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The Western Sahara Conflict: Is Peace Possible in Today's Changing Global Landscape?

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Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara between Morocco and the Sahrawi Polisario Front, focusing on how changes in international recognition and diplomatic support shape negotiation asymmetries and prospects for conflict resolution. While existing literature has largely emphasised questions of self-determination and regional rivalry, it has paid comparatively less attention to how evolving international alignments continuously reshape the dynamics of the conflict. Addressing this gap, the article aims to analyse how shifts in external support influence the balance of power between the parties and affect the feasibility of peace initiatives. Using a qualitative research methodology and conflict mapping as the theoretical framework, the article integrates historical grievances, territorial claims, and contemporary geopolitical dynamics to provide a holistic analysis. The findings indicate that external actors, including the United States, France, and the European Union, reinforce Morocco's position, while regional actors such as Algeria influence the Polisario Front's negotiating capacity. The analysis identifies limited openings for peace but highlights enduring structural obstacles such as human rights violations, displacement, and weak enforcement

mechanisms. Given these findings, the study offers policy recommendations to advance peace. It stresses that any resolution requires coordinated global mediation, enduring political commitment, and humanitarian aid to support Sahrawi self-determination whilst managing Morocco's territorial ambitions.

Keywords: *Western Sahara, Conflict, Geopolitics, Peace, Africa*

INTRODUCTION

Western Sahara has been at the epicenter of a territorial dispute since 1975, opposing the Moroccan Kingdom and the Sahrawi people, represented by the Polisario Front. The roots of this conflict can be traced back to the colonial era, when Spain's withdrawal from the region in 1975 left a power vacuum, resulting in competing territorial claims from Morocco and Mauritania. Recent trends indicate a resurgence of tensions and violence, despite numerous efforts by international organisations to reach an agreement. As the conflict remains unresolved, millions of people have been displaced, and reports of human rights violations persist. The situation continues to be a largely 'forgotten' crisis for the international community, despite its deepening humanitarian impact and the growing frustration of the Sahrawi people. While the Western Sahara dispute has been the subject of extensive diplomatic and legal debate, its persistence reveals deeper structural and geopolitical dynamics that are often underexplored in the literature. Existing analyses often emphasise the legality of self-determination or the regional rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, but they tend to overlook how evolving international alignments continually shape the parameters of the conflict (Zoubir, 2007). In response to these gaps, this paper asks the following questions: How do changes in international recognition and diplomatic support shape negotiation asymmetries and affect prospects for conflict resolution in Western Sahara?

The article argues that whilst new geopolitical alignments might offer small windows for negotiation, deep-seated regional rivalries and a fading international consensus make a self-determination referendum highly unlikely. Situating the analysis within broader debates in international relations, particularly conflict transformation theory, this article provides a multidimensional framework combining historical legacies, geopolitical shifts, economic interests, and humanitarian pressures. Although scholars such as Zoubir (1990; 2007), Jensen (2005), and Mundy (2004) have examined these elements separately, this qualitative analysis connects them through a conflict mapping approach

that links structural drivers to emerging patterns of diplomatic recognition and power asymmetry.

The rationale for this paper lies in the rapid transformation of global alliances and regional competition since 2020, marked by the US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty, changes in France's diplomatic position, Algeria's increasing isolation, and the emerging influence of external actors such as Russia and Iran. By analysing how these developments affect the conflict's trajectory, the article contributes to understanding the evolving power configurations that structure potential pathways toward compromise between Morocco and the Polisario Front. Ultimately, it argues that the growing international involvement has expanded the conflict beyond a simple territorial dispute, whilst a worsening humanitarian crisis and rising militarisation add further layers of complexity. By integrating theoretical, historical, political, and human rights perspectives, the article reflects on possible avenues for a durable peace grounded in inclusive and forward-looking negotiation frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on conflict transformation theory, particularly the work of John Paul Lederach (1996; 1997; 2015). Unlike traditional conflict resolution or management, conflict transformation focuses on addressing the underlying structures, relationships, and long-term processes that generate and reproduce conflict, rather than short-term dispute settlement. It highlights the importance of relational change, power asymmetries, and the social and institutional conditions necessary for sustainable peace. This lens is particularly relevant for Western Sahara, a long-lasting and asymmetric conflict in which changes in international alignments continually interact with long-standing drivers, reshaping the balance of power between actors.

