

Forum: General Assembly 4 (Special Political and Decolonisation)

Issue: The Situation of the Western Sahara

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Introduction

While 266,000 square kilometres of desert land may seem uninteresting, the Western Sahara has caught the attention of quite a few nations and has been the site of conflict since July of 1970. Today, the conflict lies between its northern neighbors, the Kingdom of Morocco, and the military and political organisation, the Polisario Front. The Polisario Front was founded in 1973 to fight for the full independence of Western Sahara. On the other hand, Morocco feels the Western Sahara belongs to the Kingdom of Morocco due to historical reasons.

Western Sahara was originally colonised by Spain in 1884, when the area was occupied by Berber tribes. It became known as Spanish Sahara in 1934 after Western Sahara is declared a Spanish province. While Spain seemed to have Western Sahara under control, it came to a halt in 1957. Near the end of the year, a recently independent Morocco lays its claims on Western Sahara. Morocco brought up the issue at the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations (UN), a part of the UN that oversaw decolonisation and is now inactive. The end of 1965 saw the UN call for the decolonisation of Western Sahara for the first time. After many negotiations and treaties, Spain finally withdraws in 1975.

Morocco was unable to hold on to Western Sahara as the Polisario Front declares war against Morocco in 1976 starting the Western Sahara war. The Polisario Front then proclaims Western Sahara as the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), with Madagascar and Algeria being the first to recognise this as a state.

In present day, the question whether Western Sahara should be an independent state still remains. Despite the UN calling for a ceasefire and the UN security council discussing this matter every year, Western Sahara still remains an issue. These UN resolutions aim to emphasise the need for all parties to come to a mutual solution and put an end to this problem.

Definition of Key Terms

Decolonisation

Allowing a region that was a colony to be independent

Guerrilla War

A war consisting of guerrilla warfare tactics, the use of hit-and-run tactics by small groups (such as the Polisario Front)

Autonomy

Refers to the independence and freedom and the right for a state to self-govern itself

Referendum

The practice of referring measures to be approved or rejected as proposed or passed by a legislative body

Ceasefire

The suspension of all harsh activities.

Sovereignty

Independent and supreme power in a government or state

Self-determination

Determining of the nation's future political status by the people, regardless of the wishes of other countries.

Background Information

Before the 1950s

Towards the end of 1884, Spain claimed a protectorate on Western Sahara and the surrounding area. Shortly after, Spain signed a treaty to consolidate its legal control over Western Sahara. The native Sahrawis resisted the Spanish control, refusing to give up their lifestyle. There were rebellions by the indigenous tribes of the Western Sahara against Spain, which made it difficult to control the area until

1934. Western Sahara becomes a province of Spain, the Spanish Sahara, in 1934, installing Spanish garrison at the city of Smara. Spain only established full colonial rule in 1936.

However, even though Spain fought for the control of Western Sahara, the nation seemed uninterested about the land. The tribes were unwilling to relinquish to the Spanish ways and Western Sahara was a barren area. Western Sahara had no known natural resources until later, which many looked to exploit.

1950 to 1975

The Spanish control over Western Sahara is first challenged in 1957. Western Sahara's southern neighbour, Mauritania, is the first to lay its claims on Western Sahara. However, Morocco stakes its claims over Western Sahara as well as Mauritania. Morocco, who gained its independence from France in 1956, is Western Sahara's northern neighbour. The UN General Assembly votes to let Mauritania be part of the UN as its own nation in 1961, inhibiting Morocco's ability to claim them. Morocco only tightened its clutch on Western Sahara, speaking out about how Western Sahara was part of pre-colonial Morocco. In 1965, the UN enters the troubled territory, urging for the decolonisation of Western Sahara. Spain remains in Western Sahara for the next 10 years.

With strain building up on relationships between various nations, the 1970s came with a very significant change to the control over Western Sahara. In May of 1973, the Polisario Front was founded. This organisation is the Sahrawi rebels working towards full decolonisation and independence of Western Sahara. Their first step to doing so was an armed attack against the Spanish army. As the Polisario Front start to engage in guerrilla warfare against Spain, Spain is reluctant to be part of the war. Due to pressure from the UN about decolonising, Spain would have to give up Western Sahara anyways. Finally, Spain announces in 1974 that it will hold a referendum the following year.

