

Forum: Special Political and Decolonization Committee (GA4)

Issue: Mitigating the territorial dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front

Student Officer: Rea Karvouni

Position: Co-Chair

INTRODUCTION

The territorial dispute over the region of the Western Sahara between the Polisario Front and Morocco, is a decades-long conflict that involves the question of sovereignty, the right of a peoples to self-determination and the process of decolonization. The topic involves the claim of both parties over the territory, as on the one hand, Morocco believes it has sovereignty over it and on the other, the Polisario Front strives to free the area from Morocco's occupation and give the indigenous people the right to determine their own future.

The Western Sahara is a north-west African region that is in the United Nations (UN) list of non-self-governing territories. The Sahrawi people are the indigenous inhabitants of the region and the Polisario Front is a rebellious movement run by the Sahrawis that was established to ensure the freeing of the disputed territory from occupation.

It used to be colonized by Spain and was known as Spanish Sahara under Spanish rule, but it withdrew from the area in 1975, signing a deal with two of its neighboring states, Mauritania and Morocco that claimed to hand over control of the territory to the two states. This was later nullified by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), but regardless of this ruling, the countries decided to proceed with the occupation, with Mauritania eventually withdrawing in 1979.

In the 1980s, the Moroccan government built "The Berm", a 2,700 km-long sand wall fortified with landmines and military outposts, to divide the occupied zone from the Polisario-controlled areas. Its intent is to prevent the return of Sahrawi refugees and fighters to the western occupied part of the region.

It is the last African colony to be fully decolonized and nowadays around two-thirds of Western Sahara is occupied by Morocco, while the remaining area is controlled by the Polisario Front, representing the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

Moreover, seeing as the region possesses large amounts of phosphate reserves, rich fishing grounds in addition to the possibility of it having oil deposits, there is a large amount of interest in the area. Internationally opinions are divided, with some states supporting and officially recognizing the SADR as a state and others remaining more neutral or backing Morocco's plan for autonomy.

Lastly, Sahrawi refugees that have sought freedom from Moroccan occupation have resided in camps in neighboring countries, where they face extreme living conditions. Moreover, the people that stayed behind and live in the southern part of Western Sahara have a very low standard of living and in both cases, humanitarian concern has been raised. This makes the issue all the more pressing and also intensifies tensions on a political standpoint in the region. Morocco's claims to sovereignty over the region and the Polisario Front's demand for self-determination are posing challenges to making effective peace efforts between the two entities.

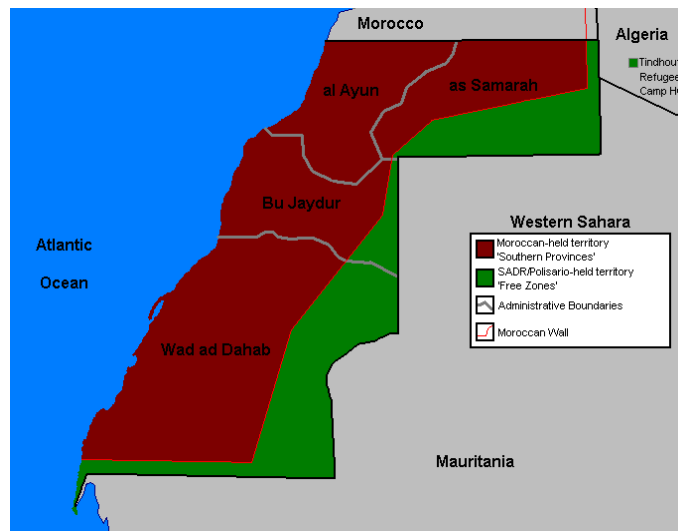


Figure 1: Map of the Western Sahara and its current division between Morocco-occupied territory and Polisario-controlled territory¹

¹ By Orthuberra at the English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0. Map of the Western Sahara and Its Current Division between Morocco-Occupied Territory and Polisario-Controlled Territory, commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1236416 By Orthuberra at the English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0. Map of the Western Sahara and Its Current Division between Morocco-Occupied Territory and Polisario-Controlled Territory

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Annexation

Annexation can be defined as “possession taken of a piece of land or a country, usually by force or without permission”². Generally, annexation is a unilateral act by a state and is considered legitimate when it receives broad recognition from other states and relevant international actors. Specifically, in the case of the Western Sahara, the region was annexed and is being occupied by Morocco, although the annexation isn’t internationally recognized.

Autonomy

Autonomy is “the right of an organization, country, or region to be independent and govern itself”³.

Colonialism

Colonialism is the “domination of a people or area by a foreign state or nation”⁴ also by maintaining political and social control over the region.

