

BAALMUN'25

SPECPOL STUDY GUIDE

Under Secretary General

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1.Letter From Secretary General

2.Letter From Under Secretary General

Distinguished participants,

I take great pleasure in welcoming you all to the third edition of BAALMUN. I, Bahar Serter, am a 11th grader at Adnan Menderes Anatolian High School and will be serving as the Under-Secretary General of the committee GA:4 SPECPOL. I wish all of you fruitful debates and a joyful committee with a friendly environment and academically fulfilling experience.

Our committee faces the problem of ‘Addressing the Political and Economic Challenges in Western Sahara’. As we approach this important issue, you are expected to be able to come up with durable and good solutions in order to solve this big issue.

I am sure that we are going to make this committee as fun, good, useful as possible with the participation of our dear chairs and our academic assistant and of course with you our dear delegates.

If you have any kind of questions regarding either the agenda item or the committee, always feel free to contact me via my email address:
baharserterr28@gmail.com.

I am once again looking forward to seeing you all in BAALMUN!

Sincerely,

Bahar Serter

Under-Secretary General of GA:4 SPECPOL

4. Introduction

4.1. Introduction to the Committee

The **United Nations General Assembly Fourth Committee** (also known as the **Special Political and Decolonization Committee**) is one of six main committees of the United Nations General Assembly. It deals with diverse political issues, including UN peacekeeping and peaceful uses of outer space. However, the problems of decolonization and the Middle East take up most of its time.

When it was first created, the Fourth Committee was solely responsible for trusteeship- and decolonization-related matters. However, after independence was granted to all the United Nations trust territories on its agenda, the committee's workload decreased. Consequently, the Fourth Committee was merged with the Special Political Committee, which had been created as a seventh main committee to deal with certain political issues.

The Fourth Committee deals with: items, the effects of atomic radiation, questions relating to information, a comprehensive review of the question of peacekeeping operations, a review of special political missions, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, the report of the Special Committee on Israeli Practices and international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space.

The Fourth Committee meets every year from late September to mid-November, but also convenes briefly in the spring to adopt any resolutions and decisions relating to peacekeeping passed by the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations. All 193 member states of the UN can attend its meetings.

4.2. Introduction to the Agenda Item

The Western Sahara conflict is an ongoing conflict between the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic/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 over Western Sahara intensified after Spain withdrew in 1975, as per the Madrid Accords. The Polisario Front, supported by Algeria, launched a 16-year war for independence against Morocco and Mauritania. In 1976, the Polisario declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), gaining limited international recognition but not UN membership. After Morocco and Mauritania annexed Western Sahara, the UN reaffirmed the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. France intervened in 1977, and Mauritania withdrew in 1979, leading to a stalemate. A ceasefire was reached in 1991, leaving most of the region under Moroccan control, with the Polisario governing about 30%. These borders have remained largely unchanged since.

Despite multiple peace initiatives through the 1990s and early 2000s, the conflict reemerged 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 30% 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.

5. Historical Context

5.1 Colonial history and decolonization efforts

At the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), Spain claimed a protectorate over the African coast from Cape Blanc to Cape Bojador, informing other powers in January 1885. Spain established military and trading posts and appointed Emilio Bonelli as commissioner of Río de Oro in 1885. An 1886 scientific expedition explored the region, which was previously uncharted.

Spanish forces faced strong resistance from indigenous Sahrawi tribes. A significant rebellion in 1904 led by Shaykh Ma al-'Aynayn was suppressed by France in 1910, followed by further uprisings from his descendants.

In 1886, Spain signed the Treaty of Idjil with the Emirate of Adrar, ceding Río de Oro, but the treaty lacked legal validity. Morocco claims sovereignty over the region, citing historical treaties, but the 1975 International Court of Justice ruling found these only indicated ties of allegiance, not legal sovereignty.

The borders of the region were defined through treaties between Spain and France in the early 20th century. Spanish Sahara was established in 1924 by combining Río de Oro and Saguia el-Hamra, separate from Spanish Morocco.

After gaining independence in 1956, Morocco laid claim to Spanish Sahara as part of its historic pre-colonial territory. In 1957, the Moroccan Army of Liberation nearly occupied the small territory of Ifni, north of the Spanish Sahara, during the Ifni War. The Spanish sent a regiment of paratroopers from the nearby Canary Islands and repelled the attacks. With the

assistance of the French, Spain soon re-established control in the area through *Operaciones Teide-Ecoubillon* (Spanish name) / *Opérations Ecouvillon* (French name).

Spain tried to suppress resistance politically. It forced some of the previously nomadic inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara to settle in certain areas, and the rate of urbanization increased. In 1958, Spain united the territories of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro to form the overseas province of Spanish Sahara, while ceding the province of the Cape Juby strip (which included Villa Bens) in the same year to Morocco.

In the 1960s, Morocco continued to claim the Spanish Sahara. It gained agreement by the United Nations to add the territory to the list of territories to be decolonized. In 1969, Spain ceded Ifni to Morocco, but continued to retain Spanish Sahara.

In 1967, Spanish rule was challenged by the *Harakat Tahrir*, a Sahrawi movement created by Muhammad Bassiri. In 1970, Spain suppressed the Zemla Intifada.

