

**SPECIAL COMMITTEE: TEDIC**  
**Topic B: Impeding the Escalation of Tensions in**  
**the Western Sahara conflict**

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## Background Information

To begin with, the Western Sahara is a disputed territory located in North Africa that was under Spanish colonization since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a desert area and is barely populated consisting of a population of around 500,000 people.



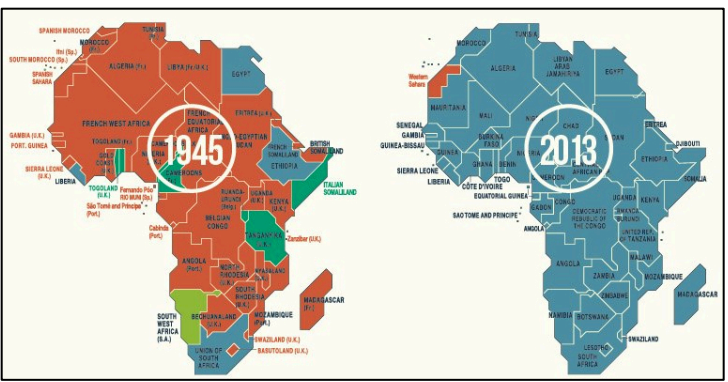
The area of the Western Sahara was relinquished by Spain in 1975 and since then has been under the control of the Moroccan Kingdom. King Hassan II was the one responsible for engineering the ‘retrieval’ of the Western Sahara from Spain and was an important step in the consolidation of Moroccan politics. Morocco sees Western Sahara as a Moroccan area that is rightfully theirs. The retrieval was handled in a peaceful and

very effective way, in which 350,000 unarmed Moroccans crossed into the former Spanish colony and reasserted their kinship ties to the tribes that existed in that region. It was labeled as the Green March; it consolidated King Hassan II’s power more and it showed his experience in statecraft and the handling of territorial dispute. This boosted his popularity in Morocco and strengthened the perception of Western Sahara as a Moroccan region.

Ever since the Moroccan retrieval, the Western Sahara has been labeled as a non-self-governing state in the United Nations and has had international and regional discussions on the Moroccan claim to it. The United Nations officially considers the Western Sahara as Africa’s last colony indicating that they adopted an international stand that is for Western Saharan independence. However, the process for independence has been deeply hampered

and the area has undergone numerous conflicts. It is still under the control of Morocco and despite various negotiations, the future status of it is still unknown.

Despite the supposedly peaceful retrieval of the Sahara, the region was plagued with conflict for almost two decades. The Indigenous Sahrawi,



who labeled themselves as the Polisario Front, waged war against Morocco from 1975 until 1999. The Polisario Front was created in 1973 in order to end the Spanish colonization of the Western Sahara area and are considered as an official representative of the Sahrawi people by the United Nations. At the moment when the Spanish departed in 1975, the Front shifted its focus to oppose the annexation of the Sahara region by Morocco and Mauritania. The conflict ended with a ceasefire in 1991

with a promise for a referendum for independence a year later, which did not occur. After the ceasefire, the first 9 years saw a UN presence to organize a referendum on the independence of the Sahara region or integration within Morocco. Following the death of King Hassan II in 1999, the Security Council



opted out of the “winner take all” referendum and preferred negotiations with the new King, Mohamed VI. Despite everything, the Security Council maintained its support for Western Sahara’s right to self-determination.

Currently the international framework for the handling of the Sahara region was submitted in 2007 to the United Nations by Morocco. The proposal recommends an autonomous Sahara region federated by Morocco, which has elections of officials for local institutions, development of varied educational programs, imposing taxes, adopting budgets and monitoring police and judicial boards. The only part that would have remained officially under the control of the central Moroccan government would have been the defense and the foreign affairs. This was still not adopted and the situation of the Sahara until now has no official framework.

*\*\*\* An important thing to keep in mind about the Polisario Front is their claim to the indigenous nature of the Western Sahara region. They reject the Moroccanism of the Sahara as espoused by the region. This has been an important issue with the formation of the Sahrawi identity and a call for a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic by the Polisario. The Polisario constantly affirms that Morocco has no historical ties to the region and that the true Sahrawi are indigenous to the region and have had a distinct past from Morocco. Also, they have threatened to return to conflict if Morocco keeps stalling its promise to hold a referendum on the future of the Sahrawi region.*

## Timeline

**1884** – Western Sahara falls under Spanish rule

**1934** – Western Sahara becomes a Spanish province

**1957** - Morocco raises centuries-old historical claim to Western Sahara at the United Nations.

**1973** - Polisario Front is formed and establishes itself as the sole representative of the Sahrawi people.

**1975:**

**June** - Morocco's King Hassan takes the territorial dispute to the World Court in The Hague. The court finds that some tribes had paid allegiance to Moroccan rulers, but rules that people should be allowed to settle the sovereignty issue through self-determination. Spain will organize a referendum.