Independence

Independence is the “freedom from being governed or ruled by another country”⁵. The difference from autonomy is that independence only entails freedom of external control, while autonomy is a country having the right to govern itself.

Non-self-governing territory

Under the eleventh Chapter of the United Nations Charter, Non-Self-Governing Territories are defined as "territories whose people have not yet attained a full measure of

² “ANNEXATION | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” Dictionary.cambridge.org, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/annexation Accessed 14 July 2025

³ Cambridge Dictionary. “AUTONOMY | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” Cambridge.org, 2019, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/autonomy Accessed 15 July 2025

⁴ Merriam-Webster. “Definition of COLONIALISM.” Merriam-Webster.com, 2018, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonialism Accessed 14 July 2025

⁵ Cambridge Dictionary. “INDEPENDENCE | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” Cambridge.org, 20 Nov. 2019, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/independence Accessed 15 July 2025

self-government”⁶, meaning regions where the local population has not yet achieved full political autonomy or the ability to govern themselves independently. In this case, Western Sahara is classified by the UN as a non-self-governing territory, as it hasn’t yet achieved full independence with the ongoing dispute with Morocco, making it even more difficult for the region to achieve self-governance

Polisario Front

The Polisario Front is a rebel national liberation movement, formerly called a “politico-military organization, which is striving to end Moroccan control of the former Spanish territory of Western Sahara, in northwestern Africa, and win independence for that region.”⁷ The majority of the Polisario Front are the indigenous inhabitants of the Western Sahara, known as Sahrawis.

Referendum

A referendum is “when a question is decided by putting it to a public vote. Referendums are an example of direct democracy.”⁸ In this case, a referendum was promised to the Sahrawi people but never actually occurred, due to disagreements within the body in charge of organizing it.

Refugees

“Refugees are people who have fled their countries to escape conflict, violence, or persecution and have sought safety in another country.”⁹ Refugees are usually unable to return to their home countries and are forced to flee with few or no possessions, due to conflict, persecution, or other threats in their country of origin.

⁶ United Nations. “Non-Self-Governing Territories | the United Nations and Decolonization.” Www.un.org, 22 Sept. 2020, www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsqt Accessed 7 July 2025

⁷ “Polisario Front | Conflict, History, Movement, & Rebel Group.” Encyclopedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/Polisario-Front. Accessed 6 July 2025

⁸ UK Parliament. “Referendum.” Www.parliament.uk, 2024, www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/referendum/ Accessed 15 July 2025

⁹ UNHCR. “Refugees.” UNHCR, 2024, www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-protect/refugees Accessed 15 July 2025

Sahrawi people

“The Sahrawi, or Saharawi, are the people living in the western part of the Sahara desert which includes Western Sahara [...], parts of southern Morocco and the extreme southwest of Algeria. [...] Sahrawis are composed of many tribes and are largely speakers of the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, and some of them still speak Berber in both of Morocco's disputed and non-disputed territories. The Arabic word Sahrawi literally means "Inhabitant of the desert".”¹⁰ Over time, due to the conflict over the status of the Western Sahara, many Sahrawis have developed a strong sense of national identity, which has led to the rise of Sahrawi nationalism - a movement focused on gaining the right to govern themselves, separate from Moroccan control.

Self-determination

In this context, self-determination is defined as “[...] the power of a nation to decide how it will be governed”¹¹. This includes people having the right to freely choose their political status and determine the course of their economic, social, and cultural development without external influences.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is often described as the supreme authority in the process of making decisions concerning a state's affairs and in enforcing the rule of law. The term sovereignty refers to the power resting in the people and being exercised through representative bodies in modern democracies. It mainly involves the ability to legislate and entails that the sovereign authority is immune to any external interference.

¹⁰ atlasofhumanity.com. “Sahrawi People.” Atlas of Humanity, www.atlasofhumanity.com/sahrawi Accessed 7 July 2025

¹¹ “SELF-DETERMINATION | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” Dictionary.cambridge.org, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/self-determination Accessed 7 July 2025

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historical Background

Pre-colonial era

The area now called Western Sahara was home to various indigenous populations leading nomadic desert lifestyles, before Spanish colonization. From the 11th to the 13th centuries, Arab tribes steadily moved into the Maghreb, which is the region of northwest Africa. A particularly influential tribe imposed itself on the Sanhaja Berbers, the tribes in the region through cultural blending and the Berber population became arabized over time. The modern Sahrawi society can be characterized as mixed, as several elements of different cultures and interaction across the Sahara got incorporated into their heritage.

Each tribe within the Sahrawi society kept its independence and the various Sahrawi tribes weren't limited by boundaries as they are known today, as they went all over the region and their location depended mostly on where there was access to water and seasonal migration routes. Unlike neighboring centralized kingdoms, the Saharan tribes had a fluid governance system, often described by outsiders as "Blad Essiba", meaning land of dissidence, due to their resistance to outside authority.