In 1973, the Polisario Front was formed in a revival of militant Sahrawi nationalism. The Front's guerrilla army grew rapidly, and Spain lost effective control over most of the territory by early 1975. Its effort to found a political rival, the *Partido de Unión Nacional Saharaui* (PUNS), met with little success. Spain proceeded to co-opt tribal leaders by setting up the *Djema'a*, a political institution loosely based on traditional Sahrawi tribal leaders. The *Djema'a* members were hand-picked by the authorities, but given privileges in return for rubber-stamping Madrid's decisions.

In the winter of 1975, just before the death of its long-time dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco, Spain was confronted with an intensive campaign of territorial demands from Morocco and, to a lesser extent, from Mauritania. These culminated in the *Marcha Verde* ('Green March'), where a mass demonstration of 350 000 Moroccans coordinated by the Moroccan Government advanced several kilometers into the Western Sahara territory, bypassing the International Court of Justice's *Advisory opinion on Western Sahara* that had been issued three weeks prior. After negotiating the Madrid Accords with Morocco and Mauritania, Spain withdrew its forces and citizens from the territory.

Morocco and Mauritania took control of the region. Mauritania later surrendered its claim after fighting an unsuccessful war against the Polisario Front. In the process of annexing the region, Morocco started fighting the Polisario Front, and after sixteen years, the UN negotiated a cease-fire in 1991. Today, the sovereignty of the territory remains in dispute between Morocco and the Sahrawi people, and the referendum has not been possible to date due to dispute over who can vote.

Present Status of Western Sahara

Western Sahara is listed by the United Nations (UN) as a non-decolonized territory and is thus included in the United Nations' list of non-self-governing territories. Under international law, Western Sahara is not a legal part of Morocco, and it remains under the international laws of military occupation.

Moroccan settlers currently make up more than two-thirds of the inhabitants of the territory. Under international law, Morocco's transfer of its civilians into occupied territory is in direct violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

UN peace efforts have been directed at holding a referendum on independence among the Sahrawi population, but this has not yet taken place. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic has been recognized by 84 UN member states and the African Union (of which it is a founding member).

5.2. Key stakeholders

Morocco

The official position of the Kingdom of Morocco since 1963 is that all of Western Sahara is an integral part of the kingdom. The Moroccan government refers to Western Sahara only as "Moroccan Sahara", the "Saharan provinces", or the "Southern Provinces".

According to the Moroccan government, in 1958 the Moroccan Army of Liberation fought Spanish colonizers and almost liberated what was then the Spanish Sahara. The fathers of many of the Polisario leaders were among the veterans of the Moroccan Southern Army, for example the father of Polisario leader Mohammed Abdelaziz. Morocco is supported in this view by a number of former Polisario founders and leaders. The Polisario Front is considered by Morocco to be a Moroccan separatist movement, referring to the Moroccan origins of most of its founding members.

On 22 January 2020, Morocco's House of Representatives voted unanimously to add Western Sahara waters to the Moroccan maritime borders.

Polisario Front and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic

The Polisario Front, mainly backed by Algeria, is described by itself and its supporters as a national liberation movement that opposes Moroccan control of Western Sahara, whilst it is considered by Morocco and supporters of Morocco's claims over Western Sahara to be a separatist organization. It began as a movement of students who felt torn between the divergent Spanish and Moroccan influences on the country. The original goal of the Polisario, which was to end Spanish colonialism in the region, was achieved, but their neighbors, Morocco and Mauritania, seized the sovereignty of the region, which the Polisario felt was entitled to self-determination and eventually independence. The Polisario engaged in guerrilla

warfare with the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. It evacuated the Sahrawi population to the Tindouf refugee camps due to the Royal Moroccan Air Force bombing of the refugee camps on Sahrawi land with napalm and white phosphorus. The Polisario Front has called for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara to be decided through a referendum. Although the SADR is not recognized as a state by the UN, the Polisario is considered a direct participant in the conflict and as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, recognized by the United Nations since 1979.

The Polisario Front argues that Morocco's position is due to economic interests (fishing, phosphate mining, and the potential for oil reserves) and political reasons (stability of the king's position and the governing elite in Morocco, deployment of most of the Moroccan Army in Western Sahara instead of in Morocco). The Polisario Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in Bir Lehlou (Western Sahara), on 27 February 1976.

Mauritania

Claims on Western Sahara had proliferated since the 1960s, fueled by Mauritanian President Moktar Ould Daddah. Before Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords and after the withdrawal of the last Spanish forces, in late 1975, the Mauritanian Army invaded the southern part of Western Sahara, while the Moroccan Army did the same in the north.

In April 1976, Mauritania and Morocco partitioned the country into three parts, Mauritania getting the southern one, which was named Tiris al-Gharbiyya. Mauritania waged four years of war against Polisario guerrillas, conducting raids on Nouakchott, attacks on the Zouerate mine train, and a coup d'état that deposed Ould Daddah. Mauritania finally withdrew in the summer of 1979, after signing the Algiers Agreement with the Polisario Front, recognizing the right of self-determination for the Sahrawi people, and renouncing any claims on Western Sahara. The Moroccan Army immediately took control of the former Mauritanian territory.

Mauritania recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic on 27 February 1984.

Spain

Spain's colonial past and current geopolitical objectives are closely linked to its continued significance in the Western Sahara conflict. Spain withdrew in 1975 and, through the Madrid Accords, gave administrative authority to Morocco and Mauritania without holding the UN-recommended referendum on self-determination. This choice left the Sahrawi people's hopes for independence unmet and laid the groundwork for the current conflict.

