

### **3. The Western Sahara Conflict as the Chicken and Egg of the “Non-Maghreb”**

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#### **The Changing Shape of a Protracted Conflict**

The dispute over Western Sahara may be characterised as a protracted decolonisation and territorial-sovereignty conflict with a regional dimension, which has long determined the course of international relations and foreign policies in the Maghreb. Following a series of developments triggered by the United Nations’ (UN) demand for the decolonisation of the territory known at the time as Spanish Sahara – including the birth in 1973 of the Polisario Front as a national liberation movement representing the indigenous Sahrawi people, Morocco’s judicial and diplomatic offensive to assert its claim over the territory, and Spain’s delayed announcement of plans to hold a referendum on self-determination (1964-75) – the combination of the Spanish U-turn enshrined in the Madrid Accords and the Moroccan Green March gave rise to the foreign occupation of this non-self-governing territory and a conflict that remains unresolved to this day. The conflict as such has gone through three main stages since late 1975:

- *Open war (1975-1991)* between the two recognised conflict parties, the Polisario Front – which declared the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in early 1976 – versus Morocco, plus Mauritania during the first four years (with total casualty estimates ranging from 6,000 to 16,000,<sup>1</sup> including over 1,400 mine/unexploded remnants of war casualties);<sup>2</sup>
- *Conflict freezing and thwarted resolution process (1991-2020)* since the two parties’ acceptance of the UN Settlement Plan and ceasefire declaration, including the successive failures of the implementation of the self-determination referendum envisaged in this plan (1991-2000), UN attempts at brokering a “political solution” through the Baker Plans I and II (2000-04) as well as the “negotiations without preconditions”<sup>3</sup> pursued thereafter through shuttle diplomacy and direct talks in Manhasset (2007-08) and Geneva (2018-19);
- *Violent thawing and resumption of low-intensity hostilities (2020 to the present)* since the ceasefire fell apart, leading to the exchange of strikes between the Polisario Front and Morocco (including drone strikes by the latter), which remain ongoing to date.

The chief features of the Western Sahara conflict are its protractedness and intractability. Protractedness characterises not only Morocco’s control over most of the disputed territory, which has solidified with a straightforward legal-administrative annexation of the so-called “Southern provinces” since 1976-79, challenging international law. There is also a protracted refugee

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<sup>1</sup> S. Zunes and J. Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), New York, Syracuse University Press, 2022, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> See “[Western Sahara. Casualties](#)”, *MONITOR Landmine and Cluster Munition*, 21 October 2018.

<sup>3</sup> A. Theofilopoulou, “[Western Sahara: The Failure of ‘Negotiations without Preconditions’](#)”, United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C., 2010.

situation – one of the oldest under the remit of UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) – created by the flight and longstanding settlement of a large proportion of the Sahrawi people in the Tindouf camps in south-western Algeria. As to the conflict’s intractability or resistance to all resolution efforts, this stems from the zero-sum view of the goal incompatibility between the parties, and the existential value they attach to Moroccan “national territorial integrity” and Sahrawi self-determination respectively.

When it comes to its evolution in the XXI century, two main developments must be noted. Firstly, as the resolution process stalled in the early 2000s, the international politics of the conflict started to be reshaped by an “inward turn” caused by the combination of Rabat’s development and launch of the 2007 Autonomy Plan (under its sovereignty) for Western Sahara, on the one hand, and the rise of Sahrawi non-violent civil resistance and pro-independence activism inside the same Moroccan-annexed territory, on the other.<sup>4</sup> The latter process shone the spotlight on two problematic side-effects of its long-lasting occupation, i.e. Morocco’s human rights violations and economic exploitation of its natural resources, which the Polisario Front subsequently turned into the basis of a new, twofold “low politics” international strategy. This strategy comprised two main planks: seeking a UN Security Council extension of the mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to human rights monitoring; and pursuing political and legal action against Western Sahara’s inclusion by default in many of the international economic cooperation agreements concluded by Morocco. The main

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<sup>4</sup> M.J. Stephan and J. Mundy, “A Battlefield Transformed: From Guerrilla Resistance to Mass Nonviolent Struggle in the Western Sahara”, *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2006, pp. 1-32; I. Fernández-Molina, “Protests under Occupation: The Spring Inside Western Sahara”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2015, pp. 235-54. I. Fernández-Molina, “Bottom-up Change in Frozen Conflicts: Transnational Struggles and Mechanisms of Recognition in Western Sahara”, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2019, pp. 407-30.

targets were the UN and the United States (US), which saw unprecedented diplomatic crises with Morocco over the human rights issue in 2012-13; and the European Union (EU), whose multiple bilateral deals lacking any territorial differentiation between Morocco and Western Sahara started to be challenged through parliamentary (European Parliament) and judicial (Court of Justice of the EU [CJEU]) routes in the same decade.

Secondly and more recently, Western Sahara’s three-decade status as a frozen conflict abruptly came to an end in 2020-21 as the ceasefire collapsed, hostilities resumed between the parties and broader regional instability escalated.<sup>5</sup> This violent thawing related to three major developments on the local, regional and international levels. The local, direct trigger, in October-November 2020, was a crisis in Guerguerat, a border crossing between the far south of Moroccan-annexed Western Sahara and Mauritania which is traversed by the demilitarised buffer strip established by the 1991 ceasefire. A sustained Sahrawi civilian protest called by the Polisario Front in this strip blocked the road that connects Morocco with Mauritania through Western Sahara, disrupting land traffic and transport, and was eventually cleared through a Moroccan military operation beyond the dividing line – which thereby breached the terms of the ceasefire (military agreement No. 1).<sup>6</sup> This, in turn, pushed the Polisario Front to declare the end of its commitment to the ceasefire and the long-threatened return to armed struggle.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the conflict entered a new stage of what the UN describes as “low-intensity hostilities”, with

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<sup>5</sup> “Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara”, International Crisis Group (ICG), 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Military agreement No. 1 was an agreement concluded in 1997-98 between MINURSO and each of the two conflict parties to specify the rules for the ceasefire. It divides Western Sahara into five areas: a five-kilometre-wide buffer strip east of the berm, two restricted areas west of the berm and two areas of limited restriction in the remainder of the territory. See <https://minurso.unmissions.org/ceasefire-monitoring>.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Situation Concerning Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General”, S/2021/843, 1 October 2021, pp. 1-3.