Building on this foundation, the article adopts a conflict mapping approach (Sandole, 1998; Wehr, 1979). While conflict mapping is typically used in practical peacebuilding, it offers substantial analytical value by breaking the conflict down into its core components. Together, conflict transformation theory and conflict mapping provide the conceptual basis for analysing how diplomatic reconfigurations reinforce or challenge the entrenched imbalances that shape the prospects for peace in Western Sahara.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research design that uses conflict mapping as its primary analytical tool. Methodologically, conflict mapping provides a structured way to organise and interpret complex conflicts by linking historical legacy with contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Rather than presenting a chronological narrative, the analysis is structured around four analytical dimensions: (1) drivers, (2) actors, (3) dynamics, and (4) obstacles (Table 1). Conflict mapping is particularly suited to the current context, where abrupt geopolitical shifts intersect with deep-rooted structural issues like resource exploitation, regional rivalries, humanitarian pressures, and the unresolved question of self-determination. This approach allows for a multidimensional interpretation of the conflict, with particular attention to the negotiation asymmetries produced by enduring and emerging factors.

Table 1: Conflict Mapping Dimensions

Dimension	Analytical Focus
Drivers	Underlying structural factors such as colonial legacies, economic interests, and ideological narratives;
Actors	Stakeholders, including Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria, the United Nations, and external powers;
Dynamics	Evolving interactions among actors, diplomatic alignments, and shifts in international support;
Obstacles	Enduring impediments to peace, such as institutional stagnation within MINURSO, asymmetrical power relations, and the fragmentation of international consensus;
Conflict Mapping Outputs	Synthesis of coded elements to show negotiation imbalances and potential points of influence

Data Collection and Source Selection

The paper relies on secondary sources published between 2020 and 2025, including peer-reviewed academic literature, UN resolutions, reports from international organisations (eg., the African Union, the EU, and the UN), government communications, and analyses from research institutions. Sources were selected based on (a) credibility, (b) relevance to developments between 2020 and 2025, and (c) representativeness of perspectives from both Western and regional actors. Special care was taken to combine different secondary data sources to create a solid base for future fieldwork and empirical research. Numerical claims (eg., refugee population estimates, humanitarian indicators, resource-related data) were cross-checked with UNHCR, WFP, and World Bank datasets to ensure consistency and transparency.

Analytical Procedure

All materials were examined through thematic coding aligned with the conflict mapping framework. Triangulation was employed by comparing narratives across source types (academic publications, policy documents, and media sources) to minimise interpretive bias and identify converging or diverging evaluations. The coded results were then synthesised into a

conflict map (Table 2, located at the end of Section 2), representing relationships between actors, structural drivers, power asymmetries, and diplomatic alignments.

Limitations

As a qualitative and interpretive analysis based primarily on secondary data, this research faces several limitations. First, limited access to primary data restricts direct engagement with Sahrawi refugee camps and Moroccan-administered territories, reducing insights into internal political processes and local perspectives. Second, interpretive synthesis depends on the quality and transparency of available reports, some of which may reflect institutional or political biases. Consequently, replication is limited because interpretive qualitative reasoning inherently lacks the exact, standardised reproducibility of quantitative approaches. Third, while the conflict mapping model is transferable to other long-term conflicts, the empirical findings are context-specific and therefore have limited generalisability beyond the Western Sahara case. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a structured and transparent approach for analysing complex conflicts when direct fieldwork is restricted.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES

Located on the Atlantic coast of Africa, Western Sahara is a vast, mostly desert land bordered by Mauritania and Morocco. Today, the area is home to over half a million Sahrawis, most of whom are Muslims. In 1884, while imperial powers scrambled for Africa, Western Sahara came under Spanish colonial rule, which lasted until 1975. As decolonisation pressures grew, Spain's withdrawal created a power vacuum that triggered competing territorial claims from Morocco and Mauritania and ignored Sahrawi demands for self-determination. The United Nations rejected the 1975 Madrid Agreements, considering them a violation of international law and instead affirming the Sahrawis' right to decolonisation, setting the stage for the political contest that followed (Yerkes & Triche, 2025).

In 1973, the Polisario Front emerged as the main Sahrawi liberation movement and declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976. Amid growing tensions, Morocco's King Hassan II faced a series of coups and increased domestic insecurity, intensifying his

determination to consolidate territorial control, as symbolised by the Green March in November 1975. Algeria's support for the Polisario Front transformed the dispute into a regionalised conflict, confirming the Moroccan-Algerian rivalry as a structural stalemate drive. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Morocco secured most of the territory, while Sahrawis were displaced to refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. Mauritania's 1979 withdrawal allowed Morocco to expand further. The construction of the 'sand berm', guarded by more than 100,000 Moroccan soldiers (Murphy, 2008), established a military division of territory, institutionalising asymmetric control that persists today.