Spain's position has changed recently, most notably when it endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan in 2022, which grants some degree of self-governance under Moroccan sovereignty. This demonstrated Spain's prioritization of strategic interests with Morocco, such as trade, energy cooperation, and migration control, and diverged from its previous neutral support for a UN-mediated solution.

Algeria, a major supporter of the Polisario Front, and proponents of Sahrawi self-determination have criticized Spain's closer ties with Morocco, despite Spain's continued support for a peaceful resolution through international dialogue. Spain is a crucial but divisive actor in the conflict because of its actions, which demonstrate a balancing act between national interests, regional stability, and historical responsibility.

Algeria

Algeria has supported the independence of the whole of Western Sahara since 1975, when Spanish forces and settlers withdrew from the area. It is one of the few countries to do so in the Arab League. It has provided aid to the 'Polisario Front'. Algeria's role became indirect, through political and military support for the Polisario Front. Algeria recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic on 6 March 1976. Its involvement in the Western Sahara independence movement has interrupted the development of Algerian-Morocco diplomatic relations, which were restored in 1988.

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. Morocco's expansionist ambitions caused strains, including a temporary rupture of relations with Tunisia. The Moroccans have been more successful regarding the Western Sahara. 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.

European Union

The EU's stance on the conflict in the Western Sahara strikes a balance between upholding international law and preserving strategic relations with Morocco. Although the EU formally supports the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination and a UN-led resolution, its actions frequently seem to favor Morocco, especially through trade agreements that incorporate resources from Western Sahara. Despite decisions by the EU Court of Justice, these agreements have been criticized and challenged in court for not obtaining Sahrawi consent.

Its stance is further complicated by internal conflicts among EU members, with some, like Sweden, supporting Sahrawi self-determination while others, like France, back Morocco. The EU also has to manage its ties with Algeria, a major energy partner and supporter of the Polisario Front. Perceptions of bias toward Morocco have resulted from this delicate balancing act, which has damaged the EU's credibility in mediating a just settlement and added to the protracted political impasse in the region.

United States

The Obama administration disassociated itself from the Moroccan autonomy plan in 2009, however, reversing the Bush-backed support of the Moroccan plan, and returning to a pre-Bush position, wherein the option of an independent Western Sahara is on the table again.

In April 2013, the United States proposed that MINURSO monitored human rights (as all the other UN missions since 1991) in Western Sahara, a move that Morocco strongly opposed, cancelling the annual African Lion military exercises with U.S. Army troops. Also in mid-April, United States Ambassador to Morocco Samuel L. Kaplan declared during a conference in Casablanca that the Moroccan autonomy plan "can't be the only basis in these negotiations", referring to the UN-sponsored talks between the Polisario Front and Morocco.

On 10 December 2020, President Donald Trump announced that the United States would officially recognize Morocco's claims over Western Sahara, in exchange for Morocco agreeing to normalize relations with Israel.

On 4 December 2020, the United States recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and reaffirmed its support for Morocco's autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory. The United States has stated that it believes that an independent Sahrawi State is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution.

5.3. Role of the United Nations in the dispute

In 1975, war broke out between the Moroccan government and the independence movement of the indigenous people of Western Sahara—the Polisario Front—which had been organized in 1973 to eject Spanish colonial powers. The Moroccan government took its case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), arguing that the territory was part of a historic “Greater Morocco,” which entitled Morocco to control Western Sahara and ignore the will of the territory’s inhabitants. The ICJ disagreed and issued an advisory opinion calling for self-determination for those who lived there. Despite this ruling, on the evening of the ICJ’s decision, the King of Morocco addressed the Moroccan people via TV and radio. He called for 350,000 volunteers to settle and colonize Western Sahara, an event called the “Green March.” A few weeks later, Spain signed the Madrid Accords and transferred control of Western Sahara to the Moroccan and Mauritanian governments, making no provisions for prescribed self-determination of the territory’s people.

A hot war between Morocco and the Polisario Front embroiled the territory for sixteen years, displacing most Sahrawis into refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria. Then in 1991, the UN

brokered a ceasefire and established the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). MINURSO has overseen two basic missions: maintaining a ceasefire in the territory and running a referendum on the future of the territory. But since 2003, Morocco has refused to take part in any referendum that includes a Western Saharan independence option. Unfortunately, the ceasefire broke out in 2020, rendering both primary elements of the mission failures. Today, the United Nations considers Western Sahara to be a non-self-governing territory, as it is often called “Africa’s last colony.”

The conflict has consistently revealed international legal failures to ensure self-determination and prevent the occupation of foreign territories. Even when all UNSC members backed UN plans—as in 2003 when supporting James Baker’s Peace Plan—no state has compelled the Moroccan government to abide by any democratic process that could result in independence for Western Sahara. Instead, with French and American support, Morocco has pursued territorial conquest and settler colonialism.

In late 2020, in its final weeks of governing, the Trump administration recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. This recognition overturned decades of US policy and contradicted the territory’s UN status. The United States set a grave precedent for its foreign policy, akin to recognizing Russian sovereignty over Crimea. More broadly, the US decision points to a growing international toleration of territorial expansion. The Moroccan government has benefitted from a status quo defined by UN member states who are unwilling to check territorial expansion.

