

Forum: General Assembly 4

Issue: The question of the Western Sahara

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Introduction

Western Sahara is one of the world's longest unresolved territorial disputes. Located on Africa's northwest coast along the Atlantic, it is sparsely populated but strategically significant, offering access to shipping lanes and resources such as phosphates, fisheries, and potential offshore oil and gas.¹

The conflict centers on Morocco, which controls most of the territory and claims it as part of the kingdom, and the Polisario Front, which declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and seeks independence. Since Spain's withdrawal in 1975, the region has seen cycles of fighting and fragile ceasefires. A 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire promised a referendum through MINURSO, but disputes—especially over voter eligibility—have stalled progress.²³

The stalemate destabilizes the Maghreb, strains ties among Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, and complicates cooperation on counter-terrorism, migration, and trade. The African Union recognizes the Sahrawi Republic, while countries like the U.S. back Morocco's sovereignty. Meanwhile, many Sahrawis face displacement, economic hardship, and life in refugee camps, particularly in Tindouf, Algeria.⁴

Tensions reignited in 2020 after nearly three decades of ceasefire, as Morocco expanded its control through infrastructure and diplomacy, met by renewed resistance from the Polisario. The

¹ "Western Sahara Profile." *BBC News*, 28 Oct. 2024, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115273.

²Fabiani, Riccardo. "The Western Sahara Conflict: A Fragile Path to Negotiations." *Atlantic Council*, 3 Aug. 2023, www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-western-sahara-conflict-a-fragile-path-to-negotiations/.

³ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Western Sahara | Facts, History, & Map | Britannica." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/place/Western-Sahara.

⁴Allen, Stephen, and Jamie Trinidad. *The Western Sahara Question and International Law*. 2024.

Western Sahara dispute embodies not only local struggles for self-determination but also wider questions of decolonization, regional power, and the international community's capacity to resolve protracted conflicts—making it simultaneously a humanitarian crisis and geopolitical contest.

Definition of Key Terms

Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is a self-proclaimed state declared in 1976 by the Polisario Front, representing the aspirations of the Sahrawi people for independence. It has been recognised by dozens of countries and is a full member of the African Union, though it is not recognised by the United Nations. The SADR operates a government-in-exile from refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria.⁵

Polisario Front

The Polisario Front is a liberation movement founded in 1973 to fight Spanish colonial rule and later Moroccan administration of Western Sahara. It seeks independence for the Sahrawi people and leads the SADR. The Polisario fought a guerrilla war against Morocco and Mauritania until a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991. It continues to advocate for a referendum on self-determination for Sahrawis.⁶

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

MINURSO was established by UN Security Council Resolution 690 in 1991 to monitor the ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front and to organise a referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people. Although it remains active, the referendum has never taken place due to disagreements over voter eligibility.⁷

Green March

The Green March was a mass mobilisation of approximately 350,000 Moroccans into Western Sahara in November 1975, orchestrated by King Hassan II to pressure Spain into

⁵ "Western Sahara Profile." *BBC News*, 28 Oct. 2024, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115273.

⁶ "Historical Documents - Office of the Historian." *State.gov*, 2024, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p3/d221.

⁷ United Nations Peacekeeping. "MINURSO." *United Nations Peacekeeping*, peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minurso.

relinquishing control of the colony. The march played a pivotal role in Spain's decision to withdraw and in Morocco's subsequent occupation of much of the territory.⁸

Berm (Moroccan Wall)

The Berm is a fortified sand wall built by Morocco during the 1980s, stretching over 2,700 kilometres and heavily militarised. It divides the Moroccan-administered areas of Western Sahara from the Polisario-controlled "liberated zones" to the east. The Berm is lined with landmines and is a central symbol of the conflict's division.⁹

Background Information

Colonial history

Western Sahara was ruled by Spain from the late 1800s until 1975, known then as "Spanish Sahara." The nomadic Sahrawi people, largely excluded from political decisions, relied on herding. As Spain faced decolonization pressure in the 1970s, both Morocco and the Polisario Front claimed the territory. When Spain withdrew in 1975, a power vacuum left its future unresolved.¹⁰

Green march and Moroccan control

In 1975, Morocco staged the Green March, sending 350,000 civilians to assert its claim over Western Sahara. Soon after, Spain signed the Madrid Accords, transferring administrative control to Morocco and Mauritania—though the UN never recognized this as legal. Mauritania withdrew in 1979 after clashes with the Polisario, but Morocco remained and expanded its control over most of the coastal, resource-rich territory.¹¹

Polisario Front and Sahrawi struggle

⁸"Green March, Miracle of Time — High Atlas Foundation." *Highatlasfoundation.org*, highatlasfoundation.org/en/insights/green-march-miracle-of-time.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Correale, Francesco. "A History of Western Sahara." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 18 Sept. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.1202>.

¹¹Asmae Daoudi. "The Green March: A Unique Chapter in Post-Colonial Moroccan History." *Morocco World News*, 6 Nov. 2023, www.moroccoworldnews.com/2023/11/27156/the-green-march-a-unique-chapter-in-post-colonial-moroccan-history/.

