

Italian Foreign Policy and the Western Sahara: Balancing Relations with Morocco and Algeria

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E S S A Y P R I Z E

The unresolved conflict over the Western Sahara remains an important issue for geopolitical balances in the Mediterranean, including Italian foreign policy and Rome's relations with Morocco and Algeria.

Generally described as a "frozen" or low-intensity conflict, the Western Saharan dispute involves a number of disparate actors. The Polisario Front – a movement fighting for the independence of Western Sahara – and Morocco, which since 1975 has occupied Western Sahara, are the key protagonists, but a relevant role is also played by Algeria, the key regional backer of the Polisario, as well as Mauritania, the United States, the

European Union and Israel. In 2021, a formal ceasefire was broken by the Polisario Front, which explained its decision as a response to Moroccan incursions in the neutral area: the events have caused a reaction by Algeria and have raised concern for a possible direct conflict between it and Morocco.

One by-product of this conflict has been its impact on regional integration, given Algeria and Morocco's deep rivalry over the Western Sahara. Such divisions within North Africa have also had carry-on effects on relations with the EU, constraining efforts to foster Euro-Mediterranean integration.

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These issues are of significant importance to Italy. Due to its geography, Italy would benefit significantly from enhanced integration and reconciliation in North Africa, not least in light of its positive political and trade relations with both Morocco and Algeria. Such matters have become even more important in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Italy and Europe's search for alternative energy supplies in North Africa and the Middle East to diminish dependence on Russia.

In 2022, Algeria quickly emerged as a key interlocutor for Italian efforts to replace Russian gas supplies. This was the case due to the historically excellent trade relations between Italy and Algeria and to the existence of the pipeline Transmed, connecting the two countries. In April, a new agreement was signed with Algeria to increase gas imports to Italy over the coming years, leading Algeria to replace Russia as Rome's first gas provider by late 2022.¹

The increased visibility of Italy–Algeria energy relations caused concern in Morocco, where some feared that such relations would push Rome to assume a more forceful stance in support of the Polisario Front and Algeria's stance on the Western Sahara. While the Italian government made all efforts to reassure Rabat that new energy relations with Algeria should in no way be construed as picking sides between the two North African neighbours or a revision of

Italy's longstanding stance on the Western Sahara conflict, the signature of the gas deal and repeated high-level visits by Italian officials to Algiers have not helped diminish concern in Morocco.

Historical legacy and recent trends

The Western Sahara conflict dates back to the early 1970s, when the territory was still ruled by Spain as a colony. In 1973, the *Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro* (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro), backed by Algeria and known as the Polisario Front, was formed, seeking self-determination for the population of the Western Sahara. At the same time, however, the rapid growth of the Moroccan nationalist movement acted as a counterbalance to the Polisario. By 1975, Spain withdrew from the area, accepting Moroccan calls and handing control of the Western Sahara to Mauritania and Morocco.²

This decision led to a liberation war, fought by the Polisario Front against the two countries. Mauritania withdrew in 1979, renouncing its territorial ambitions, but the conflict with Morocco lasted until 1991, when the Kingdom and the Polisario signed a settlement plan and ceasefire. Armed clashes diminished, but no long-term political solution was found. The conflict passed to the United Nations, which established the peacekeeping mission MINURSO to prepare the

¹ Italian Government, *Prime Minister Draghi in Algiers*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.sitiarcheologici.palazzochigi.it/www.governo.it/ottobre2022/www.governo.it/en/node/19625.html>.

² This happened through the Declaration of Principles on Western Sahara, a treaty which gave no role to the Polisario Front and to the people of the territory.



territory for a referendum on the independence of Western Sahara: the mission, however, found several difficulties, and the vote never took place.³ Meanwhile, 80 per cent of the Western Sahara has remained occupied by Morocco.