In 1991, both sides agreed to a UN-mediated peace plan that established a ceasefire, deployed UN peacekeepers, and promised the Sahrawis a vote on independence or integration. However, voter eligibility became a structural obstacle, as Morocco promoted settlement in the territory to shift demographic balance and increase prointegration support (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). Despite the recognition by the UN of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and the Polisario Front as legitimate representatives of the Sahrawi people, the referendum never occurred, freezing the conflict and shifting the diplomatic focus to competing political frameworks.

Since 2007, Morocco has proposed an autonomy plan under its sovereignty, which has gained support from a range of international actors, while the Polisario Front maintains that only a referendum on self-determination meets international legal standards. The SADR continues to receive recognition from several states and the African Union, highlighting the divided stance of the international system. This normative disagreement, sovereignty vs. self-determination, reflects the core incompatibility between local aspirations and regional proposals.

Meanwhile, Morocco's consolidation of territory and resource exploitation (phosphate, fisheries, and potential hydrocarbons) has deepened Sahrawi perceptions of dispossession. Conditions in the Tindouf refugee camps, which host approximately 173,600 refugees according to recent UNHCR data, are marked by a structural dependence on aid (UNHCR, 2024). Data from the World Food Programme's Algeria Country Brief indicate that around 80% of Sahrawi refugees are food insecure, highlighting persistent vulnerability and strengthening the conflict's humanitarian and identity-based dimensions (WFP, 2025; United Nations, 2024). In the Moroccan-controlled areas, restrictions on political freedoms and

repression of pro-independence activists further deepen mistrust and obstruct confidence building (Amnesty International, 2023).

Overall, the lack of political resolution has caused frustration, particularly among youth, threatening the cultural and identity survival of the Sahrawi people. Interlocking structural dynamics, including an incomplete decolonisation process, entrenched territorial asymmetry, demographic and legal contestation over the referendum, geopolitical rivalry, and longstanding humanitarian precarity, continue to shape the ongoing conflict.

GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENTS

Recent Developments

Internationally, Morocco has strengthened its diplomatic ties and gained support for its autonomy plan, even reintegrating the African Union in 2017. However, in 2020, the situation deteriorated after Moroccan forces violated the 1991 ceasefire by entering a section of the UN buffer zone to secure a route linking Guerguerat to Mauritania, which had been blocked by Polisario activists (Sun, 2024). In response, the Polisario Front declared the end of the ceasefire and resumed fighting. A month earlier, both sides dismissed a compromise proposed by the UN envoy to Western Sahara that would have partitioned the contested land between them. The military confrontation continued, including exchanges of drone strikes and shellfire (Sun, 2024). In December 2020, tensions further intensified when Donald Trump recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for normalisation of Morocco's relations with Israel. This major diplomatic shift strengthened Morocco's international position while marginalising the Polisario Front. In 2021, Algeria completely broke off diplomatic relations with Morocco, including the closure of its airspace to Moroccan planes and the suspension of gas supplies, after Morocco supported the self-determination of the Berber Kabyle people at the UN (Fabiani, 2023).

The conflict is often referred to as 'cold' or 'frozen', reflecting the sporadic nature of hostilities and Morocco's clear military dominance. Since the 1991 ceasefire, the Polisario Front demobilised forces, retaining only a minimal contingent primarily in the northeast. By 2011, Libya lost its position as a major weapon supplier, leaving it with largely outdated Soviet-era equipment, including portable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and grenades (Fabiani, 2023). Although Russia has provided

some military support, the ongoing war in Ukraine has weakened its capacity, leaving the Polisario Front dependent on limited external assistance from Mozambique, Nicaragua, South Africa, and Venezuela (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). In contrast, Morocco has advanced weaponry, ensuring military superiority. Several incidents have threatened regional stability, including attacks on Algerian and Mauritanian civilian convoys. A recent bomb attack inside Moroccan-controlled territory highlights the potential for escalation, although both sides appear cautious about publicising such events (Fabiani, 2023).

External Actors and Alignments

The international reactions to the renewed fighting remain divided. Prior to 2020, the US supported a political solution acceptable to both parties, aiming to maintain neutrality. Tensions arose during the Obama administration when it suggested incorporating human rights monitoring into the MINURSO mandate to address allegations of abuse (Arief, 2014). Morocco rebuffed this action, viewing it as an infringement on its sovereignty, while the US relented in order to avert a direct diplomatic clash (Yerkes & Triche, 2025).

