



**TOPIC 2:**  
**Addressing the territorial dispute over Western Sahara**

Committee: **SPECPOL**

## **Key Terms**

### **Polisario Front**

A political and military organisation that was founded in 1973 to end the Spanish colonisation of Western Sahara through guerrilla warfare. It now aims to end the Moroccan control of Western Sahara and establish an independent state. It is funded and supported by Alegria.

### **Madrid Accords**

An Agreement between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania to decolonize Western Sahara and cede control to Morocco and Mauritania.

### **Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)**

A self-proclaimed state that claims sovereignty over Western Sahara which is currently mostly Occupied by the Kingdom of Morocco. The SADR currently control 20% of Western Sahara and is recognised by 45 United Nations Member states.

### **Green March**

The Green March was a mass demonstration in November 1975, organised by the Moroccan government, to pressure Spain to handover control over Western Sahara Annexation.

### **MINURSO**

The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara is the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, established in 1991 under United Nations Security Council Resolution 690 as part of the Settlement plan.

### **Non-Self-Governing Territory**

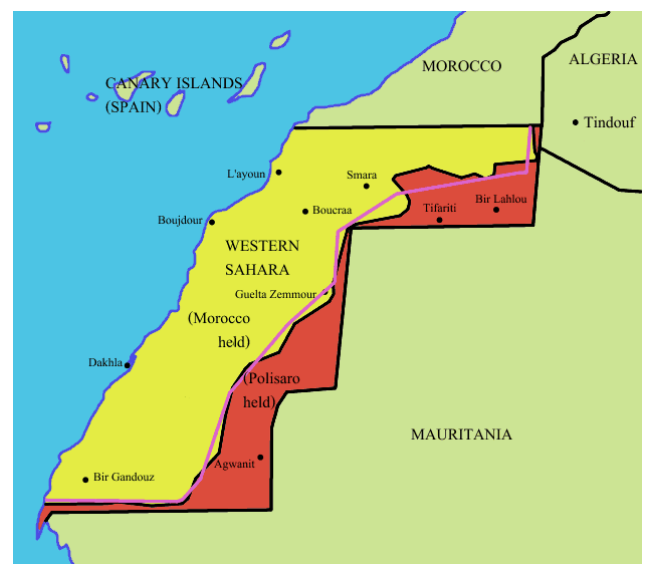
Defined by the Sixth Chapter of the Charter of the United Nations, as "territories whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government." Currently, Western Sahara is considered to be a Non-self-Governing Territory.

### **Sahrawi**

A group of Nomadic inhabitants native to Western Sahara.

## **Overview of the topic**

Western Sahara is a highly disputed area in North-western Africa. This region is often referred to as the Maghreb region. Western Sahara is currently controlled by two opposing groups. The Kingdom of Morocco controls 80% of the land area and claims it as its Southern States. The rest of the territory is controlled by the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Western Sahara lies within the Sahara Desert and is an extremely sparsely populated



area. With a surface area of 266,000 km and only 500,000 inhabitants.

Western Sahara is valuable due to its vast phosphate deposits and rich fishing off its coast. Furthermore, it is believed that there are oil deposits in its territorial waters.

Until 1975, Western Sahara was a Spanish Colony then known as Spanish Sahara. Following the end of World War 2, the United Nations was created. One of its aims was to end colonisation and transfer power to the natives. In 1965, the United Nations asked Spain to decolonize the territory. While Spain eventually abandoned its claim over Western Sahara, self-governance never materialised. By 1980, it was the only remaining African country on the UN's list of "Non-self-governing Territories." Western Sahara remains on the list to this day.

In 1973 during Spanish Colonisation, the Polisario Front was founded to fight against the Spanish occupation. From the outset of its creation by the Sahrawi tribes, the Polisario Front was funded and supported by Algeria. Algeria even allowed the Polisario Front to train and plan attacks from Algerian Territory. The Polisario Front went on to fight a guerrilla war against Spanish forces as they sought the creation of an Independent Country.