reported “firing incidents across the berm” from both sides, as well as Moroccan drone strikes.<sup>8</sup>

At the international level, shortly after the Guerguerat crisis, the US unilaterally recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara through a presidential proclamation by President Donald Trump in December 2020.<sup>9</sup> This unexpected pro-Moroccan turn came as part of a trilateral transactional deal whereby Rabat committed itself to normalising its bilateral relations with Israel following in the steps of the Abraham Accords concluded by United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.<sup>10</sup> A hitherto unthinkable diplomatic victory that emboldened Morocco, the US recognition sent shock waves through the Maghreb and beyond, upsetting Algeria and destabilising Rabat’s bilateral relations with at least three Western European states – Germany, Spain and France – which Morocco now pressured to align with Washington’s new position. Two and a half years later, the same process would yield a formal Israeli declaration of recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in July 2023.<sup>11</sup> Finally, at the regional level, spiralling tensions between Morocco and Algeria culminated in the latter’s decision to cut bilateral diplomatic relations in August 2021. While this escalatory step was officially justified by a wide array of grievances and the Western Sahara conflict was only mentioned in a general and formalistic way, the two developments set out above certainly contributed to the rupture.

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Security Council, “[Situation Concerning Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General](#)”, S/2022/733, 3 October 2022, pp. 1, 9.

<sup>9</sup> White House, “[Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara](#)”, 10 December 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Morocco’s domestic discontent with the normalisation with Israel was kept under control for nearly three years, yet it rocketed in the context of the Israel-Gaza war starting in October 2023. Rallies in solidarity with the Palestinians then brought together tens of thousands of protesters across many Moroccan cities, convened by networks that included left-wing and Islamist parties, unions and associations, and uttering chants such as “The people want the end of normalisation”.

<sup>11</sup> “[Communiqué du Cabinet Royal](#)”, *Maghreb Arabe Press*, 17 July 2013.

This takes us back to the chicken-and-egg debate that underlies any historical and contemporary analysis of international relations in the Maghreb: what came first, Moroccan-Algerian rivalry or the Western Sahara conflict?<sup>12</sup> Those who give causal precedence to the former highlight how post-colonial bilateral territorial disputes between the two neighbouring states broke out right after Algeria's independence, provoking the Sand War in 1963, which suggests that the Western Sahara issue was thereafter fuelled and instrumentalised as a means to an end within the context of competing state-building and regional hegemony projects. The opposing view is that it was the Western Sahara conflict that crystallised, entrenched and granted an intractable identity dimension to bilateral tensions that would otherwise have become more manageable over time, if not totally diluted. These causal arguments also relate to politicised disagreements about the very nature of the conflict, between proponents of its framing as a "decolonisation/self-determination conflict" and as a "regional conflict". While the former label is grounded in international law, the latter inevitably resonates with the Moroccan official line, which denies Sahrawi agency and portrays the Polisario Front as a mere puppet in the hands of rival Algeria, the "real party in this conflict" according to Rabat.<sup>13</sup> In fact, though, the two interpretations need not be mutually exclusive, and binary reasonings do not do justice to the complex origins and the multi-layered sediments of time in this conflict.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Y.H. Zoubir, "Algerian-Moroccan Relations and their Impact on Maghribi Integration", *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2000, pp. 43-74. K. Mohsen-Finan, *Sahara Occidental. Les enjeux d'un conflit régional*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Mohammed VI, "Discours de SM le Roi adressé à la nation à l'occasion du 39<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire de la Marche Verte", *Maroc.ma*, 6 November 2014.

<sup>14</sup> R. Ojeda-García, I. Fernández-Molina, and Victoria Veguilla (eds.) *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

In sum, while interacting with clashing post-colonial state- and nation-building struggles, geopolitical interests and opposing Cold War ideologies and alignments, the Western Sahara conflict has congealed as the chief cause and incarnation of the “non-Maghreb”.

## **The Lens Through Which Morocco Sees the World**

“The Sahara issue is the lens through which Morocco looks at its international environment. It is the clear, simple benchmark whereby my country measures the sincerity of friendships and the efficiency of partnerships”, stated King Mohammed VI in August 2022.<sup>15</sup>

The existential value attached to Moroccan “national territorial integrity” is such that, since its inception, the Western Sahara conflict has dominated the country’s entire foreign policy agenda as *the* superior priority and cross-cutting issue,<sup>16</sup> if not a distorting lens overdetermining behaviour elsewhere. This is somewhat paradoxical given that policies concerning the annexed territory are considered to be domestic as a matter of principle. In fact, what drives Rabat’s foreign policy conduct in this respect is the persistent mismatch or friction between the internal and international orders of things: a long-consolidated annexation from the perspective of domestic governance effectiveness and law which nevertheless, despite varying levels of external de facto connivance, has until recently received a minimal, close-to-zero degree of formal international

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<sup>15</sup> Mohammed VI, “SM le Roi Mohammed VI adresse un discours à la Nation à l’occasion du 69ème anniversaire de la Révolution du Roi et du Peuple”, *Maroc.ma*, 20 August 2022.

<sup>16</sup> I.W. Zartman, “Morocco’s Saharan Policy”, in A. Boukhars and J. Roussellier (eds.), *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms, and Geopolitics*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, p. 55. See M. Hernando de Larramendi, *La política exterior de Marruecos*, Madrid, Mapfre, 1997; R. El Houdaïgui, *La politique étrangère sous le règne de Hassan II Acteurs, enjeux et processus décisionnels*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2003.

recognition and *legalisation*. Morocco's longstanding top foreign policy goal has thus been to close the gap by achieving the latter. Positions on Western Sahara have always drawn the line between Rabat's friends and foes, both bilaterally and in terms of multilateral regional integration – as most notably shown by Morocco's withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1984, following the latter's admission of the SADR as a member. At the same time, until the 2010s, the country's foreign policy role as a *champion of national territorial integrity* has been generally clash-free and compatible with its unwavering alliance with and recognition from the West, chiefly the US and the EU.

