

**Forum:** Political Committee

**Issue:** Question of Western Sahara

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**Position:** President Chair

## Introduction



Map of Morocco and Western Saharan region

In the aftermath of being a former colony of Spain, long-lasting issues have emerged in Western Sahara starting in 1975 and still continue to be a major concern in the Northern African region especially for the Kingdom of Morocco which is considered to be a part of this conflict and the indigenous people of Sahrawi, represented by Polisario Front, being the other.

Prior to the withdrawal of Spain from the region, Morocco claimed that the territory belonged to them and tried to annex most of it. However their actions were responded to by an armed conflict named Polisario front by Sahrawi people with a grand desire for independence since the departure of Spain has caused a power vacuum and set the stage for different parties to control.

Algerian assistance enabled the Polisario Front to fight Mauritania and Morocco in a 16-year-long battle for independence that started in 1975. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was proclaimed in February 1976 by the Polisario Front. It received some recognition from other states but was not accepted into the UN. The UN handled the dispute by reiterating the Sahrawi people's right to

self-determination in the wake of the Polisario Front's proclamation of independence and Morocco and Mauritania's 1976 annexation of Western Sahara.

At the height of the crisis, in 1977, France became involved in a diplomatic manner as a negotiator. Following Mauritania's withdrawal from the conflict and its occupied areas in 1979, there was a standoff throughout the majority of the 1980s. A cease-fire agreement was signed between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan government following a number of more encounters between 1989 and 1991. In its role as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the Polisario ruled over around 20% of the Western Sahara at the time, with other areas of authority located in the camps for Sahrawi refugees along Algeria's border. The majority of the region was still governed by Morocco. These boundaries are mostly unaltered as of right now.

About 20% of the Western Sahara is governed by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), with no international recognition. Today, the Moroccan government controls a sizable portion of the region, which is known as the Southern Provinces. Among the main concerns of the current Western Sahara peace process are those of mutual recognition, the creation of a potential Sahrawi state, and the enormous number of Sahrawi refugees who have been uprooted by the violence.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Western Sahara:** territory occupying an extensive desert Atlantic-coastal area of northwest Africa. It is composed of the geographic regions of Rio de Oro ("River of Gold"), occupying the southern two-thirds of the region (between Cape Blanco and Cape Bojador), and Saguia el-Hamra, occupying the northern third. It is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the west and northwest, by Morocco on the north, by Algeria for a few miles in the northeast, and by Mauritania on the east and south

**Sahrawi People:** *Saharawis*, are the people living in the western part of the Sahara desert which includes Western Sahara (claimed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and mostly controlled by Morocco), other parts of southern Morocco and the extreme southwest of Algeria. As with most peoples living in the Sahara, the Sahrawi culture is mixed. It shows mainly Arab-Berber characteristics, like the privileged position of women, as well as characteristics common to ethnic groups of the Sahel. 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".

**Polisario Front:** This term defines a politico-military organization striving to end Moroccan control of the former Spanish territory of Western Sahara, in northwestern Africa, and win independence for that region. The Polisario Front is composed largely of the indigenous nomadic inhabitants of the Western Sahara region, the Sahrawis. The Polisario Front began in May 1973 as an insurgency (based in neighboring Mauritania) against Spanish control of Western Sahara.

**Decolonization:** process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country.

Decolonization was gradual and peaceful for some British colonies largely settled by expatriates but violent for others, where native rebellions were energized by nationalism

**United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO):** Resolution 690 of the Security Council on April 29, 1991, created the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in compliance with settlement offers that the Frente POLISARIO and Morocco had approved on August 30, 1988. The Security Council-approved settlement proposal called for a transitional period to be used for organizing a referendum wherein the people of Western Sahara would be given the option of choosing independence or incorporation with Morocco. An integrated group of civilian, military, and civilian police personnel, to be known as the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, was to assist the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in carrying out his duties. The Special Representative was to have sole and exclusive authority over all matters pertaining to the referendum.

**Buffer Zone:** A buffer zone is a neutral zonal area that lies between two or more bodies of land, usually pertaining to countries. Depending on the type of buffer zone, it may serve to separate regions or conjoin them.

## General Overview

### Historical Context:

When we talk about Western Sahara, we are talking about the final frontier of decolonization in Africa, a situation for which Spain is directly responsible; the rich territory of North Africa has been subject to its domination for more than 200 years. We are also talking about one of the most entrenched conflicts in the history of the African continent, the conflict over the land is sparsely populated but rich in natural resources and some of the richest fishing grounds in the world.

