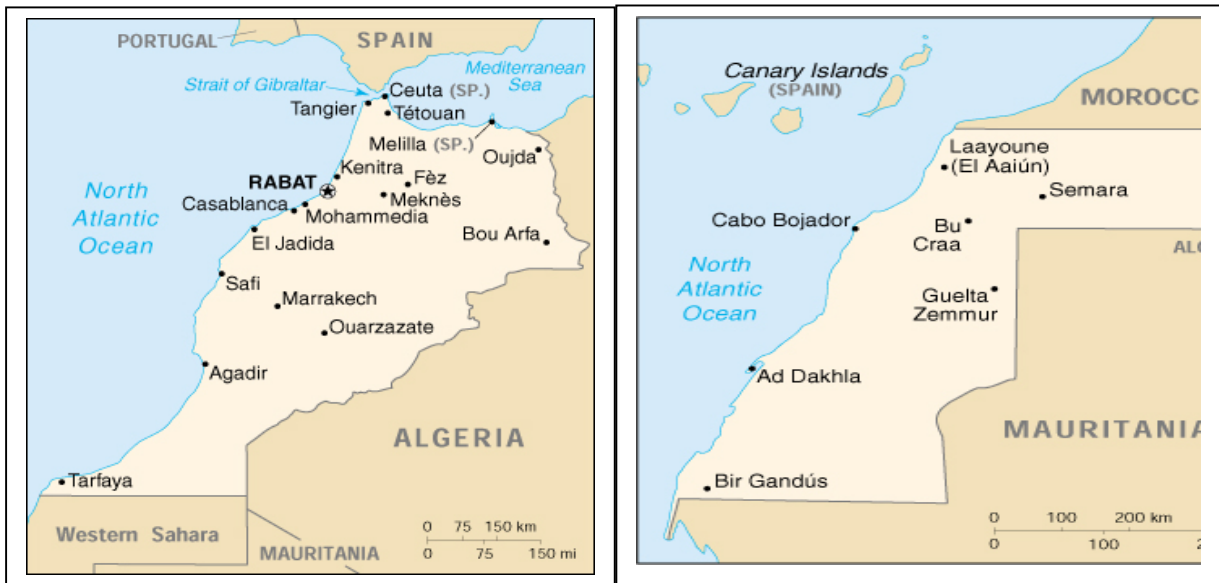


Morocco

Population: 30.1 million
Life expectancy: 69 years
National capital: Rabat
Independence from France: 2 March 1956

Western Sahara

Population: 0.24 million
Life expectancy: 50.0 years
No national capital
No internationally recognised independence



Abstract

The West Saharan conflict, disputed between Morocco and the POLISARIO, has constituted a major threat to regional stability since Spanish decolonization in 1975. The War has cost thousands of lives and disappearances, prisoners of war on both sides and forced Morocco to construct a huge fortified wall in Sahara. The conflicting parties have a fundamental disagreement on the status of Sahara: Morocco, an important ally of the US and France, claims the “marocanity” of Sahara, based on the region’s historical ties with Moroccan dynasties. In contrast, the POLISARIO, supported by Algeria and Libya, fights for the Sahrawi rights of the Sahrawi people to self-determination, stemming from OAU principles and UN resolutions. However, the underlying dispute concerns the control of the regions’s rich phosphate and fish resources. The UN force MINURSO has played a major role in the organization of a referendum on the future status of Western Sahara, delayed several times due to disputes over voter identification and registration.

The Sanctity of Borders and the Question of Western Sahara

Terhi Lehtinen

The conflict between Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO) in Western Sahara (1975-) is one of the last pieces of the unfinished decolonization in Africa. The question of Western Sahara challenges the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) emphasis on the inviolability of existing African borders and internationally recognized right to peoples' self-determination. The UN has played a leading role in the referendum process for the eventual independence of the Sahrawi people (See chronology).