Furthermore, by that point, Western Sahara was claimed by further two states: The Kingdom of Morocco and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Both states were recently decolonised and claimed historic ties to the region. The opposing claims of the three different parties made the decolonization process even harder. Spain agreed to hold a referendum for the future of Western Sahara but The Kingdom of Morocco requested a delay so that the International Court of Justice can access the opposing claims. The ICJ found that while both Mauritania and Morocco had historic ties to Western Sahara, they both do not have a current legitimate claim of sovereignty.

To assert their claim, the Moroccan King called for his citizens to march on to Western Sahara. Over 350,000 people participated in the march. They were protected by Moroccan forces. This march is now known as the Green March. The Green March, the worsening conflict between the 4 claimants (Morocco, Sahrawi Republic, Mauritania, and Spain), alongside the increasing pressure from the United Nations proved too much for Spain and forced them to speed up decolonization. Knowing they would have to abandon their colony sooner rather than later and not wanting to waste any more resources in fighting, Spain decided to leave Western Sahara as soon as possible. This led to the Madrid accords to decide the fate of Western Sahara. The agreement was signed on the 14th of November 1975 and asserted that Spain would leave Western Sahara by the 28th of February 1976. Until the exit of Spanish forces, civil administration would be split between Morocco, Spain, and Mauritania. Following the exit, Mauritania and Morocco would jointly decide on the fate of Western Sahara. The Madrid Accords were Condemned by the Polisario Front and Algeria as they both sought independence for Western Sahara. Therefore, guerrilla campaigns by the Polisario front continued.

The end of the Spanish Colonisation sparked a 16-year conflict between the Morocco and Polisario Front. Mauritania was initially involved in the conflict but then in 1979, it signed the Algiers Agreement to renounce its claim over Western Sahara and acknowledge the right of Sahrawi to self-determination. This left Morocco alone to fight the Polisario Insurgency. Morocco was supported by the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia and had by 1980 gained control over the majority of Western Sahara. In 1980 they started the construction of the Berm which is a sand wall meant to separate the Moroccan-controlled section from the SADR Controlled land. The construction was finally completed by 1986. By this point, Morocco controlled over 80% of Western Sahara as well as the vast majority of population centres as well as the coastline.

Following the escalation of violence between 1989 and 1991, a ceasefire agreement took hold which was monitored by MINSURO. This took effect on the 6th of September 1991. The Ceasefire agreement stipulated that a referendum on the future of Western Sahara would take place within 6 months. This never happened due to disagreements on voting rights. Although the

referendum never happened, the cease-fire still stands. Meanwhile, MINSURO has proposed three plans for lasting peace, but these never materialised. With no active negotiations and waning international interest, there is no clear path for a settlement.

## **Timeline of Events**

- 1884: Spain Colonises Western Sahara following the Conference of Berlin
- 1957: Newly independent Morocco claims Western Sahara due to historic ties to the region
- 1966: United Nations calls for a referendum in Western Sahara to determine its future
- 1973: The Polisario Front was officially established
- 1975: Green March takes place
- 14/11/1975: Madrid Accords are signed
- 26/2/1976: Spanish Forces Leaves
- 1979: Mauritania renounces its claim over Western Sahara
- 1980-86: Berm construction
- 1991: Cease-fire
- 2000: Baker Plan 1
- 2003: Baker Plan 2

## **Positions of the Major Parties Involved**

### **The Kingdom of Morocco**

Following Colonisation, the Kingdom of Morocco laid claim over Western Sahara due to historic ties before colonisation. The Kings of Morocco ruled over Western Sahara. As such, they claimed that control over Western Sahara rightfully belongs to them. Following the withdrawal of Spanish forces from Western Sahara, Morocco was engulfed in a 16-year-long guerrilla war against the Polisario Front which sought full independence. In 1991, the United Nations intervened to establish a ceasefire and hold a referendum. The Kingdom of Morocco proposes giving Western Sahara autonomy within the Kingdom but the Polisario Front and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic seek full independence.

