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Sahara: International Crisis Group warns of risk of “broader conflict” if hostilities continue escalating

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The International Crisis Group has warned that a gradual escalation of hostilities over the Sahara issue could spark a broader conflict in the region.

The Algeria-backed Polisario group could launch more attacks on Moroccan territory, targeting foreign economic interests, says the Brussels-based think-tank in its assessment of serious global conflicts risks.

The deadly attacks targeting civilians, intentionally or unintentionally, could flare, especially as younger disillusioned Polisario members dissent with their chiefs may be tempted to escalate attacks, adds the ICG in its conflicts tracker, an early warning tool designed to help prevent deadly violence.

Morocco will likely continue to use drones in the military zone against Polisario militia infiltrators, which could spark an accidental escalation, especially if Algerian nationals (who drive through the territory to transport goods to Mauritania) are killed, says ICG report, noting that Algeria could engage retaliatory steps against Morocco, potentially fueling a direct military confrontation.

Civilian deaths on both sides could trigger retaliatory attacks, while Israel’s military operations in Gaza could stoke anger within Polisario’s youth wing against Morocco, which has normalized relations with Israel, warns the Crisis Group, an independent NGO committed to preventing wars and resolving deadly conflicts.

Tit-for-tat attacks between Morocco on one hand and the Polisario and its main ally, Algeria, on the other, may also increase the risk of a regional escalation, though a major conflict is unlikely, says the document.

If war erupts however, it will divert resources away from migration control in both countries, fueling irregular departures to Europe, and encourage the Polisario and Algeria to target economic infrastructure in Sahara, say the analysts of the think-tank.

Furthermore, the stalled UN-led political process could also lead to direct confrontation between Morocco and Algeria, affecting the whole Maghreb and Sahel regions.

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