Shortly after, Moroccan ruler, King Hassan II requested the referendum be postponed to have a hearing from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) about Moroccan sovereignty. Mauritania later joined this claim. Spain agreed to this, along with the UN. The UN organises a visiting mission to Western Sahara to investigate the situation and report back to the ICJ. This mission of inquiry published a report saying an "overwhelming" majority of Sahrawis wanted independence, thus making the Polisario Front the most powerful force in that area. An advisory opinion was also issued by the ICJ: "the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity." The ICJ ruled for the people's right to self-determination in Western Sahara. Following this, the referendum was to continue as planned.

The Green March

Despite this seeming like the end to the matter, Morocco was unhappy with the ICJ ruling done in October. A few hours later, King Hassan II of Morocco announces “The Green March”. On the 6th of November, King Hassan ordered 350,000 volunteers to move into the Western Sahara and claim it as Moroccan territory. This was to pressurise Spain to hand over then Spanish Sahara to Morocco through the mass demonstration. Spanish troops did not oppose the entry of the Moroccans, but the Polisario Front were outraged. The conflict would eventually lead to war.

1975 to 1990

Spain held talks with Mauritania and Morocco following the pressure of the Green March. The three countries signed the Madrid Accords. This treaty specified Spain handing over administrative control of the northern two-thirds to Morocco and the remaining third to Mauritania. This was not a transfer of sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, the Polisario Front were unhappy with this decision, believing it went against the ICJ ruling. As Morocco and Mauritania moved in to annex its share of Western Sahara, they are met with heavy resistance by the Polisario Front. This triggered the beginning of the Western Sahara War.

On the 27th of February 1976, Spain completely withdraws from Western Sahara. The Polisario Front proclaims the region as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Unfortunately, the Western Sahara War carried on for the next 16 years until 1991. The Polisario Front, backed strongly by its eastern neighbour Algeria, engages in a guerrilla war. Due to the war and Polisario’s strong ties with Algeria, many Sahrawi refugees fled to Algerian camps in Tindouf, Algeria. While the exact number of casualties are unknown, there were many reports of both sides holding troops captive as well as many bombings.

Mauritania eventually buckled under the pressure of the Polisario Front and withdrew from the war. Polisario and Mauritania signed a peace treaty and Mauritania left all claims to its third of the Western Sahara. Morocco does not hesitate to move into and claim the southern third. By the end of the 1970s, Morocco had full administrative control over Western Sahara.

Looking at the next decade, it is easy to see that both Polisario and Morocco experienced countless casualties. In 1981, Morocco started the construction of a 2,500 km wall to separate the Moroccan-controlled region from that controlled by the Polisario Front after much conflict. This was named the Western Saharan Berm, but was nicknamed ‘the wall of shame’ by the Polisario. This was completed in 1987.

In 1988, representatives from Morocco and Polisario agree on a Settlement Plan created by the UN and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). This discussed a ceasefire and a transitional period, followed by a referendum. This was aimed at allowing the people of Western Sahara to choose whether they wanted independence or become part of Morocco. The war did not end after this and continued into the next decade.

1990 to present day

In 1991, after the more detailed version of the UN peace plan was published in the previous year, the ceasefire finally begins, with close monitoring by the UN. As part of the Settlement Plan, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) is established. This is all encapsulated in the UN Security Council Resolution 690. The Settlement Plan also encompassed plans for a referendum in 1992. However, this referendum never happens, with both sides blaming the other for this. To mediate the negotiations, James Baker III, a former US Secretary of State, gets involved. He has talked with the Polisario Front and Morocco on multiple occasions, none of which were successful in getting both parties to agree to voter eligibility. The UN reached a deadlock once again after Baker resigns in 2004.

