POLISARIO FRONT & THE WESTERN SAHARA

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Western Sahara, formerly occupied by Spain, has been under Moroccan occupation since 1975. Often dubbed Africa's last colony, it is represented by The Polisario Front, a national liberation movement established in 1973 and recognized by the UN which opposes Moroccan rule and advocates for self-determination. In 1976, the Polisario Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The UN's mission, MINURSO, established in 1991, aimed to monitor a ceasefire and facilitate a referendum, but the process has been continually delayed. Presently, Morocco controls the majority of the territory (80%), with the Polisario Front governing the remainder.

Historical Context

In the scramble for Africa in the 1880s, a weakened Spanish empire was only able to claim limited territory. One piece of that territory is what was first declared to be "Spanish Sahara," and after 1975, Western Sahara. Located in the northwest part of Africa, north of Mauritania, south of Morocco and west of Algeria, this largely desert territory has been home to a largely nomadic people known today as the *"Sahrawis."*

Though there has been a relationship between some of the Sahrawi people and Morocco, contrary to the claims of the Moroccan monarchy, there is no historical link between Western Sahara and Morocco, at least nothing that has been substantiated in international law. Western Sahara is one of many territories that the Moroccan monarchy has laid claim to, alongside much of northwest Africa, and parts of western Algeria and Mauritania. No one recognizes such vast claims, though the USA and Israel currently recognize the Moroccan occupation of 80% of Western Sahara.

During the nearly one hundred years of the Spanish occupation, the Sahrawis developed their own "national consciousness," leading them to develop an independence movement that ultimately resulted in the formation of what came to be known as *"Frente Polisario" (Frente Popular de Liberacion de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro)*. Though the Sahrawis were demanding independence from Spain, Morocco and—at the time—Mauritania were claiming Western Sahara as being legitimately parts of their respective countries.

In 1975, Morocco announced what they referenced as a “Green March” in which thousands of Moroccan soldiers and settlers invaded the then-Spanish Sahara, proclaiming it to be their territory. Mauritania attacked from the south, staking their claim. Frente Polisario responded, defeating the Mauritanians (and coming to an agreement with them), and then—with the assistance of the Algerian government, fighting a protracted war against Morocco that resulted in a ceasefire in 1991.

Ceasefire & Stalemate

Frente Polisario and the Moroccan monarchy declared a ceasefire in 1991 with the understanding that this would lead to a referendum of the Sahrawi people on their future. Negotiations, with the assistance of the United Nations, went on for more than ten years resulting in nothing. When it became clear to the Moroccan monarchy that Morocco would lose any referendum, they reneged on their promises and declared that there would never be a referendum that included independence as an option. The Sahrawis had the option, then, of sham autonomy or absorption.

War did not recommence, at least immediately. Year after year of negotiations were attempted, though there was no progress. Tensions built within the Sahrawi refugee camps in western Algeria as nothing seemed to change for the better while, at the same time, Morocco continued to increase settlers plus open Western Sahara to corporate investments (both examples of gross violations of international law). The Moroccans also strengthened their military presence through the creation of a wall—called the Berm—dividing occupied Western Sahara from the liberated zones (controlled by Frente Polisario).

Though the Frente Polisario-led government in exile—the *Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic*—has been recognized by close to eighty countries, and was a founding member of the African Union, with rare exceptions the international community has done little to assist the Sahrawi movement and compel Morocco to accept international law and the role of the United Nations. Resolution after resolution has been passed by various governments and civil society organizations, but the real pressure on Morocco is next to non-existent.

Tensions exploded in November 2020 when Moroccan forces attacked peaceful Sahrawi demonstrators. Frente Polisario ended the ceasefire and the war reignited. The following month, outgoing US President Trump recognized the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. His reasoning has been debated, but the recognition has never been formally voided by the Biden administration. One likely reason for both the recognition and the failure of Biden to reverse the decision rests with the so-called Abraham Accords. These are the agreements that were created by the Trump administration as a means to isolate the Palestinians by having Arab governments establish normal relations with Israel. Morocco has had a close relationship with Israel since the 1960s and their signing onto the Abraham

Accords was meant to cement that relationship (note: other Arab nations have also signed on or indicated an interest in signing on). The Biden administration, it has been reported, has feared that a US reversal of Trump's recognition will fracture the Accords.

Regional war?

The Western Saharan Struggle has complicated the relationship between the Moroccan government and Algeria, a relationship that went downhill almost immediately upon the independence of Algeria (1962) when Morocco attempted to lay claim to part of Algeria. As Algeria continues to support Frente Polisario, these tensions increase. The Moroccan government's relationship with Israel and a close Moroccan alignment with the objectives of the USA further contribute to these tensions. And as of the time of writing, Morocco and Algeria have been increasing their military stock.

Adding to the tension has been the killing of civilians by Moroccan drones, including the killing of Algerian, Mauritanian, and Sahrawi civilians.

If a regional conflict were to take place it is likely that Algeria and, quite possibly, Mauritania could side with the Sahrawis. Under such circumstances, it is possible that the USA and France—the principal backers of the Moroccan monarchy—could enter the picture.

Leaving us where?

Western Sahara is frequently referenced as "Africa's last colony." Yet it is a struggle that is often ignored and trivialized even by progressives who are of European, Arabs or Africans descent. Like the 1994 Rwanda genocide or the 'world war' that has taken place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1997, the main perpetrators of violence are not European, which may contribute to Sahrawi marginalisation.

At the same time, the Arab World is very split over the Western Sahara conflict with some, including some on the political Left, viewing the struggle as an illegitimate secessionist battle conducted by the Sahrawis when—these people would argue—what is needed is unity in the Maghreb.

According to the Western Sahara Resource Watch, Corporations currently extracting resources in the Western Saharainclude OCP S.A which is floated in the Irish stock exchange, the Delek Group a subsidiary of the Israeli NewMed Energy, Siemens a German conglomerate, and the American giant, General Electric. Although the Saharawi people's right to self-determination is supported by more than 100 UN resolutions, Moroccan authorities have been consistently impeding gatherings advocating for Sahrawi self-determination. They also obstruct the activities of certain local human rights NGOs, often by denying them legal registration, and torture and abuse activists.

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