

ENKA  
INTERNATIONAL  
MODEL UNITED  
NATIONS 2018

“World in Crisis”



**The question of the Western Sahara Dispute**

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**Issue:** The question of the Western Sahara Dispute  
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## Introduction

The Western Sahara conflict is an issue that has been going on for decades. The issue can be inspected from two aspects: **the political aspect** and **the humanitarian aspect**.

The political approach can be explained by the endless war between Morocco and the indigenous people of Western Sahara. Because both sides are claiming their rights on the land located on the west coast of North Africa, the conflict still remains unsolved. Due to the long coastal area, phosphate reserves, and undiscovered oil resources, the territory is valuable for both sides. The armed war on the area has been stopped by the ceasefire agreement declared by the United Nations in 1991, but since then, chaos has been ruling the territory.

The indigenous people of Western Sahara, the Sahrawi citizens have been trying to find a place of shelter since the Moroccan government captured 85 percent of the territory. Hundreds of refugees displaced from their homelands have moved to Algeria to shelter in very bad conditions where humanitarian aid is hardly supplied. The youth living in refugee camps under awful circumstances like harsh weather conditions or starvation usually tend to make wrong decisions in life like joining terrorist groups or choosing to be criminals to survive for the rest of their lives which also connects to the humanitarian aspect of the issue.



Picture 1: Western Sahara location on the Africa map

## Key Vocabulary

**Colony:** A country or area controlled politically by a more powerful country that is often far away.

**Territory:** Land, or sometimes sea, that is considered to belong to or connected with a particular country.

**Independence:** Freedom from being governed or ruled by another country.

**Referendum:** A vote in which all the people in a country or an area are asked to give their opinion about or decide an important political or social question.

**Ceasefire:** An agreement, usually between two armies, to stop fighting in order to allow discussions about peace.

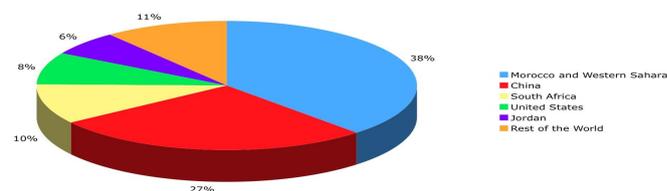
**Indigenous:** Existing naturally or having always lived in a place; native.

## Focused Overview

Western Sahara is a territory located in the North-West coast of Africa, bordered by Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. True to its name, Western Sahara is mostly dry and an inhospitable desert, but there are **rich phosphate deposits, undiscovered natural resources, and access to offshore fishing grounds** within the territory. Currently, 85 percent of the territory is controlled by Morocco. However, Morocco's claim of the territory is contested by the homegrown liberation movement known as the Polisario Front. To understand the topic better, the history of the land should be examined.

## 1) History of The Territory

In the 1950s, France and Spain began to give up their colonial holdings in North Africa and new countries started to take shape - still with quite a lot of influence from the imperial powers.



Picture 2: Global distribution of phosphate reserves

Suddenly, newly free nations like Morocco started to claim its rights on the territorial borders set up by the colonizers. Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, was annexed by Morocco in 1975. In 1975, the United Nations explained that the region's tribes of Western Sahara had historical ties to Morocco, but were insufficient to establish "any tie of territorial sovereignty" between the Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco.

## 2) Involvement of The United Nations

A year after it gained its **independence**, Morocco laid its claim to Spanish-controlled Western Sahara at the United Nations (UN) in 1957. The International Court of Justice (ICJ), the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, took over the case. In 1965 the UN called on Spain to formally **decolonize** the territory for once and all. Over the next years, the General Assembly (UNGA) adopted various resolutions on Western Sahara, each reiterating the territory's right to self-determination failing to claim independence for the Western Sahara dispute.

## 3) The Western Sahara War

In 1973, the **Polisario Front** was formed. At first, the Sahrawi fought against the Spanish occupiers in pursuit of independence. But the situation changed drastically in 1975 when Moroccan King Hassan II defied a Hague ruling that was in favor of West Saharan self-determination. King Hassan launched what he called the "**Green March**".