**November** – King Hassan launches the Green March with 350,000 unarmed Moroccans crossing into the territory. Spain agrees to transfer administration of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania.

**December** – Morocco sends in forces to occupy the territory.

**1976** - As Spanish troops withdraw, Polisario guerrillas backed by Algeria and Libya proclaim the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) with a government-in-exile based in Algeria.

**1979** - Mauritania signs a peace deal with Polisario and renounces its claim to Western Sahara.

**1980** - Morocco annexes Mauritania's share of the territory.

**1984** - SADR is admitted as a member state of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Morocco leaves the OAU.

**1991** - U.N. brokers ceasefire, ending the guerrilla war between Polisario and Moroccan forces. The U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara is established to oversee the ceasefire. A referendum is set for January 1992 but is postponed because of a dispute over who is eligible to vote.

**2001** - Former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker proposes autonomy for Saharawis under Moroccan sovereignty, a referendum after a four-year transition period, voting

rights for Moroccan settlers resident in Western Sahara for over a year. Polisario and Algeria reject the proposal.

**2003** - U.N. proposes Western Sahara become a semi-autonomous region of Morocco for a transition period of up to five years, to be followed by a referendum on whether the territory should become independent, semi-autonomous or integrated with Morocco. Polisario endorses the plan but Morocco rejects it, saying it will never give up sovereignty.

**2006:**

**October** – Morocco calls a U.N. report critical of its human rights record in Western Sahara biased in favor of the Polisario Front.

**December** - The Moroccan advisory council proposes autonomy, burying the prospect of independence. Polisario has already dismissed autonomy and the council's draft proposal.

**2007:**

**April 10** – Polisario says it proposes a "flexible" peace plan at the United Nations. Morocco unveils its plan the next day.

**Aug 11** - Two days of U.N.-sponsored talks end with no breakthrough but agreement to meet again.

**Dec 12** - Rabat urges the U.N. to stop Polisario leaders from holding a congress at which they will propose preparing to resume war with Morocco.

**Dec 21** - Polisario says war may break out again if U.N.-sponsored talks fail.

## Key Terms

**Western Sahara** – A mainly desert territory in northwest Africa. It is phosphate-rich and believed to be rich in oil. The territory is the subject of a decades-long dispute between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front

**Polisario Front** – Sahrawi rebel national liberation movement group that has claimed Western Sahara territory as theirs. It has established itself as the sole representative of the Saharan people. They seek to end Moroccan control and influence over the region.

**Sahrawi** – People that inhabit the western part of the Sahara desert, which includes Western Sahara.

**Morocco** – Country that has claimed ownership of Western Sahara. According to a treaty set up between Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain, Morocco owns two thirds of the territory.

**Hassan II** – Moroccan King that freed Western Sahara from Spain.

**Mauritania** – Country that supports Morocco's claims over Western Sahara. According to a treaty set up between Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain, Mauritania owns one third of the territory.

**Algeria** – Country that supports the Polisario Front. It hosts several Polisario camps in its territory.

**Self-determination** –The process by which a country determines its own statehood and forms its own allegiances and government. It is a fundamental right, stated in the Declaration of Human Rights.

**MINURSO** – The United Nations Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara. Its brief was to implement a peace plan outlined in a 1990 Security Council resolution.

**Baker Plan** – A formula created by James Baker that provided for autonomy for Saharawis under Moroccan sovereignty, a referendum after a four-year transition period, and voting rights for Moroccan settlers resident in Western Sahara for over a year. It was rejected by the Polisario and Algeria.



## Guiding Questions

- How can a peaceful referendum occur if Morocco keeps opposing it?
- Did the Arab Spring overshadow the Western Sahara conflict?
- Does the monarchical nature of Morocco prevent it from allowing a referendum?
- Do you think the Polisario Front will allow multiparty democracy if the Sahara got independent? Alternatively, will they use force to rule the potential state?
- What becomes of Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara if it got independent?
- Does Western Sahara have a right to self-determination?

## Further Research

### **UN actions regarding the Western Sahara Conflict**

<http://pimun.epanu.org/downloads/SG/UNESCO.pdf?PHPSESSID=pj8j90n8407bi5c1quaoij4b7>

<http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minurso/>

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/22/us-france-westernsahara-idUSBRE93L13D20130422>

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/02/morocco-algeria-western-sahara.html>

### **More key terms related to the topic**

[http://unitednotionsfilm.com/Media/STOLEN\\_Study%20guide.pdf](http://unitednotionsfilm.com/Media/STOLEN_Study%20guide.pdf)

### **Western Sahara profile**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14115273>

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/westernsahara/index.html>

### **Current conflicts**

[http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/current\\_conflict.php?id\\_state=140](http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/current_conflict.php?id_state=140)

<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/09/24/morocco-s-two-track-approach-to-western-sahara-conflict/go3m>

### **Explanation of the Western Sahara Conflict in Animation**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p4aSn-arBA>