

## Briefing Paper

Committee: SPECPOL

Topic: The Question of Resolving the Status of Western Sahara

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### Summary

Western Sahara is a region in north-western Africa that has been left with an unresolved political future, despite decades of United Nations involvement. While previously a Spanish colony, Western Sahara was classified as a Non-Self-Governing territory in 1963 by the UN and as a result, it was placed under the international decolonisation framework. When Spain withdrew in 1975, both Morocco and Mauritania asserted their claim over the area.

This led to an armed conflict breaking out between the Polisario Front – a national liberation movement who proclaimed themselves as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic – and the states of Morocco and Mauritania. Following an International Court of Justice appeal, the UN has formally recognised the Polisario front as representative of the people of Western Sahara and confirmed that they possess a right to self-determination. However, no act of self-determination has yet taken place.

Mauritania have since withdrawn and Morocco now controls approximately 80% of Western Sahara with the Polisario Front occupying the remaining 20%. During this period, hundreds of thousands of Sahrawi refugees have fled from Moroccan forces and ended up in refugee camps in Algeria.

In 1991, the UN helped bring in a ceasefire that required a referendum to take place. However, this referendum was indefinitely postponed, and Morocco has since expressed opposition to holding the vote. They now advocate for an autonomy arrangement under its sovereignty while the Polisario Front insist on a referendum with independence as an option.

The conflict has also led to many human rights violations with Sahrawis being forced out of their homes and their refugee camps being attacked with napalm and white phosphorous. Algeria's reaction to the Green March also saw them forcefully expel 45,000 Moroccan families, some of whom had lived in Algeria for decades. For a substantial period, the Polisario front also held Moroccan prisoners of war in the refugee camps although all have since been released.

Therefore, the question of resolving the status of Western Sahara remains one of the longest running unresolved decolonisation issues on the UN agenda raising legal, humanitarian and sovereignty concerns.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Non-Self-Governing-Territory** – A territory recognised by the UN as not having achieved full self-government, with administering countries responsible for their development.

**Decolonisation** – The action of a state attaining political independence by withdrawing itself from a former colony.

**Self-Determination** – The right for people to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

**Ceasefire** – An agreement between two conflicting countries for a temporary suspension of fighting.

**Referendum** – A general, direct vote where a population is asked to decide upon a singular political question.

**Sovereignty** – A principle of international law where a state possesses full authority and power over its territory and population and is recognised as legally equal to other states.

**Autonomy Arrangement** – An agreement where a state can exercise internal self-governance while being under another state's sovereignty

## Background Information

European involvement in Western Sahara began at the end of the nineteenth century after the Berlin conference. Spain established formal control over the region which became known as Spanish Sahara. The area remained under Spanish administration until the mid-1970s with the majority of Spanish settlers being located in the coastal areas.

In 1956, Morocco exerted a claim over Western Sahara based on their historical and cultural ties to the region. Despite this, it still remained in Spanish control. In 1963, the UN General Assembly classified the region as a non-self-governing territory and therefore placed it under the international decolonisation framework.

After the Sahrawis, led by the Polisario front, partook in an uprising against Spanish control in 1975, Spain withdrew from the region. The Madrid Accords saw Spain transfer control to Morocco and Mauritania with the territory being divided between the two countries. This year also saw a UN visiting mission to the region which concluded that Sahrawi support for independence had an “overwhelming consensus”.

In 1976, the Polisario front formed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and began to launch an armed attack against Morocco and Mauritania. After several military engagements, Mauritania withdrew from the conflict and territory in 1979 and following this, Morocco extended its control over the areas previously run by Mauritania. Morocco have since constructed a barrier known as “the Berm” which separates the Moroccan zones from the Polisario ones. Morocco now control approximately 80% of Western Sahara.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

### 1. Morocco

- Controls 80% of Western Sahara giving them access to the major cities and most natural resources.
- Claims their sovereignty over the area based on historical and cultural ties dating back to pre-colonial times.
- Proposes an autonomy arrangement as a way of resolving the dispute.
- Strongly against holding a referendum where full independence is an option.

### 2. Polisario Front / Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic

- A Sahrawi national liberation movement recognised by the UN as representative of the people of Western Sahara.
- Controls 20% of Western Sahara with most territory east of the Berm.
- Advocates for a UN-organised referendum where independence is an option.

### 3. Mauritania

- Initially claimed part of Western Sahara after Spain’s withdrawal.
- Have since withdrawn from the territory and now take a neutral stance to the dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front.

### 4. Algeria

- Strong advocates for the implementation of the UN-backed referendum on self-determination and actively oppose Moroccan sovereignty over the region.
- Provides political, financial and military support to the Polisario Front.
- Hosts Sahrawi refugee camps housing tens of thousands of displaced Sahrawis.

### 5. UN

- Recognises Western Sahara as a Non-self-governing territory and recognises Polisario front as representative of Sahrawi people.
- Established MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) in 1991 to monitor the ceasefire and organise a referendum.