### **The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic/ The Polisario Front**

The SADR is a self-declared state established by the Polisario Front in 1976 which lays claims the entirety of Western Sahara but currently only controls approximately 20% of Western Sahara and is recognised by 41 member states of the United Nations. The SADR believes that Western Sahara should be independent and sees Moroccan control as an illegal occupation. Many Sahrawi People currently live in Refugee camps in Algeria due to the SADR-controlled territory being mostly desert. The SADR is currently not a Member of the United Nations but has been a member of the African Union since 1984.

### **People's Democratic Republic of Algeria**

Algeria is not considered to be an active part of the conflict but remains the foremost supporter of the SADR and the Polisario Front. Starting from the creation of the Polisario Front, Algeria has provided weapons, training, and diplomatic backing against the

Spanish Colonisation and then the Moroccan Annexation. Furthermore, Algeria is home to much of the SADR and Polisario leadership as well as Saharawi Refugees.

### **Kingdom of Spain**

Many see the Spanish colonisation and slow ineffective decolonization as the main cause of the protracted conflict. Following their Withdrawal in 1976, Spain has not been involved directly in the conflict, but it has played an important part in diplomacy regarding the conflict. Spain is particularly involved in influencing the policy of other EU states. While Spain does not officially recognise the SADR, it has provided humanitarian aid to the Sahrawi people and supports their right to Self-determination.

### **The Islamic Republic of Mauritania**

Similarly to Morocco, Mauritania claimed Western Sahara due to historic ties. Following the Madrid Accords, Mauritania gained partial control over Western Sahara. Mauritania then engaged in a protracted conflict with the Polisario Front. Due to the heavy toll of the conflict, Mauritania signed the Algiers Agreement on the 10th of August 1979 with the Polisario Front where Mauritania renounced its claim over Western Sahara and recognises the Sahrawi's right to self-determination. Currently, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania is neutral on the conflict.

### **The United States of America**

Historically, the USA supported the right of the Sahrawi's right to self-determination and a referendum. In December 2020, the United States under the administration of President Donald Trump recognized Morocco's claim over Western Sahara. This was the result of the normalised relations between Morocco and Israel.

### **The French Republic**

Similarly, to the Spanish colonisation, the French Colonisation of Morocco is seen as one of the main causes of the conflict. Currently, France claims to be neutral in the conflict, however it is allied with Morocco and supported them in the war against the Polisario Front.

### **The Arab League**

The Arab League has been purposefully vague on this topic as it hopes to avoid a rift between Arab countries. Its official stance on the topic is that it supports "the integrity of the Moroccan territorial sovereignty" without specifying the limits of the territory or any solutions to the conflicts. Importantly, the SADR is not a member of the Arab League although Sahrawi people are Arab.

### **The European Union**

The EU supports United Nations' efforts for a peaceful and amicable solution to the conflict. Likewise, it supports the Sahrawi's right to self-determination.

### **Previous attempts by the United Nations**

#### **A/RES/2027**

This resolution called on Spain to decolonize Western Sahara

**Settlement Plan**

This is the plan to lead to the 1991 ceasefire which stipulated that a referendum would take place within 6 months with an option for autonomy or independence. The referendum never took place due to disagreements on voting rights

**Baker Plan 1**

This plan was formulated by UN special envoy James Baker. This plan involved giving autonomy to Western Sahara under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco. The regional government would have control over all matters except foreign relations and defence. This proposal was rejected by the Polisario Front

**Baker Plan 2**

This was the second iteration of the Baker plan. It involved a plan to establish a Western Sahara Authority which would rule western Sahara for 5 years. This would be followed by a referendum. This plan was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council and accepted by the Polisario Front. It was rejected by Morocco because they do not want Independence to be an option on the referendum