

Algeria recalls Spain envoy over Western Sahara policy change

On Friday, Spain said it backed a 2007 proposal by Morocco to offer Western Sahara autonomy under its sovereignty.

Moroccan soldiers are seen on an earth wall that separates areas controlled by Morocco and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara [File: Zohra Bensemra/Reuters]

19 Mar 2022

Algeria has recalled its ambassador from Madrid in protest at Spain's decision to back a Moroccan autonomy plan for the disputed former Spanish colony of Western Sahara.

Morocco sees Western Sahara, with rich phosphate resources and access to lucrative Atlantic fishing waters, as an integral part of its territory.

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A statement carried by Algeria's official media on Saturday condemned the "abrupt about-turn" by Madrid, which had previously maintained neutrality in the decades-old conflict for the territory between Morocco and the Polisario Front independence movement.

On Friday, Spanish foreign minister Jose Manuel Albares backed a 2007 proposal by Morocco to offer Western Sahara autonomy under its sovereignty, describing it as the "most serious, realistic and credible basis" to end the long-running conflict.

Meanwhile, the Polisario Front movement has accused Spain of making a “grave error” after it changed its position.

The Algeria-backed Polisario separatists took up arms in the 1970s and have continued to demand an independence referendum on the basis of a 1991 deal that included a ceasefire.



Friday’s move sparked an angry response from the Polisario, which expressed “surprise”.

“The position expressed by the Spanish government totally contradicts international legitimacy,” the Polisario statement said.

The separatists called on political sides in Spain “to exert pressure on the Spanish government to correct this grave error”.

“The United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, the International Court of Justice, the European Court of Justice and all regional organisations do not recognise Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara,” the movement said.

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Earlier this month, the United States reiterated its support for Morocco's plan for autonomy in the Western Sahara.

“We continue to view Morocco's autonomy plan as serious, credible and realistic,” US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said during a visit to Rabat.

In late 2020, the Trump administration recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as a quid pro quo for the kingdom mending ties with Israel. The deal sparked renewed tensions with Algeria.

The Biden administration has not reversed Trump's decision.