

tober 1975 final report indicated that most of the population favored independence and opposed Moroccan and Mauritanian claims.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the ICJ asserted that Western Sahara, known as Rio de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra during Spanish colonization, was not a territory belonging to no one (terra nullius).<sup>3</sup>

In tandem with the ICJ's judgment, and to bolster Moroccan claims to Sahrawi territories, King Hassan II announced the "Green March," involving the mobilization of 350,000 Moroccan people towards Western Sahara. Despite Spanish efforts to impede the march, demonstrators arrived in Western Sahara on November 6, 1975,<sup>4</sup> generating support among Moroccan followers and political leaders. However, this action prompted widespread international reactions, particularly from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which condemned the march and called for Morocco to "withdraw from the Territory of Western Sahara all the participants in the march."<sup>5</sup> Consequently, on November 16, 1975, Spain opted to withdraw from Western Sahara and transfer the administration of the region to both Morocco and Mauritania.

The POLISARIO, seeking independence since its inception in 1974, did not accept the Moroccan-Mauritanian occupation and launched a resistance campaign. In the 1970s, approximately 160,000 Sahrawis left Western Sahara for refugee camps in Algeria (where POLISARIO has its main base in Tindouf) and Mauritania.<sup>6</sup> On February 27, 1976, POLISARIO announced the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and declared its first government on March 4. After a coup in Mauritania, the new government signed a peace treaty with POLISARIO, rejecting all territorial claims. Morocco took advantage of the situation, moving to seize the former Mauritanian-occupied areas. Sahrawi fighters, supported by Algeria, declared war against Moroccan troops.<sup>7</sup> On April 19, 1991, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 690 (1991), establishing the MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) and outlining arrangements for a free and fair referendum on choosing between independence and integration into Morocco.<sup>8</sup>

For years, Morocco and POLISARIO disputed ways of identifying voters for the referendum, each aiming to ensure results supporting their desired goals. In March 1997, then-U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker as his personal envoy to reach a common understanding. Baker established a new agreement to restart voter identification, completed in 1999 with 86,000 voters identified.

## Western Sahara: A Forgotten Conflict in a Changing World

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### **A. Introduction:**

The Western Sahara conflict stands out as one of the most enduring disputes globally, persisting for nearly five decades since the UN General Assembly mandated a self-determination referendum. Regrettably, despite the passage of time, the conflict remains as intractable as ever. Presently, Western Sahara unequivocally holds the distinction of being the largest territory still present on the United Nations' roster of "non-self-governing territories." Within the framework of the UN, it is designated as a region that has yet to realize its inherent right to determine its own destiny.

In 1881, the region now recognized as Western Sahara came under Spanish colonial rule. However, in the mid-1970s, Spain initiated plans to decolonize the area, envisioning its transformation into a close, allied, and independent state through a self-determination referendum. Despite these intentions, both Mauritania and Morocco, neighboring countries, rejected Spain's proposal and asserted their respective claims over the territory. While historical reasons were cited, the underlying motivation for their claims seemed to revolve around the abundant natural resources in Western Sahara, including phosphates, fish, and crude oil, intensifying the dispute over these valuable reserves.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the strategic geographic location of the region played a significant role in the contention. To address the complex situation, King Hassan II of Morocco sought the intervention of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to reassess the status of the contested territories. In response, the United Nations dispatched a special commission to Western Sahara in May 1975 to evaluate the on-the-ground circumstances. The commission's Oc-

## 2. SADR:

The Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was declared on February 27th, 1976, by POLISARIO. In 1982, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) recognized SADR as a member and acknowledged it as the sovereign government of Western Sahara. Over the years, more than 80 countries have recognized the sovereignty of SADR. Algeria has been a crucial supporter, providing military, diplomatic, and logistical assistance. SADR administers 22 camps in Algeria for Sahrawi refugees. Notably, the United States does not recognize SADR's sovereignty over Western Sahara, and Spanish authorities have ceased recognizing travel and identity documents issued by SADR.

## 3. Morocco:

Morocco plays a central role in the conflict, having previously been at war with POLISARIO. Recently, the ceasefire that began in 1991 was violated, yet military tensions are not acute. Morocco has strained relations with Algeria, not only for supporting POLISARIO but also due to historical issues, including a border dispute.<sup>11</sup> Morocco is in good relationship with USA that provided it with military, economic, and diplomatic support, and at the time, Morocco played a proxy role on behalf of USA and the west in fighting nationalist forces that received help from the Soviet Union<sup>12</sup>. After SADR was recognized by the OAU/AU, Morocco boycotted the organization. On July 18, 2016, Morocco made the decision to rejoin the African Union, from which it had been absent for 32 years. Its membership was accepted on December 29, 2017.