6. Political Challenges

6.1. Territorial claims and sovereignty issues

6.2. Human rights concerns in the region

The Sahrawi people, who have been fighting for their right to independence and self-determination, have been the main victims of the protracted conflict in Western Sahara, which has resulted in grave human rights violations. Morocco asserted sovereignty over Western Sahara and started occupying a large portion of the region after Spain left it in the 1970s. Years of armed conflict ensued as a result of the Polisario Front, a movement that represented the Sahrawi people, declaring the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and fighting for independence.

Many Sahrawis have been living in refugee camps in neighboring Algeria for decades after being forced to flee during the occupation. Morocco clamped down on those calling for Sahrawi independence and placed severe restrictions on political expression inside the occupied territories. Human rights advocates, journalists, and activists frequently faced harassment, torture, and arrest. Numerous cases of physical and psychological abuse during

incarceration were reported, and many people faced arbitrary detention without trial. The Sahrawi people had little opportunity to express their aspirations for independence or to hold Morocco accountable for abuses due to its restrictions on free speech and protest.

In regions under Moroccan control, the Sahrawi people were also subjected to pervasive discrimination. They had limited access to basic services like healthcare and education, were frequently forced into low-paying jobs, and were shut out of political and economic opportunities. Their sense of injustice was heightened by this marginalization, which also stoked their desire for autonomy. Furthermore, the war left a hazardous legacy of landmines, especially from the Moroccan military, which injured civilians long after the fighting had stopped. The local population lived in a state of fear and danger as a result of these mines, military brutality, and attacks directed at civilians.

The denial of the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination is arguably the most important human rights issue in the conflict in Western Sahara. This right is recognized by international law, but Morocco has opposed attempts to hold a referendum to give the Sahrawi people a say in their future, and the international community has found it difficult to carry out the process. Because of this, the Sahrawi people are still in a state of uncertainty with no end in sight, and many are still suffering as a result of the ongoing conflict.

The situation is made more difficult by the international community's inaction, as certain nations and businesses profit from Morocco's control over the region's natural resources, like fisheries and phosphate, while largely ignoring the violations of human rights taking place there. The conflict and the suffering of the Sahrawi people have continued as a result of this inaction.

In the topic there are two main situations to consider. One being “Human rights in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara” and the other being “Human rights in Polisario-controlled refugee camps”. These topics are briefly explained below. If needed, further readings are recommended.

Human rights in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara

The most severe accusations of human rights abuses by the Kingdom of Morocco are the bombings with napalm and White phosphorus of the improvised refugee camps in Western Sahara in early 1976, killing hundreds of civilians, as well as the fate of hundreds of "disappeared" Sahrawi civilians sequestered by Moroccan military or police forces, most of them during the Western Sahara War. Other accusations are the torture, repression and imprisonment of Sahrawis who oppose peacefully the Moroccan occupation, the expulsion from the territory of foreign journalists, teachers, and NGO members, the discrimination of the Sahrawis on the labor, and the spoliation of the natural resources of the territory.

On the 15th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, former prisoner, human rights defender and second vice-president of CODESA (Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights

Defenders) El Mami Amar Salem denounced that more than 30,000 Sahrawi citizens had been tortured by Moroccan forces since 1975.

Human rights in Polisario-controlled refugee camps

The Polisario Front has been accused of grave violations of human rights, such as the imprisonment, murder, and abuse of Moroccan POWs from the late 1970s until 2006. According to other allegations, some people in the Tindouf refugee camps are forced to stay there against their will and are not allowed to express themselves freely. International agencies have not confirmed the violent suppression of protests in the camps that Moroccan media has reported. The camps are home to many Spanish and international human rights and aid organizations that refute Morocco's claims and even commend the camps' democratic administration. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, no evidence of torture was found in the camps in Saharawi in November 2012.

In April 2010, the Sahrawi government called on the UN to supervise Human rights in the liberated territories (Free Zone) and refugee camps, hoping that Morocco would do the same.

6.3. Mediation and negotiation efforts

Ceasefire

The cease-fire ending hostilities was officially signed in 1991. Further attempts have since been made to resolve the conflict, but no lasting resolution has been achieved to date. The ceasefire was upheld until 13 November 2020 when the Moroccan army entered into the demilitarized town of Guerguerat, and the Saharawi authorities responded by declaring that the ceasefire was broken and the SPLA armed forces attacked Moroccan army positions along the Moroccan Western Sahara Wall.

Referendum and Houston agreement

The referendum, originally scheduled for 1992, was intended to give the local population of Western Sahara the option between independence or affirming integration with Morocco, but it quickly stalled. In 1997, the Houston Agreement attempted to revive the proposal for a referendum, but likewise has not met with success. As of 2010, negotiations over the terms of any potential referendum have not resulted in any substantive action. At the heart of the dispute lies the question of who qualifies as a potential voter; the Polisario has insisted on only allowing those found on the 1974 Spanish Census lists (see below) to vote, while Morocco has insisted that the census was flawed by evasion and sought the inclusion of members of Sahrawi tribes which escape from Spanish invasion to the north of Morocco by the 19th century. Consequently, both sides blame each other for the stalling of the referendum, and little progress is likely to be made soon.

Efforts by the UN special envoys to find common ground between both parties did not succeed. By 1999 the UN had identified about 85,000 voters, with nearly half of them in the Moroccan-controlled parts of Western Sahara or Southern Morocco, and the others scattered between the Tindouf refugee camps, Mauritania and other locations throughout the world. The Polisario Front accepted this voter list, as it had done with the previous list presented by the UN (both of them originally based on the Spanish census of 1974), but Morocco refused. As rejected voter candidates began a mass appeals procedure, the Moroccan government insisted that each application be scrutinized individually. Continuing disputes between the two factions once more brought the process to a halt.