That being said, Morocco's foreign policy strategies on this issue have swung over time between more cooperative and more coercive or confrontational approaches. One crucial dynamic explaining this variation is the interaction between Western Sahara's management on the domestic and international fronts. Since Mohammed VI's accession to the throne, the Moroccan position has seen a succession of virtuous and vicious circles in this regard.<sup>17</sup> In the early 2000s, the possibility of solving the conflict through an autonomy formula under Moroccan sovereignty – known at the time as the “third way” – made headway both internally and internationally, enabled by a relative political opening and decrease in repression in the annexed territory (1999-2003).<sup>18</sup> Yet, this came to a halt following Rabat's rejection of the Baker Plan II, which turned the kingdom into a spoiler that openly hindered the UN's peacemaking efforts and plunged its international negotiation strategy into deep crisis (2003-06). We later saw another shift towards an emphatic conciliatory policy towards the Sahrawi population internally, including the resurrection of the Royal

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<sup>17</sup> I. Fernández-Molina, *Moroccan Foreign Policy under Mohammed VI, 1999-2014*, Oxon-New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 47-73.

<sup>18</sup> N. Messari, “National Security, the Political Space, and Citizenship: The Case of Morocco and the Western Sahara”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2001, pp. 47-63.



Consultative Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS), in parallel to Morocco’s drafting and wide-ranging international promotion of an Autonomy Plan – now distinctly unilateral – for Western Sahara (2006-08).<sup>19</sup>

However, from 2009 and throughout the 2010s, the effects of the conflict’s inward turn and the Sahrawis’ “low politics” international strategy drastically intensified domestic governance tensions and Morocco’s crackdown in Western Sahara, while increasing the strain on Rabat’s relations with several of its main international partners. Following a pioneering official visit to the Tindouf camps by prominent Sahrawi activists from inside the annexed territory, which formalised the latter’s growing alignment with the Polisario Front, Mohammed VI articulated the repressive turn in his November 2009 warning that “there is no more room for ambiguity or duplicity”, and “either one is a patriot or one is a traitor”.<sup>20</sup> The stronger Moroccan grip resulted in significant internal crises with international reverberations such as those provoked by the expulsion and hunger strike of the Sahrawi activist Aminatou Haidar in November 2009, and the violent dismantling of the Sahrawi protest camp established in Gdeim Izik near Laayoune in October-November 2010 – following the largest protest cycle ever witnessed inside the Moroccan-annexed territory. Besides tarnishing the credibility of the Moroccan Autonomy Plan, these events reinforced the call to add human rights monitoring to MINURSO’s mandate, which in turn led to two major, interrelated Moroccan foreign policy crises with the UN and the US (Barack Obama administration): Rabat’s withdrawal of confidence from the UN Secretary General’s personal envoy Christopher Ross, following hints of increased UN concern with the human rights situation in Western Sahara in the spring of 2012; and the unforeseen US

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<sup>19</sup> H. Bouqentar, “La politique étrangère marocaine: un changement dans la continuité”, in Centre d’Études Internationales (ed.), *Une décennie de réformes au Maroc (1999-2009)*, Paris, Karthala, 2010, pp. 328-31.

<sup>20</sup> Mohammed VI, “Discours de SM le Roi à la Nation à l’occasion du 34ème anniversaire de la Marche Verte”, *Maroc.ma*, 6 November 2009.

penning of a draft UN Security Council resolution that would have consummated the feared human rights empowerment of MINURSO if the total mobilisation of Morocco and some of its allies had not narrowly averted it in April 2013.<sup>21</sup>

Subsequently, in February 2016, the first judicial outcomes of the Polisario Front's "low politics" strategy concerning natural resources, i.e. CJEU rulings on the EU-Morocco agricultural trade agreement, led Morocco to suspend all official contacts with the EU institutions for no less than three years (see below). This was coupled with an open high-level threat, for the first time ever, to reduce Rabat's contribution to Europe's externalised migration and border control: "How do you [Europeans] want us to do the job of blocking African emigration if Europe does not want to work with us today? Why are we going to continue to act as gendarmes?", said the Agriculture Minister and king's strongman.<sup>22</sup> In the same context, by contrast, Morocco invested much of its diplomatic energy in the endeavour to join the African Union, as eventually achieved in January 2017, putting an end to over three decades of absence from pan-African regionalism.<sup>23</sup> Alongside its new regional power aspirations, Rabat's main motivation was the aim of neutralising the continental organisation's vital diplomatic backing for the SADR, if not the latter's very membership thereof. On the other hand, in addition to the aforementioned troubles with Western allies, Morocco's post-2009 foreign policy also included diplomatic incidents or crises with countries such as Venezuela (January 2009), Iran (March 2009, May 2018), Libya (September 2009) and Sweden (November 2009, September 2015), whose common denominator was the

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<sup>21</sup> Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et de la Coopération/Royaume du Maroc, "Note à Monsieur le Ministre", 2 October 2014, leaked document.

<sup>22</sup> J. Otazu, "Marruecos advierte a la UE de las consecuencias si no habla con una sola voz", *La Vanguardia*, 6 February 2017.

<sup>23</sup> M. Hernando de Larramendi and B. Tomé-Alonso, "The Return of Morocco to the African Union", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2017*, Barcelona, IEMed, 2017, pp. 229-332.

willingness to draw a red line with regard to Western Sahara.

