid, "Sahara : ce qu'il faut retenir de l'attaque du Polisario contre Mahbès", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 November 2024; "Round up. Attaque du polisario à Mahbes: le film des événements", Médias24, 11 November 2024.

⁷¹ Mohammed Jaabouk, "Sahara : Le Polisario tire cinq projectiles sur Es-Smara", Yabiladi, 27 June 2025.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Polisario official, Tindouf, March 2025.

⁷³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sahrawi activists, February-June 2025.

which could also damage civilian interests, in the medium term”.⁷⁴ Other Sahrawis in the Tindouf refugee camps underlined the frustration caused by difficult socio-economic conditions and the lack of a political horizon, saying young people can vent it only through smuggling, migrating to Europe or taking up arms against Morocco.⁷⁵

On the other hand, and despite the meagre results of armed struggle, Polisario officials are loath to trade it in for diplomacy as momentum continues to build behind Morocco’s autonomy plan. The Front has stuck to its longstanding demand that Rabat join it in bilateral talks to organise an independence referendum for Western Sahara before it will consider suspending military action. The UN envoy and European governments have repeatedly called upon the group to come up with something new. But the Front has said no. As a Polisario diplomat explained, “Every time we have made a concession to Morocco, Rabat has failed to reciprocate and simply pocketed our compromises”. He added: “We are waiting for the UN to initiate talks and only then will we show tactical flexibility”.⁷⁶

Algeria has been equally careful not to make an escalatory move. It has, for example, declined to give the Polisario its drone jamming technology, such as the Russian-made Repellant 1, which has the potential to change the course of the war.⁷⁷ In a February interview, President Tebboune reiterated that the Polisario is “asking for weapons, which we are refraining from giving them for the time being”.⁷⁸ One likely reason is the government’s desire to avoid an escalation that could trigger armed conflict with Morocco. Another is probably fear of greater international isolation at a time when Algiers is already in the middle of diplomatic crises with France, Mali and the United Arab Emirates.⁷⁹

The low intensity of fighting seems to suit Morocco, too, as it has allowed Rabat to advance a bold diplomatic and economic strategy for Western Sahara. Rabat could have retaliated forcefully after the Mahbes and Smara bombings, but it held back.⁸⁰ The Rubio statement

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Polisario official, Tindouf, March 2025.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Polisario officials, humanitarian workers, Tindouf, March 2025.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Polisario official, June 2025.

⁷⁷ “Algeria operating Russian-made Repellant 1 C-UAS”, *Military Africa*, 7 January 2025.

⁷⁸ “Vu d’Algérie. Abdelmadjid Tebboune se livre dans un journal français : ‘vérités’ ou ‘postures creuses’ ?”, *Courrier International*, 3 February 2025.

⁷⁹ Algeria’s tensions with Mali stem from Bamako’s withdrawal from the Algiers Accords that had put an end to the conflict in northern Mali. A number of military incidents near the border with Algeria have followed, undermining Algeria’s traditional role as mediator in northern Mali. Frictions between the UAE and Algeria have arisen because Algiers accuses Abu Dhabi of expanding its influence in the Sahel (notably through Mali and Niger) to fuel instability in the region.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Moroccan officials, Rabat, May 2025.

gave impetus to Rabat's demand that negotiations be conducted in a roundtable format that would include Algeria and Mauritania, with the single objective of discussing the autonomy plan as the only acceptable solution to the conflict. (Rabat considers the Polisario an Algerian proxy and believes that there can be no agreement without Algiers' direct involvement in talks.) In July, King Mohamed VI extended an olive branch to Algeria in his speech for Throne Day, mentioning the need for a "consensual solution that saves the face of all the parties, where there are no winners or defeated". Instead of Algiers, it was the Polisario that replied, reiterating its longstanding position: dialogue should resume about self-determination and independence.⁸¹

