

The History of the Western Sahara

The sovereignty of the Western Sahara remains the subject of a dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front, a separatist group based in southern Algeria. Morocco reasserted its sovereignty over the territory after Spain withdrew its colonial interests from the area in 1975. The Polisario Front has challenged Morocco's control over the Western Sahara.

The Moroccan Government has undertaken a sizable economic development program in the Western Sahara to provide economic, political, and social infrastructure for the region's residents. Today, international efforts are underway to encourage a political settlement between Morocco, the Polisario Front, and Algeria that would resolve sovereignty over the Western Sahara through autonomy, a solution widely supported in the international community, particularly the US and Europe.

- 1578 to 1727** Moroccan Kings rule over the territory currently known as the Western Sahara.
- 1884** Spanish colonization begins.
- 1956** Morocco claims independence from France and reclaims the Western Sahara at the UN for the first time.
- 1958** King Mohammed V formally lays claim to the Sahara.
- 1963** The UN includes the Western Sahara on the list of non self-governing territories.
- 1965** The UN General Assembly adopts its first resolution calling on Spain to decolonize the Sahara.
- 1973** The Polisario Front is founded and stages its first attack.
- 1974** Algeria begins to oppose Moroccan policy on the Sahara and trains Polisario guerillas.
- 1975** The Green March takes place in which 350,000 unarmed Moroccans march South into the desert to reassert Moroccan sovereignty of the Sahara from the Spanish.
Morocco signs Madrid Agreement, which seeks to transfer control of the Sahara to a three party administration divided between Morocco, Spain, and Mauritania.
Spain officially terminates its administration of the Sahara.
- 1976** The Polisario Front declares the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and raises the flag of "Western Sahara."
- 1977** Spanish-Moroccan fishing agreement is signed; the Polisario begins attacks on Spanish fishing vessels.
- 1991** UN Security Council approves the establishment of MINURSO. Cease-fire declared in the disputed Western Sahara region.
- 1997** Former US Sec. of State James Baker III is appointed as UN Sec. Gen. Special Envoy in the Sahara region.
Houston Accord is signed between Morocco and Polisario establishing the implementation of a referendum to decide the future of the Western Sahara.
- 2002** UN Sec. Gen. Kofi Annan presents the Security Council with four options to break the impasse in the Western Sahara: referendum, autonomy, partition, or complete withdrawal.

"[Morocco's compromise autonomy initiative] originated in the Clinton Administration. It was reaffirmed in the Bush Administration and it remains the policy of the United States in the Obama Administration. [...] And I don't want anyone in the region or elsewhere to have any doubt about our policy, which remains the same."
-U.S. Sec. of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, November 3, 2009



"[A]utonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution for the Western Sahara dispute [...]"
-Dana Perino, White House Press Secretary, June 23, 2008

"My conclusion that an independent Western Sahara is not an attainable goal is relevant today because it lies at the root of the current negotiation process..."
- UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy for the Western Sahara Peter Van Walsum, April 21, 2008

UN Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 1541, urging the parties to the Western Sahara conflict to "to achieve a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution."

Dutch ambassador Peter Van Walsum is appointed as the new UN Sec. Gen. Special Envoy to the Western Sahara.

Morocco releases autonomy under sovereignty plan for the Western Sahara which is endorsed by the many in the international community, including the United States, Spain, and France.

Morocco and the Polisario Front conduct the first of four rounds of talks.

After the final round of talks, UN Sec. Gen. Special Envoy Van Walsum calls for realism, deems independence an unattainable option, and calls for future negotiations to be based solely on autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.

UN Sec. Gen. appoints US diplomat Christopher Ross as the new Special Envoy for the Western Sahara.

US Sec. of State Hillary Rodham Clinton reaffirms that US policy, supporting a solution based on autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, remains unchanged.

Morocco and the Polisario Front conduct first of nine rounds of informal talks. Ending in 2012, the talks yield no progress.

Sec. Clinton meets with Moroccan Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri in 2011 and with Moroccan Foreign Minister Saad-Eddine Al-Othmani in 2012, reiterating that the Moroccan autonomy plan is "serious, realistic, and credible."

In a Joint Statement issued on November 22, 2013, following a meeting between President Obama and King Mohammed VI, the US reiterates that Morocco's autonomy plan is "serious, realistic, and credible," and both leaders affirm their shared commitment to the improvement of the lives of the people of the Western Sahara.

US law is enacted stating that US funding for Morocco shall be made available for use in the Western Sahara

This material is distributed by the Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP) on behalf of the Kingdom of Morocco. Additional information is available at the Justice Department in Washington, D.C.