During the early Trump administration, the US adopted a more favorable stance toward Morocco's 2007 autonomy plan, viewing the Western Sahara dispute as a potential opening for normalisation with Israel. On 10 December 2020, the US formally recognised¹ Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, declaring the autonomy plan the only fair and lasting solution. This significant change in US policy led to a tripartite agreement² with Israel and Morocco, further isolating the Polisario Front.

Under the Biden administration, the US shifted to a more nuanced approach, treating Morocco's autonomy plan as one possible solution rather than the only solution. While official maps do not distinguish Western Sahara from Morocco, the administration refrained from establishing a US consulate in the territory and limited direct financial

¹ Proclamation on Recognising The Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco Over the Western Sahara, December 10, 2020, available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-sovereignty-kingdom-morocco-western-sahara/>

² Joint Declaration available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morocco-Israel.pdf>

support (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). The Biden administration also sought to revive UN-brokered negotiations and stabilise regional relations, positioning itself as a critical interlocutor in the dispute capable of engaging with all parties. However, despite this unique role, the US has considered the conflict a low-priority issue, investing little political capital in resolving it (Fabiani, 2023). Instead, it has capitalised on the willingness of all parties to strengthen their ties with America, aiming to build confidence among the main actors. More specifically, the Biden administration worked to enhance economic and security relationships with Algeria, stabilise relations with Morocco, and maintain diplomatic ties with the Polisario Front, yet it refrained from pressuring for formal negotiations. Reaching a solution in Western Sahara will be an important challenge for Trump's second mandate.

Within the European Union, the Western Sahara conflict highlights divisions between member states, each driven by its own policies and national interests. Despite prior efforts to improve ties with Algeria, France pivots in 2024 to openly recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, lending its weight to the 2007 autonomy plan. This prompted Algeria to recall its ambassador from France and created tensions with the bloc (Nogueira Pinto, 2024). Spain and Germany also recognised Morocco's plan as the most viable solution while EU-Morocco diplomatic and trade ties improved (Fabiani, 2023). These moves legitimised Morocco's control over much of the territory, but drew criticism from Sahrawi activists and human rights organisations.

The shifting international positions that legitimise Morocco's claims in the disputed territory have motivated its administration of the area, evident in the development of the New Development Model for the Southern Provinces, a strategy focusing on the development of the southern territories as part of the national cause (Economic, Social, and Environmental Council, 2013). Therefore, in addition to its growing regional and international influence, Morocco now controls three-quarters of the disputed territory, casting doubt on the feasibility of the proposed referendum of the United Nations to allow Sahrawis to choose between independence or integration with Morocco. Simultaneously, the Polisario Front appears to be increasingly isolated.

Meanwhile, Russia and China have taken cautious stances. China emphasises non-intervention and balances trade relations with both parties, contributing modestly to UN peacekeeping efforts to enhance its strategic interests (Wanjun & Sobral, 2018). Russia, for its part, seeks to maintain a neutral position while maintaining close ties with Algeria, a

relationship highlighted by the fact that Algeria received 78% of Russia's arms exports to Africa between 2013 and 2017 (SIPRI, 2018; Roussellier, 2018). Russia's involvement also extends beyond military support, reflecting strategic interests in the resource-rich territory.

The United Nations

The UN had a crucial role in the early years of the 1991 ceasefire, with the deployment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) mandated both to monitor the ceasefire and to organise a referendum on self-determination. While the ceasefire monitoring component remains MINURSO's primary operational function today, the promised referendum has never been implemented. This gap between original purpose and current practice raises questions about the UN's capacity to enforce a political resolution to the dispute. The presence of the UN has nevertheless helped prevent major violence, and agencies such as UNHCR and WFP provide critical humanitarian support in refugee camps (United Nations, 2024).

After the 2020 breakdown of the ceasefire, deep polarisation between pro-Morocco and pro-Polisario members polarised the UN Security Council, resulting in a diplomatic stalemate that has exacerbated the conflict (Nogueira Pinto, 2024; Fabiani, 2023). Attempts at consensus repeatedly failed, with Morocco and some members of the Security Council opposing international scrutiny (Fabiani, 2023). For example, Germany's call for consultations in 2020 prompted Morocco to suspend diplomatic ties. In 2021, the US urged the Council to nominate a UN envoy to prevent further escalation, but India, acting on Morocco's behalf, strongly opposed the move, causing the US to retreat. However, the Biden administration later overcame this opposition and successfully appointed a new UN envoy. Despite these challenges, the UN envoy has maintained engagement with regional actors and facilitated amendments to annual resolutions³ to encourage dialogue.

