

FAQ: The Western Sahara Conflict

At the end of April 2012, the United Nations Security Council will vote on the renewal of MINURSO—the peace-keeping mission for the Western Sahara, which, since the mid-1970’s, has been an area of conflict between Morocco and the separatist group Polisario Front.

What is the Western Sahara 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 the Spanish colonization. The Polisario Front, a separatist group backed by Algeria, Cuba, and Libya launched a guerilla war against Morocco. The war lasted until 1991, when the UN brokered a ceasefire, which still remains in effect. Currently, Morocco controls 85% of the Western Sahara, while the Polisario Front controls the remaining 15%. The Polisario Front set up and runs refugee camps in southwestern Algeria where tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees live [under desperate conditions](#), subsisting entirely on international humanitarian aid. Sahrawis in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara enjoy the full rights and protections guaranteed by [Morocco’s Constitution](#).



Why is the Western Sahara conflict an issue of critical global importance?

The conflict is a significant contributor to instability in North Africa, where dangerous turmoil currently threatens stability in the region and beyond. The conflict inhibits economic and security cooperation among the countries in the region, which is essential not only to much-needed regional development, but also to critical anti-terrorism efforts, including those that protect US interests. According to a [recent report by the International Center for Terrorism Studies \(ICTS\)](#), the Polisario-run camps have become “a recruiting ground for terrorists, traffickers, and other criminal enterprises.” A [recent Carnegie Endowment for International Peace paper](#) added that “the deteriorating social and political conditions in the camps in Tindouf, the westernmost province in Algeria, represent a tinderbox waiting to explode,” and that links between elements of the Polisario and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb pose “a major security threat to the Maghreb and the Sahel.”

What is the position of the US on the Western Sahara conflict?

[Under the Clinton, Bush, and Obama Administrations](#), the US has called for resolving the Western Sahara conflict by providing autonomy for the disputed territory under Moroccan sovereignty—a policy reiterated by bipartisan majorities of both the US House and Senate. As US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton [said](#) earlier this year, “U.S. policy toward the Western Sahara has remained constant for many years. We have made clear that Morocco’s autonomy plan is serious, realistic, and credible and that it represents a potential approach that could satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity.”

What can the US do to resolve the Western Sahara conflict?

Since 1990, the US and its international partners have spent more than \$1 billion to support the refugees in the Polisario-controlled refugee camps, much of which has reportedly been diverted to enrich some Polisario leaders. The US Congress should act immediately to redirect US aid for the refugees towards the promotion of durable solutions, including voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement in a third country. [The United States should also extend US aid programs in Morocco to the Western Sahara](#) in order to support Morocco’s on-going efforts to promote democracy, build critical infrastructure, and improve civil and human rights to improve the lives of those in the Western Sahara.

What is the status of human rights in the Western Sahara?

In the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, government-sponsored and civil-society-run human rights groups are active in the monitoring, reporting, education, and promotion of human rights. Under reforms enacted in 2011, an independent [National Human Rights Council \(CNDH\)](#) operates in the Western Sahara with far-reaching investigative powers to ensure that human rights and national and local legislation are aligned with international treaties and law. Secretary Clinton has called the CNDH,

FAQ: The Western Sahara Conflict

[“an excellent idea”](#) which “will serve a very important purpose” in Morocco and as an example for the region. International human rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Amnesty International enjoy broad access to the territory and often hold events and issue reports and press statements about the portion of the Western Sahara under Moroccan control.

On the other hand, the Polisario Front severely restricts access for human rights groups and monitoring bodies to the refugee camps in southern Algeria. Because of these restrictions, little is known about the state of human rights in the Polisario-controlled camps. But former Saharawi refugees who have escaped the camps in recent years report [widespread human rights abuses](#). And the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants has reported that the refugees’ basic rights have been “neglected,” and there is “evidence of slavery, imprisonment of women for adultery, and restricted freedom of movement.”

Why are there still refugees in the Polisario camps? Is there a place they can go?

The Polisario Front refuses to allow thousands of Saharawi refugees to leave the camps in southern Algeria, where they live in inhumane conditions. The exact number of refugees in the Polisario camps is not known because the Polisario Front and Algeria will not permit a census of the refugee population, despite numerous requests from the international community, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The former UN Secretary General’s Personal Envoy for the Western Sahara, Dutch diplomat Peter van Walsum, [called the refugee’s plight](#) a “moral dilemma” because of “deeply involved supporters of the Frente Polisario, who do not live in the camps themselves but are convinced that those who do would rather stay there indefinitely than settle for any negotiated solution that falls short of full independence.”

There is a simple solution to this humanitarian crisis—which has persisted for more than three decades. Unlike refugee situations elsewhere in the world, Sahrawi refugees can be repatriated and resettled in Morocco. To date, nearly 7,000 Saharawi refugees have escaped the Polisario camps and returned to the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, where they enjoy the full rights and protections guaranteed by the Moroccan Constitution. Many are politically active as representatives and leaders at the local and national levels.

What is MINURSO?

MINURSO is the French acronym for the peace-keeping mission established by the UN to monitor the ceasefire in the Western Sahara. Since 1991, the mandate of MINURSO has been periodically evaluated and renewed by the UN Security Council while the UN seeks to resolve the dispute through negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front.

What are the UN-led negotiations and how/when did they start?

Since 1991, numerous attempts at resolving the Western Sahara dispute through negotiations have failed. In 2007, Morocco presented an [autonomy proposal](#) that offered a compromise solution of broad autonomy for the Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. The UN Security Council welcomed the “serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution.” [The Council urged Morocco and the Polisario Front](#) to seek “a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution,” which was affirmed by the US and other UN Security Council members. Since 2007, four rounds of UN-led negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front have failed to resolve the conflict. In 2008, Peter van Walsum, who mediated the negotiations, concluded that “an independent Western Sahara is not an attainable goal” and proposed that the next round of negotiations focus on a negotiated political solution, such as autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.

What is the current status of the negotiations?

Since 2008, the current Envoy, US diplomat Christopher Ross, has held nine rounds of “informal talks” to encourage compromise between the parties so that the fifth round of negotiations can take place focusing on a compromise political solution, as van Walsum recommended to the UN Security Council.



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