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# The Western Sahara issue, a timeline

– By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (08.08.2020) – The Western Sahara dispute, dating back to 1975, has become one of the longest running regional conflicts in the world. Since the ceasefire of 1991, Morocco and the Polisario Front have maintained a stalemate in a conflict which is at the center of a complex set of regional and foreign interests encouraging its prolongation. Twenty-seven years have passed since the guns fell silent and there is still no political solution in sight.

The UN and the international community recognise the dangerous potential of this conflict to destabilise North Africa and Southern Europe, and seek ways forward. While its roots are intertwined with the competition between Algeria and Morocco for regional hegemony, other forces have contributed to the conflict's persistence or are trying to get involved.

This study first sets the scene with a timeline running from the Spanish colonisation in the mid-1880s until the cease-fire brokered by the UN in 1991.

Since the annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco in 1975, the Southern Regions of the Kingdom have experienced a significant demographic growth and an impressive economic development.

Over the last four decades, the Polisario has faced serious internal and external challenges. The lack of accountability with regard to its human rights violations, the lack of internal democracy and freedom of political thought, defections of high officials, cases of corruption and embezzlement of humanitarian aid from the UN, US, EU and its member states are all sources of concern. The Polisario youth are now growing impatient, leaving the Tindouf camps and creating their own political space in the diaspora.

For forty years, the UN and the MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) have been powerless in carving out a political solution that could be accepted by all parties in the conflict. The question is also raised about whether the UN decolonisation instruments are

still appropriate to solve territorial and sovereignty issues inherited from the last century.

On the one hand, the **Kingdom** of Morocco has proposed an autonomy plan inside its current territorial boundaries, keeping a minimum of powers at the national level and granting many political competences to the regional level. On the other hand, the Polisario along with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic **Republic** (SADR) claim self-determination, independence and possession of a territory that was an undeveloped desert forty years ago.

For years, the European Union along with its member states have been involved in joint projects with the Kingdom of Morocco aiming at the economic and human development of Western Sahara and its maritime zone in the framework of its Southern Neighbourhood Policy. This report aims at shedding some light on the historical roots and developments of the conflict, various human aspects of it, its political and economic dimensions, some human rights issues and the dynamics at work between the parties. May this report contribute to a better understanding of the issue by the EU and its member states.

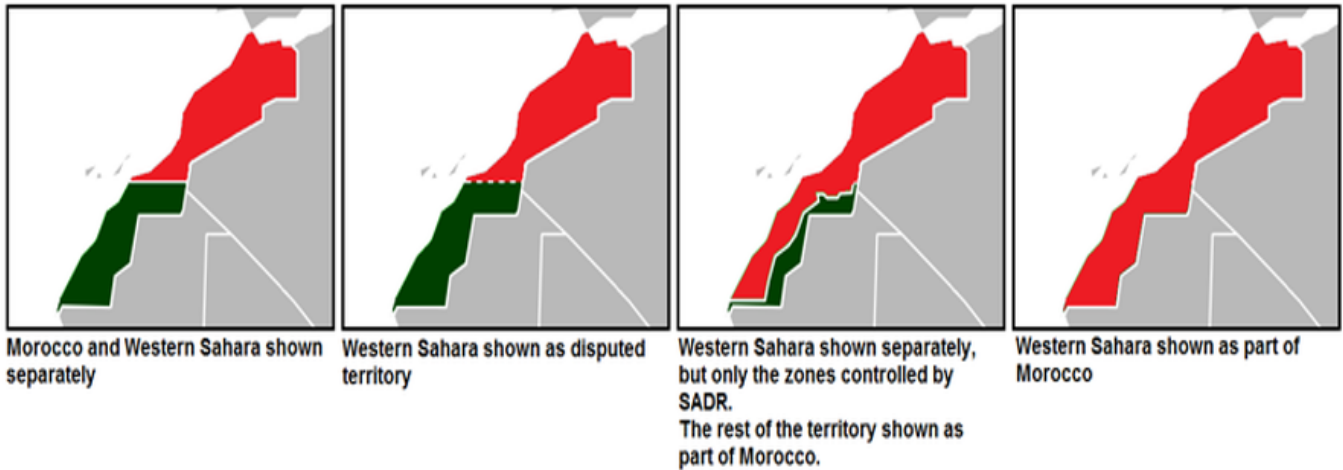
## **Western Sahara : A timeline**

Western Sahara is a sparsely-populated area of mostly desert situated on the northwest coast of Africa.

