



Research Report

Security Council

The question of managing the conflict
around the status of the Western Sahara
as a non-self-governing territory

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Model United Nations Alfrink
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Introduction

Western Sahara is a territory in the Maghreb region of North Africa. It is partially controlled by the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and partially Moroccan-occupied. Both parties claim the region and have their own reasons for doing so. Morocco believes Western Sahara to be a part of their territory before the European colonization and therefore feels entitled to it. The Polisario Front, on the other hand, is fighting for the rights of Sahrawi, who used to live there.

Morocco's invasion in Western Sahara forced thousands of refugees into the Algerian desert. Many of them have been living in makeshift camps for over forty years. Because of the kilometres long sand wall, which the Moroccan government built across Western Sahara in the 1980s, the refugees cannot return to their homes. The wall is surrounded by landmines and about hundred thousand Moroccan soldiers.

Western Sahara has been the subject of a long-running territorial dispute. According to the EU Foreign Policy Chief, Federica Mogherini, "Western Sahara's status remains that of a non-self-governing territory".

The committee

The Security Council has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. The Security Council's powers include the establishment of peacekeeping operations and international sanctions, and the authorization of military action through Security Council resolutions.

Like the UN as a whole, the Security Council was created after World War II to address the failings of a previous international organization, the League of Nations, in maintaining world peace. The Council held its first session on the 17th of January 1946.

The Security Council consists of fifteen members. China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America are the five permanent members of the committee and have the right to veto any Security Council resolution. The other ten non-permanent members are elected by the General Assembly to serve two-year terms.

In MUNA the Security Council consist of 15 double delegations. The countries that were in the Security Council in December before the start of the conference are selected. Security

Council members prepare themselves the same as they would for other committees. However, since its resolutions will be made ad-hoc, the debate does not start with an entire resolution but is built up clause by clause during the debate and the Security Council will not participate in the plenary session.

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Keywords

- **Sahrawi**
People living in the western part of the Sahara desert which includes Western Sahara (claimed by the Polisario and mostly controlled by Morocco), other parts of southern Morocco not claimed by the Polisario, most of Mauritania, and the extreme southwest of Algeria.

- **Polisario Front**
A Sahrawi politico-military movement aiming to end Moroccan control of the former Spanish territory of Western Sahara and win independence for that region.

- **Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)**
A self-declared state claiming authority over the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which is presently occupied by Morocco, declared by the Polisario Front (one day after the Spanish withdrawal in 1976).

- **Green March**
A strategic mass demonstration in November 1975, coordinated by King Hassan, in which approximately 300.000 Moroccan volunteers were sent unarmed across the border to force Spain to hand over the province of Spanish Sahara to Morocco.

- **Madrid Accords**
A treaty between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania aiming to end the Spanish presence in the territory of the Spanish Sahara.

Overview

During the 19th century Western Sahara was colonized by Spain and became known as Spanish Sahara. At the end of WWII the United Nations were created, therefore the idea of colonies changed since the UN is fundamentally against colonialism. Throughout the 1960s, the United Nations made an effort to decolonize the African continent and urged colonial powers to transfer power to the natives. By 1980, the entire African continent had been decolonized, except for Western Sahara.

Western Sahara has been a colony of Spain from 1884 until 1976. The territory has been on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories since 1963.

In 1973, the Polisario Front was established to end the Spanish colonial rule in Western Sahara and to fight for the independence of the Sahrawi people. Polisario troops, with backing from Algeria, engaged the Spanish forces in guerrilla warfare. However, since Spain was already under heavy pressure from the UN to decolonize Spanish Sahara it did not want to get involved in any war over the region. Spain agreed to hold a referendum. The Sahrawi people had to decide between three scenarios: the Independence as the SADR, the Integration with Morocco, or the Integration with Mauritania.

Morocco requested the referendum to be postponed, calling for a hearing from the International Court of Justice, regarding Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

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The referendum was successfully postponed. The ICJ acknowledged that both Morocco and Mauritania had historical ties to the region, but that it would not imply any legal sovereignty.

Therefore, the referendum was to go along as planned. However, just as after the Court's opinion was published, Morocco announced the Green March, which was a demonstration into Western Sahara of 300.000 Moroccan people, escorted by 20.000 Moroccan troops. This was done with a goal of putting pressure on Spain to transfer sovereignty over to them.

The same month the Madrid Accords were signed in which Spain relinquished the administrative control of the territory to a joint administration by Morocco (which had formally claimed the territory since 1956) and Mauritania.

According to the UN, the Madrid Agreement did not transfer sovereignty over the territory and it did not affect the status Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing territory. The Polisario Front was fiercely against this, believing it went the ICJ hearing. As Morocco and Mauritania moved in to take control of Western Sahara, they encountered strong resistance from Polisario troops, with backing from Algeria. Mauritania withdrew its claims in 1979, after which Morocco took over the management of the previously occupied Mauritanian territory, including all the major cities and natural resources. In 1982, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was admitted to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) as the government of Western Sahara. In protest to this, Morocco withdrew its membership.

The United Nations considers the Polisario Front to be the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, and maintains that the Sahrawis have a right to self-determination.

In 1991, after 16 years of war the United Nations held a ceasefire agreement. Part of the agreement was that a referendum would take place within 6 months, but despite several attempts, this still has not happened to this day.

No country or organization has ever officially recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, but many countries support the idea of Sahrawi autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. It is worth mentioning that Morocco used to be a colony of France (from 1912 until 1956), and although France seems to be quite discreet, it seems that they are supporting Morocco. For instance, in 2014 France threatened to use its Security Council veto power to block any proposals to have U.N. peacekeepers in Western Sahara monitor the human rights situation in the disputed North African territory.