Today, the Polisario Front and the Kingdom of Morocco are yet to reach a mutual consensus about Western Sahara. The referendum of whether Western Sahara will be independent or integrated still stands, despite this issue being on the agenda of the UN security council for over the past 25 years. With everything at a complete standstill, the UN has to implement stronger solutions in order to bring peace to this conflict.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Spain

In the 19th century, the Berlin Conference occurred to discuss the colonial powers of Europe within Africa. When deciding the region(s) each nation would control, Spain seized Western Sahara, establishing it as a Spanish colony not long after. Spain was previously interested in a Western Sahara, initially using it as a port during the slave trade and later for commercial fishing. Spain did not find it easy to establish its rule because of the opposition of the Sahrawis. The Sahrawis started several uprisings, only letting Spain get full colonial power in 1936. The Western Sahara is finally recognised as Spanish Sahara.

Spain decolonised Western Sahara after pressure from the UN and handed administrative control to Morocco and Mauritania. However, Morocco later agreed with the European Union to permit 477 Spanish shipping vessels to fish there between 1995 and 1999. This was so that Spain could return \$650 million to Belgium.

Morocco

Morocco first laid its claims to Western Sahara in 1957. The reason was that before colonialism, Western Sahara was part of Morocco, according to Morocco. Today, Morocco argues for the integration of Morocco and Western Sahara, causing this issue to drag out and be unresolved.

While Morocco was fixated on the idea of uniting with Western Sahara due to historical claims, Western Sahara was found to be rich in certain resources. The coast off of Western Sahara is abundant in fish, a great source of income and a trading tool. In the 1970s, large reserves of phosphate were found at Boucraa, a northern city. Morocco has been exploiting this and is now the largest exporter of phosphate for the production of fertiliser.

During the Western Sahara war, Morocco released bombs in the area, as well as targeting the refugee camp in Tindouf, Algeria. The Polisario Front reported that over two hundred were missing and held captive by Morocco. Recently, Morocco released over 60 Sahrawis but previously denied their existence. At the beginning of the Western Sahara war, hundred of Sahrawis had gone missing but were suspected to be held prisoners to Morocco. Despite their denials, Morocco released them after the 1991 ceasefire. The 200 later stated that they were held in detention centres and tortured.

In any case, the Western Sahara war and the years following had clear violations of human rights. Morocco's imprisonment and torturing of Sahrawis was met with a similar retaliation from the Polisario Front. Both parties went against the basic rights of humans, one of the many reasons for the UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991.

Mauritania

Mauritania was not a major player in the conflict but was definitely opposed to the independence of Western Sahara. Prior to Morocco, Mauritania claimed that Western Sahara was part of pre-colonial Mauritania. Mauritania was still colonised by France at this time and only gained independence in 1960.

As Spain re-administered power of Western Sahara, Mauritania was given the lower third of the area. Mauritania sided with Morocco during the war and fought off Polisario attacks. However, Mauritania decided to end its role in the war in 1979. The Polisario and Mauritania signed a peace treaty and Mauritania gave up its third of Western Sahara. While the Polisario Front may have looked to take over

the land, Morocco was quick to claim it as their own. Mauritania has had no further involvement since then.

Algeria

Algeria was a surprising part of this situation. Unlike Morocco and Mauritania, Algeria made no claims to Western Sahara but instead was a supporter of the independence of Western Sahara. Algeria trained the Polisario Front for the guerrilla war, as well as setting up a camp for Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf. One example of Algeria's support was during the Green March. Moroccan civilians in Algeria were sent back to Morocco by force. This has caused a lot of tension between these two nations, straining their relationship till today.

However, Algeria has not been entirely happy with the Sahrawis. Tindouf was also where Moroccan prisoners were held in detention centres as well as a growing refugee camp. An article was released by Moroccan World News, discussing whether the Sahrawis were overstaying their welcome in Algeria. This specific camp also caught the attention of the European Commission as a humanitarian crisis. The Tindouf camp was provided with food aid, clean water, medicines and more by the European Union.

The Polisario Front

The Polisario Front is an organisation formed in 1973 to fight for the independence of Western Sahara. Backed by Algeria, the Polisario set up their headquarters in Tindouf. As part of being an independent state, the Polisario Front declared the Western Sahara as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976.

