

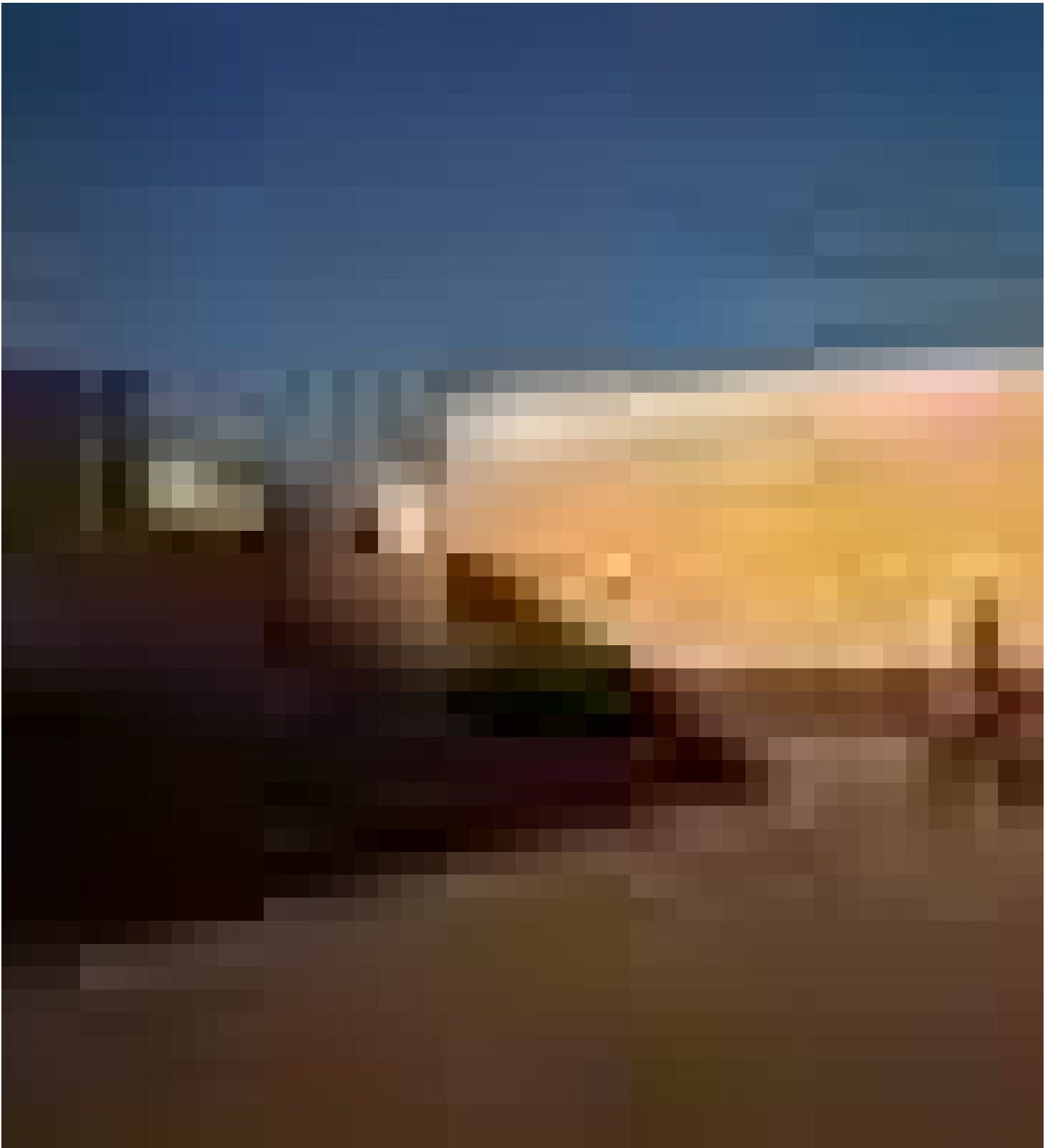
Morocco and Western Sahara: A new conflict brewing?

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With Israel recognizing Western Sahara as part of the Moroccan kingdom and a contentious fishing agreement between Morocco and the EU expiring, tensions are intensifying between the Polisario Front, Morocco and Algeria.

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⌋ Sahara's population is roughly half a million, but it homes rich phosphate mines.

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Characterized by vast expanses of dunes and sparsely vegetated plains, Western Sahara is a predominantly desert and arid territory. The [United Nations categorizes](#) it as a non-self-governing territory, essentially a remnant of a former colony.

But underneath its soil lies abundant reserves of phosphate — a vital component in fertilizer production, which became a strategically important commodity following the war in Ukraine. The territory also has rich fishing waters along its coastline on the Atlantic Ocean.

Morocco considers Western Sahara an integral part of its territory and has maintained de facto control over most of the region for decades. However, most countries — and the United Nations — have refused to endorse Morocco's claim.

Along with the UN General Assembly, several international courts including [the International Court of Justice](#) have ruled that colonialization in Western Sahara is still pending and Morocco's efforts to annex it are illegal.

