

“We are a small nation, but when you are fighting with your heart, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose, except your chains.”

-Malainin Lakhai, Secretary General of Saharawi Journalists and Writers Union

The war over the Western Sahara has passed through many stages, but the conflict between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front – the independence movement of the Saharawi people – has kept the Maghreb region in a state of tension for over three decades. At stake is not only the stability of the region, but also the legitimacy of the UN, and the lives of over 150,000 Saharawi refugees living in neighboring Algeria. In the 1960s, when decolonization was picking up steam around the globe, the UN began to put pressure on Spain to allow for the self-determination of the Saharawis of the Western Sahara, who had lived under Spanish control since 1884. In 1967, the Saharawis organized a non-violent resistance to the Spanish colonial presence. When nonviolent protests failed, a group of Saharawi university students studying in Morocco formed a guerilla movement in 1973 to oppose Spanish rule through armed struggle.



In 1975, (while Spain began to pull its people out in the early 1970s, it did not fully remove its administrators and relinquish its control of the territory until February 1976 – 4 months after the Green March) the Moroccan King, Hassan II, sent the Royal Moroccan Army (FAR) and over 350,000 Moroccan civilians into the Western Sahara (an event which became known as the Green March) to occupy and annex the territory. At this time, tens of thousands of Saharawis fled the Moroccan forces and settled in neighboring Algeria. On February 27th, 1976, the day after Spain unofficially abandoned its former colony, the Polisario Front proclaimed the creation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as the legitimate government of the Western

Sahara, which functions largely in exile to this day. The Polisario Front's new Saharawi People's Liberation Army (ALPS) quickly turned their focus to the Moroccans and Mauritians in their drive for independence.

In 1979, the Mauritians renounced their claims to the territory, while the armed conflict with Morocco continued until a UN-backed ceasefire was signed in 1991. Nineteen years later, the stalemate endures, with Morocco controlling the cities and coastal areas on the western side of a 1,500-mile-long military wall it constructed in the 1980s, and the Polisario Front administering the eastern side.

With the ceasefire – which was also sponsored by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) – signed, the UN Mission for a Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) deployed to begin preparations for a free and democratic referendum for the Saharawi people. Throughout the decade, MINURSO struggled to create a list of voters that was acceptable to both the Moroccans and the Saharawis. A key sticking point has been Morocco's insistence that its settlers who had arrived in the territory from 1975 onwards be allowed to vote, while the Polisario Front seeks to have the vote confined only to those Saharawis refugees forced to flee in 1975, and those still living in the Western Sahara. MINURSO remains in the Western Sahara to monitor the ceasefire and has continued to support an eventual referendum, though little concrete progress has been made on the issue. Two internationally-supported peace plans advanced in the last decade have failed to bring the two sides together, and current efforts have been directed at fostering greater cooperation and communication between Morocco and the Polisario Front.

Eighteen years after the signing of the ceasefire, the goal of self-determination for the Saharawis and the Western Sahara thus remains distant. The current status quo – called a situation of “neither war nor peace” by the Saharawis – is unsustainable.