In November 1975, the kingdom stated its claim to the territory as some **350.000** unarmed Moroccans crossed into Western Sahara. The march pressured Spain to cede Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania - though Mauritania gave up its claim in 1979. The move was condemned by the UN and eventually triggered the Western Sahara War.

This phase of war lasted from 1975 to 1991 with the Polisario Front waging a violent guerrilla struggle against the Moroccan army. The conflict was deadly, especially during the early part of the war. The number of casualties experienced on both sides was hard to determine due to unreliable reporting. Some put the final death toll at **20.000**. Additionally, the conflict led to the **displacement** of thousands of Sahrawis, some of whom still reside in refugee camps in southwest Algeria today.

#### 4) UN Declares a Cease-fire

After almost two decades of fighting, the UN finally declared a **ceasefire** in 1991. But the ceasefire was based on a referendum that has not been held yet, so the status of the territory remains undecided as Morocco maintains its presence. Since the ceasefire was implemented, several ceasefire violations have been reported. The UN has recently tried to organize new peace talks but no progress has been made yet.

### Major Parties Involved and Their Views

#### Morocco

Morocco's claims on the territory connect to the history of the Moroccan and Saharawi people. Western Sahara is a part of the **Greater Maghreb** which is a territory in Northern Africa that was allied with the Moroccan Sultanate in the past. The Greater Maghreb and the Moroccan Liberation Army have fought against Spain throughout history. Due to this, Morocco fights for the territory of Western Sahara even though the indigenous Saharawi people have requested a referendum to form their own independent state. With Morocco's army and greater population, Morocco has control all over the Western Sahara coast, leaving the inhospitable areas of the territory to the Saharawi people.

#### Polisario Front

Polisario Front, the abbreviation of Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro, is a military organization aiming to end Moroccan control over the territory of Western Sahara, in Northwestern Africa, and win independence for that region. The Polisario Front consists of the **indigenous citizens** of the Western Sahara region, the Sahrawis.

#### Algeria

Algeria hosts Sahrawi refugees in **Tindouf**, a town in Algeria bordering Mauritanian, Western Saharan, and Moroccan borders, welcoming the refugees to its camps. A new generation of Sahrawi refugees is starting to get uncomfortable as the necessary aid is not provided at the camps. Also, the attempts to settle the refugees in comfort and health has made no progress currently. Algeria recognizes Western Sahara as a legitimate country occupied by a foreign force, Morocco.

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

**MINURSO** was established by the Security Council (UNSC) resolution 690 of 29 April 1991 in accordance with settlement proposals and humanitarian aid for the indigenous Sahrawi people. Top three troop contributors for this mission are Bangladesh, Egypt and the Russian Federation. The lack of progress towards a referendum on the region's status, and the lack of human rights on the territory has been concerning some observers about MINURSO's efficiency.

#### Spain

By the end of the 15th century, Spain owned countless colonies all over the world including areas from Africa like the Western Sahara dispute. After decades of claiming its rights on the land, Madrid decided to withdraw from Spanish Sahara following renewed Moroccan demands and international pressure, mainly from United Nations resolutions regarding decolonization. The Spanish government feared that the conflict with Morocco could lead to a war in Africa. Under immense pressure, Spain agreed to cede the colony to Morocco and Mauritania; the area was then split between the two countries which later Mauritania withdrew its claims from the land.

## Mauritania

In late 1975, the Mauritanian Army invaded the southern part of Western Sahara, while the Moroccan Army invaded the north. In April 1976, Mauritania and Morocco shared the country into three parts, Mauritania getting the southern one. After Mauritania fought four years of war against Polisario Front, the country finally withdrew in 1979, after signing the Algiers Agreement with the Polisario Front, recognizing the right of self-determination for the Sahrawi people. The Moroccan Army immediately took control of the old Mauritanian territory.