More recent developments have resulted in renewed focus on the dispute. In 2020, the Trump administration broke with longstanding US policy by ignoring the UN proposed roadmap for the Western Sahara and unilaterally recognising Moroccan sovereignty over the territory in exchange for Rabat's agreement to normalise diplomatic relations with Israel.⁴

Since then, certain European countries, including Spain and Germany, have similarly distanced themselves from the UN roadmap to express support for Morocco's proposed autonomy for the region. This second plan was presented in 2007 by Rabat to the UN and insists on the necessity of integrating Western Sahara in the Moroccan state, providing limited autonomy to the region.⁵

³ Marco Zupi, "La questione del Sahara occidentale: origine e sviluppi", in *Note dell'Osservatorio di politica internazionale*, No. 89 (February 2021), p. 3, <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/note/PI0089Not.pdf>.

⁴ Anthony Dworkin, "North African Standoff: How the Western Sahara Conflict Is Fuelling New Tensions between Morocco and Algeria", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, April 2022, p. 2, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=90331>.

⁵ Francesco Palmas, "Il contenzioso del Sahara Occidentale fra passato e presente", in *Informazioni della Difesa*, No. 4/2012, p. 58, https://www.difesa.it/InformazioniDellaDifesa/periodico/periodico_2012/Documents/R4_2012/50_59_R4_2012.pdf.

These shifting policies towards Morocco and the Western Sahara led to significant concern in Algeria, traditionally the key supporter of the Polisario Front. Since the start of the Western Sahara conflict, Algiers has provided the Polisario with arms and political support, as well as hosting bases of the movement in Algerian territory.⁶

Algeria's support for the Polisario can be contextualised against the backdrop of a broader dispute with Morocco: tensions between the two states began in the early 1960s, when Morocco's attempt to gain significant territory along the Algerian border led to the Sand War.⁷ In this context, the African Union has also traditionally supported the Polisario Front and its claims: in 1984, Morocco withdrew from the African Union in protest, albeit the Kingdom re-joined the organisation in 2017 after securing increased support across Africa for its claims over the Western Sahara.

Beyond the African continent, Morocco has also benefitted from US support, particularly following the 2001 terrorist attacks, which led to increased counter-terrorism cooperation with Rabat in North Africa. While for years Washington maintained its formal support for the UN-led peace process, this changed during the Trump administration and its unilateral recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara

⁶ Marco Zupi, "La questione del Sahara occidentale: origine e sviluppi", cit., p. 9.

⁷ Anthony Dworkin, "North African Standoff", cit., p. 3.

and Rabat's autonomy proposal. Within Europe, Morocco has traditionally maintained good relations with France and, to a lesser degree, the UK and Spain. However, these states never fully recognised Moroccan claims and instead remained firm in support of the UN-led process for the Western Sahara. In this context, Italy, too, has long identified the UN roadmap as the preferred solution to the issue, aligning with the EU as a whole and the majority of its member states.

Italy's balancing act

Italian policy on the Western Sahara is in many respects an outgrowth of its strong relations with both Morocco and Algeria, and Rome's efforts to balance these ties to maximise economic and trade returns with both. As part of this policy, Italy has also cultivated friendly relations with a variety of actors affiliated with the Western Sahara. Many Italian local administrations have approved twinning agreements and cooperation projects with the territory and its municipalities.⁸ Also, the Italian Parliament granted diplomatic representation to the Polisario Front in 2007 and has since called for the need to guarantee human rights in the territory.⁹

⁸ Regione Toscana, *Aggiornamento situazione Sahara Occidentale*, 2008, <https://www.regione.toscana.it/documents/10180/920288/News+Sahara+Occ+2008.doc/672011b8-ec88-4109-964f-44b382251d39>.

⁹ Italian Chamber of Deputies-Research Department, "La questione del Sahara Occidentale", in *Note di politica internazionale*, No. 37 (12 November 2013), <http://documenti.camera.it/Leg17/Dossier/pdf/ES0132INF.pdf>.

Italy's balancing act between Algeria and Morocco has become more difficult as of late in light of the US's changing stance on the Western Sahara and Algeria's new position as Rome's first supplier of natural gas. Efforts to reconcile Italy's interests in the Mediterranean and Rome's traditional support for the UN-led diplomatic track on the Western Sahara have led Italy to take a rather ambiguous approach to the issue in recent times.