³ Resolution 2654 (2022) available at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_RES_2654.pdf

Regional Dynamics

The broader context of North Africa and the Middle East significantly influences the conflict. Long-standing tensions between Morocco and Algeria, rooted in competing regional ambitions, have been exacerbated by Algeria's support for the Polisario Front. Algeria's provision of sanctuary and military aid to the Polisario Front in Tindouf since 1975, alongside the permanent closure of the Morocco–Algeria border in 1994, continues to institutionalise the bilateral rivalry. Morocco has responded by supporting self-determination claims among the Kabyle people of Algeria (Nogueira Pinto, 2024).

Algeria, holder of Africa's second-largest natural gas reserves, has become an increasingly important supplier for Europe, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Nogueira Pinto, 2024). In response to the growing alignment of the EU with Morocco, Algeria declined to renew the Maghreb-Europe pipeline contract, interrupting flows through Morocco. However, Algeria's dependence on gas revenue makes a substantial reduction in exports to Europe unlikely.

Regional polarisation intensified after Israel recognised the sovereignty of Morocco over the Western Sahara in 2020, prompting Algeria to sever diplomatic and energy ties. Iran's involvement has further internationalised the conflict. Morocco has long accused Iran of supporting the Polisario Front through arms transfers and training facilitated by Hezbollah in camps in Algeria (Kensche, 2023). This assistance, which is likely to continue, enhances the group's military capabilities and expands Iran's influence in North Africa.

Morocco's readmission to the African Union after 33 years has strengthened its regional influence, although key states such as South Africa and Nigeria continue to advocate for Sahrawi independence. The AU's capacity to mediate remains limited (Nogueira Pinto, 2024). Meanwhile, the Arab League remains largely disengaged from the dispute, choosing instead to focus on collective Arab solidarity and its alliance with Morocco. Although some member states support the self-determination of the Sahrawis, the position of the League is shaped more by regional geostrategic interests and relationships than by decolonisation concerns (Iratni, 2020).

Drawing on the conflict mapping framework outlined earlier, Table 2 provides a structured overview of the positions and strategic interests of the main regional and international actors involved in the conflict.

Table 2. Conflict map: Actors, Positions, and Interests in the Western Sahara Conflict

Actor	Role in Conflict	Stance on Morocco's 2007 Autonomy Plan	Stance on Self-Determination	Major Interests
Morocco	Primary claimant controlling approx. 80% of the territory	Main proponent	Rejects independence	Sovereignty, territorial integrity, and economic gains from resources and infrastructure projects.
Polisario Front / SADR	Representative of Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic	Rejects	Strongly supports	Independence for the Sahrawi people and return of refugees.
Algeria	Regional rival of Morocco; host of Sahrawi refugees; Supporter of Polisario Front	Rejects	Strongly supports	Counterbalancing Morocco regionally; refuses direct participation in negotiations but remains a decisive external actor.
United Nations / MINURSO	Mediator; MINURSO peacekeeping mission since 1991	Not officially	Supports	Ceasefire monitoring; facilitating negotiations; blocked on referendum implementation.
United States	External power	Supports since 2020	Weak support	Strategic alliance with Morocco's regional stability.
France	Morocco's main diplomatic partner	Supports	Avoids position	Historically aligned with Morocco; security and economic interests.
European Union	Divided internally; legal debates	Divided	Supports the UN process	Securing fisheries and trade deals with Morocco, containing migration, and legal compliance after EU Court rulings that exclude Western Sahara from EU-Morocco agreements without Sahrawi consent.

African Union (AU)	Regional body, including both Morocco and SADR	Rejects	Strongly supports	Sees conflict as unfinished decolonisation; maintains SADR as full member despite Morocco's return in 2017; promotes continental stability.
Spain	Former colonial power	Increasingly leaning toward autonomy (shift in 2022)	Previously supported UN referendum mandate	Managing historical ties to Western Sahara while prioritising security, migration control, and political relations with Morocco.
Russia / Iran	Indirect geopolitical influencers	No explicit position	Implicit support for Algeria / Polisario Front	Using the conflict to increase influence and weaken Western/Moroccan positions, while avoiding any firm commitment to a settlement.

PEACE PROSPECTS

The previous sections mapped the conflict in Western Sahara by describing its historical roots, structural drivers, and the role of key actors at the regional and international levels. Building on this foundation, this section applies utilises conflict mapping to analyse how these overlapping dimensions intersect and influence the potential for a lasting settlement. Specifically, the analysis considers three interrelated questions: how external powers influence incentives for negotiation, what scenarios are the most plausible, and what structural challenges must be addressed to achieve a durable peace. By doing so, it evaluates both obstacles and opportunities for compromise in Western Sahara.