The new assertive and at times confrontational tenor of Moroccan foreign policy on Western Sahara would further heighten in the early 2020s. This attitude stemmed from an unprecedented self-perception of strength at the international, regional and domestic levels between 2019 and 2020. Rabat seemed to be benefiting from a tailwind in the UN because of the creeping advance of its positions in terms of the Security Council resolutions on Western Sahara, the anomalously long vacancy of the post of personal envoy of the Secretary-General for this conflict following Horst Köhler’s resignation in May 2019, and the end of the dynamism of the Geneva process associated with the “Bolton effect” in September of the same year. Altogether, the ousting of US National Security Advisor John Bolton – who had exhibited an unusual personal investment in the Western Sahara issue and was viewed by Morocco as a direct enemy – and the reconciliation with the EU after the 2016-19 bilateral crisis meant that both Washington and Brussels were considered to be largely on Rabat’s side. Regionally, Morocco’s success in joining the African Union – though not in getting the SADR expelled – coincided with a severe decrease in Algeria’s rival influence, impaired by the large-scale domestic unrest caused by the Hirak protest movement in that country. Last but not least, between December 2019 and December 2020 there was a wave of openings of 16 African and two Arab consulates in the cities of Laayoune and Dakhla, in the annexed Western Sahara territory, where international diplomatic presence had thus far been totally absent. This put an end to the longstanding international consensus on the formal non-recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty claims.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Since the summer of 2022, the list of states that have opened consulates in either Laayoune or Dakhla comprises 27 countries, including 21 from Africa (Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Malawi, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Zambia), 3 from Latin America

Such an extraordinary conjunction of diplomatic advantages and achievements explains not only Rabat's carefree resort to military force during the Guerguerat crisis, but also its miscalculation of the snowball effect of Trump's recognition proclamation. As a result, the tide turned again from early 2021. Morocco went back on the defensive in the face of the new Joe Biden administration's ambiguity on the aforementioned recognition, which was neither rescinded nor overtly implemented, as well as the Western European countries' reluctance to jump on the bandwagon. Major bilateral diplomatic crises with Germany, Spain and France ensued (see below), raising the question of whether Rabat's confrontational approach was rooted in strength, vulnerability, or a mix of both.

## **The Confluence of Algeria's Principles and Interests**

As argued above, the Western Sahara conflict is the main issue that crystallised the geopolitical rivalry between Algeria and Morocco in the Maghreb, and is both a consequence and a cause of the clash of both countries' post-colonial political identities and interests. For Algeria, this is an issue on which self-interest-based and normative motivations have historically converged. The former include geopolitical aspirations, such as curbing Morocco's territorial irredentism or securing access to the Atlantic Ocean through a friendly or subordinate state. More importantly, both the defence of borders inherited from the colonial period and support for the right to self-determination and national liberation movements lie at the heart of the national political culture that resulted from the traumatic and bloody liberation war against France (1954-62). This approach immediately collided with Moroccan irredentism, i.e. the idea

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(Guatemala, Haiti, Suriname) and three from the Arab Middle East (Bahrain, Jordan, United Arab Emirates).

that Morocco's independence was incomplete because the country had been denied the historical borders of its prior empire. The two narratives led to armed confrontation during the 1963 Sand War.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, regarding Western Sahara, until the Green March in 1975 Algeria had not taken a clear position concerning the self-determination of the Sahrawi people, nor had it supported the Polisario Front, which had been created in 1973 with Libyan backing.<sup>26</sup> Algeria's main objective at the time was to simply get Morocco to ratify the bilateral border demarcation agreement concluded in 1972. But the Green March and the partition of Western Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania were both perceived by Algeria's President Houari Boumédiène as deliberate attempts to illegitimately redraw the map of North Africa. These events led to the rupture of diplomatic relations with Rabat between 1976 and 1988. Back then, Algiers also started to actively support the Polisario Front, allowing part of the Sahrawi population to seek refuge and establish the SADR's operational headquarters in Tindouf. The logistical and humanitarian backing was accompanied by an authorisation for the Polisario Front to use Algerian territory as a rearguard in armed attacks on Western Sahara, Morocco and Mauritania. Simultaneously, the Algerian diplomacy played a vital role in advancing the international positioning of the SADR, e.g. with the latter's admission to the OAU in 1984.

In terms of official position and as a matter of principle, Algeria considers the Western Sahara conflict a decolonisation issue. It therefore regularly calls for the UN to effectively guarantee the self-determination of the territory, while rejecting Moroccan attempts to shift the conflict resolution process towards bilateral negotiations between Rabat and Algiers.<sup>27</sup> While supporting

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<sup>25</sup> A. Torres, *La Guerra de las Arenas: Conflicto entre Argelia y Marruecos durante la Guerra Fría (1963)*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> M. Salem Abdi, "El rol de Argelia en la cuestión del Sahara Occidental", *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, no. 31, 2021, pp. 195-96.

<sup>27</sup> S. Lagdaf and N. Flici, "Algeria and the Conflict in Western Sahara", in Y.H.

UN peacemaking initiatives since the 1990s, Algeria has never stopped backing the Polisario Front and its claims for the territory's self-determination, opposing Moroccan attempts to impose an autonomy solution. At the same time, domestically, this protection does not have the same level of popular appeal among the Algerian population as solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Based on a deep suspicion towards Morocco, the Western Sahara issue has been primarily a political tool used by the Algerian army and security services to maintain their influence over the regime.<sup>28</sup> Algerian support for the Polisario Front/SADR has been very stable throughout the years, yet somewhat decreasing in intensity in periods of domestic economic or political difficulty. This occurred, for instance, at the time of the sharp drop in hydrocarbon prices in the 1980s and the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. No official data are available on this matter, but some (critical) sources estimate that, altogether, the Polisario Front/SADR costs the Algerian state around one billion dollars per year.<sup>29</sup> Politically, Western Sahara has remained one of the key elements that hinder the normalisation of diplomatic relations with neighbouring Morocco.

More recently, since Abdelmadjid Tebboune was elected President in December 2019, he has been seeking to revitalise Algeria's diplomacy as a domestic legitimisation strategy. In this context, the Western Sahara issue helps to reinforce one of the normative and identity hallmarks of Algerian foreign policy, i.e. support for "just causes". However, this does not necessarily translate into providing greater support to the Polisario Front on the ground. Indeed, despite endorsing the Polisario Front's

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Zoubir (ed.), *The Politics of Algeria: Domestic Issues and International Relations*, Oxon-New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 251-65.

<sup>28</sup> L. Thieux, "Algerian Foreign Policy towards Western Sahara", in R. Ojeda-García, I. Fernández-Molina, and V. Veuilla (eds.), *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 121-41.

<sup>29</sup> "Exclusif: Ce que Réellement Coûte la République Sahraouie au Trésor Public Algérien", *Algérie Part*, 21 February 2022.

decision to abandon the ceasefire in November 2020, Algeria has not supplied it with any additional military equipment. On the other hand, Algeria’s leadership considers that Morocco took advantage of its international inactivity during President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s last mandates as well as the domestic turbulences of the Hirak in 2019.