Since May 2005, there has been an increase in the Sahrawi people's oppression at the hands of the Moroccan authorities. Peaceful demonstrations have been brutally suppressed. Many Sahrawis have been arrested and imprisoned. Some have been tortured and some have 'disappeared'. Women and children have been assaulted in their own homes and their property has been stolen by Moroccan police and soldiers. A 2,720 km wall divides Western Sahara into the coastal zone occupied by Morocco and the interior part held by the Polisario Front.

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Clearly, the present situation cannot continue. Attempts to hold a referendum in order to find a solution for the Western Sahara conflict have failed multiple times. In addition to that,

instead of giving the chance to the ones who are truly involved, meaning the citizens of the specific area, to decide about the future of their territory we have seen countries continuously fighting in order to gain tracts of land.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1884	Spain colonizes Western Sahara
July 1957	Mauritania raises claim to Western Sahara at the United Nations
November 1957	Morocco raises claim to Western Sahara at the United Nations
April 1973	Polisario Front is formed and establishes itself as the sole representative of the Sahrawi people
1975	The beginning of the guerrilla warfare between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan Army
November 1975	Morocco's King Hassan called on 300.000 civilians to move into and claim Western Sahara as their own (Green March)
14 November 1975	Madrid Accords
26 February 1976	All Spanish forces had withdrawn from Western Sahara
1979	Mauritania withdrew its claims
1982	SADR was admitted to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as the government of Western Sahara
1991	The war ends with a UN-sponsored cease-fire
1992	Attempt to hold a referendum but there were disagreements about voter eligibility (Settlement Plan)
2001	Baker Plan I
2003	Baker Plan II

Major Countries and Organizations involved

Spain

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Plays a significant role in the conflict since the whole conflict concerning the 'identity' of Western Sahara started about two centuries ago with the colonization of the territory by Spain. Later, Spain was forced by the UN to decolonize the territory and this allowed Morocco and Mauritania to govern the territory in a collaborative way.

Morocco

After gaining their independence, the Moroccan country claimed Western Sahara as part of their territory before the colonization from the European countries. They were against Spain, against Polisario Front, against Mauritania, and against whoever claimed Western Sahara as their territory. They would not accept any treaty, agreement, or referendum that could possibly lead to the independence of Western Sahara. They created Green March, took part in the Western Sahara War, postponed all referendums proposing independence using all available excuses to keep control of the territory.

Mauritania

Even though they entered the conflicted with the courage of claiming part of the territory, under pressure from especially Morocco they soon withdrew their claims.

Algeria

Algeria sees itself as an 'important actor' in the conflict, and officially supports the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination. They remain to be a strong ally of the Polisario Front, backing them in critical situations. The Polisario Front is exiled in Algeria

Arab League

Efforts to gain support in the Arab World for the idea of a Greater Morocco did not receive much support despite efforts in the early 1960s to enlist the Arab League for its cause. Unlike the Organization of African Unity, which has strongly backed Western Sahara's right to self-determination, the Arab League has shown little interest in the area.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

The Settlement Plan

The Settlement Plan was an agreement between the Sahrawi Polisario Front and the Kingdom of Morocco on the organization of a referendum, originally scheduled for 1992. The referendum was indented to give the local population of Western Sahara the option between independence and integration with Morocco, but it quickly stalled. It resulted in a cease-fire, which remains effective to this day, and the establishment of the MINURSO peace force to oversee it and to organize the referendum. The referendum, however, never took place.

The Houston Agreement

The Houston Agreement was the result of negotiations between the Polisario Front and Morocco on the organization of a referendum possibly leading to full independence or integration within Morocco. The talks were conducted during 1997 in Houston, United States, under the auspices of United Nations representative James Baker, using the framework of the 1991 Settlement Plan. The agreement was supposed to lead to a referendum in 1998, but eventually did not happen.

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The Baker Plan and Baker Plan II

In the years 2001 and 2003, a different approach was taken to resolve the dispute with two versions of what we know as 'the Baker Plan'. The Baker Plan of 2001 would give the Sahrawi people an autonomous government under the sovereignty of Morocco, which was rejected by the Polisario Front. However, the Baker Plan II in 2003 offered 5 years of the autonomy arrangement followed by a referendum. The second version was reluctantly accepted by the UN Security Council, the Polisario Front and Algeria, however, it was rejected by Morocco, stating that they would no longer agree to a referendum which had the independence as the SADR as an option.

Resolution

In order to solve the conflict, or at least provide the parties involved with an acceptable solution, we need a resolution which will achieve, as the UN Secretary-General said, "a just, lasting and mutually acceptable solution, which will enable the people of Western Sahara to exercise self-determination, under the objectives of the United Nations Charter."

Take into consideration that many countries could benefit from Western Sahara since it is rich in significant mineral resources.

Western Sahara consists of a large amount of phosphates, has some of the richest fishing waters in the world, and their oil resources are being explored.

The above characteristics make Western Sahara one of the richest parts of the Maghreb and may create vested interest among the parties involved.

This situation has already appeared when a new group of fortune hunters was eyeing great financial opportunities in the probably oil-rich territory, ignoring international law.

Moroccan authorities currently have granted two oil exploration licenses on the disputed territory of Western Sahara, despite a legal notice from the UN in 2002 questioning the legality of such exploration and concluding that further oil exploitation in all circumstances would be illegal as long as Western Sahara remains occupied.

To conclude, something must happen to improve the situation in Western Sahara including tackling humanitarian aid issues. Keep in mind that Western Sahara's resources could play a significant role and that a referendum has already failed a couple of times and therefore might not be the best solution.

Links and sources

<https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/conflict-western-sahara>

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