Meanwhile, the kingdom has continued to attract large amounts of foreign capital to Western Sahara, mostly to bolster green hydrogen and other renewable energy projects, with the aim of tying international interests to economic development of the area under Moroccan sovereignty.⁸² Foreign companies appear to view the sparsity of Polisario attacks in the disputed territory as a guarantee that investment and other business will be reasonably safe. The Polisario may seek to disrupt the capital inflow with an upsurge in military action. Young Sahrawis and some officials have indicated that civilian aviation and foreign interests in Western Sahara may soon be targets, though no such attempt has yet been made.⁸³

Against this backdrop, it remains unclear if Morocco is still genuinely interested in negotiating an autonomy deal with Algeria and the Polisario. Numerous Western and UN officials suspect that Rabat no longer seeks this objective, given the lack of international pressure and its ability to manage the status quo.⁸⁴ For their part, Moroccan officials and researchers regularly question whether it remains realistic to pursue a deal, given the Polisario and Algeria's well-known rejection of the autonomy plan.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, Rabat may be working discreetly on a different path forward, alongside its official stance, outside the UN mediation framework and without the Polisario's involvement.⁸⁶ UN officials say it would entail staging a vote at the UN General Assembly based on a recommendation from the Fourth Committee on decolonisation to remove

⁸¹ "Main tendue à Alger : le roi du Maroc, Mohammed VI, persiste et signe", *Le Point*, 31 July 2025; and "Sahara occidental : le Front Polisario répond à Mohammed VI", *Tout Sur l'Algérie*, 4 August 2025.

⁸² Omar Soussi, "Green Hydrogen: 5 consortiums to invest 319 billion dirhams in Moroccan Sahara", *Yabiladi*, 7 March 2025; and "Morocco, UAE firms discuss \$10 billion wind power project in Sahara", *Africa Energy Portal*, 11 July 2025.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Sahrawi refugees and activists, Tindouf, March 2025.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, EU and UN officials, 2021-2025.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former and current Moroccan officials, Rabat, May 2025.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Sahrawi activists, Tindouf, March 2025.

Western Sahara from the list of non-self-governing territories.⁸⁷ Various former Moroccan diplomats have publicly discussed this scenario, indicating that such a vote, combined with termination of MINURSO, could settle the conflict even without Algeria and the Polisario's consent, at least from an international law perspective.⁸⁸ With the list of governments supporting Rabat's stance on Western Sahara getting steadily longer, such a goal seems increasingly within reach, but Polisario officials say it would not stop their struggle for independence.⁸⁹

V. Returning to the Negotiating Table

Almost five years since it resumed, the Western Sahara conflict remains contained within the unstated rules of the game, with a low death toll and a modest risk of regional escalation. The implicit understanding among the parties to keep a lid on hostilities rests mainly on a shared interest in avoiding war between Algeria and Morocco. At the same time, neither the Polisario nor Morocco feels a need to silence the guns. For the Polisario, fighting is a means of putting pressure on Morocco and the main outside powers, such as the U.S. and European countries, to back off the autonomy plan. For Rabat, the Polisario's raids are acceptable, since it can contain them with its air superiority and since they do not interfere with its diplomatic strategy. The resulting equilibrium is precarious, however, as impatient Sahrawi youth push for more muscular Polisario action and hardliners in Washington and Rabat work to undermine MINURSO and formally brand the Polisario as terrorists.

The Trump administration's desire to help bring the parties back to the negotiating table is a welcome development for a territory whose status has been in limbo since 1975. Trump's hunger for "deals" that he can claim have ended armed conflicts is likewise promising. At the very least, it is a departure from years in which the U.S. and European countries have preferred to manage, rather than resolve, this dispute. The Biden administration's careful approach to Western Sahara had the benefit of muffling the conflict's repercussions. Even so, under Biden the U.S. stubbornly refused to spend political capital on restarting talks, which proved to be a drag on the UN envoy's efforts to find a solution.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former and current UN officials, European capitals and by telephone, May 2025.