This structure of the Sahrawi tribal groups posed significant challenges to colonial powers, which later tried to impose territorial control on a society shaped by movement, negotiation, and local authority.

Spanish colonial era

When Spain first attempted to colonize the region it faced many challenges such as hostility and the presence of loosely organized tribal groups. Seeing as the indigenous populations were leading a nomadic lifestyle, lacking clearly defined borders or territorial limits, it was extremely difficult to achieve control over the territory. Some additional obstacles faced by colonizing powers at the time were the absence of any legal structures, the lack of a centralized authority and a general dislike and resistance to the sedentary lifestyle Spain sought to impose on the population.

Moreover, tribal loyalties included each group prioritizing its own interests, as alliances between tribes constantly changed unexpectedly and were very unstable. As a result, when

colonizing powers came to impose their way of life on them, the indigenous populations refused to place their trust in foreign powers.

These populations were also heavily armed, due to constant intertribal clashes and raids for resources. When the European powers arrived, any tribes that allied with them were seen as legitimate and fair targets for looting by rival tribes. This dynamic not only fueled hostility toward the colonizing powers, but any local group engaging with them, however eventually Spain managed to impose some sort of control over the region.

In 1963, the UN officially listed Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory, recognizing it as a colony under Spanish administration. In 1965 the UN General Assembly (UNGA) passed Resolution 2072 that formally urged Spain to initiate the decolonization process and to allow the indigenous people of Western Sahara to exercise their right to self-determination.

In the late 1960s a Sahrawi nationalist movement was noticed to spread in response to the various changes Spanish colonialism had imposed on Sahrawis. It seeks to rebuild the community and establish a modern state, but to achieve this, the Sahrawi people needed to emancipate themselves. However, Spanish authorities suppressed this movement quickly and fiercely.

In May 1973, the Polisario Front was formed, in response to the suppression of this early nationalist movement. The “Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro” (Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro are the two main areas of the former Spanish Sahara), is commonly known as “Polisario Front”. It’s a rebel national liberation movement aimed at ending the occupation of Western Sahara, from Spain and since 1975, from Moroccan occupation.

Green March

On November 6th 1975, King Hassan II of Morocco organized a march into the Western Sahara, which was later called the “Green March”. Approximately 350,000 civilians were urged to move into the region and claim it as their own. This was done as a way of strategically forcing Spain to “hand over” control over the disputed territory to the Moroccan government, which later turned out to have worked.

However, most Sahrawis refer to this event as the “Black March”, symbolizing the start of their forced occupation, while some others call it the “Red March” to indicate the bloodshed and war crimes Morocco committed against the Sahrawi population during the war following this march.

Spanish withdrawal and the Madrid Accords

Two years prior to Spain decolonizing the region it announced plans for a referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people, which would be supervised by the UN. Morocco formally opposed this and requested, along with Mauritania, for an advisory opinion to be issued from the International Court of Justice (ICJ), hoping it would rule in support of its historical claims over the territory. After examination by the court, it was concluded that, while there were certain ties between Morocco and some tribes in the area, these didn’t qualify to grant Morocco sovereignty over the region.

After the Green March, a tripartite agreement was organized between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, namely the Madrid Accords. This treaty entailed Spain agreeing to transfer administration and general control of the region of Western Sahara to the other two countries, instead of holding the referendum that had originally been promised to the Sahrawis. Following this, when Spain unilaterally withdrew from its colony the territory was divided between the two foreign powers. Morocco received the northern two-thirds and Mauritania the southern one-third. Despite the ICJ’s declaration, both countries proceeded with occupation of the territory, thereby violating the 1975 court ruling.

The Madrid Agreement was not recognized by the UN and in 2002 a statement by the UN Office of Legal Affairs made it clear that colonizing powers cannot simply transfer the authority of a region from one country to another, stating that “[the] Madrid Agreement did not transfer sovereignty over the Territory, nor did it confer upon any of the signatories the status of an administering Power, a status which Spain alone could not have unilaterally transferred. The transfer of administrative authority over the Territory to Morocco and Mauritania in 1975 did not affect the international status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory.”¹²

¹² Counsel, UN Legal. “Letter Dated 29 January 2002 from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, the Legal Counsel, Addressed to the President of the Security Council.” United Nations Digital Library System, UN, 12 Feb. 2002, digitallibrary.un.org/record/458183?ln=en&v=pdf Accessed 15 July 2025

Conflict and ceasefire

On February 27 1976, a day after Spain withdrew from Western Sahara, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was declared by the Polisario Front. While Morocco and Mauritania were moving in, the Sahrawi people fought back against the occupation, triggering the Western Sahara War starting 1975 and which lasted until 1991. By the time the war began, thousands of Sahrawis had escaped and entered southern Algeria, where the Algerian government established refugee camps.