The Portuguese were well aware of the wealth of Western Sahara, but their initial attempts to colonize the territory were hampered by resistance from the Saharawi people. The Spanish arrived next and through agreements with the main tribes inhabiting the territory, established themselves in Western Sahara, not only colonizing it but also incorporating it into the Western state Spain.

Western Sahara Became Spain's 53rd province. The people of Western Sahara, like all Africans, rose up to demand an end to colonial rule. With the aim of achieving autonomy for their territory, they founded the first organized liberation movement, the Polisario Front, in 1973.

At its best, it is an event of changes. Spain has broken the trust of the people of Western Sahara by failing to fulfill its responsibility to decolonize the territory according to the regulations of the United Nations and the ICJ due to their political view and even though it was promised to the Sahrawi people. They did not hand over the Western Saharan region to the Sahrawi people and their lands to Morocco and Mauritania in exchange for political and economic benefits. They did not grant the land which was promised to Western Sahara by standing idly while its people were invaded, bombed, forced into exile, divided by a wall and oppressed by a brutal Moroccan occupation. These are crimes for which Spain is primarily responsible.

### **Nationalism raised by the Sahrawi People and Polisario Front:**

Sahrawi nationalism is a political ideology that seeks self-determination of the Sahrawi people, the indigenous population of Western Sahara. It has historically been represented by the Polisario Front. It came as a reaction against Spanish colonialist policies imposed from 1958 on, and subsequently in reaction to the Mauritanian and Moroccan invasions of 1975.

Right after it has sparken, the nationalism of these Indigenous people has not changed and remains to be the primer ideology for how this nation is still not adopted to the Moroccan government showing exemplary resistance and self-defense.

The Polisario Front traces its origins back to the Sahrawi nationalist movement known as the MOLA (Movement for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Wadi el Dhahab), which was formed in 1973. The MOLA aimed to launch an armed resistance against the Spanish occupation, which lasted until 1975. At that time, the Spanish decided to divide and occupy the territory between Mauritania and Morocco. The PLO fought a war to expel the two armies.

### **Moroccan Claim**

On November 14, 1975, when the region was being transferred, the Spanish government signed a tripartite agreement with Morocco and Mauritania during the latter days of General Franco's reign and following the Green March. The agreements provided for a bipartite government, and both Morocco and Mauritania proceeded to annex the regions. Morocco did so by assuming control of the southern third of the Western Sahara, known as Tiris al-Gharbiyya, and the northern two thirds as its Southern Provinces. Within three months, Spain left the Spanish Sahara and repatriated the Spanish dead from its graves.



Sahrawi army resisting the Moroccan troops

The Polisario Front, which had Algerian support, opposed the annexations of Morocco and Mauritania. Under pressure from Polisario, which included bombarding its capital and other economic targets, it started guerilla warfare and withdrew from Mauritania in 1979. Morocco expanded its rule over the remaining area. It constructed the vast sand-berm in the desert, called the Moroccan Wall or the Border Wall, to keep out guerrilla combatants and progressively confined the insurgents. A UN Settlement Plan-mandated cease-fire that ended hostilities in 1991 was monitored by the peacekeeping force MINURSO.

### Baker Plan

The UN special envoy James Baker circulated the initial draft of the proposal, known as Baker I or the Framework Agreement, in 2000, but it was never formally submitted to the Security Council. Despite being grounded in Baker's suggestions, it was written by a legal team supported by Morocco. It proposed autonomy for the Western Saharan people inside the Moroccan state. Local government would be in charge of all other decisions, with the exception of foreign and defense affairs. The Polisario rejected the idea, but Morocco approved it.



James Baker and his explanations on West Sahara Conflict

The second version, often referred to as Baker II, called for five years of Saharan self-government under the Western Sahara Authority, followed by an independence vote. The whole population of Western Sahara today would take part in this vote, including individuals who had migrated from or been settled by Morocco post-1975, something which Polisario had so far refused. On the other hand, a provision that the interim local government (the Western Sahara Authority) would be elected only by a restricted voters' list (those identified as original inhabitants of the territory by MINURSO) alienated Morocco. After Morocco had voiced early objections to Baker II, the Polisario front reluctantly accepted the plan as a basis for negotiations. In July 2003, the UN Security Council endorsed the plan, something that it had not done with Baker's first draft, and unanimously called for the parties to implement it. Morocco, however, then rejected the plan, saying that it would no longer agree to any referendum that included independence as an option.

