

The Situation in Western Sahara



History of the Current Situation

Background

Western Sahara, formerly known as Spanish Sahara (1958-1976), is a “non-decolonized, non-self-governing *territory*,” according to the United Nations.¹ It lies on the western Atlantic coast of Africa,² and its population of 600,000 people is mostly ethnically Sahrawi.³

Spanish and Moroccan involvement:

In 1884, the Western Sahara was colonized by Spain after Scottish and Spanish merchants arrived in Africa. The Spanish government claimed a protectorate over the Western Sahara coastal zone establishing the “Spanish Sahara.” However, political conflict arose in 1957, when Morocco boldly raised a claim to Western Sahara. The previous year, Morocco gained independence from France. The revolution against French control over Morocco began in 1947, with revolutionists King Mohammed V and Hassan II provoking riots. These riots eventually led to Morocco gaining independence and further, the nation seeking control of the Spanish Sahara. During the 1960s, the United Nations General Assembly approved several resolutions, including resolution 2072 (1965) and 2229 (1966), that sought the decolonization of the Western Sahara by Spain.⁴ Resolution 2229 specifically called for a UN-led referendum on the self-determination of the territory to be conducted with input from the indigenous population and with the consultation of Spain, Mauritania, and Morocco.⁵ This referendum was not held and Sahrawis nationalists formed the Polisario Front, which rebelled against Spain in 1973.⁶ Polisario was supported in its earliest stages by Algeria and Libya.⁷

Recent History (1975 to current)

Events leading to the current conflict

To “stake its claim” over the Sahara Territory, Moroccan King Hassan sent 350,000 unarmed Moroccans into the Western Sahara territory—also known as the “Green March”—in November 1975.⁸ Consequently, pressured by the Green March, Spain relinquished its control on the Western Sahara territory to Morocco and Mauritania in November 1975.⁹ These two monumental events lead to the Western Sahara War (1975-1991) between Moroccan troops and the Polisario Front, a Sahrawi

¹ “Western Sahara: A Country or Part of Morocco?” *World Atlas*. <https://tinyurl.com/3ekpypdh>.

² “Western Sahara.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Sahara>.

³ “What’s Going on the Western Sahara.” *NowThisNews*. <https://nowthisnews.com/videos/news/whats-going-on-in-western-sahara>.

⁴ “2072 (XX). Question of Ifni and Spanish Sahara.” *United Nations*. <https://tinyurl.com/2ze5n6cs>; “2229 (XXI). Question of Ifni and Spanish Sahara.” *United Nations*. <https://tinyurl.com/mpzcbc5m>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “35. Spanish Sahara (1965-1976).” *University of Central Arkansas*. <https://tinyurl.com/mrycrhy2>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “What’s Going on the Western Sahara.” *NowThisNews*. <https://nowthisnews.com/videos/news/whats-going-on-in-western-sahara>.

⁹ “The Western Sahara conflict: A fragile path to negotiations.” *The Atlantic Council*. <https://tinyurl.com/4hhufc6c>.

liberation guerilla.¹⁰ Algeria and Libya continued to support the Polisario Front by providing them arms, further escalating the conflict.

Escalation

In October 1988, the Polisario Front initiated a heavy attack against Moroccan troops. However, the Moroccan retaliation left the Polisario Front with many damaged tanks, vehicles, and soldiers. Due to their loss, the Polisario liberation guerilla was open to a ceasefire. In 1991, Moroccan forces launched the Tifariti offensive and attacked the Polisario troops in Bir Lahou and Meharies. These attacks gave the Moroccan side a great advantage.¹¹

The Ceasefire

In September 1991, the United Nations brokered a ceasefire, which ended the war. This ceasefire resulted in an 80/20 split of the Western Sahara, with Morocco occupy the resource-rich majority.¹² The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) oversees this ceasefire.¹³ MINURSO worked under the 1991 settlement plan agreed upon by both sides. This plan promised a referendum for Sahrawis to vote for independence or integration with Morocco. However, disagreement on voter rights stalled the referendum, and Morocco resigned from the 1991 settlement plan. Polisario sees no progress and threatens to resume attacks. With Morocco's withdrawal and Polisario's frustration, there is a looming risk of a second war.¹⁴