After years of warfare between the Polisario Front and its occupiers, Mauritania decided it would be best to withdraw from the region fully, after several clashes with the Polisario Front. It signed a peace agreement with the Polisario on August 5th 1979, renouncing all claims to the southern half of the Western Sahara.

In response to that decision, King Hassan of Morocco stated that Mauritania had no right to withdraw from its part of the region. He also implied that Morocco might occupy the whole of the territory Mauritania withdrew from, which was seen in the following years.

According to Sahrawis, the reason Morocco claims to have sovereignty over the territory is that it believes that the Saharan territory has always been part of the Kingdom of Morocco. However, this would suggest that Morocco has always existed in its current form, which completely overlooks the processes that shaped the larger region historically. It is often forgotten that the boundaries of territory in this area were not defined at all before European colonization, a fact that Moroccan claims often hide.

The armed conflict continued until 1991, when the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established by Security Council resolution 690. Its duty was to arrange a ceasefire and monitor in accordance with it, as well as organize a referendum on the self-determination of the indigenous peoples. The referendum has not occurred to this day, due to disagreements over voter eligibility. Specifically, there was some concern about whether a fair referendum could take place, as voter registration plans were being complicated by factors like Sahrawis traditionally being nomadic and many of them having escaped to refugee camps in Algeria.

In November 2020, there were some clashes at Guerguerat, which is a region in Western Sahara, between military forces belonging to Morocco and the Polisario Front, breaking the ceasefire, which had been held for 29 years. After this occurrence there were sporadic

armed clashes and highly increased tension between the two fronts that have continued to this day.

Current situation

Humanitarian situation and concerns

The humanitarian situation in the area is critical as right after the war broke out in 1975, there were over 170.000 Sahrawis who decided to leave and reside in Algeria, where refugee camps were built near an Algerian region called Tindouf¹³. Despite the Algerian government's attempts to ease the burden on the refugees and support them, the living conditions in the camps remain harsh, with food insecurity or malnutrition, as well as limited access to water, healthcare and education being some of the most pressing humanitarian concerns. Additionally, living conditions under occupation inside the area are especially harsh as Sahrawis face economic marginalization and have an extremely limited access to public services.

Some accusations against Morocco during, but also after the war include arbitrary arrests, torture, and suppression of Sahrawi activism. However, it is important to note that there were several human rights violations reportedly committed during the early phases of the war by both sides of the conflict.

Political and strategic control

The Moroccan government is attempting to handle the issue from all perspectives, so as to successfully gain sovereignty over the territory as they are now offering incentives and jobs to settlers from Morocco to permanently move to the Sahara area as a means of altering the ethnic balance of the region. This is a problem, because not only is this considered highly disrespectful to the indigenous populations who inhabited the area prior to Moroccan occupation but it is also deemed illegal by numerous international laws. This, along with others, have been some long-term efforts by Morocco to gain more control by integrating Western Sahara politically and economically to its nation.

Resource exploitation and economic incentives

A factor which often plays a role in territorial disputes is a region's natural resources and in this case, the Moroccan-occupied part of Western Sahara is being deprived of these

¹³ USCRI. "Backgrounder: Sahrawi Refugees and Western Sahara - USCRI." USCRI, 23 Apr. 2025, refugees.org/sahrawi-refugees-and-western-sahara/

resources, due to extractions taking place by Moroccan authorities. The region possesses resources such as phosphates, fisheries, and there is a possibility of there being offshore oil and gas. Natural resource exploitation without the consent of the people originating from the territory who have been displaced, violates international legal norms based on the UN's legal opinion and several EU court rulings.

Renewed tensions and recent developments

Diplomatic shifts

In his first term, current President of the United States Donald Trump, decided to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the region by signing the Abraham Accords, which were a series of agreements brokered by the US, aiming to normalize ties between Israel and several Arab nations, including Morocco. They entailed the US agreeing to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, in exchange for Israel and Morocco renewing diplomatic ties with each other. The succeeding Joe Biden administration chose not to implement or disregard Trump's policy toward Western Sahara, meaning they didn't take back the US's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the region, making it far more difficult for the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) to establish an independent state. Nevertheless, with Trump in the White House for a second term, little attention is directed toward this fifty-year-old dispute, which is being drowned out by several other conflicts currently happening in the world.

Lastly it is crucial to add that there has been an increasing number of countries, including France, Spain, and Israel, who have expressed support for Morocco's autonomy plan for the region, signaling a favorable stance toward Morocco's position without formally recognizing its sovereignty - an issue that remains sensitive and disputed.

