

Things are getting hot in Western Sahara

Amol Rajput 1 week ago



November 6, 2021

Dakhla and Mahives

NSHE TEA It was very caffeine-filled, but I felt terrible. As the night went on, I heard the sound of a cannon in the distance. About 15 Sahrawi soldiers set up a camp under one of the rare bushes in the western desert of Sahara. The youngest of them, who looked like a teenager or younger, searched the sky for a surveillance drone. "War is the only way," said one. Shortly before midnight, the radio operator received news that a Moroccan battery was firing. Then came the echo of the thunder of a falling missile.

Listen to this story

Enjoy more audio and podcasts with [iOS](#) Also [Android](#)..

The decade-old conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front, a nationalist movement for independence in Western Sahara, is intensifying again. For the past year, Morocco has United Nations Polisario claims to have launched more attacks, but more than 1,000 Polisario "incidents" fired at its troops. Most of the battle was a duel of cannons along the longest front line in the world. A 2,700 km (1,700 mile) sand or berm wall built by the Moroccan army and mine-sown. The commander of the Polisario Front says dozens of their soldiers and many civilians have been killed. Morocco has officially denied that the war has resumed.

But war is affecting a wider area in an undeniable way. In particular, by fostering competition between Morocco and Algeria in support of Polisario. The conflict in Western Sahara contributed to Algeria's

decision to cut off diplomatic relations with Morocco in August. Algeria then stopped supplying natural gas to the kingdom via the Maghreb-Europe pipeline. It also receives gas from the pipeline and may hurt Spain in the midst of an energy crisis. Meanwhile, the Biden administration is linked by Donald Trump's 2020 decision to break international consensus and recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Decades after the fate of the disputed territory was determined, it has not caused the end of the problem.

Broken promise

Morocco and Polisario began fighting when colonial Spain withdrew from Western Sahara and Morocco annexed its territory in 1975. Both sides stopped in 1991 United Nations-A sponsored peace process designed to conclude with a referendum on independence within the territory. But voting never happened, mainly due to Moroccan sabotage. The Kingdom wants to use vague offers of autonomy as the basis for new negotiations. Polisario rejects the proposal and says the ceasefire is over. Currently, Morocco controls nearly 80% of Western Sahara. Polisario does the rest (see map).

The feud between Morocco and Algeria goes back further. After Algeria's independence from France in 1962, they fought a short war across the border. Algeria's support for revolutionary movements around the world has always offended the Moroccan monarchy. However, Algerian officials claim that Morocco has contributed to its own anxiety by supporting armed groups such as Islamists during the Algerian Civil War. As a result, Algeria closed its border in 1994 (it remains closed). This year, Morocco was reported to have targeted Algerian officials' phones with spyware. Algeria also said the kingdom supported a group allegedly involved in firing in northern Algeria and blamed the bombing on November 3 for killing three Algerian truck drivers.

Polisario action comes with the blessing of Algeria, which accepts group leaders and many humble Sahrawi refugees. "We are facing a war situation," says an Algerian diplomat. The country has a habit of boosting the guerrilla movement. Algeria hosts Che Guevara, trains young Nelson Mandela and invites Yasser Arafat. In 1974, he spotlighted the Palestinian cause. Last year, Algeria opposed Morocco by establishing diplomatic relations with Israel as part of a deal in which the United States granted control of Morocco in Western Sahara.

However, Algeria's motives are also strategic. If Polisario dominates Western Sahara, Algeria will gain access to the Atlantic Ocean and an easier route to West Africa, and Morocco will be bordered in the northwestern corner of the continent. Instead, I've seen Morocco abuse its territory. The part of the Kingdom of Western Sahara has the rights to phosphate, oil and fishing. It sought to consolidate control of the territory and provided generous subsidies to the Moroccans moving there. This policy could also help influence the vote if Morocco was forced to hold a referendum on Western Sahara's independence.

The kingdom has spent billions of dollars repairing Western Sahara. Many of the buildings in the capital, Laayoune, appear to have been built quite recently, including consulates opened by more and more

African countries. The coastal city of Dakhla was a fishing village 40 years ago. It is now a fast-growing resort full of kite surfers. A large port is being built for supply to West Africa. Trucks run on Western Sahara, a coastal road that connects Morocco to a wider area. Deployment of the kingdom's army United Nations-Last year, the buffer zone patrolled to clear the path of protesters sparked the current battle.

Morocco has long been a low-cost manufacturing hub for European companies. Recently, he has been trying to establish trade relations with allies in sub-Saharan Africa. Morocco returned in 2017 after boycotting the African Union for 32 years over the inclusion of Western Sahara. King Mohammed VI We have opened dozens of new embassies and consulates on the continent. Most of Morocco's foreign investment is directed to sub-Saharan Africa. This paid off: less than half AU Members are currently aware of Western Sahara. In general, Morocco's influence in Africa is expanding with the decline of Algeria. Jihadists were accused when two Moroccan truck drivers were killed across Sahara earlier this year. However, Western diplomats suspect that Algeria, which is trying to prevent Morocco from pushing south, may have played a role.