The Western Sahara conflict presents persistent challenges to regional stability, and the prospects of a negotiated settlement have remained elusive in recent years. Both sides remain deeply entrenched in their positions, making direct negotiations difficult and a referendum on self-determination mostly elusive. Morocco favours a 2019 roundtable format for negotiations or seeks alternative processes, while the Polisario Front remains skeptical due to limited international attention and its relatively weak position.

The Role of External Powers in Bringing Peace

External actors continue to shape the trajectory of the conflict. The US and French backing of Morocco's autonomy plan strengthens Rabat's bargaining position but also narrows the options of the Polisario Front, creating asymmetric dynamics. Although international recognition could embolden Morocco to negotiate more confidently, it concurrently worsens Sahrawi marginalisation, elevating the risk of political withdrawal or a return to armed conflict.

From an analytical perspective, the question is whether external actors can recalibrate their participation from reinforcing unilateral claims to incentivising reciprocal concessions. For example, the US and France could condition their support for the Moroccan autonomy proposal on human rights guarantees, local political participation, or international monitoring, ensuring that autonomy is not merely symbolic. Similarly, the Polisario Front could be encouraged to renounce military tactics in exchange for stronger international advocacy of Sahrawi rights. Without such balancing measures, external involvement risks entrenching the conflict rather than resolving it.

The US has a critical role in fostering a lasting resolution that acknowledges the Sahrawis' right to self-determination and promotes trust between the conflicting parties. US engagement could involve enhancing diplomatic presence, supporting regional economic initiatives, and encouraging multilateral recognition of Morocco's claims. The opening of a US consulate in Dakhla, first pledged during the first Trump administration, faced delays resulting from the considerable resource allocation required. However, increasing official visits to the region and urging European countries to establish a presence could further solidify recognition of Morocco's claims. In December 2019, Comoros became the first country to open a diplomatic post in Western Sahara, followed by 28 others, mainly from Africa and the Arab world (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). Furthermore, while the US is unlikely to use foreign aid as leverage, particularly given the recent cuts made during the second Trump administration, it could potentially extend the 2006 Free Trade Agreement with Morocco to include Western Sahara, further reinforcing its stance on the issue. The US involvement could also involve pressing Morocco to honor the tripartite agreement. Although the Israel– Hamas conflict created significant diplomatic friction, Morocco has persisted in its bilateral engagement with Israel. After the opening of a liaison office in Rabat in 2021, Israeli diplomats gradually

returned with plans for a full embassy. Normalisation of relations between Morocco and Israel could provide new diplomatic avenues, especially if a resolution to the Israel-Hamas conflict is reached (Yerkes & Triche, 2025). In this context, the US could engage with both Morocco and Israel to strengthen their diplomatic relations, further cementing Morocco's control over Western Sahara. Ultimately, wider international backing remains essential to legitimise Moroccan sovereignty claims and pave the way for a definitive settlement. A power-sharing arrangement between Morocco and a semi-autonomous Sahrawi government may be required to define political and territorial boundaries, enabling Morocco to pursue its territorial ambitions while ensuring peaceful co-existence for the Sahrawi people.

The Economic Aspect

Beyond sovereignty, Morocco's rigid stance in Western Sahara is reinforced by economic factors, which serve as a major structural driver of the conflict. The territory is strategically important for Morocco's resource strategy, particularly in its phosphate sector. The US Geological Survey data indicate that the phosphate rock reserves in Morocco and Western Sahara amount to approximately 50 billion metric tons, representing nearly 70% of global reserves (USGC, 2019). According to the 2024 Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW) report, Morocco exported approximately 1.6 million tons of phosphate rock from Western Sahara in 2023, with an estimated market value of US \$406 million, underscoring the scale of economic interests embedded in the conflict (WSRC, 2024). The Bou Craa mine, operated by the Moroccan OCP Group, represents a major strategic asset, with an annual production capacity of 2.6 million tons and estimated reserves of 500 million tons (WSRC, 2024).

Beyond phosphates, other economic interests support Morocco's claim. Investments in infrastructure, such as the planned deepwater port in Dakhla, and renewable energy in the disputed territory have escalated, aligning with Morocco's broader development strategy (Reuters, 2024). These investments not only generate immediate economic returns but also serve as geopolitical tools to cement Morocco's presence and strengthen its negotiation position.

