

# Decolonization's Last Stand in the Sahara

How the Polisario Front's 50-year war for independence is escalating a battle over a territory long disputed—and feeding a broader crisis.

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Polisario Front commander Abwa Ali oversees the preparations of a rocket attack against Morocco's Berm from Polisario-controlled Western Sahara on May 26. PESHA MAGID AND ANDREA PRADA BIANCHI FOR FOREIGN POLICY

NEAR THE BERM, WESTERN SAHARA—Abwa Ali, the commander of the Polisario Front's second district, is pleased with his latest rocket attack against Morocco. He is a grizzled man in his late 60s who has been fighting since the 1970s for the independence of Western Sahara, a

territory disputed between Morocco and its indigenous Sahrawi people. He wears thick black sunglasses like an aging rock star and knows how to navigate the roadless, ever-repeating desert without a map or compass.

He speeds away from the site of the attack in a tan Toyota with a sawed-off top that the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi liberation movement, uses to blend into the desert. They remove the windshield so there is no chance that the sun will glint against the glass and give their position away to enemy surveillance. As the car bumps over the pebbled ground, the boom of a Moroccan reply sounds out, and plumes of sand bloom on the horizon. Ali counts off the number of shells discharged with increasing satisfaction: The more weapons Morocco wastes, the happier he is.

Ali has been fighting this war on and off for 50 years. A mottled scar on his stomach and pieces of shrapnel buried in his legs tell the story of the last time that this conflict was hot. He represents a generation that began as guerrilla fighters against the then-colonizer Spain, only to shift to squaring off against occupying Moroccan forces once Madrid pulled out in 1976. Morocco wanted (and still wants) to exploit the immense phosphate reserves within Western Sahara's borders and viewed Sahara as part of a greater nationalist enterprise.



Polisario fighters fire a 120mm mortar against Morocco's Berm from Polisario-controlled Western Sahara on May 26. PESHA MAGID AND ANDREA PRADA BIANCHI FOR FOREIGN POLICY

The Polisario Front's fight against Morocco never technically ended. In 1991, after 15 years of war, the Polisario and Morocco declared a cease-fire with the understanding that the United Nations would soon hold a referendum on independence in the disputed territories. It never happened. Now the Polisario Front only controls around 20 percent of Western Sahara. Its headquarters are in refugee camps in the southwest of Algeria, which supports it partially to needle its regional rival, Morocco.

After 29 years of uneasy *détente*, in November 2020, Morocco sent soldiers to disperse a Sahrawi protest, and the Polisario Front declared the cease-fire null and void. Commanders like Ali have been carrying out attacks against Moroccan positions ever since.

The war in Western Sahara often gets called a “forgotten” conflict, but this return to the battlefield is bringing tensions across the Maghreb to a boil.

A month after the end of the cease-fire, former U.S. President Donald Trump declared U.S. support for Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara in order to bring Morocco into the Abraham Accords, a series of deals aiming at normalizing relations between Arab-majority countries and Israel. Morocco used the decision—the first time a U.N. member state had recognized Rabat’s claims—as a launching pad to rally diplomatic support for its claim over Western Sahara, and simultaneously drew closer to Israel and especially its arms industry.

As a result, Algeria and Morocco’s already strained diplomatic relations came to a bitter end, and even Spain and France are getting drawn into a complicated battle, one of the last unresolved decolonization fights left from the 20th century. “For Algeria,” said one former U.N. official with long experience in the dispute, “Western Sahara has enormous strategic importance. It keeps Rabat stuck fighting with Polisario at minimal cost for Algiers. It is a delicate situation that risks spiraling out of control.”

Geoff Porter covers nothing but North African geopolitics at his consultancy, NARCO. “I’m more worried than I’ve ever been,” he said.

The seed of this potentially sprawling conflict is the long-delayed hopes of the Sahrawi people, whose liberation struggle is grimly continuing despite ever-mounting odds.