A 2700 km long buffer strip, or “berm” (sand wall) with

landmines and fortifications, stretches the length of the disputed territory and separates the Moroccan-ruled western portion from the eastern area controlled by the Polisario.

#### 4 WAYS TO SHOW WESTERN SAHARA



**November 1884 – December 1885:** At the Berlin conference (a.k.a. Congo Conference or West Africa Conference), the European colonial powers agreed on the division of their spheres of influence in Africa. The conference ushered in a period of heightened colonial activity by European powers, which eliminated or overrode most existing forms of African autonomy and self-governance. Spain seized control of the Western Sahara, an area formerly populated by Berber tribes, and was recognised on her request as the colonial power of the territory. In the previous centuries, it had already used that region as a port for the slave trade and by the 1700s for economic and commercial activities.

**1901:** On 30 March, France and Spain signed the first treaty for the delimitation of borders of Guinea and Western Sahara. It was completed by other treaties between both countries in 1904 and 1920.

**1912:** The Spanish protectorate in Morocco was established on 27 November 1912 by a treaty between France and Spain that converted the Spanish sphere of influence in Morocco into a formal protectorate.

**1934:** Western Sahara became a Spanish province known as Spanish Sahara. After 1939 and the outbreak of World War II, this area was administered by Spanish Morocco.

**20 July 1946 – 10 January 1958:** Establishment and duration of Spanish West Africa (which included Western Sahara, Spanish Southern Moroccan Protectorate and Sidi Ifni).

**1956:** On 7 April 1956, Morocco became independent after the departure of France. In the same year, Morocco regained a part of the Rif from Spain.<sup>[1]</sup>

**1957:** Newly-independent Morocco laid centuries-old claim to Western Sahara.

**1958:** Morocco recovered Tarfaya (Atlantic coast) from Spain.

**1963:** UN Special Committee on Decolonisation declared Western Sahara a “non-selfgoverning territory to be decolonised” in accordance with General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 Dec. 1960.

**December 1965:** The UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution on Western Sahara, requesting Spain decolonise the Territory (General Assembly resolution 2072 (XX) of 17 Dec. 1965).

**December 1966:** The UN General Assembly requested Spain organise, under UN supervision, a referendum on self-determination (General Assembly resolution 2229 (XXI) of 20 Dec. 1966). The demand was repeated each year from 1967 to 1973 but with no effect.

**1969:** Morocco regained Sidi Ifni from Spain.

**29 April 1973:** The Frente Para la Liberación de Saguia Al Hamra y Rio de Oro (Polisario) was founded in Zouerate (Mauritania) with the purpose of obtaining independence for Western Sahara.

**10 May 1973:** First military action of Polisario against Spanish forces.

**20 May 1973:** Creation of the Polisario Front, the indigenous Saharawi independence movement.

**December 1974:** The Spanish census, a prerequisite for the self-determination referendum, registered 73,497 local inhabitants in Western Sahara.

**October 1975:** The Decolonization Committee issued a report

requesting the UN General Assembly to enable the local population to choose their future in free and fair circumstances.

**16 October 1975:** The International Court of Justice in The Hague issued an opinion on the matter, stating that ties between the Moroccan sultan and some tribes in then-Spanish Sahara *had* existed, but that these ties were *not* sufficient to abrogate Western Sahara's right to self-determination. A similar ruling was issued with regard to Mauritania. Thus, the court recommended the UN continue to pursue self-determination for the Sahrawis, enabling them to choose for themselves whether they wanted Spanish Sahara to turn into an independent state, or to be annexed to Morocco or Mauritania.

