

# FAQ: The Truth about the Polisario Front

The Polisario Front represents itself as the “sole legitimate representative” of the Sahrawi people and the exclusive political arm of a fictitious state called the “Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).” Despite these lofty claims, it fails miserably in these pretensions. Below are answers to important questions about the Polisario and the truth about its governance record.

## **What is the Polisario Front?**

The Polisario Front (Polisario) is a separatist movement fighting for independence for the Western Sahara. Founded in 1973, the movement established a pseudo-state in exile in 1976 based in refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria.<sup>1</sup> Backed by Algeria, Cuba, and Libya (under Gaddafi), and supplied with Soviet arms, the Polisario led a guerrilla war against Moroccan forces until a 1991 ceasefire.<sup>2</sup> While the ceasefire has held, no further progress has been made in resolving the conflict and the Polisario continues to run a “government-in-exile” in Algeria.

## **How does the Polisario govern the refugee camps?**

The Polisario operates as a one-party dictatorship under the rule of Mohamed Abdelaziz, who was elected secretary-general and “president” in August 1976 and has reigned as sole leader for more than 37 years.<sup>3</sup> Independent political parties, associations, and civil society groups are forbidden in the camps, and Sahrawis under Polisario Front control there are denied the most basic rights.<sup>4</sup>

## **How does the Polisario treat the Sahrawi refugees?**

The Polisario falsely claims to represent the rights and interests of the Sahrawis. The truth is that the Polisario routinely violates the human rights of tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees who have remained trapped in desperate conditions in camps for more than three decades.

- Freedom of expression is non-existent in the camps – the Polisario suppresses any form of dissent, labeling defectors and dissidents as pro-Morocco traitors.<sup>5</sup>
- Freedom of movement is restricted – the Polisario and/or Algerian military maintain checkpoints at roadways leading to, from, and in between the camps.<sup>6</sup>
- The Polisario has consistently refused to allow the UN to conduct a census to better identify types and levels relief assistance to the refugees. Instead, eyewitnesses report that the Polisario routinely diverts food aid intended for the camp populations, selling it on the black market.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anouar Boukhars, “Simmering Discontent in Western Sahara,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/12/simmering-discontent-in-western-sahara/a2ah>.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Moniquet, “The Polisario Front: Credible Negotiations Partner of After Effect of the Cold War and Obstacle to a Political Solution in Western Sahara.” *European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center*, November 2005.

<sup>3</sup> “Western Sahara Profile,” *BBC News*, April 18, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14115273>.

<sup>4</sup> J. Peter Pham, “Not Another Failed State: Toward a Realistic Solution in the Western Sahara,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1(2010): 1-24, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Toby Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa’s Last Colony?* (London: Zed, 2004), 180.

<sup>6</sup> Merrill Smith, “Stonewalling on Refugee Rights: Algeria & the Sahrawi,” *United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants*, 2009, [http://www.uscrrrefugees.org/2010Website/3\\_Our%20Work/3\\_2\\_1\\_3\\_Morocco/Stonewalling.pdf](http://www.uscrrrefugees.org/2010Website/3_Our%20Work/3_2_1_3_Morocco/Stonewalling.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Claude Moniquet, “The Tindouf Refugee Camps: The Responsibilities Confronting Algeria and the Polisario Front,” *European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center*, 26 April 2010, <http://www.esisc.org/upload/publications/briefings/the-tindouf-refugee-camps-the-responsibilities-confronting-algeria-and-the-polisario-front/8.%20THE%20TINDOUF%20REFUGEE%20CAMPS.pdf>.

### **Has the Polisario taken steps resolve the Western Sahara conflict?**

Since the UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991, the Polisario has been an obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the Western Sahara conflict.<sup>8</sup> It has abrogated its international responsibilities to negotiate a political solution, which the UN Security Council has called for, and refused to compromise in UN-led negotiations. It has repeatedly threatened to return to armed struggle – a serious threat given its well-armed “Liberation Army” and overwhelming evidence that members of the Polisario are involved in terrorism and trafficking in the region.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the Polisario has consistently hindered efforts to promote durable solutions to the refugee crisis, refusing to allow the UN to conduct a census and register the refugees or conduct a voluntary repatriation program for those refugees who wish to return to their homes and families in Morocco.<sup>10</sup>

### **Who are the Polisario’s allies?**

For most of its existence, the Polisario has been supported militarily, financially, and diplomatically by Algeria, which has provided the Polisario with territory, arms, and money.<sup>11</sup> Although Algeria is the Polisario’s longest-standing and strongest supporter, the group also had close ties with Libya and Cuba. Libya, under Gaddafi, provided significant, albeit inconsistent support for the Polisario in the early years, arming and training fighters starting in 1973.<sup>12</sup> Credible news reports citing NATO sources likewise reported that several hundred Polisario fighters supported the Gaddafi regime during the Libyan civil war that ousted the regime.<sup>13</sup> Cuba continues to provide education and training for Polisario cadres and Abdelaziz maintains close relations with the Cuban leadership and their allies in Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Polisario chief warns of armed struggle,” *Agence France Presse*, May 11, 2013, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hLLnJXChABRhgbyEU1Fypu5vsk\\_w?docId=CNG.481ac8aab6040095cc700e62c5d22c1b.731](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hLLnJXChABRhgbyEU1Fypu5vsk_w?docId=CNG.481ac8aab6040095cc700e62c5d22c1b.731).

<sup>10</sup> Smith, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Shelley, p. 26, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Con Coughlin, “Libya: Col Gaddafi 'has spent £2.1m on mercenaries'.” *The Telegraph*, April 21, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8464254/Libya-Col-Gaddafi-has-spent-2.1m-on-mercenaries.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “‘Get Well Soon’ Letter for Castro,” *Washington Post*, August 14, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/13/AR2006081300647.html>