

Resolving the Western Sahara Conflict

Origins of the Conflict

- In 1975, when Spain relinquished colonial control over the sparsely-populated desert area south of Morocco, Morocco sought to regain control of the territory, over which it had exercised some degree of sovereignty for centuries before Spanish colonization. The Polisario Front—a separatist group born in Morocco and backed by Algeria, Cuba, and Libya—launched a guerilla war against Morocco and Mauritania.
- The fighting resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Sahrawis from Western Sahara to refugee camps in southwest Algeria, where they remain until this day.
- In 1979, Mauritania relinquished all claims to the Western Sahara, but the war between Morocco and the Polisario continued.

UN Intervention and a Failed Referendum

- The war lasted until 1991, when the UN brokered a peace deal and established a peace-keeping mission, known as MINURSO, to monitor the ceasefire and arrange for a referendum on the future of the region.
- For more than a decade, the UN attempted to organize the referendum, but to no avail, as neither side could agree on a voter list.
- In 2002, the annual resolution renewing MINURSO at the Security Council for the first time urged parties, to reach a “mutually acceptable political solution to the conflict.” Subsequent resolutions dropped explicit references to the referendum.

A New Approach: The Autonomy Initiative

- On April 11, 2007, Morocco presented “[The Moroccan Autonomy Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region](#)” to the United Nations as a compromise that could facilitate the opening of negotiations for a “just, durable, and peaceful” political solution.
- The initiative was the product of a year-long consultation process in which all sectors of the local Sahrawi population, the views of foreign governments, and expert international authorities were included. The plan provides broad outlines of an autonomy arrangement for the Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty, including a description of areas of local and shared powers for the region with the central government. The initiative states that specific arrangements should result from direct negotiations between the parties.
- Officials from every administration since the Clinton Administration, as well as bipartisan majorities of Congress, have endorsed Morocco’s autonomy plan. *For a full list of statements by US officials in support of Morocco’s autonomy plan, please see [“US Policy on the Western Sahara”](#).*

Continued Challenges

- On the basis of this initiative, the UN Security Council endorsed direct negotiations between Morocco

and the Polisario Front. [Four formal rounds](#) of negotiations failed to resolve the Western Sahara conflict.

- The failure of the negotiations led Peter Van Walsum, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy and the UN mediator for the first four rounds of negotiations, to issue a frank assessment in 2008 calling for compromise and realism in the ongoing negotiations. Mr. Van Walsum concluded that "an independent Western Sahara is not an attainable goal." He called the four rounds of talks a failure and urged the Security Council to pursue the only realistic compromise political solution to the conflict: autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.
- The exact number of refugees in the Polisario camps remains unknown because neither the Polisario Front nor Algeria will allow a census of the population, despite numerous requests from the US, the EU, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

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