According to a NATO delegation MINURSO election observers stated in 1999 that "if the number of voters does not rise significantly the odds were slightly on the SADR side". By 2001, the process had reached a stalemate, and the UN Secretary-General asked the parties for the first time to explore other solutions. Indeed, shortly after the Houston Agreement (1997), Morocco officially declared that it was "no longer necessary" to include an option of independence on the ballot, offering instead autonomy. Erik Jensen, who played an administrative role in MINURSO, wrote that neither side would agree to a voter registration in which they believed they were destined to lose.

Baker plan

The Baker Plan was a United Nations initiative led by James Baker to grant self-determination to Western Sahara, and was formulated in the year 2000. It was intended to replace the Settlement Plan of 1991 and the Houston Agreement of 1997, which had effectively failed to make any lasting improvement. Since early 2005, the UN Secretary-General has not referred to the plan in his reports, and by now it seems largely dead. No replacement plan exists, however, and worries persist that the political vacuum will result in renewed fighting. Morocco continues to propose autonomy for the territory as the solution to the conflict, while the Polisario Front insists on nothing other than complete independence.

Moroccan Initiative and Manhasset negotiations

In 2006 the Moroccan Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS) proposed a plan for the autonomy of Western Sahara and made visits to several countries to explain and gather support for their proposal. Citing the Spanish approach to regional autonomy, the Moroccan government plans to model any future agreement after the cases of the Canary Islands, Basque Country, Andalusia or Catalonia. The plan was presented to the UN Security Council in April 2007, and has received the backing of both the United States of America and France.

On 30 April 2007, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1754, which both urged the involved parties to "enter into direct negotiations without preconditions and in good faith." and extended the MINURSO mission until 31 October 2007. As a result of the passage

of this resolution, the parties involved met in Manhasset, New York to once again try and settle the dispute. The talks between the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front were considered the first direct negotiations in seven years between the two parties, and hailed as a landmark in the peace process. Also present at the negotiations were the neighboring countries of Algeria and Mauritania, a nod to the role they play in the ongoing conflict. The first round of talks took place on 18–19 June 2007, during which both parties agreed to resume talks on 10–11 August. After another inconclusive round of talks, the parties finally, on 8–9 January 2008, agreed on "the need to move into a more intensive and substantive phase of negotiations". An additional round of talks was held from 18 to 19 March 2008, but once again no major agreement was reached. The negotiations were supervised by Peter van Walsum, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's personal envoy for Western Sahara. To date, all negotiations have failed to resolve the dispute.

Peace talks resume

In 2018 the United Nations Security Council announced that peace talks regarding the Western Sahara territory would resume and delegates of the Polisario Front, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania would all be present.

In April 2020, the Polisario Front publicly condemned the state of the ongoing peace talks stating that its inaction legitimized the encroachment of Morocco into the territory. The statement reiterated the Polisario Front's request that the UN organize a free referendum within Western Sahara on their self-governing status. Currently, the position of United Nations envoy to Western Sahara is empty and the Security Council is actively seeking a replacement.

On 6 October 2021, United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, announced the appointment of Staffan de Mistura as his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara. On 13 January 2022, De Mistura commenced a round of discussions starting with Morocco's Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita. On 15 January 2022, de Mistura, met with Polisario's head of political organization, Khatri Addouh, in Shahid Al Hafed.

7.Economic Challenges

7.1 Natural resources and their role in the conflict

Western Sahara is a region rich in valuable natural resources, which plays a huge role in the ongoing conflict. The main resources causing tension are phosphate, fish, and possibly oil and gas.

Phosphates:

That area has some of the biggest phosphate reserves in the world, crucial for fertilizer production. Morocco actually controls most of the region and its phosphate mines, especially the famous Bou Craa mine. This is about resource extraction at the heart of the conflict

because Morocco benefits from these resources while the Sahrawi people have no control or say in their extraction. Many also view it as a violation of the rights of the Sahrawi people, who need to be included in decisions regarding what happens with the resources of their land.

Fisheries:

The waters off Western Sahara are rich in fish, which is vital not only for local livelihoods but also yields a colossal export income. Morocco has signed agreements with other countries, including the European Union, which permits foreign vessels to fish off these waters. The Sahrawi people and their pro-independence groups think the fishing rights should be given to them and not to foreigners or Morocco. It is one of the most prominent manifestations of the control of Morocco over the land and one of the main disputes between the inhabitants and foreign entrepreneurs.

Oil and Gas:

Offshore oil and gas reserves are believed to exist in Western Sahara, although this has not been fully explored. A few companies have shown interest in drilling, despite the fact that the region's sovereignty is disputed. Many human rights groups have protested this, calling it an unethical practice since the Sahrawi people aren't consulted or compensated. While some companies have pulled out under pressure, the potential for oil and gas resources only feeds into the conflict and raises the stakes.

7.2 Economic development and poverty in the region

As long as the conflict continues, Western Sahara remains underutilized economically. Whether under Moroccan control or living in refugee camps, the people of Western Sahara face enormous obstacles to economic development.