Polisario commandos scramble to take up positions near the front line with Morocco during an air-raid drill in Western Sahara on June 14, 1988. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Ali first heard of the Polisario Front on a transistor radio that he would furtively listen to under the covers. In 1973, Western Sahara was still colonized by Spain, which after its discovery of phosphates (vital for fertilizer production) had started pouring money and settlers into the conflict. Ali, like many indigenous Sahrawi people, came from a family of nomads who traversed Western Sahara trading goods and looking for places for their goats and camels to graze.

The Polisario Front was formed in 1973 by a cadre of young Sahrawis, many of whom had been educated in Morocco and inspired by the decolonization movements there and in Algeria. They started out with “17 men and two camels,” in the words of a senior military official in the Polisario Front, Sidi Ovgal. They were led by a charismatic young Marxist, El-Ouali Mustafa Sayed, who sported long hair, a leather jacket, and a decided Che Guevara chic.

Another leader, who would go on to direct the Polisario’s army, was a young man with a thick handlebar mustache named Brahim Ghali, who today is the president of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the one-party state founded and governed by the Polisario Front. He still had the same mustache when *Foreign Policy* met him in the Presidency, a run-down building with peeling yellow paint and very little security, his office decorated by a massive map of Western Sahara on the wall. For a man who has been fighting since the 1970s, Ghali comes off as more avuncular than warrior.



Brahim Ghali, president of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and secretary general of the Polisario Front, talks during a private meeting with *Foreign Policy* at the presidential palace in the Rabouni refugee camp on May 27. PESHAMAGID AND ANDREA PRADA BIANCHI FOR FOREIGN POLICY

Fighters like Ghali, Ali, and El-Ouali used their knowledge of the landscape to face the superior forces of the Moroccans, who rained down white phosphorus munitions and napalm on Sahrawi refugee camps in 1976. “My training was done in the field, especially on the battlefield,” Ghali said in response to a series of written questions.

Moroccan occupation forced the majority of the Sahrawis to flee to refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, a town in a particularly arid patch of desert bordering Western Sahara, where they still live today. In 1981, Moroccan forces started construction on what would become the largest active military wall in the world to divide the territory they occupied from the areas controlled by the Polisario. Morocco seeded the nearly 1,700-mile long (2,700 km) sand wall, famously known as the Berm, with millions of land mines, making it nearly impassable. When Ali brought FP on the rocket attack, he was targeting Moroccan outposts on the Berm, which could be seen as a pale yellow caterpillar-like line in the distance, broken only by the antennas of the occasional Moroccan garrison.



Children play at the Auserd refugee camp near Tindouf, Algeria, on June 18, 1997. SCOTT PETERSON/LIAISON VIA GETTY IMAGES

The 1991 cease-fire was made with the understanding that the United Nations would soon carry out an independence referendum, and Turtle Bay established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). The U.N. classifies Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory, essentially a vestigial colony. As Sahrawis waited for a referendum that would never come, Morocco has been exploiting and profiting from the resources of Western Sahara. It controls 80 percent of the region, where the valuable resources are located. Morocco gets much of its phosphates from the area, and has signed deals with foreign companies, including an Israeli firm, to explore for natural gas off the coast of Western Sahara. Watching Morocco benefit from their land, while promises from the U.N. withered, has made many Sahrawis indignant.

“Now you may ask why the decolonization of Western Sahara remains unfinished,” said Sidi Omar, the Polisario representative to the United Nations, in a recent session for the U.N. Committee on Decolonization. “It is the indefensible inaction of the international community that has encouraged the occupying state of Morocco to continue, with complete impunity, to occupy by force parts of Western Sahara. It is as simple as that.”

Morocco’s representative to the U.N. did not respond to requests for comment. They said they would not speak in any story that included comments from the Polisario Front. Moroccan King Mohammed VI said in November 2021: “the Moroccanness of the Sahara is an immutable and indisputable fact,” and that “Morocco is not negotiating over its Sahara.”