Political Conflict

The conflict in Western Sahara was reignited in 2020 after Moroccan soldiers broke up Sahrawi protests in the area, which provoked the Polisario Front to declare an end to the 29-year ceasefire.¹⁵ Morocco has been engaged in sporadic fighting in the region with Polisario ever-since, but Moroccan has attacked Algerian and Mauritanian groups that they allege are assisting and supporting Polisario.¹⁶ These military battles with Algeria and Mauritania threatens to destabilize the entire region. Yet, politically, Morocco has made been able to advance its claim internationally with the United States in recognize Moroccan control over Western Sahara in December 2020.¹⁷

Polisario Front, SADR, and Algeria

Founded in 1973, the Polisario Front is a guerilla of Sahrawi fighters with a common goal of freeing the Western Sahara territory from Moroccan control. This group firmly supports officializing the Western Sahara territory into Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).¹⁸ Despite SADR being a self-declared state, only 80 countries recognize its independence. In 1984, SADR became a member of

¹⁰ "Timeline: Western Sahara, a 50-year old dispute." *Reuters*. <https://tinyurl.com/5n777vhp>.

¹¹ "36. Morocco/Western Sahara (1976-present)." *University of Central Arkansas*. <https://tinyurl.com/bdfh2x3s>.

¹² "Morocco's autonomy plan for the Western Sahara." *France24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220407-morocco-s-autonomy-plan-for-the-western-sahara>.

¹³ "MINURSO- Background." *The United Nations*. <https://minurso.unmissions.org/background>.

¹⁴ "Morocco's autonomy plan for the Western Sahara." *France24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220407-morocco-s-autonomy-plan-for-the-western-sahara>.

¹⁵ "Decolonization's Last Stand in the Sahara." *Foreign Policy*. <https://tinyurl.com/c5m2nrxu>.

¹⁶ "The Western Sahara conflict: A fragile path to negotiations." *The Atlantic Council*. <https://tinyurl.com/4hhufc6c>.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ "Polisario Front." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Polisario-Front>.

the African Unity (OAU), which prompted Morocco to leave the OAU.¹⁹ Moreover, due to Algeria's support for the Polisario Front, Morocco and Algeria have a contentious relationship. Algeria has been supplying funds and arms to the Polisario because Algeria was defensive against "the strategic threat...from an emboldened and expansionist Morocco."²⁰ Algeria has been more than happy to continue to support Polisario efforts since the breakdown of the ceasefire in 2020. The Algerian government views Polisario as an inexpensive way to keep the Moroccan military distracted.²¹

War Crimes

In 2022, the Collective of **Human Rights Defenders in Western Sahara (CODESA)** reported that Morocco performed "20 extrajudicial executions and illegally arrested at least 121 Saharawi citizens in the period between September 2020 and December 2021."²²

CODESA critiques the UN for not fulfilling the promise for Sahrawi's self-determination made in 1991.²³ Moroccan jails deny the Sahrawi captives their rights under international law. Additionally, these captives are suffering from famine, and their captivity has stripped them of their families. Morocco seeks to clamp down on Sahrawi activists in the Western Sahara territories, preventing Sahrawis from engaging in protests and hacking the phones of activists in order to track their movements.²⁴



Refugee Crisis

Water and food crisis.

ACAPS, a humanitarian data and analysis group, released a report on the extremity of the Sahrawi refugee crisis developing in Algeria, a neighboring country. More than 173,000 Sahrawi refugees fled from Western Sahara to find a safe haven in the Tindouf province, Algeria.²⁵ There are currently five camps to

house all 173,000 refugees. These refugees struggle to find water and food in Tindouf's inhospitable desert conditions. The closest water sources may be over 10 miles from the camp, which means many rely on humanitarian aid.²⁶ For the refugees who can access water, it is high in salt and mineralization, and there is not enough of it for the recommended 20L per person.²⁷ Moreover, food

¹⁹ "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahrawi-Arab-Democratic-Republic>.

²⁰ "North African standoff: How the Western Sahara conflict is fuelling new tensions between Morocco and Algeria." *European Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/north-african-standoff-how-the-western-sahara-conflict-is-fuelling-new-tensions-between-morocco-and-algeria/>.

²¹ "Decolonization's Last Stand in the Sahara." *Foreign Policy*. <https://tinyurl.com/c5m2nrxu>.