Legal and institutional changes

Many courts, such as the European Court of Justice, have ruled against trade and fisheries agreements involving the region without Sahrawi consent, as that constitutes illegal resource exploitation. Furthermore, there are ongoing discussions in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) about renewing MINURSO's mandate, which still lacks fundamental monitoring mechanisms such as a human rights monitoring body. However, it is important to recognize that there are still persisting international divisions with the AU continuing to recognize the SADR as a member, while globally there is a split in support between autonomy, which is Morocco's plan and full independence, what the Polisario demands.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Algeria

Algeria has been a staunch supporter of the Polisario Front ever since 1975. It has helped with the provision of arms, humanitarian aid and several Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindrouf. Tindrouf is a region in the southern part of the country, where it is estimated that over 174,000 people have been living since 1975.

Algeria's stance on the issue is heavily influenced by its own experience of colonization as the nation fought a brutal war of independence against France from 1954 to 1962, which resulted in the country's current beliefs of opposing colonialism and occupation. Therefore it is a supporter of anti-colonial movements and the right to self-determination, both of which the Polisario Front seeks. It was also one of the first three countries to officially recognize the SADR as a state and installed an "Algeria-Western Sahara Parliamentary Group of Friendship and Fraternity" in the Algerian National People's Assembly. The SADR also has an embassy in the capital of Algeria, Algiers. Algeria has consistently argued that people under colonial rule, in this case, the people of Western Sahara, have the right to self-determination through a referendum.

France

France is an ally of Morocco both militarily and diplomatically and has shown support for its autonomy proposal multiple times in international forums. It also frequently blocks UN resolutions perceived as unfavorable to Morocco, which doesn't allow for substantial progress to be made in discussions. It is also tied to this topic as France used to colonize both Morocco and Algeria. Recently there have been some tensions between Algeria and France, as French endorsement of Morocco has significantly strained Franco-Algerian relations.

Mauritania

Mauritania was one of the two states that claimed part of Western Sahara after Spain's withdrawal and used to control the southern one-third of the area. However it withdrew from the region in 1979 after armed conflict with the Polisario Front and internal pressures. It has since then maintained a relatively neutral status but supports a peaceful resolution of the matter. It is also important to note that Mauritania was also formerly colonized by France in the period of the 1920s until the 1960s, when it managed to gain independence.

Morocco

Morocco is one of the two central actors in this conflict, administrating around 80% of Western Sahara, after having annexed it in 1975 and expanding its control after Mauritania withdrew from the region in 1979. It launched an Autonomy Plan in 2007, offering regional autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, a proposal now endorsed by the US, Spain, France (its former colonizer) and some AU members.

Furthermore it is undertaking active diplomacy by rejoining the AU, established international consulates in Dakhla, a city in Western Sahara, and is currently aiming to reduce Polisario influence. Morocco is trying to achieve this goal by having built extensive, primarily military, infrastructure such as the Berm, the second-longest wall in the world to limit Sahrawi access to the occupied parts of the region as well as its access to resources.

Spain

Spain is the former colonial power and used to occupy the region now known as Western Sahara, which used to be called Spanish Sahara starting in the 1880s until 1975. It imposed its views of territorial organization and borders upon the former nomadic tribes of the Sahara and withdrew in the 20th century due to pressure from the UN and the emergence of the rebel Polisario movement. On November 14, 1975 it signed a tripartite agreement with Mauritania and Morocco, the Madrid Accords, claiming to transfer control of the region to the two countries, a move which was later deemed to be legally meaningless by the ICJ. Nowadays, although the country has no direct involvement in the issue, it still partakes in discussions and takes historical responsibility.

United States of America

The United States have shown support for Morocco's autonomy proposal and the Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that "[the] United States continues to believe that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution"¹⁴ It was also the first state to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020 under the first Trump administration, who did it in exchange for Morocco normalizing its ties with Israel. Lastly

¹⁴ Lewis, Simon. "US Says Moroccan Proposal Should Be Sole Basis for Western Sahara Talks." Reuters, 8 Apr. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-says-moroccan-proposal-should-be-sole-basis-western-sahara-talks-2025-04-08/. Accessed 15 July 2025

the US maintains a strategic partnership with Morocco, by providing military aid and arms to the country and supporting the Moroccan Air Force.

African Union (AU)

The African Union recognized the SADR as a member state in 1984 and supports the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination, resulting in it facing some tensions with Morocco, which rejoined the AU in 2017 after leaving in protest of the SADR's admission. Despite being one of the founding member states of the AU, Morocco decided that its views didn't align with the AU's and didn't want to be associated with a Union that recognizes the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. Since it rejoined on January 30th 2017, Morocco has successfully managed to de-prioritize Western Sahara at AU summits.