By 2020, many Sahrawi young people were champing at the bit to get a chance to break out of this holding pattern and fight Morocco. Owgat, the Polisario official, said that while the Sahrawis respected their obligations to the United Nations, they were waiting for Morocco to give them the “chance” to officially declare the cease-fire void. When Moroccan forces broke up a peaceful Sahrawi protest in the border town of Guerguerat, they had their chance.



Sahrawi women representatives carry flags and signs as they take part in a parade for the 50th anniversary of the Polisario Front in the Awserd refugee camp on May 21. PESHA MAGID AND ANDREA PRADA BIANCHI FOR FOREIGN POLICY

Morocco is a formidable opponent: Rabat is buying hand-me-down but still advanced military equipment from the United States and Israel, including HIMARS long-range artillery from Washington, and drones from Israel, Turkey, and China. There have been documented drone strikes in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara, and the Polisario Front claims that its forces are regularly targeted by Moroccan air power.

“Morocco is doing a very good job convincing Washington to supply it with weapons systems and other military and defense applications,” said Porter, the consultant. In response, Algeria is running into Russia’s arms to get more guns. “I think there’s this misunderstanding in Washington that is either intentionally or unintentionally fueling an arms race.”

Ghali, like several older Sahrawi fighters, said the front’s past experience as guerrilla fighters made him confident in the current struggle. “We were able to confront Morocco’s military superiority in the past,” he said.

But the Polisario Front would not be able to confront anything without the cooperation of Algeria, which opens its border every day to fighters armed with artillery who shoot at Moroccan soldiers. When they crossed the military checkpoint between the camps and Western Sahara, Ali and his men stopped to chitchat with the Algerians amid big smiles and pats on the back. It infuriates Morocco. But seen from Algiers, Morocco is strengthening ties with two of its old foes, the United States and Israel.

Morocco and Algeria have been adversaries since they both gained independence from France. In 1963 they fought a border war that ruined the relationship between the two countries forever. During the Cold War, Morocco leaned toward the United States, and Algeria toward the Soviets. Since the end of the cease-fire between the Polisario and Morocco in 2020, the old animosity has become an open confrontation. In March 2023, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said the relations with Morocco have reached “the point of no return.” The resumption of fighting along the Berm is the leading cause of strife.



Polisario commander Abwa Ali poses for a portrait in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara on May 26. PESHA MAGID AND ANDREA PRADA BIANCHI FOR FOREIGN POLICY

Nowadays, Ali sleeps in the desert with his team in between small groves of acacia trees. They train young soldiers on how to navigate the landscape without a map or GPS. His unit is a mix of old-timers like himself and young men who pile into cars in goggles and green turbans to protect their faces from the dust and the sand. In a Polisario mortar attack against the Berm, a young man dug a hole and wedged a mortar tube into the ground while Ali and one of his older men paced a hill to locate the exact Moroccan position. The Polisario's strategy is to carry out a war of attrition, in which they will slowly exhaust Morocco's resources—but Morocco has plenty of means, including drones.

The strikes have killed an unknown number of the Polisario Front's fighters, but Polisario-associated organizations claim that between 80 and 100 civilians, including people from other countries, have been killed or injured as a result of Moroccan drone strikes. In November 2021, a Moroccan strike hit a truck transporting fuel with an Algerian license plate in Polisario-controlled territory of Western Sahara. Algeria said three of its citizens died in the strike and accused Rabat of working to "sow and maintain tensions in the region." Morocco replied that there was "no reason to justify the presence of civilians or Algerian nationals ... in this area."