## United States of America

The stand of USA throughout the thirty years of conflict has been generally seen neutral caused by the disagreements in the government. Some support Morocco and emphasize the strength of the historic U.S.–Moroccan ties; others support the Sahrawis' rights independence and criticize Morocco's record on human rights and its exploitation of the territory's natural resources, ignoring the argument about the relations between the two countries as a thing of the past.

## Timeline of Events

Date of Event	Description of Event
1884	Spain colonizes Western Sahara.
1934	The territory becomes a Spanish region known as Spanish Sahara.
1957	Newly independent Morocco claims sovereignty over Western Sahara; however, Spain refuses to withdraw forces from the region.
1965	The United Nations calls for the decolonization of Western Sahara.
1973	Polisario Front, the indigenous Sahrawi independence movement, is established.
June 1975	Morocco's King Hassan stages the "Green March" of 350,000 Moroccans into Western Sahara and Spain withdraws from the area.
December 1975	Morocco sends in additional forces to occupy the territory.
1976	The Polisario Front declares war against Morocco, starting the Western Sahara War.
1976	Thousands of Sahrawi refugees flee to western Algeria to set up camps near the town of Tindouf.
February 27 <sup>th</sup> , 1976	The self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is established.

1979	Mauritania withdraws from the war, signing a peace treaty with Polisario Front after an intense armed conflict.
1991	UN brokers ceasefire, ending the guerrilla war between Polisario Front and Moroccan forces.
2000s	Numerous UN-sponsored talks continue to fail to organize a referendum and decide the fate of the region.
2016	The Secretary General of the Polisario Front, Mohamed Abdelaziz Ezzedine, passes away.

## Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

- [Madrid Agreement \(1975\)](#)

The Madrid Agreement was the treaty between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania to end the Spanish presence in the territory of Spanish Sahara. This agreement was obeyed and Spanish forces withdrew after this treaty.

- [S/RES/690 \(1991\)](#)

This resolution established the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). The institution is still present in our day attempting to solve the issue in a peaceful manner. Although MINURSO keeps being renewed every year it still could not succeed in its mission yet.

- [S/RES/2414 \(2018\)](#)

This resolution extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 31 October 2018, calling for a “realistic, practicable and enduring” political solution to end the decades-old conflict.

## Possible Solutions

One of the solutions that can be suggested is arranging a referendum. The composition of a referendum has been proposed by the United Nations in 1991 but postponed due to some facts like the uncertainty of the people who was going to vote. Two sides, Morocco and Sahrawi Arab Democratic People, were not able to cooperate in order to reach an agreement on who would be granted voting rights during the referendum. Due to Morocco not wanting Sahrawis and Sahrawis not wanting Moroccans, the referendum was postponed and never put into action. After a meeting held by an observer country to this issue, it was decided that the disagreements should be solved diplomatically. After the meeting, the referendum should be held as soon as possible. Every Moroccan and Saharawi citizen residing in the territory should have a right to vote. Both sides should obey the result of the referendum.

Another solution can be giving the Sahrawi government a broad autonomy for the region under Moroccan sovereignty. Being an autonomous state has been suggested by the UN before but the suggestion was retreated without even being debated. The Sahrawi government could be granted freedom with internal affairs however would function under Moroccan rule concerning certain issues,

including international affairs. If the phosphate reserves in the territory stay in Morocco's control, then a considerable percentage of profits should be estimated to be offered to the Sahrawi government monthly/annually. The Sahrawi government should spend the money earned from the reserves, not for the military but to improve education, infrastructure, health services and etc. The youth, who lean towards terrorist tendencies in the refugee camps, can be solved from the roots by this solution.

## Further Reading

- [The Western Sahara conflict, detailed overview of the topic](#)
- [Detailed timeline](#)
- [The youth movement in Saharawi refugee camps](#)
- [Further possible solutions](#)
- [Facts about the Western Saharan territory](#)

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