Thus, the economic logic intersects with political legitimacy: for Morocco, the Western Sahara is not just a territorial claim but a resource base that supports its global trade ambitions, strengthens its economic

partnerships, and underwrites long-term infrastructure strategies. Future peace processes are further complicated by these economic factors, forcing negotiators to balance territorial sovereignty and human rights against the practicalities of resource management and foreign investment.

Potential Scenarios for the Future

Two potential scenarios could unfold in the future of the Western Sahara conflict:

A. Consolidation of Moroccan Control

The more likely scenario would see Morocco solidify its control over Western Sahara, particularly after diplomatic successes that have increased its international recognition. While the position of the UN is unlikely to change in the short to medium term, Morocco may gain more support from other countries, being considered a reliable partner, especially given the increasing insecurity in the broader region. In this scenario, Morocco could negotiate its autonomy plan with the Polisario Front while pursuing major economic projects, such as the Dakhla Atlantic Port megaproject, aimed at improving trade with the Sahel countries. However, while Morocco could reach a negotiated settlement with the Polisario Front, this scenario remains far from achieving full self-determination for the Sahrawis.

B. Resumption of Armed Conflict

A less probable but still possible scenario involves an escalation of tensions and the resumption of armed conflict. This remains probable if escalating external alignment with Morocco convinces the Polisario Front that political avenues are exhausted, prompting a return to armed conflict. Such a development would likely require additional backing from regional actors, particularly Algeria or Tunisia. Although Algeria's commitment to opposing Morocco's growing influence remains strong – evidenced by its ties with Russia, Iran, and other partners – a direct military confrontation over Western Sahara seems unlikely. However, tensions could increase in buffer zones and refugee camps in Algeria under Polisario control.

Although Algeria declines formal participation in peace negotiations, its political, military, and logistic support for the Polisario Front continues to shape regional power dynamics and constrain Morocco's options. Any sustainable peace process must consider its indirect

leverage, potentially through confidence-building measures, regional development initiatives, and cooperative humanitarian or demilitarisation efforts.

In either scenario, Morocco's rise as a regional power underscores the need for a pragmatic approach to the conflict, balancing territorial aspirations with Sahrawi rights and needs. Proliferating involvement from novel state and non-state actors in African security, alongside the diminishing efficacy of UN peacekeeping missions, threatens to further jeopardise peace prospects in Western Sahara (Symeonidis, 2024).

Major Challenges to Address

Several critical issues must still be addressed to resolve the conflict. A central concern is the question of borders and sovereignty. According to the US Department of State 2018 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, Morocco administers approximately 75% of Western Sahara, while the remaining territory lies outside its control (US Department of State, 2018). The question is how this roughly 25% would be governed if Morocco were to assume full sovereignty, and whether the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (as proclaimed by the Polisario Front) would be granted independence within this territory. Furthermore, Morocco claimed the maritime borders, historically associated with the Western Sahara, in 2020, further complicating the situation (Yerkes & Triche, 2025).

Another challenge involves the question of autonomy and governance, with the establishment of a Sahrawi government within the autonomous territory under Moroccan control. Morocco's autonomy plan remains unclear regarding the leadership of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and its specific role within the proposed framework. This raises numerous questions, including how Morocco will respect the authority of the Sahrawi government, the division of responsibilities between parties, the consequences of violations of autonomy, and the creation of infrastructure to facilitate economic trade and the movement of people, among others. As such, defining borders is critical to resolving the dispute.

The question of Sahrawi refugees is also of paramount importance. Parties will need to develop plans for the return and reintegration of refugees, as well as to provide options for those who wish not to return. The demilitarisation of the Polisario Front must also be addressed in the negotiations. Furthermore, Morocco has reiterated the need to include

Algeria in peace negotiations, although Algeria does not consider itself a party to the conflict and has refused to participate. However, with the second Trump administration's positive relations with Algeria, there may be an opportunity for collaboration and exerting pressure to reach a deal. The first step will be to negotiate an end to hostilities.

Ultimately, resolving the conflict will require extensive planning and dialogue, with power-sharing agreements between Morocco and the Sahrawi government being a potential solution. External actors such as the United States, France, and Spain will play a crucial role in mediating the process and contributing to Morocco's economy, including in the disputed Western Sahara region. A robust shared-governance framework could ensure that foreign investment benefits the Sahrawi people as well. Given Morocco's strategic position as a key partner along both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the new US administration has a significant opportunity to help establish peace and stabilise the region. Securing a permanent settlement depends on a balanced strategy that reconciles Morocco's geopolitical ambitions with the self-determination rights of the Sahrawi people.