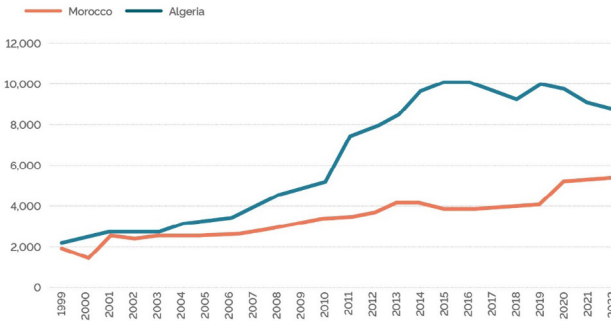
Against this backdrop, the bilateral rivalry escalated up to the breakdown of diplomatic ties in the summer of 2021.<sup>30</sup> The trigger for the Algerian decision was the consideration that Morocco had crossed a red line and interfered in the country’s domestic affairs by publicly supporting the Kabyle people’s right to self-determination. The Algerian authorities made public a list of grievances ranging from the victims of the Sand War to bilateral border demarcation to the Western Sahara conflict.<sup>31</sup> The trilateral US-Morocco-Israel deal of December 2020 had certainly fuelled the bilateral tension between Rabat and Algiers. The latter considered that Morocco’s joining of the Abraham Accords and reinforced security cooperation with Israel were bringing the “Zionist enemy” much closer to its borders. The escalation of bilateral tension was apparent in both countries’ flaunting of their military power by creating new military regions in border areas, organising manoeuvres or just increasing the budget for the acquisition of military equipment. The Moroccan-Algerian rivalry has also reached regional organisations such as the African Union, where, since Rabat’s accession in 2017, Algiers has opposed Moroccan attempts to keep the Peace and Security Council away from the Western Sahara dossier as well as to grant observer status to Israel.

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<sup>30</sup> “Graves dérives du Makhzen et rupture entre Alger et Rabat en 2021”, *Algérie Presse Service*, 30 December 2021.

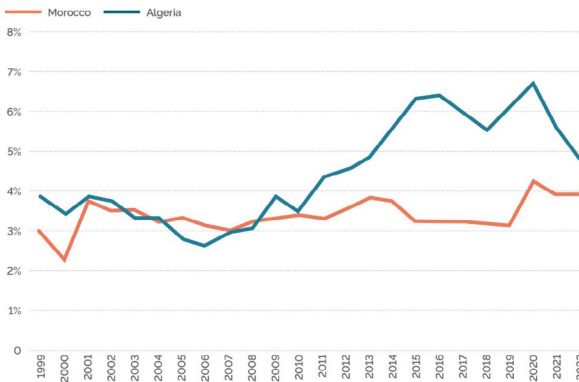
<sup>31</sup> “Déclaration de Lamamra sur la rupture des relations diplomatiques avec le Maroc”, *Algérie Presse Service*, 24 August 2021.

FIG. 3.1 - MILITARY EXPENDITURE IN ALGERIA AND MOROCCO IN CONSTANT (2021) US\$ MILLION, 1999-2022



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (<https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>)

FIG. 3.2 - MILITARY EXPENDITURE IN ALGERIA AND MOROCCO AS PERCENTAGE OF GDP, 1999-2022



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (<https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>)

Besides the rupture with Morocco, the importance that the Algerian regime continues to attach to the Western Sahara issue was recently reflected in its decision, taken in June 2022, to suspend the country’s 2002 Treaty of Amity, Good



Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Spain.<sup>32</sup> This measure came in response to a shift in Madrid’s longstanding formal position of “positive neutrality”<sup>33</sup> on Western Sahara – which was, in turn, an attempt by the Pedro Sánchez government to restore relations with Rabat. In order to settle a prior year-long Moroccan-Spanish crisis, in a letter to Mohammed VI, the Spanish Prime Minister described the Moroccan Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara as “the most serious, credible and realistic basis for the resolution of this dispute”,<sup>34</sup> which did not sit well with Algeria.

## **Regional Spill-Over to Tunisia and Mauritania**

At the same time, the breakdown of diplomatic relations between Algeria and Morocco has also spilled over and deepened the competition between the two countries in the wider Maghreb region, reactivating a logic of axes that already existed during the 1980s – when Algeria signed the 1983 Treaty of Fraternity and Concord with Tunisia and Mauritania, and in response, Morocco concluded the Oujda Treaty with Libya one year later. In a new iteration of historical polarisation dynamics, a diplomatic crisis broke out in August 2022 between Morocco and Tunisia. Just days after Mohammed VI asserted that Western Sahara is “the lens through which Morocco looks at its international environment”, the Polisario Front’s Secretary-General and SADR President Brahim Ghali was officially invited and received in Tunisia on the occasion of the

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<sup>32</sup> “L’Algérie suspend le Traité d’amitié, de bon voisinage et de coopération avec l’Espagne”, *Algérie Presse Service*, 8 June 2022.

<sup>33</sup> “Positive neutrality”, or interchangeably “active neutrality”, is a phrase used in Spain’s diplomatic parlance since the country’s democratic transition and withdrawal from Western Sahara, though largely as an empty signifier devoid of specific content which has been over time adapted to this conflict’s changing context.

<sup>34</sup> M. González, “La carta de Pedro Sánchez a Mohamed VI: ‘Debemos construir una nueva relación que evite futuras crisis’”, *El País*, 23 March 2022.

8<sup>th</sup> Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). Rabat cancelled its participation in the conference and recalled its ambassador in Tunisia for consultations, leading the latter country to respond in kind. Morocco interpreted Tunisia’s decision to receive Ghali as a head of state despite not recognising the SADR – as well as its prior abstention at the UN Security Council vote on Western Sahara in October 2021 – as a consequence of Algeria’s decisive influence on President Kais Saied.<sup>35</sup> This pressure came at a time when Tunisia was facing the utmost economic and political fragility. Being internationally and regionally isolated, the Tunisian President relied on Algeria to cover two-thirds of his country’s gas consumption, to control 1,200km of common borders and, above all, to receive economic and financial assistance. This support was particularly important as Tunisia pursued negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to unlock access to new international financing in a context of deteriorating socio-economic conditions, due in part to the war in Ukraine.