²² "Right violations and war crimes by Morocco continue in occupied Western Sahara, says CODESA report." *The People's Dispatch*. <https://tinyurl.com/5n7ha6mf>.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ "Morocco and Western Sahara." *Amnesty International*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/morocco-and-western-sahara/report-morocco-and-western-sahara/>.

²⁵ "ACAPS Briefing Note: Algeria: Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf (19 January 2022)." ACAPS.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/algeria/acaps-briefing-note-algeria-sahrawi-refugees-tindouf-19-january-2022>.

²⁶ "Visit to the Sahrawi camps in Tindouf part 1 of 2." *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRVrZWb1z-4>.

²⁷ "ACAPS Briefing Note: Algeria: Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf (19 January 2022)." ACAPS.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/algeria/acaps-briefing-note-algeria-sahrawi-refugees-tindouf-19-january-2022>.

is scarce and unavailable for many refugees. In 2019, 7.6% of children between 0-5 years of age were malnourished.²⁸ In 2018, 30% of Sahrawi refugees were food insecure.²⁹ Due to this crisis, most refugees rely on external humanitarian assistance in order to survive; however, during the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing for humanitarian operations decreased, and COVID restrictions dramatically increased, preventing many from getting the aid they need.³⁰

Health

Unfortunately, health is a major obstacle for the Sahrawi refugees. According to ACAPS, 50% of Sahrawi children and women have anemia.³¹ Due to funding shortages, humanitarian aid can't supply sufficient medication to treat patients. As of 2021, five hospitals and one regional hospital are available in the refugee camps. Also, there is a lack of proper equipment and specialized health services due to low funding. Furthermore, COVID-19 forced medical personnel to abandon their positions in the camps and Western Sahara's poor public health infrastructure means that few people living in the territory were able to receive COVID-19 vaccines.³² Finally, Mental health has become a prominent issue, especially for younger refugees and increased rates of self-harm and suicide have been reported.

Climate Change in Western Sahara

Background

Climate change has significant implications for the Western Sahara region, exacerbating existing dynamics and creating new challenges for the Saharawi people. One consequence of climate change is the reduction of global access to resources available in the Western Sahara. Also, scarcity of resources amplifies the existing conflicts between Morocco and the Saharawi people, as competition for these resources intensifies.³³

Initiatives Taken

Morocco has developed a plan called Plan Maroc Vert (Green Morocco Plan) to adapt to climate change. This plan focuses on two main pillars: sustainable use of existing resources and increasing the utilization of renewable energy sources.³⁴ One aspect of the plan aims to promote sustainable fisheries and reduce the ecological footprint of the fisheries sector. However, the implementation of this plan in the Western Sahara, particularly in Dakhla, violates the United Nations' recognition of the territory as a "non-self-governing territory." This violation creates a new legal basis for the conflict, where the Saharawi people have a favorable position under international law.

Foum El Oued

The Foum El Oued Wind Farm Project, which is being evaluated for funding by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is a wind farm project aims to harness wind energy in the Western Sahara region and aligns with Morocco's renewable energy targets. While the

²⁸ "ACAPS Briefing Note: Algeria: Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf (19 January 2022)." ACAPS. <https://reliefweb.int/report/algeria/acaps-briefing-note-algeria-sahrawi-refugees-tindouf-19-january-2022>.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid.

³² "The vaccine hesitancy in North Africa's Covid 'black hole.'" *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20221124-the-vaccine-hesitancy-in-north-africas-covid-black-hole>.

³³ "Climate change and the important role it plays in the Western Sahara conflict." *The London School of Economics*. <https://tinyurl.com/wrbv4ca3>.

³⁴ "Approaches to implementation of the two pillars of the green Morocco plan." *Moroccan Ministry of Agriculture*. <https://www.ada.gov.ma/en/approaches-implementation-two-pillars-green-morocco-plan>.

project is part of Morocco's efforts to combat climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, its implementation in the Western Sahara raises several additional concerns and grievances from the Saharawi people.³⁵ The Western Sahara is a disputed territory, with the Saharawi people seeking self-determination and sovereignty. They view the project as an encroachment on their land and resources, and the utilization of their territory for energy projects without their consent further fuels their longstanding grievances. Moreover, the implementation of the wind farm project in the Western Sahara raises questions about the equitable distribution of benefits and potential environmental impacts. The Saharawi people fear that they might be marginalized in terms of economic opportunities and benefits from the project, while bearing the potential environmental consequences associated with large-scale energy infrastructure.

