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The ensuing military stalemate laid the basis for a 1991 UN-mediated settlement plan, which established a cease-fire and a UN buffer zone along the sand berm; called for a self-determination referendum; and set up a mission, MINURSO, to monitor the cease-fire and organize the referendum. The vote never took place due to Moroccan objections. Subsequent negotiations failed to achieve a breakthrough, even though the two sides continued to abide by the cease-fire. In 2007, under pressure from France and the United States, Morocco proposed an autonomy plan that would provide for a degree of self-government for Western Sahara under its sovereignty. The Polisario rejected it out of hand for denying the Sahrawi population's right to self-determination.

The most destabilizing incidents have come from alleged Moroccan attacks on Algerian and Mauritanian civilian convoys. These have threatened to widen the conflict to the rest of the region. In November 2021, an alleged Moroccan drone strike in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara resulted in the deaths of three Algerian truck drivers en route to Mauritania. The incident prompted the Algerian presidency to publicly pin the blame on Rabat and vow retaliation. A second such incident occurred in April 2022, when Algeria accused the Moroccan air force of killing another three people in an attack on a civilian truck convoy near the Mauritanian border.

Divisions and inaction marked the UN Security Council's initial response to the restart of the conflict in 2020. The council remained inactive for weeks after the cease-fire collapsed due to deep divisions within its ranks between pro-Polisario (such as Russia among the permanent members, as well as several African and Latin American countries) and pro-Morocco member states (such as France and many Arab and West African governments). Pro-Polisario members wanted the council to publicly put more pressure on Rabat, while pro-Morocco states supported the kingdom's reluctance to allow any form of international scrutiny of the conflict.

All attempts to push the council to discuss and take a position failed. When Germany requested consultations on the matter in December 2020, Rabat suspended diplomatic ties in retaliation. In April 2021, the United States tried to push the council to take a stance on the need to avoid an escalation and appoint a new UN envoy, but this initiative crashed on a roadblock thrown up by India, which acted on Morocco's behalf. This move was enough to block the US initiative, as Washington realized that the costs of overcoming New Delhi's objection would far outweigh the initiative's benefits.

Faced with a paralyzed Security Council, the Joe Biden administration tried to ease hostilities in Western Sahara. It pushed for the appointment of Staffan de Mistura as the new UN envoy, overcoming Rabat's initial rejection. Yet, it refrained from clarifying its position on former President Trump's decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, in an apparent attempt to avoid antagonizing either side.

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The Biden administration has started playing a somewhat more assertive role in efforts to revive UN-brokered negotiations. Over the past months, US officials have engaged with all parties involved, aiming to contain regional tensions and rebuild the UN framework for Western Sahara. Washington's unique position as the only external actor capable of engaging with all stakeholders makes it a critical interlocutor.

Despite its privileged position, Washington has been reluctant to invest significant political capital in ending the conflict, considering it a low-priority issue. Instead of applying pressure, the administration has tried to build confidence among all the main stakeholders by leveraging their desire for strong ties with the United States. To this end, the Biden administration has worked to establish closer economic and security ties with Algeria, maintained relations with Morocco, and offered the Polisario the prospect of an expanded diplomatic relationship. But its reluctance to make a bigger push for negotiations could hamper the UN envoy's efforts.

Indeed, Morocco has yet to modify its position. Moroccan diplomats continue to engage with the UN envoy, but refuse to abandon the 2019 roundtable format or negotiate beyond their autonomy plan. The Polisario remains open to discussing the envoy's proposals, but skeptical of the current circumstances for negotiations due to a lack of international attention toward the conflict and a weak negotiating position.

Despite the temporary lull in tensions, Israel's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara has further exacerbated regional tensions. The Moroccan media celebrated the July 17 announcement as another diplomatic victory for the kingdom. The move did not go unchallenged. Three days later, the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned it as "a blatant violation of international law."

Israel's step may have bolstered Morocco's efforts to formalize its control over the territory but is unlikely to inject real momentum in its strategy to secure international support for its claim. International media highlighted how the move strengthens the dominant narrative that Rabat has the upper hand in this conflict, but Israel's controversial role in the region suggests that few other states will follow its example.

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Decade-old geopolitical transformations have impacted the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states' efforts to implement socioeconomic reforms. More recently, the Ukraine war's reverberations are also likely to affect the MENA countries' paths towards such reforms.

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