Agents

Acronym	Name	Established	Represents	Support	Conflict with
POLISARIO/SADR	Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Mohamed Abdelaziz)/ Sahrawi Arab democratic Republic (based in Tindouf)	1973/ 1976	The Sahrawi people ¹ ,	Algeria, Libya, (UN resolutions/ International Court of Justice decision)	Morocco/ Mauritania until 1979
FAR	<i>Forces Armées Royales</i> / Moroccan state	Independent since 1956	The "marocanity" of Sahara	US, France	POLISARIO
	Mauritania	Independent since 1960	Claims on the Southern part of Western Sahara until 1979		POLISARIO

The political structure in Western Sahara dates back to historical relations between different Saharan tribes. Before the Spanish colonization, there was no supra-tribal authority connecting the vast tribal network of the region. However, certain Saharan

¹ There are some other Sahrawi organizations, and many of them are pro-Moroccan.

tribes recognized the religious authority of Moroccan dynasties, descendants of the prophet, based on personal loyalty (bei'a) to the sultan. Despite the sultan's religious authority, Saharan tribes have constantly contested the political authority of Moroccan dynasties in Western Sahara². The Sahrawis constitute a sprawling nomadic collection of tribes, formed from a mixture of Arabic, Berber and black African cultures. Many Sahrawis³ live in refugee camps⁴, run on a semi-autonomous basis by the POLISARIO in southwestern Algeria, or in Moroccan-controlled territory (Damis 1983; Hodges 1983; IPS, March 30, 1999).

The structure of antagonism in the current Western Saharan conflict is complex. First, there is a fundamental disagreement between Morocco and the POLISARIO/SADR, supported by the UN resolutions and the International Court of Justice decision, on the status of Sahara. Second, there is a dispute between Morocco and other North African countries, especially Algeria and Libya, on their support for the POLISARIO front, perceived as interference in Moroccan internal affairs. Consequently, the Western Saharan question has threatened the regional stability of North Africa over the decades. Third, there is a great divergence between the OAU and Morocco on the principle of inviolability of existing state borders and practically, on the admittance of the SADR as an OAU member state.

The international dimension of the Western Saharan conflict articulates two levels. The first is the regional level i.e. relationships between Spain, Morocco, Algeria and Libya. The second is the global level, in particular the interests of the US and France (Lawless

² The decision of the International Court of Justice, denying both Moroccan and Mauritanian sovereignty over Western Sahara, referred to the absence of an effective territorially-based authority in Western Sahara, as Saharan tribes only recognized the personal authority of the sultans (Berramdane 1992; Lawless & Monahan 1987).

³ Estimated 165,000 Sahrawis live in the Algerian camps and another 65,000 in the Moroccan occupied territory (IPS, 30 March 1999)

⁴ The UN and various agencies keep the refugees alive by a huge and costly relief effort. The Sahrawis have also created desert gardens, growing fresh fruit and vegetables, and have set up a free education and healthcare system, including schools, colleges and hospitals. Furthermore, literacy has been raised from five to 95 per cent in this period, and many young Sahrawis go on to study at universities in countries such as Spain, France, Algeria, Libya and Cuba (IPS, March 30, 1999).

& Monahan 1987). Algeria and Libya have provided arms and refuge to the POLISARIO front, whose right to self-determination has been recognized by the international community. The Moroccan close alliance with the US and France, both reluctant to see the emergence of a radical Sahrawi Republic, endangering the geopolitical stability in northwestern Africa, has also played a major role in the evolution of the conflict (Berramdane 1992; Damis 1983).

In the African context, the OAU commitment to decolonization and the inviolability of existing borders has led to the recognition of the SADR and to the withdrawal of Morocco from the organization. Most OAU countries have some unresolved border disputes, and the Western Saharan conflict might set a dangerous precedent (Nugent & Asiwaju 1996). Also, the Western Saharan conflict has to be placed in the larger context of the Arab world in which the dichotomy between moderate, such as Saudi Arabia, and radical, such as Libya, countries has been a major dividing factor in the reactions to the conflict. The Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference have supported Moroccan peace efforts and reconciliation with Israel in the Middle East, even though the POLISARIO front has also gained support from some countries. Moroccan interest in the cooperation with the European Union⁵(EU) has also had an impact on the recent adoption of a more reconciliatory stance to the Western Saharan question. The EU has urged the conflicting parties to find a solution to the Western Saharan dispute and to agree on the issues related to the referendum (Berramdane 1992).

The UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was set up in 1991 to supervise an uneasy cease-fire between Moroccan forces and the POLISARIO and to hold a referendum allowing the Sahrawis to vote for either integration with Morocco or for the self-determination of Western Sahara.

⁵ Morocco even applied for EU membership in 1987, but the application was rejected on the grounds that Morocco is not a European country (Berramdane 1992).

Motivation

The economic importance of the Western Saharan territory, with the world's richest fishing grounds, huge untapped phosphate deposits and significant oil reserves is the main underlying factor in the Western Sahara conflict (Damis 1983).

The mobilization of fighters on both sides stems from the ideological discourse on national identity. The Moroccan king Hassan II⁶ has stressed the importance of the “territorial integrity” and “historical continuity” of the Moroccan kingdom⁷. The Moroccan claim to Western Sahara forms part of a larger claim to territories, called “Greater Morocco”, composed of tribes offering their allegiance to Moroccan dynasties⁸. The question of Sahara has become a highly delicate issue in Moroccan politics, since the “marocanity” of Sahara is the basis for Moroccan political consensus, and a founding pillar of Moroccan identity, along with the continuity of the monarchy and Islam (Waterbury 1970). The Moroccan “Green March” in 1975, based on historical legitimacy, has mobilized popular support for the long and bloody fight in Sahara. Similarly, the POLISARIO⁹ fighters expose their fervent nationalism for the independence of the SADR, referring to “the legitimate right to take up arms to defend inalienable rights and national sovereignty in the Western Sahara” (IPS, 30 March 1999).

The apparent dispute concerns very fundamental issues of Moroccan historical sovereignty over the Western Saharan territory opposing the internationally recognized Sahrawi people’s right to self-determination. However, the underlying source of dispute

⁶ In Moroccan politics, the monarchy plays the predominant role, by giving general political guidelines and arbitrating between other political actors (Waterbury 1970).

⁷ Following the attempted coup d’états in 1971 and 1972, the Moroccan king Hassan II sought to re-establish his legitimacy as a spiritual and political leader of the country. The question of Western Sahara offered an extraordinary opportunity to restore historical legacy of the Alaouite monarchy and Moroccan nationalism, to mobilize the population for the marocanity of Sahara and to engage the Moroccan army in a long war, undermining thus attempts to overthrow the government (Berramdane 1992).

⁸ For example, Morocco was strongly opposed to the independence of Mauritania, granted by France in 1960, on the grounds that it was an artificial creation of French colonialism. Morocco finally recognized Mauritania in 1969 (Damis 1983).

⁹ In the early 1970s, a small group of Sahrawi students, under the leadership of El-Ouali, decided to fight for the end of Spanish rule in Western Sahara. The Sahrawis from southern Morocco, western Algeria, northern Mauritania and Western Sahara joined forces, expressed their solidarity and officially formed the POLISARIO in 1973.

concerns the importance of phosphate and other mineral resources, which remain crucial for the Moroccan economy¹⁰. Another dispute between Morocco and the OAU concerned the admittance of the SADR as its member state. The dispute concerning voter eligibility¹¹ for the referendum revealed the profound disagreement between the conflicting parties: Morocco wanted to let all adult “Sahrawis”¹² participate, while the SADR desired to exclude those it deemed “foreigners”, limiting the franchise to those counted in the 1974 census. Finally, they found a compromise giving the franchise to all applicants belonging to Saharan tribes registered in the 1974 census. Voter identification proved to be far more complex than expected, as members of the same tribal subgroups, who must be identified individually with the assistance of their respective Sheikhs, were dispersed in different locations and means of communication were limited.