United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)

The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara was established in 1991 by the United Nations Security Council and its primary mission was to uphold the ceasefire as well as organize a referendum which would allow the Sahrawi people to choose between integration with Morocco or their independence. Due to some internal disagreements over voter eligibility, it was difficult for MINURSO to fulfill this task, something that has not been done to this day. Moreover, it is one of the very few peacekeeping operations without a human rights monitoring component and although it has faced criticism by organizations and the Polisario front, such an addition hasn't yet been made. MINURSO is split into two sections, one being in the Moroccan-occupied region of the Western Sahara, west of the Berm, (the sand wall built by Moroccan authorities to keep Sahrawis inside the southern part of the territory) and the other in the Sahrawi-controlled region. Currently, the mission has "a total of over 220 uniformed personnel, including 19 contingent troops, 193 experts on mission, 7 staff officers, and 1 police officer, supported by 227 civilian personnel, and 16 UN volunteers. Major troop contributors are Bangladesh, Egypt, and Pakistan."¹⁵

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

¹⁵ "United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara." Wikipedia, 19 Mar. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Mission_for_the_Referendum_in_Western_Sahara

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
1884	Spain colonized the region now known as Western Sahara
1934	The area of the Western Sahara becomes known as Spanish Sahara
1963	The UN lists Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory
1965	The UN formally puts pressure on Spain to decolonize the region through UNGA resolution 2072
10th May 1973	The Polisario front is formed
16th October 1974	The International Court of Justice (ICJ) issues an advisory opinion ruling that Morocco or Mauritania have no sovereignty over Western Sahara
6th November 1975	The Green March takes place
14th November 1975	The Madrid Accords take place between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania
12th January 1976	Spanish troops withdraw from the region and the Spanish Sahara becomes known as Western Sahara

26th February 1976	Spain departs from the region as its formal mandate concluded that day
27th February 1976	Polisario Front proclaims the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)
5th August 1979	Mauritania withdraws from the southern part of Western Sahara
1980 - 1987	"The Berm" is built by Morocco
12th November 1984	Morocco withdraws from the Organization of African Unity (OAU)
30th August 1988	UN Settlement Plan
29th April 1991	The UNSC establishes MINURSO through resolution 690
6th September 1991	MINURSO officially declares a ceasefire
1991-2020	Third parties make continued efforts to resolve the conflict via agreements without substantial progress being made
13th November 2020	The ceasefire ends due to clashes in a region called Guergerat
10th December 2020	Israel-Morocco normalization agreement is signed, involving the US as a mediator

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

[UNGA Resolution 3458A](#)

This resolution was passed in December 1975, when Spain had announced it would be withdrawing from Western Sahara. It reaffirms the right of the people of Spanish Sahara to the principle of self-determination and urges them to apply that principle to the inhabitants of the region. This would be done within a framework that guarantees the free and honest expression of their will, particularly in the form of a referendum. It also requested that the three parties that had taken part in the Madrid agreement should take the decolonization process into consideration and respect the inhabitants' right to self-determination through free consultations.

[UNSC Resolution 690](#)

On April 29th 1991, this Security Council resolution was passed, endorsing all efforts made by UN collaboration with the Organization of African Unity (former African Union's name), in order to organize a referendum on self-determination of the people. It also established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) and wished for both parties to cooperate with the effort being made to ensure the legality of the process of the vote and oversee the ceasefire between Polisario and Moroccan authorities.

[Houston Agreement](#)

The Houston Agreement was the result of four rounds of talks being supervised by UN representative James Baker in 1997. The agreement was supposed to lead to a referendum in 1998, after it never originally took place in 1992 and the voter identification plan suggested by Baker was agreed by both parties. Further topics that were agreed upon in these talks were both parties making provisions of troop withdrawal and the return of prisoners. The final round of talks, which was held in Houston, in September 1997 came to be known as Houston Accords. Both the parties signed the final document listing out all agreements and was the first time that any agreement was signed between the parties. However, it turned out to have some missing aspects, as both parties hadn't agreed on voter eligibility yet, with Morocco proposing to utilize numbers from during the Spanish rule in the 1970s, while the Polisario Front rejected this proposal. Therefore, while the Houston Accords advanced dialogue, their inability to settle this crucial part of the issue, highlighted the challenges blocking a final consensus both sides would be willing to sign up for.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

UN Settlement Plan

The Settlement Plan was proposed to the two parties by the United Nations Secretary-General. In 1988, both Morocco and the Polisario Front agreed to the settlement proposals, which contained proposed solutions for the question of Western Sahara by means of a ceasefire and the holding of a referendum. The intent behind this is to enable the Sahrawi to exercise their right to self-determination, by choosing between full independence and integration with Morocco. It only resulted in a cease-fire which remained effective until 2020, and the establishment of the MINURSO peace force to oversee it and to organize the referendum, which never occurred.