**6 November 1975: The Green March:** With General Franco on his deathbed in Spain, the then-colonial power agreed to withdraw from Western Sahara and on 6 November 1975, Morocco's King Hassan II immediately organised the so-called "Green March", which saw 350,000 unarmed Moroccan civilians cross the border in Tarfaya into Western Sahara to seize control of the territory. Morocco annexed two-thirds of the region. This move generated armed resistance by the Polisario Front movement of the local Sahrawi people, who wanted independence. Their guerrilla war against Morocco would last until the cease-fire in 1991.

**14 November 1975:** Spain established a tripartite administration in Western Sahara with Morocco (Saguia el Hamra) and Mauritania (Rio de Oro) after the signature of the Madrid Accord, but it never entered into effect.

**28 November 1975:** 67 of the 102 members of the '*djemaa*' (an assembly of notables appointed by the Spanish Government representing the Saharan tribes) dissolved the assembly in the so-called 'Proclamation of Guelta Zemmour'.

**11 December 1975:** The first Moroccan troops arrived in Laayoune. Fighting erupted between Frente Polisario and Moroccan forces.

**20 December 1975:** Mauritanian troops took over the cities of Tichla and La Güera.

**27-29 January 1976:** Battle of Angala between Moroccan and Polisario forces. Rabat denounced the presence of Algerian units alongside the Polisario. Algeria denied the allegations.

**26 February 1976:** Last Spanish troops withdrew from Villa Cisneros/Dakhla.

**27 February 1976: The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR):** The Polisario announced the creation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a one-party self-proclaimed state with a government-in-exile in Algeria. Thousands of Sahrawi refugees fled to western Algeria to set up camps near the town of Tindouf. In Laayoune, a newly constituted '*djemaa*' votes for the integration of the Western Sahara into Morocco.

**October-November 1977:** French air and special forces launched an operation in support of Mauritania against Polisario



(Operation 'Lamantine'). French troops remained in Mauritania until 1980.

**17-20 July 1979:** At a Summit in Monrovia, Liberia, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now AU (African Union), launched a mediation initiative for a peaceful solution to the Western Sahara conflict by calling for a cease-fire and a referendum. The proposal is rejected by Morocco.

**15 August 1979:** With the signature of the Algiers Treaty, Mauritania renounced to its all claims on Western Sahara leaving Morocco to annex its share of the territory.

**16 July 1980:** The SADR formally applied for membership in the OAU.

**1981:** Morocco began the construction of the first of a series of defensive sand walls, or '*berms*'.

**24-27 June 1981:** At the 18<sup>th</sup> OAU Summit in Nairobi, King Hassan II expresses his willingness to hold a referendum, taking into account Morocco's historical claims to the Territory.

**1982:** The 'Saharan Arab Democratic Republic' (SADR) was admitted to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Morocco suspended its participation to the OAU.

**1984:** Morocco withdrew from the OAU to protest against the membership of SADR and the presence of the Polisario at the summit of the organisation.

**1 July 1985 – 11 August 1988:** A joint effort of UN-OAU led to the presentation to Morocco and the Polisario of the 'Settlement Proposals' for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. These proposals were reiterated in the Secretary-General's Report S/22464, of 9 April 1991, and were adopted by Security Council Resolution 690 of 19 April 1991. It would be known as the 'Settlement Plan'.

**16 April 1987:** End of the construction of 6<sup>th</sup> defensive line ('*berm*') by the Moroccan Armed Forces.

**1991:** The United Nations brokered a ceasefire between the two parties. The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established by Security Council resolution 690 of 29 April 1991<sup>[2]</sup> in accordance with settlement proposals accepted on 30 August 1988 by Morocco and the Polisario.

Sources: MINURSO and BBC Country Profiles

[1] <http://www.europemaroc.com/polisario.html>

[2]

[http://www.un.org/fr/documents/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/690\(1991\)](http://www.un.org/fr/documents/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/690(1991))

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