The intervention of third parties has been motivated by various political, economic and military reasons, and different countries’ positions have greatly evolved during 1975-1999. Mauritanian involvement in the Western Saharan dispute stemmed from the country’s weakness as a national power in relation to neighboring Morocco and Algeria and from its need to find a balance between different regional interests, finally leading to the country’s withdrawal from the conflict by signing a peace-agreement 1979 (Damis 1983). Algeria never claimed the Saharan territory, but it has actively supported the POLISARIO’s fight for the independence of the Sahara. The revolutionary and anti-colonial stance of the Algerian state in the 1970s; the remnants of border disputes between Morocco and Algeria; the possibilities of joint exploitation of mineral resources and for easy access to the Atlantic Ocean with the independent Saharan state and finally,

¹⁰ Morocco is one of the world’s largest exporters of phosphate (Europa Yearbook 1999).

¹¹ Morocco and the POLISARIO have disputed over the number of Sahrawis eligible to vote. Morocco has continually argued for extra voters to be added to the last available census figures, taken by the Spanish in 1974 (which indicated there were 74,000 Sahrawis in the territory). The POLISARIO maintains that the Moroccans have simply been flooding the territory with impoverished Moroccans from further north, in order to “spoil” the vote in its favor. The UN finally finished sifting through 147,000 possible voters in September 1998. The POLISARIO had originally argued that only 85,000 of these people were eligible. However, it backed down in November 1998 and allowed the scrutiny of a further 65,000 potential electors, which has left the Moroccan government uncomfortably exposed and without further excuse for progress towards the referendum vote (IPS, 30 March, 1999).

¹² In this context, Sahrawi would mean all inhabitants of Western Sahara. In this respect, Morocco has initiated a large-scale settlement policy in Western Sahara to strengthen the Moroccan presence in the region, considered as one of the Moroccan “provinces”.

the willingness to reinforce a hegemonic regional position have all contributed to active Algerian involvement. Since its withdrawal from Western Sahara in 1975, Spain has attempted to maintain a neutral position, although it has often been perceived as being in favor of the POLISARIO with a number of Sahrawi activists living on the Canary Islands. Libyan financial and military support for the POLISARIO has been based on its opposition to Morocco and its ideological and political affiliation with various radical movements all over West Africa (Berramdane 1992; Damis 1983). France has supported Morocco for its military importance and its commitment to the francophone movement. Like France¹³, the US has been a generous arms supplier to Morocco, an important ally during the Cold war. Moderate and pro-western Morocco has offered a strategic position commanding the southern access to the Mediterranean. The US has also been concerned over Libyan support for the radical POLISARIO, hostile to American interests. Currently, Morocco, known for its conservative Islam, plays a crucial role in the fight against the Islamic fundamentalism, endangering regional geopolitical stability and French and US interests in North Africa.

Instruments

Morocco's strategy in the conflict has changed from its initial military deployment and the occupation of Western Sahara to the official acceptance of the UN peace plan. However, despite international pressure, Morocco has obstructed the implementation of the UN peace plan in several indirect ways, including cease-fire violations, the blocking of the UN peacekeeping forces and manipulation of voter identification and registration. Morocco has initiated a large-scale settlement policy in Western Saharan cities like Layoune, by offering tax relief, higher salaries and other incentives, to strengthen the Moroccan presence in the region, officially considered as one of the Moroccan

¹³ The relationship between Morocco and France has evolved over the years. The socialist President Mitterrand (1981-1995) was closer to Algeria than to Morocco, whereas the conservative President Chirac renewed the alliance with a moderate Moroccan regime in 1995, in order to fight effectively against Islamic fundamentalism (Berramdane 1992).

“provinces”. The Western Saharan conflict has been a financial burden to Morocco, but this has not undermined its firm commitment to the “marocanity” of Sahara.

