

Western Sahara's e-war

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In November, a 30-year ceasefire in the Western Sahara dispute ended when Moroccan troops intervened to remove Sahrawi protesters blocking a highway in the south of the territory. Since then, low-level fighting has continued between the Moroccan army which controls most of the former Spanish colony and the pro-independence Polisario Front.

At the same time, tensions have risen due to a last-minute intervention by the outgoing Trump administration which in December recognized the Western Sahara, annexed by Morocco in 1975, as sovereign Moroccan territory.

This recognition is seen as Washington's reward for King Mohammed VI agreeing to open full diplomatic relations with Israel, making Morocco the third Arab country after Egypt and Jordan to do so. The United States also announced the opening of a 'virtual' consulate in the contested territory, supposedly to promote trade links in the region.

But the consulate is not the only thing that is digital in this dispute. With fighting largely at a standstill, supporters on both sides have moved the

conflict online, taking to social media to spread misinformation which benefits their camp.

‘You can't really take anything that you hear for granted,’ says one diplomat. ‘It runs the gamut from just inaccurate reporting to completely fantastic stuff, sometimes in the same sentence.’

A majority of Sahrawi people – the bulk of them living in refugee camps in Algeria – now turn to social media for news. Though the Sahrawi guerrillas are no threat to the Moroccan armed forces, the King is reluctant to wage all-out war given that the Polisario is recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people.

‘I think there's a lot of rallying-around-the-flag because of this conflict, and wanting to promote the cause towards some sort of resolution in their favour,’ says the diplomat.

Through reverse-image searching methods, a number of recent posts are revealed as using old imagery to misrepresent or fabricate facts about today's conflict.

One Facebook page with over 17,000 followers, RASD PRESS, [posted a photo](#) of a fighter jet on January 4, claiming it showed Moroccan aircraft intervening near the berm, the sand wall that separates Moroccan-controlled territory from the Polisario's so-called free zone. But the image is at least one and a half years old.

Similarly, a Twitter account with almost 13,000 followers seemingly designed to resemble an official Polisario account, ‘@Polisario_’, [posted an](#)

[update](#) of the fighting in November accompanied by an image of an impressive array of tanks. In fact, the image is from 2012.

'The effect of fake news is more serious and more complicated in war,' says Ettanji Ahmed, a Sahrawi activist who helped set up his own outlet, Equipe Media. He reports on the conflict and has previously also worked with Human Rights Watch to fact-check rights violations by Moroccan troops.

'It's better to publish nothing than to publish something false, as this hugely harms the credibility of the cause,' he says.

For their part, pro-Moroccan outlets seek to minimize the struggle.

Until 2005, Morocco enforced a media blackout of the Western Sahara. The government still retains tight control over its national outlets, who all persistently downplay or deny any conflict continues.

In rare cases where reports do surface, pro-Moroccan journalists play up the kingdom's advantages.

One video, [posted on January 6th](#) by a pro-Moroccan journalist with over 24,000 followers on Facebook, claims to show Moroccan troops shooting at Polisario vehicles. In fact, one source in contact with Mauritanian officials says the footage is from an incident in December where a Mauritanian patrol mistakenly confronted Moroccan vehicles during a patrol, though it was not possible to confirm this directly with the Mauritanian armed forces.

The American decision to open a 'virtual consulate' recognizing Moroccan rule over the Western Sahara has shocked Sahrawi representatives, who see it

as a low-effort move that nonetheless deals a blow to their independence claims.

‘Even if the US wants to open the physical consulate in the Western Sahara, it would take months for that to materialize,’ says Sidi Omar, the Polisario representative to the UN. ‘The motive has nothing to do with business or trade: this is a purely political exercise.’

Visiting the city of Dakhla where the US consulate is supposed to be established, US Ambassador to Morocco David Fischer insisted in January that a real consulate would soon materialize.

A ‘virtual consulate’ may have been Trump’s only way of acting on the issue before he left office – but it could remain no more than virtual.

‘Normal presidential declarations need to be approved by Congress so it will be relatively easy for the Biden administration to reverse the decision,’ says Irene Fernandez-Molina, senior lecturer in international relations at Exeter University. If Biden’s foreign policy is about going back to multilateralism, she says, then logically speaking the recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan territory should not stand.

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