To prevent Morocco from integrating with Western Sahara, the Polisario Front engaged in a guerrilla war for 16 years. Today, the Polisario occupies around 20% of the land, separated by the Western Saharan Berm. The Polisario Front has participated in many UN negotiations for a solution for Western Sahara but none have been successful.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1884	Spain colonises Western Sahara
1934	Western Sahara becomes a Spanish province named Spanish Sahara
1957	Morocco claims Western Sahara historically belongs to them
1965	The UN urge Spain to decolonise Western Sahara

1973	The Polisario Front is founded
1975	The Green March occurs, despite the ICJ ruling The Western Sahara war begins
1976	Spain withdraws colonial power and the SADR is proclaimed
1991	The Western Sahara war is ended by a UN-brokered ceasefire
Since 1991	The UN has attempted on many occasions to solve the issue but is yet to find a solution that both parties mutually agree on.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- The situation concerning Western Sahara, 27 April 2018 (**S/RES/2414**)

This is the most recent resolution but there have been resolutions on this issue since 1990.

- Report of the Security Council mission to Western Sahara, 21 June 1995 (**S/1995/498**)
- International Court of Justice advisory opinion of the situation, 1975,
<https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/61>
- Draft resolution on the question of Western Sahara in the fourth general assembly, 8 October 2018 (**A/C.4/73/L.3**)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

As previously mentioned, the UN has discussed this issue for almost 30 years now. Every time both parties struggle to come to a mutual agreement, prolonging the conflict in northern Africa. In the most recent resolution, it was decided that the mandate of MINURSO would be extended till the 31st of October 2018. The MINURSO includes the monitoring of the ceasefire, ensuring all prisoners are released and are exchanged oversees by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and collecting information to identify qualified voters for the referendum. Essentially, this is a plan to investigate whether the Sahrawis would like independence or integration with Morocco. Once this vote is complete, the 'winner takes all'. MINURSO also extends to helping the refugee situation in Algeria, the detaining of all prisoners and controlling any violent activities.

In order for the referendum to take place, a transitional period of around 3 years is needed, in which representatives of the Secretary General will have all responsibility of matters relating to the referendum. While this seems like a simple, plausible solution, it has been postponed since 1991. This is due to the details of the transition period; both parties had divergences, standing their ground firmly.

Solving this issue is significantly complicated because neither wants Western Sahara to go into the others' hands, hence dragging out the issue to buy time.

Possible Solutions

The biggest possible solution is the implementation of MINURSO. Despite its limitations, if both parties can come to a mutual situation, the plan can proceed and resolve this conflict. Unfortunately, it is difficult to create terms that both parties are happy with.

Alternatively, an appeal can be made to the ICJ, requesting a mission to Western Sahara to get the relevant information in terms of votes. This is similar to what Morocco did in 1974. If the ICJ approves and comes back with a result, there may be a potential way forward. However, one of the parties will obviously be unhappy with the verdict and may possibly act out. Previously, Morocco went against the ICJ ruling, even though they themselves requested the investigation.

Morocco has offered a solution, one that the Polisario Front is opposed to. Morocco suggested that any local affairs could be governed themselves, granting them autonomy but under Moroccan sovereignty. Morocco will integrate with Western Sahara. This does not go against any UN Security Council directives and offers a peaceful compromise. Unfortunately, the Polisario Front wants complete independence and rejected this proposal.

It is important to remember the two scenarios that will never happen. Firstly, the UN must have a mutual negotiation regarding matters of sovereignty and autonomy. This means neither party can be forced into a decision and have to be willing to participate in the solution. Secondly, Morocco will never and can never be told to give up the Western Sahara. The UN Security Council will not force Morocco to leave its Moroccan territories and even if they did, no progress can be made to implement this. France, former coloniser of Morocco, is an ally of Morocco. As a nation with veto power, France will never allow a resolution on this to pass.

Ultimately, the issue of Western Sahara is the inability to find a solution the Polisario Front and Morocco can agree upon. This is the hurdle that needs to be overcome to bring peace to the last conflict in Africa.

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Appendix or Appendices

- I. www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/ (Resolutions adopted by the UN security council)

This link will take you to all of the resolutions passed every year. From 1990 onwards, there is at least one resolution on Western Sahara each year till present day. For ideas about solutions already being implemented in the real world, this website will help.

- II. <https://minurso.unmissions.org/> (Information on MINSURO)

A UN designed webpage that will provide you with all the information about the MINURSO plan; how it was formed, background information on Western Sahara and recent updates on the current situation.