Formed in 1973, the Polisario Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1976 and fought Morocco and Mauritania, with strong Algerian support. Thousands of Sahrawis fled to refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, where many remain. Morocco consolidated control through settlements and infrastructure, while the Polisario held smaller “liberated zones” east of the Moroccan wall.¹²

Natural resources and economics

Western Sahara’s resources play a major role in the conflict. The territory is home to the Bou Craa mine, one of the world’s largest phosphate reserves, which Morocco exploits for export. Its Atlantic waters are also some of the richest fishing grounds in the region, attracting both Moroccan and European fleets. In addition, potential offshore oil and gas reserves could further raise the area’s economic value. These resources make Morocco determined to maintain control and give the Sahrawi independence movement more reasons to demand sovereignty over their land.¹³

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Morocco

Morocco controls about 80% of Western Sahara, including major cities and phosphate-rich coastal areas. Since the 1975 Green March, it has expanded settlements, infrastructure, and migration, framing the territory as vital to its “territorial integrity.” Rejecting independence, Morocco proposes autonomy under its sovereignty, enforcing control through a strong military presence and the Berm, making it central to the ongoing conflict.¹⁴

Polisario Front / Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)

The Polisario Front is the main liberation movement fighting for Sahrawi independence. In 1976, it declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which now operates a government-in-exile from Tindouf, Algeria. The SADR has been recognised by dozens of

¹² “Western Sahara: International Law and the Struggle for Self-Determination - Harvard Law School | Human Rights Program.” *Harvard Law School | Human Rights Program*, 29 Jan. 2025, <http://law.harvard.edu/hrp-event/western-sahara-self-determination/>.

¹³ Allan, Joanna, and Raquel Ojeda-García. “Natural Resource Exploitation in Western Sahara: New Research Directions.” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21 Apr. 2021, pp. 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.1917120>.

¹⁴ Sun, Esther. “What Does the Western Sahara Conflict Mean for Africa?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2020, www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-does-western-sahara-conflict-mean-africa.

countries and is a member of the African Union. It controls small parts of territory east of the Berm, referred to as “liberated zones.” The Polisario represents the Sahrawi cause in international negotiations and continues to demand a referendum on self-determination.¹⁵

Algeria

Algeria is the strongest regional supporter of the Polisario Front and hosts the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf. It provides political, military, and humanitarian assistance to the SADR, seeing the issue as one of decolonisation and the right to self-determination. Algeria’s involvement has also deepened its rivalry with Morocco, as the conflict is tied to broader struggles for influence in the Maghreb region. Algeria insists that the referendum promised in 1991 must still take place.¹⁶

Mauritania

Mauritania initially joined Morocco in claiming Western Sahara under the Madrid Accords of 1975, but it withdrew its claim and signed a peace treaty with the Polisario Front in 1979. Since then, Mauritania has maintained a neutral position, although it remains affected by the conflict due to its shared border with Western Sahara and wider security concerns in the Sahel region.¹⁷

African Union (AU)

The African Union recognises the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as a full member state, which has caused friction with Morocco. In fact, Morocco withdrew from the AU’s predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), in 1984 in protest against SADR’s membership. Morocco rejoined the AU only in 2017 but still opposes SADR’s recognition. The AU continues to push for a peaceful, negotiated settlement that respects the right of self-determination.¹⁸

¹⁵ “Polisario Front | Conflict, History, Movement, & Rebel Group.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/Polisario-Front.

¹⁶ “Managing Tensions between Algeria and Morocco | Crisis Group.” *Crisisgroup.org*, 28 Nov. 2024, www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/247-algeria-morocco-western-sahara/managing-tensions-between.

¹⁷ Werenfels, Isabelle. “Mauritania’s Balancing Act amid Intensifying Algerian-Moroccan Rivalry.” *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik (SWP)*, 2024, www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mauritania-balancing-act-amid-intensifying-algerian-moroccan-rivalry. Accessed 28 Sept. 2025.

¹⁸ ISSAfrica.org. “AU Limits Its Role in Western Sahara Crisis.” *ISS Africa*, 11 Sept. 2018, issafrika.org/iss-today/au-limits-its-role-in-western-sahara-crisis.

United States of America

The United States historically supported neutral mediation, but in December 2020 it shifted its stance by formally recognising Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This recognition was part of a wider diplomatic deal in which Morocco normalised relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. The U.S. decision remains controversial internationally, as it diverges from most global positions on self-determination, but it has boosted Morocco's diplomatic standing.¹⁹

Viable Solutions

Increasing humanitarian support and representation for the Polisario Front

To address the Sahrawi people's needs, SPECPOL could call for increased humanitarian aid to refugee camps in Tindouf, delivered through neutral international agencies such as the World Food Programme or UNHCR. At the same time, the Polisario Front could be given more structured opportunities to participate in UN and African Union-led negotiations, ensuring their role as legitimate representatives of the Sahrawi people in line with decolonisation principles.

Establishing a shared resource management mechanism

To reduce economic tensions, SPECPOL could support the creation of an international fund to manage Western Sahara's resources, such as phosphates and fisheries. Revenues would be allocated to community development, education, and refugee resettlement. This mechanism would ensure that resources benefit the Sahrawi people and discourage exploitation that fuels the conflict, while remaining under international supervision.

Promoting regional cooperation between Morocco and Algeria

Since the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria prolongs the conflict, SPECPOL could encourage both countries to engage in confidence-building measures. This may include joint initiatives on border security, anti-smuggling efforts, and infrastructure projects that serve both nations. Neutral mediators from the African Union or other non-aligned states could facilitate such cooperation, ensuring it reduces regional tension without challenging national sovereignty.

¹⁹ Reuters Staff. "US Encourages Investments in Morocco-Ruled Western Sahara." *Reuters*, 25 Sept. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-encourages-investments-morocco-ruled-western-sahara-2025-09-25/.

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