The situation in Western Sahara complicates Morocco's external relations elsewhere. In September, the Court of Justice of the European Union EU And Morocco contained territory. (Appeals are pending.) As Spain recognizes Polisario leader Brahim Ghali for the treatment of covid-19, the kingdom will drop thousands of immigrant candidates to Ceuta, a Spanish outpost earlier this year. Allowed that. Morocco also lost relations with Germany over its "negative attitude" towards Western Sahara.

In October United Nations Security Council extended MINURSO, NS United Nations He called for a peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara and resumption of negotiations. new United Nations The envoy, Staffan de Mistura, has been appointed to the territory. But America's position is a confusing issue. Extended resolution MINURSO At the request of Russia, it reportedly called for the "self-determination of the people of Western Sahara" added by the United States. That would seem inconsistent with America's official position to recognize Moroccan rule. President Joe Biden has not yet announced whether he will maintain that stance that critics claim to set a dangerous precedent.

Lead their anger

Leaders of the Polisario Front, based in a refugee camp near the Algerian city of Tindouf, said the Moroccan operation had to break the ceasefire. But they were also under pressure at home. 173,000 Sahrawi refugees in Algeria are restless. They say it hasn't been raining in Tindouf for years and their herds are sick. Although international aid has declined, Algeria seems to be trying to keep the Sahrawi people in camps and not abandon the struggle. The Polisario Front is worried that frustration can boil and lead to radicalization. "The situation is like a volcano that can erupt," says a Sahrawi journalist.

The fight bought leadership time. But young Sahrawi people now want to escalate. "They don't feel we're in a true state of war yet," says Gari's adviser, Bacil Mustafa. Saharawi's diplomat, Maran Ann Rakar, agrees.

The young Sahrawi “want to attack,” he says. “They want prisoners. They want to see large-scale businesses like the 1970s and 1980s.” Many of them have applied for military training. Overseas Sahrawi people, in collaboration with the Sahrawi army, made a tough 10-day trip through the Mauritanian desert to circumvent Algeria’s Covid-related travel bans.

The war blew the sails of Polisario for the first time in years. However, it is not clear what will happen next. Mustafa promises a “second stage” of combat. “All leadership is for this,” he says. However, Polisario’s military power declined during the ceasefire, far from Morocco’s military power. It is normal to see Sahrawi officers in their 70s and commanding soldiers in their early 20s. If things really start, Algeria’s support will be essential. The Polisario Front wants Algeria to see war as an opportunity to rejuvenate the country’s drifting foreign policy.

Some Polisario Fronts want to pursue other tactics, such as attacking deeper in the territory occupied by Morocco. It’s “far beyond the possibilities,” says Mohammed Wari Akeik, who was recently appointed Chief of Staff of the Saharawi Army. “Companies, consulates, airlines and other sectors” are all potential targets, he says. Many of these can be rough. The Polisario Front likes to claim that its artillery and raids are demoralizing Morocco. We hope that escalation will make Morocco so uncomfortable that it makes concessions.

However, Moroccan troops are digging along the front lines. The surveillance drone patrols the skies of Western Sahara. In September it received the first batch of Turkish combat drones. Morocco’s military spending increased 29% last year. Algeria is afraid to work with Israel to impose will on the region. Moroccan officials have expressed their support for Algerian Amazighian separatists and suggest that their controlling generals should return to the barracks. Algeria then moved the army to the border. Diplomats say they are working with the controversial Russian security company Wagner Group.

Polisario is unlikely to realize its dream of independence in Western Sahara. Some observers consider it the best. Without Morocco’s support, the independent Sahrawi state may struggle. We need the help of Algeria, which is richer than Morocco, thanks to its abundant hydrocarbons. But Algeria itself is confused. Efforts to separate the economy from oil and gas have diminished. The massive protests of 2019 led to the resignation of the president. However, the general public considers the new to be a military doll. The state is obsessed with cracking down on democratization-related groups *Hirac* Movement.

Nae to autonomy

Morocco is ready for the future. Home to Africa’s largest car and plane manufacturer and fastest trains. Over 60% of Moroccans receive two jabs of the covid-19 vaccine, compared to 10% of Algerians. More than one-third of the country’s energy comes from renewable energy. Still, there are many unfortunate things for the Sahrawi people on the Moroccan side. People who talk about independence say they are

denied work. Activists have been captured by the police. Regarding Morocco's offer of autonomy, the Sahrawi have pointed out a repressive monarchy. It wouldn't be like Scotland in the UK, they say.

Of course, things are even worse on the other side of the berm, where many Sahrawi people have spent their lives in dusty camps. Some participated in *Hirac*— And I'm thinking about Polisario's leadership. Mr. Gari is 72 years old. Still, Polisario's gray leaders seem reluctant to pass on to a new generation. For now, the focus is on war, anyway. No one trusts United Nations Just to find peace. At the Boujdour refugee camp, a young Sahrawi woman says updating an old ceasefire is out of the question. "We don't allow that." The mood is the same on the front lines when a fighter called Omar is armed and ready. "If there is negotiation in the future, it will be under the sound of a gun," he says. ■■

This article was published in the printed Middle East and Africa section under the heading "Deserts in Conflict".

Things are getting hot in Western Sahara