The same logic of competing and zero-sum regional alignments has affected Mauritania, a country that both Algeria and Morocco are keen to strengthen relations with. With the three-day visit of Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Cheik El Ghazouni in December 2021, Algeria aimed to revitalise bilateral trade relations. This was achieved through the signing of a cross-border free trade agreement and the launch of a project to improve connections with a road linking the cities of Tindouf in western Algeria and Zouerate in northern Mauritania.<sup>36</sup> For Morocco, maintaining and improving the land (road) connection with Mauritania that was re-established after the 2020 Guerguerat crisis is crucial for expanding its trade relations with the rest of Africa and ensuring its position in the Western Sahara conflict.

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<sup>35</sup> M. Hernando de Larramendi and L. Thieux, “La rivalité algéro-marocaine dans un contexte de transformation”, *Afkar-Idees*, no. 67, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> “Algérie-Mauritanie: ratification du protocole exécutif relatif au projet de la route Tindouf-Zouerate”, *Algérie Presse Service*, 15 February 2023.

## **Repercussions on the Maghreb’s Relations with the EU and EU Member States**

After decades of deliberate non-involvement and a backseat role in this issue,<sup>37</sup> the EU has seen the Western Sahara conflict gain prominence in its foreign policy agenda since the 2010s as a result of the Sahrawis’ new “low politics” international strategy. At the parliamentary level, this resulted in the European Parliament’s rejection, in December 2011, of the protocol of extension of the 2006 EU-Morocco fisheries agreement because of its legally problematic inclusion of the waters adjacent to Western Sahara, among other reasons. More consequentially, Morocco’s exploitation of and trading in Western Sahara’s natural resources have been called into question by the Polisario Front before the CJEU, via one of the legal routes opened by Sahrawi diplomacy since 2005 and with greater intensity since 2012. The various judgments and orders adopted by the CJEU’s General Court (2015, 2021) and Grand Chamber (2016, 2018) show the inner contradictions between the EU’s legal and regulatory framework, on the one hand, and its geopolitical, economic and commercial interests, on the other. This is also reflected in the tensions between the implementation of the CJEU judicial rulings and the related decisions of the Council, supported by the Commission and some member states.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> J. Vaquer, “The European Union and Western Sahara”, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2004, pp. 93-113; K. Benabdallah, “The Position of the European Union on the Western Sahara Conflict”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2009, pp. 417-35.

<sup>38</sup> A. Suárez-Collado and D. Contini, “The European Court of Justice on the EU-Morocco Agricultural and Fisheries Agreements: An Analysis of the Legal Proceedings and Consequences for the Actors Involved”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 7, 2022, pp. 1160-1179.

**TAB. 3:1 - JUDGEMENTS AND ORDERS OF THE COURT OF JUSTICE OF THE EU (CJEU) ON EU-MOROCCO AGREEMENTS**

| Court/ chamber              | Date              | Case  | Parties   | Agreements  | Main decisions   |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|---|---|---|--|
| General Court (8th Chamber) | 10 December 2015  | <a href="#">T-512/12</a>  | Polisario Front vs. Council of the EU (supported by European Commission)  | EU-Morocco agreement on reciprocal liberalisation measures on agricultural products, processed agricultural products, fish and fishery products (in force since 2012) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Council decision annulled "in so far as it approves the application of the agreement to Western Sahara"</li> <li>-Council's failure to ascertain no exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources "likely to be to the detriment of its inhabitants and to infringe their fundamental rights"</li> </ul>  |
| Court (Grand Chamber)       | 21 December 2016  | <a href="#">C-104/16 P</a> (appeal against judgment on <a href="#">T-512/12</a> ) | Council of the EU (supported by 5 member states) vs. Polisario Front.   |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Judgement on <a href="#">T-512/12</a> set aside</li> <li>-Western Sahara's "separate and distinct status" as non-self-governing territory</li> <li>-People of Western Sahara regarded as "third party" of which the implementation of the agreement "must receive the consent"</li> <li>-Agreement could not be understood "as meaning that its territorial scope included the territory of Western Sahara"</li> </ul> |
| Court (Grand Chamber)       | 27 February 2018  | <a href="#">C-266/16</a>  | Western Sahara Campaign UK vs. Commissioners for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs | EU-Morocco Fisheries Partnership Agreement (in force since 2006) & 2013 protocol setting out the fishing opportunities and financial contribution                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Protocol limited to "Moroccan fishing zone" which "does not include the waters adjacent to the territory of Western Sahara"</li> </ul>   |
| General Court (5th Chamber) | 19 July 2018      | <a href="#">T-180/14</a>  | Polisario Front vs. Council of the EU (supported by European Commission)  |   |  |
| General Court (5th Chamber) | 30 November 2018  | <a href="#">T-275/18</a>  | Polisario Front vs. Council of the EU   | EU-Morocco Euro-Mediterranean Aviation Agreement (in force since 2018)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-"Western Sahara and the waters adjacent to it do not fall within the territorial scope of this agreement"</li> </ul>   |
| General Court (9th Chamber) | 29 September 2021 | <a href="#">T-334/19 &amp; T-356/19</a> (joined cases)                            | Polisario Front vs. Council of the EU (supported by 2 member states and European Commission)  | EU-Morocco Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement (in force since 2019)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Council decisions on conclusion of the agreements annulled</li> <li>-"Only the people of Western Sahara can consent to an international agreement which is applicable to its territory and natural resources"</li> <li>-Effects of the decisions maintained for a provisional period</li> </ul>  |
|                             |                   | <a href="#">T-279/19</a>  | Polisario Front vs. Council of the EU (supported by 1 member state and European Commission)   | Amendment of Protocols 1 and 4 to the EU-Morocco Association Agreement (concerning EU imports of Moroccan agricultural and fisheries products) (in force since 2019)  |  |

|                          |                 |  |  |  |                     |
|--------------------------|-----------------|--|--|--|---------------------|
| Court<br>(Grand Chamber) | Autumn of 2023? | C-779/21 P<br>(appeal against judgment on T-334/19 T-356/19) | European Commission (supported by Council of the EU and 2 member states) vs. Polisario Front | EU-Morocco Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement (in force since 2019, expired in July 2023)   | Awaiting judgements |
|                          |                 | C-798/21 P<br>(appeal against judgment on T-334/19 T-356/19) | Council of the EU (supported by European Commission and 2 member states) vs. Polisario Front |  |                     |
|                          |                 | C-779/21 P<br>(appeal against judgment on T-334/19 T-356/19) | European Commission (supported by Council of the EU and 1 member state) vs. Polisario Front  | Amendment of Protocols 1 and 4 to the EU-Morocco Association Agreement (concerning EU imports of Moroccan agricultural and fisheries products) (in force since 2019) |                     |
|                          |                 | C-799/21 P<br>(appeal against judgment on T-334/19 T-356/19) | Council of the EU (supported by European Commission and 1 member state) vs. Polisario Front  |  |                     |

