

Western Sahara conflict risks spilling over into the Sahel: how it can be resolved

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starting point the Sahrawi people's inherent sovereignty over their own land, while providing greater protections for their rights.

The current peace process is facing an existential crisis. This year marks [the 30th anniversary of the creation of the UN mission](#). In 1991, the UN brokered a ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario, but effectively abandoned the idea of holding an outright vote on independence a decade later.

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Since then, the UN Security Council has overseen an [unravelling peace process](#). It finally collapsed last year with the resumption of [armed clashes](#).

In a worst-case scenario, unchecked violence between Morocco and Polisario could spill over into neighbouring countries and further destabilise the Sahara-Sahel region. Former US president Donald Trump's [recognition](#) of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara – a policy [maintained](#) by the Biden administration – has complicated the search for peace.

There are plenty of reasons to be pessimistic about the prospects for a negotiated agreement that finally fulfils Sahrawi self-determination. Still, there are reasons to be optimistic. A timely, durable and just resolution to the Western Sahara conflict is possible.

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Disclosure statement

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This means rectifying past mistakes.

Big ask

The new UN envoy is a tough and principled diplomat with deep experience of complex diplomacy after serving as the UN's envoy to Syria. Past envoys have shared similar qualities. But this will count for little without strong support from the Security Council, particularly the US and France, when tough decisions must be made.

De Mistura must also change diplomatic tack. He can't simply facilitate dialogue between the parties. He must be given the political strength to drive forward a realistic UN-developed plan to achieve Sahrawi self-determination in the face of strong opposition from Morocco, which claims the territory as its own.

This will certainly be no small feat. But it is the most realistic path forward.

For over two decades, the UN Security Council has called on Morocco and Polisario to reach a negotiated political solution that respects UN norms of decolonising non-self-governing territories. Implicitly, this mandate assumes that a solution will be found between the options of independent statehood or integration into Morocco.

Over the past decades, this search for an alternative – a “third way” – has been dominated by the idea of autonomy. This has been an additional source of failure.

It isn't surprising, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, autonomy is merely a form of integration – it's not an alternative to it.

Secondly, autonomy arrangements have a poor track record of permanently resolving ethnic conflicts in postcolonial and developing regions. The collapse of Yugoslavia and the bloody wars between Ethiopia and Eritrea both have their roots in failed autonomy arrangements.

Thirdly, the autonomy plan put forward by Morocco in 2007 lacks any safeguards to ensure continuing respect for Sahrawi rights and self-governance by the Moroccan regime. This is a critical issue since the plan would formally integrate Sahrawis into an autocratic system that has a history of suppressing their nationalism, human rights and political agency.

Unsurprisingly, Polisario has rejected Morocco's plan as a non-starter.

Fourthly, autonomy runs contrary to Western Sahara's international legal status as a non-self-governing territory that is separate from Morocco. This was recently affirmed in a ruling of the EU Court of Justice.

But this doesn't mean that the UN Security Council should stop searching for middle ground.

Free association as an alternative?

The UN should explore the lesser-known concept of free association.

Under this arrangement, the Sahrawis (through Polisario) would delegate aspects of their sovereignty to Morocco and to a newly created state of Western Sahara. Robust international guarantees and supervisory mechanisms would help to ensure both sides respect the agreement.

The concept has been put forward in UN General Assembly [resolutions](#) as well as International Court of Justice [deliberations](#) as one means of de-colonising Western Sahara.

Any future arrangement with Morocco must above all reflect the consent of the Sahrawi people through an informed and democratic process. A free association agreement would therefore still need to be accepted by the Sahrawis in a referendum. A limited number of Moroccan settlers could also be given the right to vote in a referendum.

Critics point out that neither side has much reason to back such a solution. This is true. But if a negotiated agreement is ever to be found, it is most likely to fall within the realm of free association rather than outright independence or integration in Morocco.

A diplomatic solution is possible. But it will require both sides to make concessions to get what they want. This can only happen through increased international diplomatic activism. The UN Security Council, the EU, and their respective members all have the capacity to shape this future by deploying the right combination of incentives and disincentives.

Polisario will need to be convinced that delegating some authority to Morocco is a suitable price to pay for an end to the Moroccan occupation and internationally recognised Sahrawi statehood. This will have to include guarantees that any future deal will be enforced by the international community.

To make progress, the UN Security Council and the EU will also need to apply real leverage on Morocco – something they have proven reluctant to do. By virtue of its status as the [occupying power](#), the overwhelming control it exerts on the ground, and its obligations under previous UN resolutions and international law, it is Rabat that will have to move the most.

France and the US also need to apply pressure. As a start, France and the US should remove their automatic protection for Morocco at the UN Security Council. And Washington should suspend Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty should Rabat block UN-led peace efforts.

Few in the international community consider Western Sahara to be a pressing foreign policy issue. Yet, given the slow deterioration of security in Western Sahara and potential wider implications for north-west Africa and Europe, the appointment of a new UN envoy offers a rare moment to reboot international diplomacy.

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