Baker Plan I and II

From 1997 to 2004, the former US Secretary of State James Baker headed intensive UN-sponsored mediation attempts to end the Western Sahara conflict. In the first negotiations in London, Lisbon, and Houston in 1997, some breakthroughs did occur, like agreement on releases of war prisoners and transitional period terms. However, a sticking point continued to be resolving voter eligibility for the Sahrawi people's referendum on self-determination.

In 2001 Plan I was submitted by Baker, proposing wide autonomy for Western Sahara under Moroccan control followed by a referendum after four years. The Polisario Front and Algeria opposed this plan because they were not in support of Moroccan control during the period of transition. In 2003, he submitted Plan II, supporting phased autonomy leading to a referendum with three options, which were: independence, integration with Morocco, or autonomy. This proposal was initially met with some support by Polisario but was essentially rejected by Morocco primarily because independence had been listed as an option.

Moroccan Autonomy Plan

In 2007, Morocco put forward an autonomy proposition to bring an end to the long-standing conflict by providing autonomy to the territory under Moroccan rule. The proposition was prepared by Morocco's Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS) and presented to the UNSC. It advocates for Sahrawi autonomy, only at the local level, while retaining control on defense and foreign affairs by Morocco. In this plan, the option of

independence isn't mentioned anywhere and although some countries such as the US and France have shown support for it, the Polisario Front argues that it does not satisfy the Sahrawi peoples' right to self-determination.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Expand MINURSO's mandate

An important solution could be to expand MINURSO's mandate to include a human rights monitoring body, which is currently an important concern human rights organizations bring up when criticising the extent of the mission's effectiveness. Additionally, it is important that its original goal of organizing a self-determination referendum is reinstated and new measures are implied to make it more efficient and avoid encountering the previous difficulties such as failing to finalize voting status etc..

Regulate resource extraction by Moroccan forces

Another solution could be introducing measures to oversee and regulate the extraction of resources by Moroccan actors and establish robust oversight mechanisms to monitor the situation in the occupied parts of the Western Sahara to ensure that any use of its natural resources is conducted transparently, with the genuine consent and active participation of the Sahrawi people. Specifically, such oversight should guarantee that resource management benefits the local population, respects international environmental standards, and upholds the principle of permanent sovereignty over natural resources as recognized under international law.

Supervised Land and Resource Sharing Agreement

A major aspect of the Western Sahara conflict involves the region's natural resources, which are very significant economically. Consequently, this solution would allow both sides to enter into a legally binding arrangement, in order to manage and share the economic benefits of the area's resources together. However, this wouldn't require either party to give up territorial claims, but would rather focus on alleviating the Sahrawi people's hardships and stopping the unlawful extraction of these resources by Moroccan authorities without the indigenous peoples' consent. The supervisory body in charge of this, perhaps MINURSO as it is a neutral actor, would oversee all the resource extraction activities and revenue collection to ensure fairness. Because both Morocco and the Polisario Front would benefit from maintaining that cooperation,

this arrangement creates an impediment for further conflict. Some previous attempts to solve the issue have often focused on political status, but this directly tackles the underlying economic motivations and offers a practical solution, as political consensus is not yet fully achievable.

Third party involvement

Another possible solution could involve third-party involvement in the matter, by requesting the authority of international courts or any intergovernmental organization that would be willing to get involved, to ensure effective implementation. By doing so, states that have kept a more neutral attitude towards the issue, could play an active role in monitoring of developments such as clashes or ongoing human rights abuses. By involving neutral parties and legal bodies, the rights of the Sahrawi people would be protected and this could also result in completely legal approaches to actions concerning the territory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Algeria’s Stance on the Western Sahara Conflict: A Historical and Geopolitical Overview.” *Tech Vision*, 15 Oct. 2024, techvision.tistory.com/8

“ANNEXATION | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.”

Dictionary.cambridge.org, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/annexation

atlasofhumanity.com. “Sahrawi People.” *Atlas of Humanity*,

www.atlasofhumanity.com/sahrawi

Barreñada , Isaías . “Western Saharan and Southern Moroccan Sahrawis: National Identity and Mobilization .” *Docta.ucm.es*, 2017,

docta.ucm.es/rest/api/core/bitstreams/8d3c7715-1835-46f7-aac2-c3161c56819

Bera, Srishti. “Power, Politics, and Neglect: The Geopolitical Stalemate in Western

Sahara - the Dialectics.” *The Dialectics - Shaping Discourses in World Politics*, 23 Nov.