Source: EUR-Lex (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/>); authors' own elaboration<sup>39</sup>

Overall, the main legal conclusions that the EU’s executive institutions must face and implement after the various CJEU rulings are the explicit recognition that Western Sahara is not part of the territory of Morocco, that the Polisario Front remains the legal representative of the Sahrawi people and therefore its interlocutor, and that neither products nor natural resources originating from this territory can be included in the EU-Morocco cooperation agreements without the explicit and prior consent of the Sahrawi people. This clashes directly with Morocco’s consideration of its self-styled “national territorial integrity” as a non-negotiable red line, and led indeed to a first-time diplomatic crisis between Rabat and Brussels from 2016 to 2019 (see Table 3.1 above).

A first tangible outcome of these legal challenges has been the withdrawal of EU vessels from the waters of Morocco and Western Sahara following the expiration the EU-Morocco fisheries agreement in July 2023 and the European Commission’s reluctance to negotiate a renewal protocol as long as there is no final judgment from the CJEU on this matter.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> The authors would like to thank Alejandro del Valle Gálvez for his double-check and feedback on this table’s data.

<sup>40</sup> J.C. Sanz, “La flota pesquera se retira de Marruecos tras la sentencia europea sobre el Sáhara”, *El País*, 17 July 2023.

Such uncertainty in the second half of 2023 also coincides with the time when the presidency of the Council of the EU is held by Spain, the country with the highest number of vessels with permits to fish under this framework<sup>41</sup> – and which experienced a serious bilateral crisis with Morocco from 2021 to 2022.

Also recently, beyond these legal challenges, the issue of the utilisation and exploitation of Western Sahara’s natural resources has given rise to new competing foreign policy narratives around the 2020 European Green Deal. Morocco has endeavoured to build a “green diplomacy” based on the development of green and renewable energies with which it aims to supply the country itself and become a key exporter to Europe and other African countries.<sup>42</sup> The counter-narrative of the Polisario Front claims that the Moroccan strategy hides geopolitical and economic interests and, above all, that it does not meet the minimum requirements set by the UN Sustainable Development Goals and European policies. In other words, Morocco is being accused of “greenwashing”. While the new focus of Morocco’s development strategy is renewable and green energies, some of the existing or planned solar and wind power plants are located in the territory of Western Sahara, which means that the consent of the Sahrawi people is needed for their lawful management and exploitation.<sup>43</sup> More generally, the EU is also criticised for prioritising relations with Morocco at the expense of not respecting the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people, for its interests relating to migration control, the fight against terrorism and the energy transition, which Morocco is supposed to guarantee.

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<sup>41</sup> H. Lovatt and J. Mundy, “[Free to Choose: A New Plan For Peace In Western Sahara](#)”, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 26 May 2021.

<sup>42</sup> K.E. Nicolai, “A Green Gambit: The Development of Environmental Foreign Policy in Morocco”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2022, pp. 714-40.

<sup>43</sup> “[Greenwashing Occupation](#)”, Western Sahara Resource Watch, 6 October 2021.

On a different note, at the EU member state level, the main implications of the growing salience of the Western Sahara conflict have been a series of bilateral crises with Morocco, as well as some more indirect tensions with Algeria. The first country to go through a crisis with Morocco was Sweden in 2015, at a time when the possibility of recognising the SADR as a state was being discussed in Stockholm’s parliament. Morocco perceived those internal debates as a serious threat, and responded with a series of diplomatic and economic actions that included calling off the opening of the first Ikea store in the country. Bilateral relations did not normalise until the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs issued a formal statement announcing that the SADR issue was to be taken off the country’s political agenda.<sup>44</sup>

Five years later, the US presidential proclamation of December 2020 recognising Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara led Rabat to provoke two parallel bilateral crises with Germany and Spain, with the aim of pushing these countries to align their positions on the conflict with that of Washington. Rabat suspended contacts with the German embassy in the country in March 2021, and escalated the crisis to a recall of its ambassador for consultations two months later, accusing Berlin of “hostile acts” and chiefly a “negative attitude on the Moroccan Sahara issue”.<sup>45</sup> Germany had been the only member of the UN Security Council to demand a closed-door session to discuss the collapse of the ceasefire in Western Sahara, which eventually took place in December 2020.<sup>46</sup> Other additional reasons given by Rabat were that Berlin had not invited Morocco to an international summit on Libya it hosted in January 2020, in which Algeria did participate, and that it refused to arrest or extradite Mohamed

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<sup>44</sup> N. Messari, “Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI: Balancing Diversity and Respect”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 28 October 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, de la Coopération Africaine et des Marocains Résidant à l’Étranger/Royaume du Maroc, “Le Maroc rappelle l’Ambassadeur de Sa Majesté le Roi à Berlin pour consultations”, 6 May 2021.

<sup>46</sup> “Relaunching Negotiations over Western Sahara”, International Crisis Group (ICG), 14 October 2021.