Moroccan-Controlled Areas:

In the area controlled by Morocco, there was some investment in infrastructure, like roads, schools, and hospitals. These infrastructures serve either the Moroccan settlers or the interest of the government without benefiting the Sahrawis. Locals do not have access to jobs and opportunities opened by such projects nor profit from resource extraction going on in their backyard.

Refugee Camps in Algeria:

Many Sahrawis left their homes and started residing in refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. The living conditions are very bad, with the camps largely overcrowded and a general lack of the basic needs of life such as food, health facilities, and schools. Most people rely on humanitarian aid, which is usually not predictable or consistent. A lot of the refugees were born here and have poor opportunities to lead secure, independent lives.

Challenges Facing the Youth:

Young Sahrawis, who live in refugee camps, are particularly doomed for a bleak future. Growing up with little access to education, job training, or basic resources has made them feel hopeless and dispossessed. Frustration from this lack of opportunity has driven some to join the Polisario Front or other political movements as ways to fight for their futures.

7.3 Foreign investments and trade restrictions

It makes Western Sahara an awkward site for foreign investments and trade due to political ambiguity. Companies in great proportion abstain from doing business because there is the obvious danger of entanglement into the conflict.

Moroccan-Controlled Areas and Investments:

Morocco has exploited the resources of Western Sahara as a way to attract foreign companies in the exploitation of phosphate, fisheries, and other assets. Such investments have become controversial. Many countries and international organizations have refused to engage in the region, citing that they do not recognize Morocco's sovereignty over it. This leaves Morocco to deal with the economic benefits while the Sahrawi people are excluded from any profit-sharing.

Pressure on Companies:

NGOs like WSRW have called on companies to withdraw from the "occupied territory until its political status has been solved by international law", arguing that "any company extracting resources from the territory supports directly or indirectly, Morocco's continued occupation of it." Many such companies have bowed out of the region due to pressure exerted by such groups, yet the economic exploitation of the region has continued unabated.

Trade Barriers:

This whole dispute has also created trade barriers. Because of the disputed status of Western Sahara, it is hard to do business freely, as many international companies are reluctant to invest or trade with the region due to legal uncertainties. This limits the economic opportunities available to local businesses in Western Sahara and leaves the region isolated from the broader global economy.

7.4 The impact of the conflict on regional economies

The situation in Western Sahara has consequences not only for the local people but also for the whole region: it influences the economies of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, and is one of the reasons for their not having very good cooperation.

Morocco's Economy:

Morocco has gained from the exploitation of Western Sahara's resources, especially regarding phosphate extraction and fishing contracts. Simultaneously, however, the conflict presents a number of important challenges to Morocco: its relations with Algeria, its immediate neighbor, remain tense due to disagreement over the fate of Western Sahara fact that limits regional cooperation and economic development. While Morocco does significant economic business in the region, the dispute with the Polisario Front inhibits full economic integration with the wider North African economy.

Algeria's Economic Burden:

Algeria has been one of the major supporters of the Sahrawi independence movement, providing support to the refugees and backing the Polisario Front. But, this has come at a cost. Algeria is suffering from an economic burden that is very strong because of the continuous refugee crisis, and its resources are stretched thin, particularly in areas like humanitarian aid and housing. Furthermore, the conflict with Morocco barred Algeria from taking an active part in regional economic initiatives, such as the Arab Maghreb Union, making the country even more isolated.

Position of Mauritania:

While not being as directly involved in the conflict, Mauritania nonetheless suffers from the economic repercussions of the dispute. Sharing borders with both Morocco and Algeria, the conflict impacts trade routes, security, and regional diplomatic relations. The efforts of Mauritania to position itself as a regional economic player are constrained by the greater instability in North Africa brought about by the Western Sahara issue.

Regional Integration Challenges:

The conflict also retarded the process of economic integration in North Africa. The Arab Maghreb Union, a grouping meant to work toward regional cooperation between Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya, has largely remained inactive because of the tensions between Morocco and Algeria over Western Sahara. Without such cooperation, the region is barred from developing robust trade, infrastructure, and investment networks that could be beneficial to all involved countries.

8.Key International Efforts and Resolutions

The United Nations has played a pivotal role in attempting to resolve the conflict in Western Sahara, issuing numerous resolutions and declarations to guide the situation toward a peaceful solution. However, despite these efforts, the issue remains unresolved due to the complex political dynamics involved.

8.1Major UN resolutions and declarations

UN Resolution 1514 (1960) - The Right to Self-Determination:

This resolution was important in the context of decolonization, confirming the right of all peoples to self-determination and independence, including those in territories like Western Sahara. This has been a big argument for the Polisario Front and Sahrawi supporters, who believe that the Sahrawi people have the utmost right to decide their future. However, Morocco has rejected this interpretation, arguing that the region is historically part of its sovereign territory.

UN Security Council Resolution 690 (1991) - Creation of MINURSO:

The UN, in an attempt to find a solution, established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, known as MINURSO, by Resolution 690. The latter was to organize a referendum of self-determination by the Sahrawi people, who were supposed to choose between independence or integration with Morocco. Although MINURSO still operates in the region, it never conducted the referendum due to disagreements between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the eligible voters, in addition to other political entanglements;

UN Resolution 1754 (2007) – Suggestion Autonomy:

Resolution 1754 brought forward Morocco's initiative of autonomy for Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty as a solution. It was seen as a dramatic shift in the stance of Morocco; however, the Polisario Front rejected the option of autonomy and retained their position of total independence. While negotiations between the parties were underlined by this resolution, not much has come forward, and autonomy remains an option open for debate.