Becoming the second UN representative to quit in protest, Baker did so after this. He stated that there didn't seem to be a practical method to carry out the 1991 Settlement Plan or come up with another compromise solution because of the parties' incompatible stances and the Security Council's reluctance to impose a solution over the objections of either party. Moroccan authorities saw the retirement favorably; foreign minister Benaissa openly referred to it as the outcome of "the tenacity of Moroccan diplomacy" despite the Polisario, which was eager to have a powerful mediator with US support in control of the UN process, lamenting his resignation.

## Current

Recent Years bring some important developments.

In November 2020, the Polisario Front declared a ceasefire with Morocco that had been in force since 1991. Since then, the United Nations has recorded "low-level hostilities".

In December 2020, the Trump Administration recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the West Sahara. The Biden administration has not made any changes to this policy.

In March 2022, Spain approved Morocco Western Sahara Autonomy plan as the most serious, realistic and credible basis for resolving the conflict.

In October 2023, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution calling for a resumption of negotiations by all parties in order to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that would enable the people of Western Sahara to self-determine.

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

**Kingdom of Morocco:** Morocco remains to be a bloc of the war since the kingdom continues to claim sovereignty over the region. Today the Moroccan government annexes 80 percent of the region. Starting from 1975 Moroccan government has been trying several ways to convince the UN and defeat the Sahrawis by presenting diplomatic efforts and organizing the “Green March”

**Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR):** SADR is a partially recognized state which roots from the Polisario front in 1976, declaring independence from Morocco and claiming sovereignty of the Western Saharan territory. Today the state lacks recognition from international organizations like the United Nations.

**Algeria:** Algeria has been one of the supporters of the Sahrawi people and the Polisario front. The country hosts refugee camps for the people and provides diplomatic, militarian and political support for the decolonization due to their rivalry with Morocco

**Mauritania:** Even though Mauritania is not directly included in this conflict, the nation used to be one of the invaders of the region collaborating with Morocco since the International Court of Justice has claimed that Mauritania had no legal ties with the region. After several military losses to the Polisario supported by Algeria they had withdrawn in 1979.

**United Nations:** The involvement of the United Nations and their efforts lasts since the 1980s. The establishment of the United Nations Mission for Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in 1991 was one of the most essential elements of this process to achieve a ceasefire in the Western Saharan region.

## Timeline of Events

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <b>1884-1975</b> | Western Sahara was a Spanish colony at the time   |
| <b>1960-1970</b> | Indigenous people of Western Sahara emerged a nationalist movement aiming for their independence. |
| <b>1973</b>      | The Polisario front was formed  |

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>October 1975</b>  | The International Court of Justice declared the historical ties between Sahrawi people and Western Sahara but not legal ties between Mauritania and Morocco.                          |
| <b>November 1975</b> | The « Green March » organized by King Hassan II of Morocco was started with 300.000 people walking from Morocco to the Western Sahara region  |
| <b>1976</b>          | The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is declared by the Polisario front   |
| <b>1979</b>          | The withdrawal of Mauritania  |
| <b>1991</b>          | Establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)  |
| <b>2007</b>          | The United Nations launches negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front, known as the Manhasset negotiations, aiming to find a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict. |
| <b>2016</b>          | Morocco announces its intention to rejoin the African Union (AU) after a 33-year absence following the AU's recognition of the SADR.  |

## UN Involvement

The UN involvement in the question of Western Saharan region plays a central role in the conflict. Regarding their policy and their position the UN is an organization which tries to find a middle ground between the two nations. However, observing the process the mission has been proceeding slowly and it leaves questions behind. The UN has been trying to operate political dialogues and peacekeeping operations.



The initial actions from the United Nations were adopting general assembly and security council resolutions from the 1960s. The main aim of these adopted resolutions was recognizing the rights of the Sahrawi people and letting them own a territory and making a referendum among their inhabitants by promoting human rights and the protection of the inhabitants. Even the UN Secretary General appointed a personal envoy to rapid the process and the negotiations between the Moroccan government and Sahrawi people. There are a variety of politicians and diplomats who served in this case as well.