⁸⁸ "Sahara. Les principaux scénarios de clôture du dossier", *Médias24*, 10 June 2025; and Mohammed Loulichki, "Towards Autonomy for the Sahara: A Dynamic Underway", Policy Center for the New South, 28 April 2025.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Polisario officials, Tindouf, March 2025.

But the devil is in the absence of detail. The Trump administration's policy lacks coherence, with the White House having failed to clarify what it intends to do since Rubio made his statement in April. The resulting confusion can be attributed partly to the multiplicity of other crises, from Ukraine to Gaza and Iran, that have pushed this peripheral, low-intensity conflict into the background. Yet, having made the first move, the administration needs to spell out its policy toward Western Sahara by reassuring all concerned parties that it intends to help broker an agreement under UN auspices.

Washington should work in support of the UN envoy's efforts, dropping any illusion that settling this conflict could be a quick win achieved outside this diplomatic framework. Since the 1990s, the UN has proven to be the only mediator acceptable to both sides. While Morocco might be open to a direct U.S. mediation, it is unlikely that the Polisario would ever agree to Washington taking the UN's place. Instead, the U.S. should prepare itself for a long, difficult process by pressing Morocco, the Polisario and Algeria to accept a resumption of talks. Its intervention should not be a one-off effort, but a regular engagement that should go on even if dialogue does recommence. In addition, the U.S. should reiterate the parameters for future negotiations set by the UN envoy in his April briefing to the Security Council.

The U.S. should also encourage all parties to adopt modest confidence-building measures. It should ask Morocco to release at least some of the nineteen Sahrawi activists detained since the 2010 Gdeim Izik protests. It should push the Polisario, in return, to temporarily halt its buffer zone attacks in a unilateral truce. Other steps could include the restart of Sahrawi family visits between Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and the refugee camps in Tindouf, which were suspended in 2014.⁹⁰ These actions could help create a modicum of good-will between the parties that lets De Mistura do his job.

The U.S. should also press Morocco and the Polisario to elaborate on their respective positions. Both sides need to offer more details and, most importantly, introduce new elements to their stances, which are almost twenty years old. Rabat in particular should seize this opportunity to go beyond the four-page document from 2007 and give guarantees to the Front that the autonomy it speaks of is genuine. A revised proposal should include credible ideas about how to ensure Sahrawi control of natural resources, education and security in an autonomous territory. It should also specify how the population will be kept safe if an agreement falls apart.

⁹⁰ "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara", UN Security Council, 10 April 2015.

To increase pressure on both sides, Washington should work with the rest of the Security Council to leverage its plans to reform MINURSO by linking it to progress toward a settlement. It should not rush to downsize the mission, as that might precipitate a regional escalation. Instead, Washington should use debate over MINURSO to ratchet up pressure on the parties to make tangible progress. At present, the Security Council discusses the mission in open session once a year, prior to the vote on the mandate renewal, as well as in a mid-year closed-door session. In its capacity as penholder on the file, the U.S. should push for public Council deliberations on MINURSO to take place more frequently, ideally every quarter.

The U.S. should also ask the UN Secretary-General to prepare a road-map for MINURSO's gradual drawdown or transformation into a Special Political Mission in the medium term, informed by a detailed set of benchmarks for the main parties. Among these metrics should be the adoption of confidence-building measures, a cessation of hostilities, revised versions of the Moroccan and Polisario proposals for settling the conflict, and the restart of direct talks, on which the UN envoy would report periodically. Crucially, the mission's military monitoring component should be protected until an agreement between the two sides is in place.

Europe should back the U.S. initiative by highlighting the need to stand behind the UN, safeguard MINURSO and avoid dangerous unilateral action. The European Union and its member states, as well as the United Kingdom, should identify a lowest common denominator among their diverging positions, including supporting the UN envoy's parameters, backing MINURSO, rejecting an FTO designation for the Polisario and pressing Morocco, the Polisario and Algeria to remain committed to the tacit rules of engagement in Western Sahara. (While Algeria is not militarily involved in Western Sahara, the conflict can impinge upon its security, as happened in November 2021 when the Moroccan army allegedly killed a number of Algerian civilians.)