Other Key Resolutions and Declarations:

Besides these, several other resolutions and statements were passed by the UN Security Council and General Assembly, which stated a once more peaceful solution, self-determination, and respect for human rights. The UN consistently calls for Morocco-Polisario Front dialogue toward lasting resolution. Yet, frustrations persist because of the lack to date of an inclusive peace settlement.

8.2 Role of regional organizations such as the African Union and Arab League

Other regional organizations also got involved in trying to find a solution to the Western Sahara problem, though much more often than not, actions and influence have been dictated by the political stances and interests of their members.

African Union (AU)-Advocacy for Sahrawi Independence:

The African Union replaced the Organization of African Unity in 2002 and has since become a vocal supporter of Sahrawi self-determination. The AU has also time and again shown support for the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic declared by the Polisario Front. In fact, in 1984, the AU granted the SADR full membership—a move strongly opposed by Morocco. AU has called for a referendum allowing the people of Western Sahara to choose their future. Besides this, the AU has condemned human rights abuses in the region and called upon Morocco to enter into a meaningful negotiation process. So far, the AU has been unable to find a common approach to the issue, especially due to internal divisions within its membership, some of whom are in support of Morocco's position.

Arab League – Divided Support:

The Arab League, the regional organization for Arab countries, has been more divided on the issue. Morocco gets very strong support from certain Arab states, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for whom the region is part of Moroccan sovereign territory. But then Algeria's support for both the Polisario Front and Sahrawi independence has meant tensions at the Arab League. It had urged a peaceful resolution of the conflict but in general shied away from the active role of demanding a referendum or self-determination, as most of the Arab states were more concerned with the preservation of their diplomatic ties with Morocco. Thus, the results are a sharp division within the Arab League, and hence, lacking coherent action on the issue.

The Maghreb Union:

The conflict has also retarded the effort of broader regional integration in North Africa. The issue of Western Sahara has paralyzed the Union of the Arab Maghreb, a regional organization that was supposed to foster cooperation between Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya. The rivalry between Morocco and Algeria over the conflict has prevented the UMA from acting as a political and economic bloc, further isolating the region and limiting its potential for regional growth.

8.3 Contributions of international NGOs and civil society

Civil society organizations and NGOs have always held crucial roles in raising awareness about the Western Sahara conflict, advocating for human rights, and providing humanitarian assistance. Their efforts often focus on highlighting the plight of the Sahrawi people, pressuring governments and international organizations to take action, and supporting the refugees who have been displaced by the conflict.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International – Documentation of Human Rights Abuses:

Human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have been at the forefront of documenting and exposing human rights violations in Western Sahara. These groups have reported on the repression of Sahrawi activists, arbitrary detentions, and restrictions on free expression, particularly in the areas under Moroccan control. Their reports shed light on the human cost of the conflict and called for more concerted international action to protect the rights of the Sahrawi people.

Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW) – Economic Exploitation Exposed:

Western Sahara Resource Watch is an important NGO that monitors the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources. WSRW campaigns against illegal resource extraction-including phosphate and fish-and has demonstrated how this is part and parcel of Morocco's occupation of the region, and a denial of the right of self-determination of the Sahrawi people over their land. As a result, WSRW has managed to bring international attention to the economic dimension of the conflict and the illegality it represents under international law through the pressure it exercises on multinationals and governments to refrain from business dealings in Morocco in Western Sahara.

Refugee Support Organizations: Assistance for the Displaced Sahrawi:

Several international NGOs, such as Oxfam, MSF, and the UNHCR, have been involved in providing humanitarian assistance to Sahrawi refugees in the camps in Algeria. These organizations help supply food, medical care, shelter, and educational opportunities to the tens of thousands of Sahrawis living in extremely difficult conditions. Though such organizations are quite important in making the refugees feel their importance and alleviating their sufferings, they also seek a political solution to the conflict so that Sahrawi people can return to their homeland and rebuild their lives.

International Solidarity Movements:

The Sahrawi cause is supported by many international movements of solidarity, especially in Europe and Latin America. Activists have organized student organizations, grassroots organizations, protests, campaigns, and events that raise awareness to push for a resolution to the conflict. These movements help keep the issue on the international agenda, putting pressure on governments to take firmer action in favor of the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people.

9. Proposed Solutions and Negotiation Frameworks

9.1 Autonomy proposals and referendum plans

Over the years, many ideas have been thrown in to try to bring a solution to the conflict over Western Sahara. The two central proposals put across have been those of autonomy to the region and a referendum whereby the Sahrawi people could vote for the future of the region. Both of these propositions have both positives and negatives and neither party entirely agrees to the proposals.

Morocco's Proposals of Autonomy:

In 2007, Morocco proposed granting Western Sahara a high degree of self-government—self-determination regarding local self-government, resources, and culture, for example—but within the kingdom of Morocco. Morocco believes this is a fair compromise, as it would allow the Sahrawi people to control many aspects of their lives. The Polisario Front, however, and many Sahrawi activists do not view this as sufficient. They seek full independence, not simply autonomy within Morocco, and for them, a solution of mere full sovereignty would be less than self-determination.