This is reflected in certain statements coming from various actors within the Italian government. In May 2022, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio welcomed Morocco's "serious and credible efforts within the framework of the United Nations" and called on "all the parties to renew their commitment as a sign of realism and compromise".¹⁰ At the same time, in July, in a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, President of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune highlighted that Algeria and Italy agree on supporting the UN initiatives to solve the Western Sahara issue.¹¹

This ambiguity has served Italian interests in the past, but it is unlikely to remain sustainable in the long-term given the shifting international policies vis-à-vis the Western Sahara and the risk that Italian interests be compromised with both Morocco and Algeria in the

¹⁰ "Sahara occidentale, Di Maio: 'L'Italia sostiene una soluzione politica mutualmente accettabile'", in *Nova News*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/?p=101570>.

¹¹ Italian Government, *Prime Minister Draghi in Algeria*, 18 July 2022, <https://www.sitiarcheologici.palazzochigi.it/www.governo.it/ottobre2022/www.governo.it/en/node/20285.html>.

absence of a clear strategy. With Spain and Germany having now joined the US in backing Morocco's approach to the Western Sahara and both Morocco and Algeria having demonstrated their willingness to employ sanctions and hard diplomacy vis-à-vis actors that oppose their respective claims and policies, Italy risks being caught in a bind, forced to choose between two equally important actors for its Mediterranean interests.

Given this situation, one option could be for Italy to emerge as a key promoter of a new European position on the Western Sahara and Morocco–Algeria relations, promoting diplomacy, dialogue and regional integration in an effort to advance bridging solutions or confidence-building measures between the sides. Any such effort should also be accompanied by sustained economic, energy and trade engagements with both Rabat and Algiers, placing particular emphasis on measures aimed at increasing interdependencies between both shores of the Mediterranean as well as between Morocco and Algeria themselves. Such efforts would be in line with EU ambitions and also provide important impetus to efforts to foster the needed regional groundwork to face the compounding threats of the climate emergency, which can only be addressed through enhanced infrastructure integration and connectivity, particularly in green energy.

Such an approach would no doubt carry risks, but could provide a means to assuage the concerns of Italy's two North African partners while helping

Rome assume more visibility within Europe and with the US in seeking to advance bridging solutions or compromises on the Western Sahara. One component of such efforts would be to acknowledge the failures of the UN-led roadmap while simultaneously also recognising the dangers of unilaterally discarding international legal frameworks long applied to the Western Sahara by the international community. By prioritising efforts within the EU, and reassuring both Morocco and Algeria that what motivates Italy is a genuine effort to re-launch intra-regional cooperation and integration, Rome could shield itself from accusations of bias towards one or the other actor while also integrating Italian policy within broader objectives of the EU.

A nuanced and balanced approach would be preferable compared to the other options available. These include a business-as-usual approach – that would likely result in Italy ultimately compromising relations with one or the other actor while being increasingly isolated within the EU given Germany and Spain's distancing from the UN-led track – or to fully embrace the new stances of Berlin and Madrid (as well as Washington) on Moroccan claims. Both of these avenues would likely carry more risks than returns, given Italy's very important energy relationship with Algeria, which is only likely to increase in the future, and the reality that any such recognition of Moroccan claims over the Western Sahara would in no way lead to a genuine solution to the conflict. Rather, such action would only increase the bilateral conflict between Morocco and Algeria and likely also lead

to increased fragmentation in North Africa, elements that are detrimental to all sides involved.

When seen in this light, Italy would be well advised to act rapidly and in an unambiguous way. In particular, the government should consider the issue a priority for Italian interests and abandon the wait-and-see approach which has characterised international action in recent years. By carefully balancing its relations with both Morocco and Algeria, while acting within the EU to refocus attention and promote bridging proposals on the Western Sahara issue, Rome could have more freedom and cover to continue pursuing its bilateral interests with Algiers and Rabat while at the same time demonstrating its genuine efforts to enhance regional reconciliation and integration. The alternative would certainly be less beneficial for the Italian interests, as Rome would be obliged to join either Moroccan or Algerian claims, with relevant consequences from a diplomatic and economic point of view.

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