

Western Sahara Casts a Shadow over AFRICOM's African Lion Exercises

The core of historical Spanish-Moroccan tensions, which are now spilling over to affect the US' AFRICOM exercises, is clearly the unresolved status of Western Sahara.

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The United States Africa Command's (AFRICOM) upcoming [African Lion](#) exercises from 7-18 June are embroiled in controversy as a result of the Western Sahara conflict. Recent reports indicate that Spain won't participate in the drills like previously planned officially due to alleged budgetary reasons, but speculation about the possibly true reasons are swirling. Russia's [Sputnik](#) cited Spain's [El Pais](#) as claiming that Madrid pulled out in order to not legitimize Morocco's contentious claims to the European country's former colony of Western Sahara where some exercises will be held, while the Moscow-based outlet also referred to [Maghreb Intelligence](#)'s report that Morocco and the US pressured Spain to do this out of opposition to its recent hosting of a separatist leader.

Brahim Ghalil, the founder of the Western Sahara's Polisario Front and president of the partially recognized Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) left Spain earlier this week [for Algeria](#) after receiving treatment there for over a month. During his stay in his region's former colonizer, he also appeared before the court via video in response to allegations that his movement was responsible for war crimes against dissident Sahrawis. The judge ultimately [decided](#) not to detain him owing to lack of evidence. Morocco was furious with Spain for hosting him in the first place though, and some observers interpreted the unimpeded influx of [approximately 9,000 migrants](#) into the North African Spanish town of Ceuta a few weeks back as Rabat's asymmetrical response.

The core of historical Spanish-Moroccan tensions, which are now spilling over to affect the US' AFRICOM exercises, is clearly the [unresolved status of Western Sahara](#). Morocco claims the former colonial territory as its own and exercises de facto control over most of it while the Polisario Front regards this as illegitimate because relevant UNSC Resolutions on determining the disputed region's final political status haven't yet been fulfilled despite several decades since their promulgation. In addition, former US President Trump recognized Morocco's sovereignty over this region late last year in a contentious policy reversal regarded as a quid pro quo for Rabat's normalization with Israel at the time.

Although Spain's hosting of the Polisario Front leader was described by its government as an apolitical humanitarian gesture, it was interpreted by Morocco as a hostile move implicitly extending support to him and his movement. Rabat is concerned about Madrid's post-colonial influence in Western Sahara, while Spain's stance seems to be that it's not actually meddling but is simply reminding Morocco about international law. While the real reasons why Spain pulled out of the African Lion exercises are presently unclear, provided of course that its official explanation wasn't fully forthcoming, it's evidently the case that this unresolved conflict is now affecting the US' African policy.

The US clearly supports Morocco's claims of sovereignty to Western Sahara despite the issue remaining unsettled in accordance with the relevant UNSC Resolutions, with Washington regarding Rabat as much more important of an African partner than Madrid if push came to shove. This isn't just due to the fact that Morocco is entirely located in Africa and in a geostrategic corner of it at that unlike Spain which only has a two small exclaves along the continent's northern coast, but might also be motivated by economic reasons considering the fact that copious phosphate reserves are thought to lie underneath Western Sahara's soil. In fact, [The Atlantic](#) even wrote in 2016 that this disputed region has the world's second-largest reserves of this resource.

This little-reported fact adds a new strategic dimension to the conflict, making one wonder whether the relevant players – which include not just Morocco and Spain, but also neighboring Algeria which backs the Polisario Front – are more interested in phosphate than territorial sovereignty and international law like they've claimed. It also makes one wonder whether the US recognized Morocco's control over Western Sahara in order to exploit the economic opportunities under its soil. Observers also shouldn't forget Spain's speculation that Morocco recently weaponized the large-scale migrant influx to Ceuta by passively facilitating it at the very least, which if true would raise serious questions about Rabat's ethics.

Altogether, it's clear that the unresolved Western Sahara conflict is reshaping the US' contemporary approach to Africa. In Washington's mind, its unilateral recognition of Rabat's sovereignty over the disputed territory settles the matter, though Madrid, Algiers, and others still regard it as an open issue. The deteriorating relations between Spain and Morocco over the former's hosting of the Polisario Front's leader for medical treatment and subsequent refusal to detain him in response to war crimes accusations will likely impede cooperation not only on a bilateral basis but also a multilateral one in the AFRICOM context. This could result in a worsening security situation with respect to terrorism and migration, thereby putting Europe at greater risk of these threats.

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