

# Polisario Attack on Smara: A Worrying Escalation for Morocco

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Brief Analysis

**The recent attack in Smara signifies a troubling departure from established conflict norms, with the Polisario Front's acknowledgment of responsibility for targeting civilians raising significant concerns for a paradigm shift in the conflict and signals an escalation of the already fragile situation in the region.**

On October 29, four explosions rocked the city of Smara in Morocco's Southern Provinces, resulting in the death of a young man and the injury of three others, two of whom are in critical condition. The explosion affected three residential neighborhoods in the city and did not target any military bases or positions in the area. Through its press service, the Polisario claimed responsibility for the attack. Subsequently, the group's representative to the European Union justified the bombing by saying "Morocco also targets Sahrawi citizens with drones."

## Background

The conflict between Morocco and the Algerian backed-Polisario Front in the disputed territory formerly known as Western Sahara spans several distinct phases. The first, from 1975 to 1991, was characterized by open warfare and the death of more than 3,000 civilians. Spain had played a role in teasing the tensions by harboring several political leaders connected with the Polisario Front in Madrid. A United Nations-brokered ceasefire agreement in 1991 led to the second phase, from 1991 to 2020, which saw unfruitful negotiations and a protracted political stalemate. Although tensions simmered, there were no significant hostilities. The third phase, from 2020 to 2023, witnessed the recognition of Morocco's full sovereignty over all its Southern Provinces by the United States, and the unilateral

breach of the ceasefire by the Polisario Front, whereby the group obstructed commercial traffic at the Guerguerat border crossing with Mauritania. Morocco launched a military operation in the buffer zone, a strip established as part of the ceasefire agreement in 1991 separating Morocco and the Polisario, serving as a demilitarized area to reduce the risk of armed hostilities

### **Significance of the Attacks**

The attacks on the city of Smara occurred in the shadow of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, so have received relatively little international attention. In contrast, the attacks have sent shockwaves through the Maghreb, raising concerns about a much larger scale of war. In particular, the Polisario's deviation from the previous rules of engagement—where civilians were largely spared from direct harm—changed the status quo. It's unclear why the Polisario Front chose to target the civilians they claim to represent and defend. The attack appears to be linked to the Security Council sessions scheduled on October 30 to discuss the renewal of annual MINURSO mission to Western Sahara, especially since the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres affirmed the Moroccan self-autonomy plan and their contributions to resolve the conflict. The Polisario along with their Algerian patrons have suffered a series of diplomatic setbacks which most likely compelled the Polisario to escalate.

### **Morocco's Response**

Morocco is likely to respond promptly and resolutely to the attack. The kingdom will almost certainly focus first on reinforcing civilian areas adjacent to the "buffer strip" such as Smara and Mahbas, perhaps by eliminating the buffer zone and establishing a robust military presence in the strip to prevent the targeting of residential areas. It is likely that the rockets launched at Smara came from inside the buffer zone given the range of rockets the Polisario possesses, thus a sweep of the zone along with establishing a physical presence will ultimately deter and prevent any further attacks targeting the residential areas close to the zone.

Morocco will also likely continue its policy of targeting Polisario militants who attempt to infiltrate from Mauritania and Algeria. A larger presence in the buffer zone will enable the Moroccan military to contain these threats. This proactive approach will not only serve as a deterrent to potential aggressors but would enhance Morocco's capacity to swiftly respond to security breaches and minimize the risks and challenges associated with cross-border incursions. These measures should be combined with an effort from the Mauritanian side to secure its territory and protect the porous border to prevent these militias from launching terrorist attacks against Morocco.

### **Recommendations for Morocco**

The recent attack in Smara signifies a troubling departure from established conflict norms, with the Polisario Front's acknowledgment of responsibility for targeting civilians raising significant concerns for a paradigm shift in the conflict and signals an escalation of the already fragile situation in the region. Responding to this crisis requires a multifaceted approach.

On an international level, Morocco should leverage this change in the new rules of engagement to gain an international condemnation of the Polisario Front's targeting of innocent civilians as well as preserve its right to retaliate against external threats. International law dictates that warring parties must protect and refrain from directly targeting civilians, a principle blatantly violated in the attack on Smara.

According to the UN charter, Article 51 nations have the inherent right to self-defense when attacked by an armed force. In this context, Morocco has every right to respond to such threats, utilizing all necessary and adequate means, including its armed forces, to protect its sovereignty and the security of its citizens. Morocco should continue its adherence to international law in their conflict with the Polisario, and can rely on its well-trained and professional armed forces.

Domestically, Morocco must prioritize security measures to protect its territorial integrity and citizens, including eliminating the buffer zone and establishing a strong military presence to prevent further attacks.

There are also regional implications; the recent attacks, along with the acknowledgment by the leaders of the Polisario, could potentially lead to increased tensions between Morocco and Algeria. This possibility of escalation raises concerns for a real military confrontation, particularly considering the existing strained relations between the two countries. Algeria, which provides refuge to the Polisario Front and supports its fighters, may see further strain in its already severely deteriorated relationship with Morocco due to these recent developments.

The recent events underscore the urgent need for the international community to condemn civilian targeting and work towards a peaceful resolution. The attack should likewise serve as a stark reminder of the imperative for collective efforts to prevent further escalation and ensure the region's safety and stability. ❖

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