### 6. Displaced Sahrawi Refugees

- Approximately 90,000 Sahrawis have fled Western Sahara to escape the armed conflict and now reside in Algerian refugee camps. Nearly 30,000 are in Mauritania.
- The camps are governed by the Polisario Front.
- Being in the Sahara Desert, the camps have little access to important resources like clean drinking water or vegetation making conditions difficult.

## Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

1884 – Berlin Conference formalises European colonial claims in Africa and gives Spain control in Western Sahara.

1963 – The UN General Assembly classifies Spanish Sahara as a non-self-governing territory – UN Charter (Articles 73-74).

1973 – Polisario Front is founded as a national liberation movement and advocates for Sahrawi independence from Spanish rule – UNGA Resolution 1514, 1960

1975 – The international Court of Justice issues an advisory opinion stating that the people of Western Sahara have a right to self-determination and that no state has sovereignty over the region – ICJ Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara, 1975.

1975 – Morocco organise the Green March – a strategic demonstration where 350,000 Moroccans entered Western Sahara to establish control over the region. The Madrid accords see Spain withdraw from Western Sahara and administer the area to Morocco and Mauritania. This leads to armed conflict between them and the Polisario Front.

1979 – Mauritania withdraws from the conflict, and they renounce all territorial claims. The UN general assembly recognises the Polisario Front as representative of the Sahrawi people – UNGA Resolution 34/37, 1979.

1991 – The UN organises a ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front and establishes MINURSO to organise a referendum – UNSC Resolution 690, 1991.

2000 – The UN indefinitely postpones the referendum process after years of disputes as to voter eligibility.

2007 – Morocco proposes an autonomy arrangement to the UN Security Council.

2020 – The ceasefire collapses after Morocco reportedly launched a military operation in the UN buffer zone at Guerguerat.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

### UN-organised Referendum Process

- Following the 1991 ceasefire, the UN established MINURSO to monitor the ceasefire and organise a referendum to allow the Sahrawi people to choose between independence and integration with Morocco.
- However, there have been many disagreements over voter eligibility which has led to an indefinite postponement of the vote. Currently, Morocco are against holding a referendum.

## Moroccan Autonomy Proposal

- Morocco have proposed an autonomy agreement where Western Sahara is granted internal self-governance while being under the sovereignty of Morocco.
- This proposal was rejected by the Polisario Front due to independence from Morocco not being an option.

## Baker Plans

- A UN initiative to grant self-determination to Western Sahara which was proposed by James Baker, a UN special envoy, in 2000.
- It suggested self-rule under Western Sahara authority for five years followed by a referendum on independence. The full population of Western Sahara would be allowed to participate, including those who had migrated from Morocco.
- Morocco rejected the plan stating that they would not agree to a referendum where independence was an option.

## African Union Engagement

- The African Union has recognised the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and supported their self-determination efforts.
- However, AU member states share different opinions on the matter and thus have caused the AU to have limited effectiveness as a mediator or advocate.

## Possible Solutions

### UN-supervised Sahrawi Citizenship Registry

- Create a UN-run, Sahrawi citizenship registry separate from Moroccan or Polisario control.
- The registry would define eligibility for political participation for any future referendums.
- This would help solve the long-standing issue of voter eligibility which caused the referendum to be delayed indefinitely.

### Place Western Sahara under temporary UN transitional administration

- In this framework, Morocco would temporarily suspend claims of sovereignty while the Polisario Front would also temporarily suspend their independence claims.
- During this period, the UN could administer civil governance over the region.
- This would allow for displaced Sahrawis in refugee camps to return under a neutral administration.

### Autonomy Arrangement Expiration

- Morocco's autonomy proposal can be restructured as a possibly temporary solution.
- This proposal would be implemented for a fixed period of time before it automatically expires unless it is renewed by majority vote in a UN-supervised referendum.

- This allows for a compromise between Morocco and the Polisario front initially with a clear option for self-determination.

## Berm Partition

- Western Sahara could be formally partitioned along the existing Moroccan Berm.
- Each side with exercise authority over the territory on their side of the barrier.
- While possible controversial, this puts an immediate end to the armed conflict and allows for displaced Sahrawi refugees to return home.
- This formal partition could be permanent or temporary with borders being subject to international review after a fixed time.

## Useful Links

1. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Sahara>
2. <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgt/western-sahara>
3. <https://minurso.unmissions.org/>
4. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahrawi-Arab-Democratic-Republic>
5. <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9715>
6. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-does-western-sahara-conflict-mean-africa>

## Bibliography

1. United Nations Security Council (1991) Resolution 690 (1991). New York: United Nations.
2. United Nations Security Council (2003) Resolution 1495 (2003). New York: United Nations.
3. International Court of Justice (1975) Western Sahara: Advisory Opinion. The Hague: ICJ.
4. United Nations Peacekeeping (2024) MINURSO: United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. Available at:  
<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minurso>
5. United Nations (2024) Non-Self-Governing Territories. Available at:  
<https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgt>
6. Zunes, S. and Mundy, J. (2010) Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press