2024,

thedialectics.org/power-politics-and-neglect-the-geopolitical-stalemate-in-western-sahara

Cambridge Dictionary. "AUTONOMY | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary." *Cambridge.org*, 2019, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/autonomy

---. "INDEPENDENCE | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary." *Cambridge.org*, 20 Nov. 2019, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/independence

Chograni, Houda. "The Polisario Front, Morocco, and the Western Sahara Conflict." *Arab Center Washington DC*, 22 June 2021, arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-polisario-front-morocco-and-the-western-sahara-conflict/

Counsel, UN Legal. "Letter Dated 29 January 2002 from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, the Legal Counsel, Addressed to the President of the Security Council." *United Nations Digital Library System*, UN, 12 Feb. 2002, digitallibrary.un.org/record/458183?ln=en&v=pdf

Dib Nassima. "APN: Installation Du Groupe Parlementaire d'Amitié Algérie-Sahara Occidental." *Www.aps.dz*, Algérie Presse Service, 17 Feb. 2022, www.aps.dz/algerie/135697-apn-installation-du-groupe-parlementaire-d-amitie-algerie-sahara-occidental

"Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–9, Part 1, Documents on North Africa, 1973–1976 - Office of the Historian." *History.state.gov*, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve09p1/d87

"Green March, Miracle of Time — High Atlas Foundation." *Highatlasfoundation.org*, highatlasfoundation.org/en/insights/green-march-miracle-of-time

Hodges, Tony. "The Origins of Saharawi Nationalism." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1983, pp. 28–57. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3991166, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3991166>

Lewis, Simon. "US Says Moroccan Proposal Should Be Sole Basis for Western Sahara Talks." *Reuters*, 8 Apr. 2025,

www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-says-moroccan-proposal-should-be-sole-basis-western-sahara-talks-2025-04-08/

Maclean, Ruth. "Build a Wall across the Sahara? That's Crazy – but Someone Still Did It." *The Guardian*, 22 Sept. 2018,

www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/22/western-sahara-wall-morocco-trump

Merriam-Webster. "Definition of COLONIALISM." *Merriam-Webster.com*, 2018,

www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonialism

MINURSO. "Background." *MINURSO*, 26 Oct. 2016,

minurso.unmissions.org/background

"Polisario Front | Conflict, History, Movement, & Rebel Group." *Encyclopedia Britannica*,

www.britannica.com/topic/Polisario-Front

"Polisario Front Calls on UN to Supervise Human Rights in Territories under Its Control - Human Rights House Foundation." *Human Rights House Foundation*, 10 Apr. 2010,

humanrightshouse.org/articles/polisario-front-calls-on-un-to-supervise-human-rights-in-territories-under-its-control/

"Polisario Front Reiterates Gratitude to Algeria for Its Ongoing Support | Sahara Press Service (SPS)." *Sahara Press Service (SPS)*, 2024,

www.spsrasd.info/en/2024/04/22/3163.html

"SELF-DETERMINATION | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary."

Dictionary.cambridge.org, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/self-determination.

"Technical Difficulties." *State.gov*, 2024,

www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morocco-Israel.pdf

UK Parliament. "Referendum." *Www.parliament.uk*, 2024,

www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/referendum/

UNHCR. "Refugees." *UNHCR*, 2024,

www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-protect/refugees

"United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara." *Wikipedia*, 19 Mar.

2023,

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Mission_for_the_Referendum_in_Western_Sahar

[a](#)

United Nations. "Non-Self-Governing Territories | the United Nations and

Decolonization." *Www.un.org*, 22 Sept. 2020, www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgt

---. "Western Sahara | the United Nations and Decolonization." *Www.un.org*, 10 May

2022, www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgt/western-sahara.

Western Sahara: Historical Timeline 1884–2014 – Cultures of Resistance Films.

culturesofresistancefilms.com/ws-timeline/

"Western Sahara: UN Legal Counsel Renders Opinion on Oil Prospecting Contracts."

UN News, 5 Feb. 2002, news.un.org/en/story/2002/02/26862

Wilson, Alice. *Working Papers Du CEPED Centre Population et Développement Cycles of Crisis, Migration and the Formation of New Political Identities in Western Sahara*.

2012.

Yerkes, Sarah, and Natalie Triche. "Trump's Lesser-Known Deal of the Century?

Resolving the Western Sahara Conflict." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*,

2025,

carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/02/western-sahara-morocco-sahrawi-trump?lang

[=en](#)

MULTIMEDIA SOURCES

Orthuberra at the English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0. *Map of the Western Sahara and Its Current Division between Morocco-Occupied Territory and Polisario-Controlled Territory*, commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1236416