

**Committee:** SPECPOL

**Topic:** The question of Western Sahara

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## Summary

The conflict in Western Sahara was a dispute between Western Sahara (Frente Polisario) and Morocco which constitutes a big threat to regional stability after decolonization in 1975 by Spanish powers. The war has caused thousands of lives, big numbers of prisoners of war on both sides and has led to Morocco constructing a huge, fortified wall in Western Sahara (Lehtinen, 2003). This conflict has therefore had far reaching political, economic, and cultural impacts on Polisario.

Frente Polisario is a national organization of the Western Sahara that was formed with the aim of obtaining independence for Western Sahara. The main political impact that the Western Sahara conflict had was the formation of Frente Polisario. This was a political front that advanced plights of Saharawi society. Frente Polisario was therefore charged with the responsibility of championing independence of the Sahrawi people.

## Definition of Key Terms

**The Baker Plan (2003)**- The Baker Plan (formally, Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara) is a United Nations initiative to grant self-determination to Western Sahara.

**Western Saharan**- is a disputed territory on the northwest coast and in the Maghreb region of North and West Africa. About 20% of the territory is controlled by the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, while the remaining 80% of the territory is occupied and administered by neighbouring Morocco.

**Saharawis**- They are of mixed Berber, Arab and black African descent. They inhabit the harsh desert region stretching from southern Morocco to the valleys of the Niger and Senegal and traditionally lived a nomadic life as traders.

**SADR**- This is the Western Saharan state formed by the Polisario after the exit of Spain from the region(the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic)

**Frente Polisario-** It is a national organization of the Western Sahara that was formed with the aim of obtaining independence for Western Sahara

## Background Information

The Western Sahara conflict is an ongoing conflict between the Polisario Front and the Kingdom of Morocco. The conflict originated from an insurgency by the Polisario Front against Spanish colonial forces from 1973 to 1975 and the subsequent Western Sahara War against Morocco between 1975 and 1991. Today the conflict is dominated by unarmed civil campaigns of the Polisario Front and their self-proclaimed SADR state to gain fully recognized independence for Western Sahara.

The conflict escalated after the withdrawal of Spain from the Spanish Sahara in accordance with the Madrid Accords. Beginning in 1975, the Polisario Front, backed and supported by Algeria, waged a 16-year-long war for independence against Mauritania and Morocco. In February 1976, the Polisario Front declared the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, which was not admitted into the United Nations, but won limited recognition by a number of other states. Following the annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania in 1976, and the Polisario Front's declaration of independence, the UN addressed the conflict via a resolution reaffirming the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people. In 1977, France intervened as the conflict reached its peak intensity. In 1979, Mauritania withdrew from the conflict and territories, leading to a stalemate through most of the 1980s. After several more engagements between 1989 and 1991, a cease-fire agreement was reached between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan government. At the time, most of the Western Sahara territory remained under Moroccan control, while the Polisario controlled some 20% of the territory in its capacity as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, with additional pockets of control in the Sahrawi refugee camps along the Algerian border. At present, these borders are largely unchanged.

Despite multiple peace initiatives through the 1990s and early 2000s, the conflict re-emerged as the "Independence Intifada" in 2005; a series of disturbances, demonstrations, and riots, which broke out in May 2005 in the Moroccan-held portions of Western Sahara and lasted until November of that same year.

In late 2010, the protests re-erupted in the Gdeim Izik refugee camp in Western Sahara. While the protests were initially peaceful, they were later marked by clashes between civilians and security forces, resulting in dozens of casualties on both sides. Another series of protests began on 26 February 2011, as a reaction to the failure of police to prevent anti-Sahrawi looting in the city of Dakhla, Western Sahara; protests soon spread throughout the territory. Though sporadic demonstrations continue, the movement had largely subsided by May 2011.

To date, large parts of Western Sahara are controlled by the Moroccan Government and known as the Southern Provinces, whereas some 20% of the Western Sahara territory remains controlled by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Polisario state with limited international recognition. The questions of mutual recognition, establishment of a possible Sahrawi state and the large numbers of Sahrawi refugees displaced by the conflict are among the key issues of the ongoing Western Sahara peace process.

### **Key Facts:**

- Disputed territory claimed by Morocco and Saharawis seeking self-determination  
Population 567,000
- Main town- Laayoune
- Area- 252,120 sq. km (97,344 sq. miles)
- Main language- Arabic
- Main religion- Islam
- Life expectancy- 66 years (men), 70 years (women)

### **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

#### **Countries**

- Morocco
- Spain
- France
- Mauritius
- Algeria

## Organisations

- United Nations
- Amnesty International
- Human Rights Watch
- World Organization Against Torture
- Freedom House
- Reporters Without Borders
- International Committee of the Red Cross
- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
- Derechos Human Rights
- Defend International
- Front Line
- International Federation for Human Rights
- Society for Threatened Peoples
- Norwegian Refugee Council

## Timeline of Events

| Date        | Description   |
|-------------|---|
| 1884        | - Spain colonizes Western Sahara.   |
| 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.  |
| June 1975   | - 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 Organisation 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.

October 2006 - Morocco calls a U.N. report critical of its human rights record in Western Sahara biased in favour of the Polisario Front.

December 2006 - The Moroccan advisory council proposes autonomy, burying the prospect of independence.

-- Polisario has already dismissed autonomy and the council's draft proposal.

April 10, 2007 - 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.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara of 1975
- The United Nations (UN) to resolve the dispute over Western Sahara from August 1988, when Secretary-general Pérez de Cuellar submitted the settlement proposals to the two parties—the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario—until June 2004, when James A. Baker III, the secretary-general's personal envoy on Western Sahara, resigned.
- The Madrid Accords ( 1975)- It was a treaty between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania to end the Spanish presence in the territory of Spanish Sahara, which was until the Madrid Accords' inception a Spanish province and former colony.

It was signed in Madrid on November 14, 1975, six days before Franco died, although it was never published on the Boletín Oficial del Estado. This agreement was in conflict with the Law on decolonization of Sahara, ratified by the Spanish Parliament (Cortes) on November 18. In cause of the Madrid agreement, the territory would then be divided between Morocco and Mauritania, with no role for either the Polisario Front or the Sahrawi people generally. Following the accords, the Polisario relocated from the Mauritanian border to Algeria.

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

- The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara was a 1975 advisory, non-binding opinion by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of two questions presented to it by the UN General Assembly under Resolution 3292 regarding the disputed territory of Western Sahara (then Spanish Sahara). Morocco had approached the UN to adjudicate its and Mauritania's claims over the territory.
- The ICJ deliberated between 13 December 1974 and 16 October 1976. The final ruling by the Court stated that:
- The materials and information presented to it [the ICJ] do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity. Thus the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory.
- The Baker Plan (2003)- The Baker Plan (formally, Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara) is a United Nations initiative to grant self-determination to Western Sahara.

## Possible Solutions

- A negotiated political compromise between the two sides which is followed by a confirmatory referendum. Overseen by the UN to ensure its fairness (given that Human Rights Watch has found Morocco to have obstructed the fairness of the referendum process in the past)
- As done with the British and Argentinians in the Falklands, allow the people of the Western Saharan region to decide which authority that they more greatly associate with.
- A broad autonomy for the region under Moroccan sovereignty.

## Bibliography

(Title of source, author, date of publication – you may also wish to list some useful websites)

<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr166.pdf>

(ICJ Reports 16 October 1975, 162).

The Western Sahara and the Search for the Roots of Sahrawi National Identity- David Suarez

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