For Europeans and the UK to collaborate effectively, they should informally task an experienced and unbiased diplomat to help break the logjam in their positions. This figure would organise informal consultations with the main European governments, ideally also involving London, the only major European capital that continues to have access to all the conflict parties. Such discussions could give European governments a chance to agree on common language or even produce a joint statement that would highlight their shared support for MINURSO, their opposition to an FTO designation and the importance they attach to the conflict parties abiding by the unwritten rules of engagement.

These two diplomatic initiatives, by the U.S., Europe and the UK, could generate enough momentum for the UN to work out a new negotiating format with the participation of Morocco, the Polisario

and Algeria. With U.S. and European support, the envoy should work out an arrangement reconciling Morocco's demand that Algeria be involved in negotiations with the latter's refusal to be considered a direct party to the conflict. For example, De Mistura could put forward a format featuring several negotiating tables, each dedicated to an issue like economic affairs, security and regional matters, and which could involve different states depending on the topic under discussion. While Algeria would not be present for political discussions, it could be involved in talks about security and regional affairs. Likewise, De Mistura should continue to push Morocco and the Polisario to elaborate on their respective positions and show a greater degree of flexibility than they have so far.

The Polisario and Algeria would likely find it hard to swallow negotiating with Morocco so long as the autonomy plan is the basis for talks, but they should do so to stave off the prospect of actions contrary to their interests regarding MINURSO or Western Sahara's international legal status. Refusal to re-engage in the UN process could end up strengthening the anti-Polisario campaign in Washington and further tempt Rabat to try getting Western Sahara removed from the UN list of non-self-governing territories. The Polisario and Algeria could agree to return to the table on the condition that any agreement provide for the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination, using the 2003 Baker II plan (which combined autonomy and self-determination, a formula the Front accepted at the time) as a reference.

Likewise, Morocco should embrace the parameters set by De Mistura and agree to the principle of self-determination for the Sahrawi population, in addition to autonomy for Western Sahara. Doing so would not dilute its position, as Rabat did not object to including a reference to self-determination in its June joint statement with London. Agreeing to resume negotiations on this basis would also keep at bay any suspicions that Morocco is pursuing other, unilateral options.

For his part, the UN envoy should explore what room for manoeuvre may exist between Morocco's autonomy proposal and the Polisario's demand for self-determination. He should push both sides to be flexible in their demands and creative in their interpretations of autonomy and self-determination. While Rabat and the Polisario have been intransigent in their respective understanding of these principles – limited autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty for the former, a referendum on independence for the latter – both sides should be ready to show more pragmatism, especially when it comes to how their positions could be put into practice. In the end, a credible, sustainable resolution to the Western Sahara conflict cannot be achieved without the consent of both sides.

VI. Conclusion

The status quo in the Western Sahara conflict may look stable, but in fact it is shaky. That diplomacy has awakened from dormancy is a hopeful sign. But Washington's mixed signals, combined with European disunity and hardline rhetoric from the U.S. right and Morocco, risk blocking the only viable path to resolving the dispute: a negotiated settlement under UN auspices. The lobbying to dismantle MINURSO or designate the Polisario as a terrorist group threatens to rupture the implicit restraint that has kept fighting contained. Meanwhile, Morocco's gradual push to change the legal status of Western Sahara at the UN could render negotiations irrelevant, closing the window for compromise with the Polisario and Algeria.

To prevent this outcome, the U.S. and European powers should recommit to diplomacy with clarity and coordination. Washington should spell out a consistent strategy that supports the UN framework and presses all parties to come back to the table on the basis of the principles of autonomy and self-determination. Europe can boost the chances of a settlement if it aligns behind a common position. Without renewed leadership and a unified approach, the U.S. and European countries risk watching the Western Sahara conflict slide into a more volatile phase, one that could further entrench divisions, undermine regional stability and render future negotiations far more difficult to set up.

Algiers/Rabat/Tindouf/Brussels, 20 October 2025

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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