United Nations Involvement

Background

MINURSO, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, is a vital peacekeeping endeavor created to address the complex conflict in the Western Sahara region. Since its establishment in 1991, MINURSO has been entrusted with overseeing a ceasefire agreement among the parties involved and organizing a crucial referendum on self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.³⁶ The mission's mandate encompasses monitoring the ceasefire, facilitating the logistics of the referendum process, and ensuring the protection of human rights within the region.



Successes and Challenges

MINURSO has achieved notable successes in maintaining the ceasefire and fostering a relatively stable environment in the region. Its presence and vigilant monitoring have effectively prevented large-scale military confrontations, contributing to a more secure atmosphere. The mission has also made significant strides in identifying potential voters and establishing a comprehensive registry, laying the groundwork for the proposed referendum.³⁷ However, MINURSO faces significant challenges in accomplishing its primary objective of organizing a self-determination referendum. A major obstacle lies in the disagreement between Morocco and the Polisario Front regarding voter eligibility and the options to be presented on the referendum ballot. This impasse has hindered progress towards a resolution, necessitating renewed dialogue and negotiation.

Composition and Funding

As of February 2023, MINURSO operates with a relatively small military component, comprising around 250 personnel, complemented by dedicated civilian staff and experts.³⁸ The mission's primary focus is on monitoring the ceasefire, facilitating voter identification and registration, and addressing human rights concerns. It is important to note that MINURSO's mandate does not extend to broader peacekeeping tasks, such as civilian protection or post-conflict development. Funding for MINURSO is sourced from the United Nations' regular budget, which is primarily financed by member states.

³⁵ "Dirty green energy on occupied land." *Western Sahara Resource Watch*. <https://wsrw.org/en/news/renewable-energy>.

³⁶ "MINURSO- Background." *The United Nations*. <https://minurso.unmissions.org/background>.

³⁷ "MINURSO- Mandate." *The United Nations*. <https://minurso.unmissions.org/mandate>.

³⁸ "MINURSO Fact sheet." *The United Nations*. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minurso>.

MINURSO's composition reflects a multinational effort, with military observers and civilian personnel from various countries participating in the mission. Notable contributing nations have included Bangladesh, Egypt, France, Russia, Spain, and the United States.³⁹

Mandate Extension/Expiration

As MINURSO approaches its expiration in September 2023, the issue of a mandate extension becomes a critical concern for the General Assembly. While the GA does not possess the authority to directly authorize a peacekeeping mission, its resolutions can play a significant role in influencing the decision-making process of the United Nations Security Council.

Non-Governmental Organizations in the Western Sahara

NGOWG

The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security, or NGOWG, is an advocacy group that works to influence the Security Council, UN agencies, and Member States to help create policies that reflect the needs of women impacted by international conflict.⁴⁰ Women can become an important part in establishing a lasting settlement in the Western Sahara that brings peace for all parties involved.

Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW)

The WSRW is an international organization that monitors the exploitation of natural resources in the Western Sahara region and conducts research about the economic aspects of the situation in the Western Sahara. In addition to this, they advocate for the rights of the Saharawi people and create campaigns to raise awareness for the social injustices faced by them.⁴¹ Resource extraction by Morocco or multi-national companies support by Morocco in the Western Sahara is an issue that angers the Saharawi.

Questions to Consider

- What are the underlying political, economic, and strategic interests of the key stakeholders involved in the Western Sahara conflict?
- To what extent has the presence of MINURSO been successful in fostering trust and confidence-building measures between the parties? What additional steps can be taken to enhance cooperation between the delegations?
- What are the potential long-term implications of MINURSO's mandate extension or termination on the overall stability and security of the region?
- What are the main factors that have hindered the implementation of past peace agreements and proposals in the Western Sahara conflict?
- How does the question of resource exploitation in the Western Sahara impact the dynamics of the conflict and the prospects for a resolution?
- How might the perspectives and concerns of the Saharawi people be addressed in the negotiations and decision-making processes regarding the Western Sahara conflict?

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Women Peace Security." *NGOWG*. <https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/>.

⁴¹ "Western Sahara Resource Watch." *WSRW*. <https://wsrw.org/en>.