Clashes near the Berm are not the only point of contention between Morocco and Algeria. After Trump recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco normalizing its relationship with Israel, Tel Aviv and Rabat cemented the deal with a bevy of military and economic agreements. Algeria sees this new romance between Morocco, the United States, and Israel—three of its longtime enemies—as a threat to its security. Algerian authorities saw the Pegasus scandal of July 2021 as confirmation of their fears. The Israeli spyware was found infecting the phones of dozens of Algerian officials. One month later, accusing Morocco of massive espionage, Algiers cut diplomatic ties with its neighbor.

Between 2002 and 2022, Algeria's military expenditure increased from \$2.1 billion to \$9.1 billion, while Morocco's rose from \$1.5 billion to a little more than \$4.9 billion, according to the database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Last year, Morocco changed its traditional north-south division of military sectors, adding a third command in the east, along the border with Algeria.

"The Western Sahara conflict is expanding from a regional dimension to an international dimension, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine," said the former U.N. official,

who had long experience with MINURSO. “Morocco is moving toward the U.S. and Israel, while Algeria is courted by Russia. Both are trying to capitalize on the fight between Washington and Moscow.” The North African fight is taking on a broader dimension. Rabat had been initially cautious in supporting Ukraine after Russia’s full-scale invasion began last year, but in the last U.N. General Assembly resolution, it voted against Russia, while Algeria abstained. Algiers imports about four-fifths of all its weapons from Russia. On June 13, Algerian President Tebboune went to Russia for a three-day state visit.



A group of Sahrawi refugee women walk through the sand and wind behind the fence of Smara's camp in Tindouf, Algeria, on Nov. 30, 1998. DOMINIQUE FAGET/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

As tensions grow between Algeria and Morocco, Europe’s traditional actors in the region, Spain and France, are also getting sucked in. In 2022, Spain infuriated the Polisario and Algeria by accepting Morocco’s plan for Western Sahara, which essentially calls for limited Saharawi autonomy under the auspices of the Moroccan monarchy. Madrid’s about-face on Western Sahara angered Algeria, which in June 2022 recalled its ambassador from Spain. One year later, trade between the countries has almost stopped, except for gas and oil, according to Middle East Eye. Algeria cast out the French in 1962 and nearly cost them a president. But France had always been close to Morocco, until another Pegasus spyware scandal pushed the Quai d’Orsay closer to its former department. (Also, Algeria has lots of natural gas.)

Trump’s diplomatic bombshell in 2020 continues to hang over the Biden administration today. On the military side, the United States is fully committed to supporting Rabat; the latest was an estimated \$10 million worth of excess U.S. military equipment sent to Morocco. But from a diplomatic point of view, the Biden administration is in an embarrassing position.

When Trump recognized Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara, he also promised to open a U.S. consulate in Dakhla, a town in the Moroccan-occupied area. Reversing the recognition of Western Sahara would certainly trigger a crisis with Morocco. At the same time, actually establishing the consulate in Dakhla would mean openly going against U.N. policy. So far, the solution has been inactivity: The consulate in Dakhla is still an empty building, and the most active U.S. representation in Western Sahara is a McDonald’s in the main city of

Laayoune. The U.S. State Department said it has nothing new to announce regarding the proposed consulate in Dakhla.

On the Polisario side, Ghali said that both Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty and Biden's arms sales to Rabat "do not serve peace but lead to more tension, as they encourage the occupying state to persist in its opposition to any peaceful and just solution. We urgently appeal to the U.S. to rectify its policy towards Western Sahara."



A man flashes a victory sign as soldiers from the Polisario Front parade past during a ceremony marking the 35th anniversary of the proclamation of independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in the Western Saharan village of Tifariti on Feb. 27, 2011. DOMINIQUE FAGET/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

When asked what he thought would happen to the war in the future, Ghali was sanguine. "Victory is a matter of time. Every generation carries and grows the cause within them," he said.

But that betrays little hope for the short term. The Polisario is outgunned, and if the conflict escalates, will be even more reliant on Algeria for help. Ali and his team don't see any other options, though.

"People either have their land or the grave," Ali said.