The military balance in Western Sahara is very unequal. On one side, there are more than 100,000 heavily armed Moroccan conscripts, deployed along the fortified wall, built in the 1980s and stretching for nearly 1,500 kilometers, and surrounded by razor wire, minefields¹⁴ and forts. Opposing the Moroccans is a group of about 20,000 light-armed guerrillas of the POLISARIO Front. (IPS, 30 March 1999)

The latest UN proposals, finally accepted by both the POLISARIO and Morocco, call for an appeal process of voter identifications to be initiated, while the initial identification process is being carried out. It also calls for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to start preparing for the return of refugees eligible to vote (AP March 30; IPS, 30 March, 1999). The international community has also proposed some kind of Western Saharan autonomous arrangement under Moroccan sovereignty, but the POLISARIO has reiterated its exclusive commitment to independence. The leader of the POLISARIO rebel force has warned of a return to war in the Western Sahara if Morocco continues to bloat the voter registry to swing the poll in its favor (AP, 15 March 1999). The new Moroccan King Mohamed VI has confirmed the Moroccan commitment to a referendum. However, the first direct talks since 1997 between Morocco and the POLISARIO, held in May 2000, have not made any significant progress so far and the referendum remains postponed to an unknown future, thus leaving the longest-lasting territorial dispute in Africa unresolved.

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¹⁴ The use of anti-personnel mines constitutes a serious security threat. Morocco and the UN have signed a military agreement to identify and destroy mines and unexploded bombs still buried in the Western Sahara (AFP, 17 March 1999).

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Western Sahara News

Western Sahara Weekly News

Chronology

- **1884:** Spanish colonization of Western Sahara.
- **1960:** Progressive sedentarization of the Sahrawi population. Exploitation of phosphate deposits. Emergence of first Sahrawi political movement, banned in 1970. Border war between Algeria and Morocco in 1963.
- **1973:** Formation of the POLISARIO (The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro). Guerilla war against the Spanish. King Hassan II of Morocco claimed the territory to the north and Mauritania to the south.
- **1974:** Census of the Western Saharan populations.
- **1975:** The International Court of Justice verdict: neither Morocco nor Mauritania should have sovereignty over the Western Sahara, despite their historical claims. The “Green March” of 350,000 people as a means of advancing the Moroccan army into Western Sahara.
- **1976:** Mauritania, Morocco and Spain signed Madrid Accords dividing the territory into two; the northern two thirds to Morocco and the southern one third to Mauritania. End of Spanish colonial mandate. Formation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and a government in exile. By 1990s, 60 countries recognized SADR.
- **1979:** Mauritania abandoned its territorial claims in the south and recognized the rights of the Sahrawi people by signing a peace agreement.
- **1982-1987:** Official withdrawal of Morocco from the OAU in 1985, when the SADR was accepted as a member state.
- **1990:** Settlement plans to be administered by the UN peace keeping force MINURSO. MINURSO was mandated to organize a referendum on the independence of Western Sahara and to compile a list of eligible voters.
- **1991:** Cease-fire between Morocco and the POLISARIO. Denial of free movement through occupied Western Sahara. Settlement of thousands of Moroccans in the region. Dispute on voter identification and registration.
- **1993-1994:** Agreement on voter eligibility for applicants belonging to tribes registered in the 1974 census. Beginning of identification and registration operations.
- **1996:** Amnesty International report on Moroccan human rights violations in Western Sahara.
- **1997:** Appointment of James Baker as the UN special envoy to Western Sahara. The Houston agreements, revising the UN peace plan: Morocco and the SADR agreed to the code of conduct for the referendum, to UN authority and to the principles governing the identification of voters.
- **1998:** OAU summit in Burkina Faso debated whether the SADR could remain an OUA member. Amnesty International concerned over “disappeared” Sahrawis between 1964-1987. The POLISARIO accepted the UN peace plan.
- **1999:** Morocco gave its “agreement in principle” to the UN peace plan designed to accelerate the referendum process. Submission of revised UN propositions to conflicting parties. From 150,000

identified voter candidates, only a third have fulfilled the requisites of the identification commission.
Death of King Hassan II.

- **May-August 2000:** First face-to-face negotiations since 1997 between Morocco and the POLISARIO in May 2000 remain inconclusive. Extension of MINURSO mandate.