On Monday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu officially [recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara](#), making Israel the second country (after the United States under the Trump administration) to back Rabat's claims.

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen on Monday welcomed the move, saying in a statement that it would "strengthen the relations between the countries and between the nations, as well as the continuation of cooperation to deepen peace and regional stability."

However, there are concerns that the situation in Western Sahara is in fact moving away from "peace and stability," and that the territories might once

again become scenes of armed conflict between the Moroccan military, the pro-independence Polisario Front, and neighboring Algeria.

How did the Western Sahara conflict begin?

The Western Sahara dispute began in 1975 when Spain, which had been a colonial power, withdrew from the territories and left their future uncertain. In the aftermath of Spain's departure, Morocco organized the "Green March," where thousands of Moroccan civilians entered Western Sahara and asserted Moroccan sovereignty. The move faced resistance from the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and its military wing, the Polisario Front, which claimed they were the representatives of the indigenous Sahrawi people and sought full independence.

Armed conflict broke out between [Morocco](#) and Polisario Front the same year, which continued until the United Nations brokered a fragile ceasefire.

The UN has supported a referendum on self-determination, which has yet to take place due to disputes over issues such as who would be eligible to vote in such a referendum.



The **conflict broke out again in November 2020** when Morocco deployed its military to quell a Sahrawi protest. In response, the Polisario Front declared the existing ceasefire annulled.

"In terms of the human rights situation, Western Sahara is a black hole," Meriem Naili, an international law researcher from the University of Exeter, told DW. "We know that atrocities frequently occur there, but the government in Morocco does not allow officials from the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit the occupied lands," she added.

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"A colonial fishing deal"

Israel's recognition came a day before the end of a [decades-long fishery deal between Morocco and the European Union](#), as the bloc struggles to reconcile its economic interests and following international law.

In 2021, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) delivered a ruling that rendered the EU-Morocco fishing protocol null and void. Currently, the bloc has opted to await the ECJ's response to Morocco's appeal before deciding on whether to extend the protocol.

"It is a historic win for the Sahrawis," said Erik Hagen, a board member of Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW).

He traced the protocol back to a deal made between Morocco and colonial Spain, in which the Spanish agreed to withdraw from the region in exchange for gaining fishing rights from Morocco. "After joining the European Union in 1986, Spain brought this colonial legacy into the EU framework," he pointed out.

WSRW [published an investigation in 2021](#) [↗] suggesting Morocco spends most of the EU's funds and revenues on building settlements for Moroccan fishermen in Western Sahara.



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), the military wing of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), claims to represent the
ous Sahrawi people in their quest for full independence in Western Sahara.

Image: APP/NurPhoto/picture alliance

The controversial fishing pact is only one of the manifestations of the EU
countries' dilemma with Morocco, according to Hagen.

The bloc's officials do not recognize Morocco's sovereignty claims over
Western Sahara and follow the UN in regarding it as a militarily occupied
land. However, EU member states, including France, [Spain](#), and Germany,
support Morocco in granting [autonomy to Western Sahara](#) .

Morocco is an important partner for most EU countries, which makes it tricky
for the EU to push back against Morocco's position on Western Sahara: The
EU has several agreements with the kingdom, including on migration, trade,
and renewable energy.

"Morocco knows how to play these cards," Hagen said. "As long as matters
such as migration remain high on countries' national agenda, the EU member

states would find it hard to make moves that anger Morocco."

The rivalry between Algeria and Morocco

The Trump administration's recognition of Rabat's claims over Western Sahara in 2020 was part of the Abraham Accord, a project aimed at bringing Israel and Arab countries together through a series of trade deals. The relations between Rabat and Tel Aviv continued to improve, with Morocco purchasing an increased sum of military equipment from both the United States and Israel.



U countries, including Spain and Germany, have supported Morocco's plans to grant
ity to Western Sahara.

Image: Moroccan Royal Palace/AP Photo/picture alliance

Morocco's neighbor, [Algeria](#), which also shares a border with Western Sahara, went the opposite way and sought to tighten its military ties with Russia. Algeria severed diplomatic relations with Morocco in 2021. "The

tensions between Morocco and Algeria have been simmering for years now, and it has always had a direct impact on Western Sahara," said Naili.

The rivalry between Morocco and Algeria dates back to their independence, with tensions leading to clashes in Western Sahara at times. For decades, Algeria provided military support to the Polisario Front and allowed its leaders, as well as many Sahrawi refugees, to establish camps within its borders.

Both countries have ramped up their military spending in the past decade, according to the database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Last year, Morocco added a military sector along its borders with Algeria.

"The recognition and even supporting autonomy plan is unlikely to help with the peace process, because it antagonizes one of the conflict's parties," Naili said.

"Nothing short of a referendum can solve this dispute," she added. "No deal between the EU, Morocco, and even Polisario can determine the fate of the Sahrawi people. Sahrawis' autonomy is not theirs to give and international courts have made it clear."

Edited by: Emily Schultheis