CONCLUSION

The situation in Western Sahara persists as one of the international community's most enduring and deeply stagnant territorial conflicts. Using a conflict mapping framework, this article has highlighted the multilayered nature of the crisis, in which historical grievances, territorial claims, geopolitical rivalries, and humanitarian pressures intersect to create persistent structural constraints. The analysis shows that entrenched positions – most notably Morocco's insistence on sovereignty, the Sahrawi demand for self-determination, and Algeria's sustained support for the Polisario Front – shape negotiation asymmetries that limit the effectiveness of international mediation and leave the status quo largely unchanged.

Shifting diplomatic alignments have further deepened these asymmetries. Growing external support for Morocco's autonomy plan, particularly from the US and EU member states, has strengthened Morocco's bargaining position, while limited multilateral engagement on Sahrawi self-determination has reduced the leverage of Polisario. Conflict mapping reveals that these imbalances are reinforced by structural economic and governance constraints, including resource

control and limited Sahrawi participation, which must be addressed in any viable peacebuilding strategy.

The prospects for conflict resolution require a multidimensional approach that integrates political, humanitarian, and economic measures. This study demonstrates that addressing structural inequalities requires a multi-faceted approach, including active Sahrawi civic participation, international security frameworks, fair resource distribution, refugee repatriation, and sustainable development projects. Grassroots engagement, demilitarisation, and regional cooperation are equally essential to creating conditions for durable dialogue.

Regarding Morocco's proposed autonomy plan, the analysis indicates that, given the current distribution of external support and regional dynamics, autonomy represents the most feasible path relative to full independence or a referendum. However, its success depends on robust international monitoring, participatory governance mechanisms, and careful integration of Algeria's regional interests. Under the current conditions of sustained Moroccan consolidation, the feasibility of a referendum continues to diminish. This reinforces autonomy not as a normative choice but as the arrangement most aligned with prevailing power dynamics.

Ultimately, the challenge of establishing peace in Western Sahara lies in translating limited diplomatic openings into a sustainable and inclusive settlement that respects Sahrawi rights, ensures regional stability, and addresses the structural inequalities at the core of the conflict. The analysis demonstrates that asymmetric recognition and evolving diplomatic alignments directly shape negotiation processes and peacebuilding prospects, underscoring the need to consider both local agency and external power dynamics when analysing protracted territorial disputes.

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Appendix A: Timeline of the Western Sahara Conflict

1884-1975 | Spanish Colonial Rule

Spain establishes the colony of *Spanish Sahara*. Early Sahrawi nationalist movements emerged in the mid-20th century.

1963 | UN Lists Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory (NSGT)

The UN begins pressing Spain toward decolonisation.

1973 | Creation of the Polisario Front

Founded to fight Spanish occupation and advocate Sahrawi independence.

1975 | ICJ Advisory Opinion

The International Court of Justice confirms that some historical ties

existed between Morocco/Mauritania and the territory, but affirms the Sahrawi's right to self-determination.

1975 | Green March & Madrid Accords

Morocco organises the Green March into the territory; Spain signs the Madrid Accords, withdrawing and dividing administrative control between Morocco and Mauritania.

Polisario declares the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

1976-1991 | Armed Conflict

Polisario fights both Morocco and Mauritania (which withdraws in 1979). Morocco gains control of most of the territory and builds a defensive wall ("the Sand Berm").

1991 | UN-Brokered Ceasefire & MINURSO Mandate

A ceasefire is established with the promise of a referendum on self-determination. MINURSO is created to monitor the ceasefire. The conflict settles into a 'frozen war'.

2007 | Morocco's Autonomy Plan

Morocco proposes autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as the basis for a political solution.

2016-2019 | Renewed Tensions

Increasing friction in Guerguerat and criticism of MINURSO stagnation.

2017 | Morocco Readmitted to the African Union

Morocco rejoins the AU after leaving in 1984, strengthening its regional legitimacy.

2020 | Collapse of Ceasefire & Return to Hostilities

Clashes in Guerguerat lead the Polisario Front to declare the ceasefire over, resuming low-intensity hostilities.

2020-2024 | Diplomatic Realignment

The US recognises Moroccan sovereignty (2020).

Several African and Arab states open consulates in Western Sahara (e.g. UAE, Jordan, Liberia, etc.), reaffirming support to Morocco.

Algeria-Morocco relations deteriorate (with a diplomatic rupture in 2021).

The positions of France and the EU shift amid internal debates.

Polisario strengthens ties with Algeria, South Africa, and pan-African institutions.