Prior to these actions the UN has established a sub-body named MINURSO in 1991 under the UN Security Council 690 with the part of the settlement plan aiming for a ceasefire. In line with the Settlement Plan, MINURSO was tasked with overseeing the cease-fire and arranging and carrying out a referendum that would give the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara the option of joining Morocco or being independent. The goal was to bring Western Sahara's unfinished decolonization process to a close by completing the Sahrawi exercise of self-determination.

The UN claims that the MINURSO was originally mandated in accordance with the settlement plan to: Observe the cease-fire, confirm the withdrawal of Moroccan forces from the Territory, and keep an eye on the Moroccan and Frente Polisario forces' limitation to their assigned areas. Taking action in concert with the parties to guarantee the release of all political prisoners and detainees in Western Sahara. Monitor the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) implementation of the prisoner-of-war exchange; supervise the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) repatriation of Western Saharan refugees; identify and register eligible voters. Organize and oversee a free and fair referendum and announce the results; and lessen the threat posed by unexploded ordnance and mines.

## Relevant UN Documents

1. [Resolution A/RES/73/102 \(for the 73rd session\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(01/04/2021\)](#)
2. [Resolution A/RES/74/113 \(for the 74th session\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(15/04/2020\)](#)
3. [Resolution 2548 \(22/10/2020\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(01/04/2021\)](#)
4. [Resolution 2494 \(30/10/2019\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(19/12/2019\)](#)

5. [Resolution 2440 \(31/10/2018\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(11/04/2018\)](#)
6. [Resolution 2414 \(27/04/2018\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(11/04/2018\)](#)
7. [Resolution 2351 \(25/04/2017\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(06/04/2017\)](#)
8. [Resolution 2285 \(29/04/2016\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(05/04/2016\)](#)
9. [Resolution 2218 \(28/04/2015\) - Report: "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" \(13/04/2015\)](#)

## Treaties and Events

**Madrid Agreement** :Mauritania, Morocco, and Spain came to an agreement in 1975 known as the Madrid Accords, which gave Morocco and Mauritania administrative responsibility over the Western Sahara. The agreements triggered the military confrontation with the Polisario Front and resulted in the separation of the Western Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania.

**Settlement Plan:** A ceasefire, the departure of Moroccan and Mauritanian forces, and the holding of a referendum on self-determination for the people of Western Sahara were the three main components of the UN-proposed plan to end the war in the region. Due to disputes over voter eligibility, the referendum has not yet taken place.

**The Green March:** King Hassan II of Morocco launched the Green March (1975), a large-scale protest in which hundreds of thousands of Moroccans marched into Western Sahara to reclaim the region for their country. After Spain withdrew, Morocco asserted authority over the Western Sahara, mostly thanks to the Green March.

**Manhasset Negotiations:** With the aid of the UN several negotiations have been held in Manhasset New York in 2007 in order to bring acceptable solutions for both sides. Unfortunately these negotiations did not bring a desired outcome and the conflict remained to continue.

## Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The previous attempts to resolve this issue involved diplomatic efforts, peace agreements and negotiations mostly by the UN. Unfortunately these efforts were unsuccessful since we can still see that the tension is high in the region. All the events, treaties and resolutions were not sufficient for

resolving this issue while they also have faced numerous difficulties.

The Madrid Agreement was signed but it lost its importance since the Sahrawi people revolted against this kind of separation. The Settlement Plan successfully provided a ceasefire but the referendum had disagreements which resulted in the stallion of it. Today, there are still talks trying to achieve peace but talking about the notion of it is almost impossible since a middle ground is not established.

## Possible Solutions and Notes from the Chair

Regarding the whole process as a whole we can see that even today the diplomatic efforts are not that effective for finding a solution where two sides can agree and benefit from the agreement. In this case there are still a lot of aspects which we can examine and consider. Of course the first step of resolving this issue is ending the war and ensuring the security in the region by ending the war. Since this committee is a general assembly committee a country or a nation cannot be condemned or be punished by their actions so the most appropriate way which the Political Committee can do is arranging an agreement where two nations are responsible and benefit.

As the chair board has stated before this could not be reached in previous discussions and via adopted resolutions so in this committee we expect to find a common ground while two parties could come to a conclusion. And since it is not possible to let parties share territories by the decision of the general assembly the best this committee can do is set up a meeting with optimal conditions and ensure that human rights are not violated as it is violated frequently even today regarding the refugee, the referendum and the problems regarding the armed forces.

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