



DGAP

Summary

Online Discussion from 9. December 2020

„A Frozen Conflict thaws out“ – Renewed Conflict in Western Sahara

Background: In North Africa, a fragile peace is threatening to disintegrate. In mid-November, the Sahrawi independence movement Frente Polisario declared its intention to resume the armed struggle against Morocco after almost thirty years. This was preceded by an operation by Morocco in the border area between Western Sahara and Mauritania. The conflict over the Moroccan-controlled territory of Western Sahara has for decades hindered regional cooperation in North Africa. For the EU, Morocco is an important partner in migration policy. Algeria, on whose territory the Polisario refugee camps are located, works closely with European partners in the fight against extremist groups. Since the resignation of former German President Horst Köhler in April 2019, the position of United Nations (UN) Special Envoy for Western Sahara has also been left vacant.

Highlights:

- **The closure of the Guerguerat border crossing is a sign of the Polisario's frustration in the face of the stalemate in the political process.**
- **A military escalation is not necessarily expected.**
- **Morocco sees the "time" factor on its side and is therefore playing for time.**
- **Any new negotiations must result in the two conflicting parties clearly define their real positions.**
- **The appointment of a new UN envoy by the UN Secretary-General should be made promptly to prevent further escalations.**

Moderation

Dr Gerrit Kurtz

Research Fellow for Crisis Prevention and Diplomacy, DGAP

Discussion

David Schwake

Secretary General,
German Africa Foundation

Dr Wolfgang Weisbrod-Weber

Head of the UN Mission
MINURSO until 2012

Dr Isabelle Werenfels

Senior Fellow
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik

Philip Holzapfel

Head of Division Mahgreb,
Federal Foreign Office

Frustration in the face of stalemate - the motives of the *Polisario*

Although the *Polisario's* closure of the border crossing is not a new form of escalation - there have been about 50 such closures so far. The high-profile termination of the ceasefire shows that the *Polisario* leadership seems to be looking for new ways to put pressure on Morocco and international diplomacy. Even though the *UN* mission *MINURSO* has so far made great efforts to prevent possible clashes and to reduce the number of roadblocks, the current stalemate in the political process is an important reason for possible new clashes. The participants agreed that the *Polisario's* action in Guerguerat was above all an expression of the ever-increasing frustration among its supporters; especially among the younger Sahrawis. Many of whom studied abroad in the West and were now familiar with the situation in the refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, where the *FP* also maintains its headquarters, and hence, became dissatisfied. In general, the situation in the camps has deteriorated. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the logistical and health situation has worsened. For this reason, the *Polisario's* move is interpreted as a signal to its own supporters. Although this has succeeded in bringing their own concerns back into focus, a real escalation of the conflict is not to be expected - the military resources of the *FP* (in terms of quality and quantity) are too inferior to the arsenal at the disposal of the Moroccan military.

Morocco is playing for time - Bit by bit towards sovereignty?

The participants attested that the Moroccan side had little interest in escalating the conflict. Although the dispute over the status of Western Sahara could never be completely resolved without a diplomatic solution, time seems to be on Morocco's side at the moment. In this respect, it is also unclear whether Morocco wants to continue implementing the autonomy plan. Today, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (DARS) is only recognised by 40 countries instead of around 80. In addition, Morocco has been relatively successful in opening consulates on the territory of Western Sahara. The public response to Morocco's eviction action in Guerguerat must have been sobering for the *Polisario*, as there was little support for the Sahrawi people's cause.

Economic damages "taken into consideration"?

The economic potential of the region was assessed differently by the panellists, especially with regard to the yield of mineral resources such as phosphate. However, the current circumstances prevent the full valorisation and development of the resources through entrepreneurial investments. Morocco, however, is prepared to pay this price. Fishing in the coastal areas off Western Sahara had been complicated by a 2018 *European Court of Justice (ECJ)* ruling that Western Sahara was not part of the territory of the Kingdom of Morocco and therefore no tariff preferences could be granted for products originating there - as the *European Union's* Association Agreement with Morocco of 1 March 2000 had actually provided. Another setback is the lack of integration of the Maghreb region. Cross-border exports in the Maghreb have been stagnating at a low level of 0.6% for a long time - with a downward trend. The different interests of Morocco and Algeria with regard to the resolution

of the Western Sahara conflict represent the decisive hurdle for the establishment and deepening of economic cooperation.

Algeria's position - a neighbour that does not want to be a part of the problem!

Algeria always emphasises that it is only a "neighbour" in the conflict, which is denied by Morocco, who regards Algeria as a "party" involved. At present, Morocco seems to assume that Algeria is hardly capable of acting in terms of foreign policy, partly due to the Algerian President's illness with Covid-19 and his treatment in Germany. It should also be emphasised that the army in Algeria exerts a considerable influence on how the *Polisario* cause is viewed. Algeria could use the situation for its own domestic political ends by invoking a threat from outside. However, Algeria was also not interested in an escalation of the issue.

EU und AU - Better on the outside than in?

While Morocco demands a more direct participation of Algeria as a party, it wants to keep the involvement of the *European Union (EU)* and the *African Union (AU)* as small as possible. Both supranational institutions would have an interest in resolving the conflict. However, it would be difficult for both institutions to exert direct diplomatic influence because their members have a common stance on the conflict. Morocco hopes to convince other *AU* member states of its position. The *EU*, in every one of its pronouncements, declares its support for the rights of the Sahrawi people, but shifts the responsibility for the process to the *UN*.

What next?

There was consensus among the participants on a number of possible courses of action and solutions. The importance of appointing a new *UN* Special Envoy was stressed in order to resume coordinated diplomatic efforts and towards a resolution on the dispute in which both parties, partly more out of national pride than practical considerations, could not give up their positions without losing face. In order to better determine the "red lines" of both sides, the new special envoy should present its own renewed plan that would "force the parties out of hiding" and move towards a real chance for negotiation. In addition to appointing a new envoy, the Security Council should also reconsider its resolution on the Western Sahara conflict; for which the current resolution demands the impossible.