Hajib, a Moroccan activist based in the country. However, tensions came to an end following Olaf Scholz’s accession to the German Chancellery in December 2021, when his government nuanced Berlin’s position on Western Sahara and commended the Moroccan Autonomy Plan as an “important contribution” to end the conflict.<sup>47</sup>

In the case of Spain, the bilateral crisis with Morocco was overt from May 2021 to March 2022, and was compounded with tensions over migration and territorial issues, including Ceuta and Melilla. The short-term trigger and pretext was the hospitalisation in Spain of the Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali to receive medical treatment for Covid-19. Morocco objected that Ghali was being investigated on several charges relating to human rights violations in the Tindouf refugee camps. Seizing on Madrid’s increased dependency on its southern neighbour for anti-immigration and border control purposes,<sup>48</sup> Rabat retaliated by allowing over 9,000 migrants (mostly Moroccans) to cross the border into Ceuta in 24 hours, claiming that “there are acts that have consequences” as its ambassador to Madrid was recalled.<sup>49</sup> The EU was swift to react to this case of blatant weaponisation of migration control on its southern borders, and the European Parliament adopted a motion rejecting Rabat’s behaviour. In any case, in order to mend its ties with Morocco, the Spanish government was forced not only to dismiss the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Arancha González Laya, in July 2021, but also to state that the Moroccan Autonomy Plan is “*the* most serious, credible and realistic basis” for the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict

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<sup>47</sup> M. Al-Fawiris, “[The EU and the Diplomatic Dilemma in the Maghreb](#)”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 July 2022.

<sup>48</sup> I. Fernández-Molina and M. Hernando de Larramendi, “Migration Diplomacy in a De Facto Destination Country: Morocco’s New Intermestic Migration Policy and International Socialization by/with the EU”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2022, pp. 212-35.

<sup>49</sup> “[Embajadora de Marruecos: ‘Hay actos que tienen consecuencias y se tienen que asumir’](#)”, *Europa Press*, 18 May 2021.



in March of the following year – a move that was mired in deep domestic controversy and jeopardised Madrid’s relations with Algiers (see above).

Finally, France’s relations with Morocco have been strained over the past two years due to a combination of President Emmanuel Macron’s policy of rapprochement with Algeria, heightened visa restrictions for Moroccans and the Western Sahara issue. Regarding the latter, despite pressure from Rabat and unlike Germany and Spain, Paris has so far been reluctant to make any declaration expressing further endorsement for the Moroccan Autonomy Plan.

The other side of the coin of these bilateral crises and reconciliations with Morocco has been the Western Sahara issue’s impact on Algeria’s relations with the EU and EU member states. Algeria’s energy supply to Europe has enjoyed a long and stable trajectory. Despite the current process of energy transition, Morocco’s supply of green and renewable energy is very far from taking away the priority place of fossil energy (gas) generated and exported by Algeria. In order to prevent the spill-over of Algeria’s bilateral tensions with Morocco over Western Sahara and other issues, some EU member states have preferred to “Europeanise” disputes.<sup>50</sup> Such has been the approach followed by Spain since Algeria’s suspension of the bilateral Treaty of Amity in June 2022 in response to Madrid’s support for the Moroccan Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara. Algeria’s retaliatory measures included withdrawing its diplomatic corps from Madrid, freezing trade activities and decreasing cooperation on migration and security issues. The only elements left unchanged, in principle, were the volume and conditions of its gas sales to Spain. Algeria intended, on the one hand, not to break a contract and thus lose reliability vis-à-vis Europe, and on the other hand, to maintain foreign currency income in a political and economic context of domestic and international tension.

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<sup>50</sup> B. Tomé and A. Casani, “[Marruecos hoy, relaciones con España y Argelia](#)”, Fundación Alternativas, 2023.

Algeria is Europe's third largest supplier after Russia and Norway.<sup>51</sup> Hence, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both the EU Commissioner for Energy, Kadri Simson, and the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, visited Algeria at different times with the aim of discussing the EU-Algeria Strategic Energy Partnership in place since 2015.<sup>52</sup> In the meantime, Italy has been able to fill the gap left by Algeria's crisis with Spain and improve gas supplies from this country. The question for experts and policymakers is whether Algeria will be able to improve its production so as to increase its exports to Europe in order to meet growing demand.<sup>53</sup>

## **A Less and Less Forgotten Conflict**

A protracted decolonisation and territorial-sovereignty conflict with a significant regional dimension, the dispute over Western Sahara remains both a consequence and a cause of Moroccan-Algerian rivalry and the broader lack of integration in the Maghreb. For Morocco, "national territorial integrity" has invariably featured as *the* superior priority and cross-cutting issue determining all foreign policy behaviour. Yet, the strain this puts on Rabat's relations with its traditional international partners, especially in the West, has substantially increased in two steps since the past decade: as a consequence of the effects of the Polisario Front's "low politics" international strategy that has politicised Morocco's human rights violations and economic exploitation of the natural resources of the territory, and in the wake of the US unilateral recognition of Moroccan sovereignty thereon, in parallel to the resumption of hostilities

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<sup>51</sup> M.J. Willis, *Algeria: Politics and Society from the Dark Decade to the Hirak*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 374.

<sup>52</sup> A. Sözen, N. Goren, and C. Limon (eds.), "Conflict Resolution in the Mediterranean: Energy as a Potential Game-Changer", *Diplomats*, 2023, p. 60.

<sup>53</sup> M. Ouki, "Algerian Gas in Transition: Domestic Transformation and Changing Gas Export Potential", Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2019.

in late 2020. In the case of Algeria, the unwavering support for the Polisario Front and Sahrawi self-determination constitutes a deep-seated principled stance, and at the same time one that is strategically mobilised as a means to pursue self-interest-based goals relating to the bilateral geopolitical competition with Morocco, as well as domestic power struggles. Algiers’ decision to break off diplomatic relations with Rabat in the summer of 2021 demonstrates the extent to which normative-identity and strategic motivations are inextricably interwoven.

Furthermore, other countries in the Maghreb such as Tunisia and Mauritania have been subject to the spill-over of Western Sahara-related and Moroccan-Algerian tensions, which have embroiled them in fluid, zero-sum regional alignments. When it comes to the Maghreb’s relations with the EU, the Western Sahara conflict has entangled them in two main ways: directly, through the parliamentary and especially judicial (CJEU) route taken by the Polisario Front in order to challenge the territorial undifferentiation and inclusion of Western Sahara in all the bilateral EU-Morocco deals; and indirectly, through the related bilateral crises that various EU member states have faced with Morocco (Sweden, Germany, Spain, France), as well as Algeria (Spain).