Referendum for Self-Determination

The referendum idea, in which the Sahrawi people would vote to choose either independence or to be part of Morocco, has been on the table for decades. It was supposed to happen in the 1990s, after the establishment of the United Nations peacekeeping mission, known as MINURSO, but has not happened yet. What's the major stumbling block? Differences over who should be allowed to vote. The Polisario Front and Sahrawi people still hold out for a referendum, feeling that this is the only possible fair way that the issue can be resolved. However, Morocco strongly opposes this, fearing that a vote could lead to Western Sahara becoming independent and potentially splitting the country.

The Stalemate:

With these two positions so far apart autonomy preferred by Morocco and referendum/full independence from the Polisario Front side—there hasn't been a way around the impasse that has, to date, obstructed its resolution. Only in finding the middle ground with the compromises it entails can both sides go their different ways great deal of building of confidence and goodwill has yet to come if commonality is to be reached.

9.2 Confidence-building measures between stakeholders

Probably the hardest thing in this conflict is to overcome the massive distrust between Morocco and the Polisario Front. After two decades of tension, both sides have become super cautious with each other. This distrust must be broken down for any meaningful dialogue to take place. That is where confidence-building measures, or CBMs, come in. These are small steps that can help rebuild trust over time and create an environment where both sides feel safe to negotiate.

Getting Morocco and the Polisario Front to Talk:

Direct negotiations between the two sides have happened in the past, but they've often been brief and unproductive. To make progress, there needs to be more consistent dialogue. The United Nations or other neutral countries could act as mediators to help facilitate these talks. The idea is to create safe spaces where both sides can air their grievances, listen to each other, and find some common ground.

Humanitarian Efforts and People-to-People Diplomacy:

Sometimes, what helps is reaching out to people on the ground. Joint humanitarian projects building schools, providing healthcare, or even cultural exchanges could help build bridges between Moroccan and Sahrawi communities. These people-to-people efforts could reduce the stereotypes that fuel the conflict and show both sides that peace can have real, tangible benefits. Even small projects that bring Moroccan and Sahrawi youth together could plant seeds for a future of cooperation, rather than continued division.

Transparency and Monitoring:

For any development of trust between the parties to take place, there needs to be transparency in what each side is doing. One such idea is giving MINURSO an enhanced monitoring role in the situation on the ground and any developments that might affect the adherence to agreements. These could be both political and military in terms of the non-violation of ceasefire agreements or simply irritating behavior that is not needed.

Demilitarization:

Another step could be demilitarizing parts of the conflict zone. If both sides could agree to reduce their military presence along the ceasefire line, it would lower the risk of accidental clashes. The creation of buffer zones where both sides agree not to station troops could create space for diplomacy to take root and reduce the chances of violence flaring up again.

9.3 Encouraging sustainable economic growth

Whichever the political settlement or solution, the economic development of the region is the key to long-term stability for Western Sahara. Without the economy prospering in this region, peace can hardly be retained. Be it under the control of Morocco, an autonomous region, or independence, economic growth will play a major role in the future of the Sahrawi people.

Fair Resource Distribution:

Western Sahara boasts an abundance of natural resources, including phosphate, fish, and maybe even oil. Unfortunately, these resources have been largely exploited without much benefit to the Sahrawi people themselves. A future solution will need to ensure that the people of Western Sahara receive a fair share of the profits derived from such resources, whatever their political status might be. This may involve joint ventures between Morocco, Sahrawi authorities, and international companies, with a view toward the people benefiting,

not the governments. The transparency element will play a very important role in this regard to avoid exploitation and ensure equitability.

Investing in Infrastructure:

Infrastructure development is cardinal to the future economic prosperity of Western Sahara. This shall include, among other aspects, roads, schools, hospitals, and facilities ensuring access to clean water. Financial investment in such projects could be sought from international bodies like the World Bank or the African Development Bank. The goal, in this direction, is a better lifestyle for all nationals in Morocco-ruled territories and refugee camps or elsewhere. Thus, once there are concrete aspects in which people can feel actual changes within their lives, they will start believing in the peace process.

Diversification of Economy:

Western Sahara is so dependent on natural resources, but that need not be the case. Other sectors may involve investment, such as tourism, in which it promotes its unique culture and natural beauty, or renewable energy by leveraging its solar and wind energies. Economic diversification would provide more jobs, attract foreign investment, and would not let the region depend on a few sectors alone. The idea is to make Western Sahara a place where people can build their futures, no matter what political path the region takes.

Regional Cooperation:

To Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, finding ways to cooperate economically could pay dividends for all concerned in the region. The conflict had paralyzed the so-called Maghreb Union-regional organization of North African countries with stability in the Western Sahara political context. There could be huge potential for regional economic cooperation: joint trade routes and infrastructure projects along with joint ventures in the sphere of economy can create opportunities. Cooperation on this from countries around Western Sahara might turn into a reality for something that has been quite elusive to them for so long: stability.

10. Questions to Be Answered

What long-term plans can create job opportunities for the Sahrawi people and help reduce their reliance on aid?

How can Morocco and the Polisario improve access to education for children affected by the conflict, to prevent future instability?

What can be done to help heal divisions and promote peace, while strongly focusing on the humanitarian needs of those most affected by the conflict?

How can the international community guarantee that the humanitarian needs of the Sahrawi people are met, regardless of the political outcome?

What could the UN do to ensure that refugees in camps have access to all of the basic rights such as healthcare, education, and shelter?

How can Morocco and the Polisario Front work together, with international help, in order to improve conditions in Sahrawi refugee camps?

How can Morocco and the Polisario agree on a solution that respects the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination, while addressing Morocco's sovereignty concerns?

11. Resources for Further Research

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