## 4. Mauritania:

In 1979, POLISARIO succeeded in defeating Mauritania, leading to a military coup and a new government recognizing SADR and declaring neutrality in the Sahrawi Moroccan conflict. Mauritania distanced itself from all parties involved in the conflict. In recent years, Mauritania has adopted a new policy of rapprochement toward both Morocco and Algeria.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Algeria:

While Algeria has not declared any territorial claims on Western Sahara, it consistently provides political, financial, and military support for POLISARIO's self-determination goals.<sup>14</sup> Algeria has voted in favor of all UN resolutions advocating for a referendum and has cooperated with the UNHCR. Despite historically close ties with France, economic

However, the agreement faced appeals from 130,000 individuals submitted to MINURSO, backed by Morocco, who were denied voter identification.

In 2000, UN Security Council Resolution 1301 (2000) asked the parties to seek alternative solutions to the referendum. The UN concluded that a genuine application of the agreement plan required complete collaboration between Morocco and POLISARIO, as well as the support of Algeria and Mauritania. The UN recognized that addressing 130,000 appeals could be a lengthy process, and cooperation difficulties between Morocco and POLISARIO were evident. Nevertheless, the UN declared the need for a mechanism to implement the outcomes of a referendum. This reluctance to compromise gradually frustrated the Security Council, leading it to renew the mandate for MINURSO every six months.<sup>9</sup>

## B. Actor Analysis & Relationship Mapping

### 1. POLISARIO:

POLISARIO originated in May 1973 as an insurgency and is primarily composed of the native nomadic population of the Western Sahara region, known as the Saharawis. In 1976, the Front relocated to Algeria, where the organization found sanctuary and received substantial material support, including arms, medicine, food, and water. Libya also played a significant role by providing POLISARIO with arms, ammunition, training, and financial aid.

In 1979, a peace agreement was reached between Mauritania and POLISARIO. However, the situation escalated when Morocco seized Mauritania's portion of Western Sahara, leading to a protracted and intense conflict between the two parties. POLISARIO, backed by Algerian diplomatic support, assumed a crucial political role, gaining recognition from the United Nations. Furthermore, its standing in the global political community remained largely undiminished.<sup>10</sup>

The Tindouf refugee camps, where Saharawis reside, offer substantial support to POLISARIO, both in terms of resources and personnel. The UN acknowledgment of POLISARIO's role underscores its significance as a Key Actor in the Western Sahara conflict.

### 8. France:

France's stance toward the conflict fluctuated with changes in presidential leadership. Under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, France adopted a pro-Moroccan stance, transitioning to neutrality under socialist President François Mitterrand,<sup>20</sup> and later becoming Morocco's main weapons provider. France offered extensive political support to Morocco, especially at the UN Security Council, collaborating with the USA to block resolutions related to the conflict.<sup>21</sup>

### 9. MINURSO:

Established because of UN Security Council resolution 690 (1991), MINURSO was tasked with overseeing the referendum in Western Sahara. Comprising 225 uniformed personnel from various countries, MINURSO's mandate includes police officers, military observers, troops, local and international civilian staff, and UN volunteers. Notably, the UN General Assembly recognizes POLISARIO as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. The UN Security Council renewed MINURSO's mandate in 2015, rejecting AU recommendations for modifications, such as human rights monitoring.<sup>22</sup> On 27 August 2021 the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres announced the appointment of Alexander Ivanko of the Russian Federation as his new Special Representative for Western Sahara and Head of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).<sup>23</sup> On 30 October 2023, the Security Council adopted resolution 2703 (2023), renewing the mandate of MINURSO for another year, until 31 October 2024.

### 10. OAU/AU:

After SADR joined the OAU in 1984 as a full member, Morocco suspended its participation and eventually withdrew from the organization, becoming the only African country outside its membership. Despite SADR's membership, the OAU/AU has struggled to propose new approaches to break the impasse and reinitiate conflict resolution.<sup>24</sup> During the 28th African Summit, convened in Addis Ababa on December 29, 2017, 39 members agreed to accept Morocco's membership in the African Union without the need for a vote.<sup>25</sup>

### 11. Libya:

In 1975, Libya initially supported POLISARIO with money, weapons, and military training. However, to prevent the "balkanization" of the Maghrib, Colonel Qadhafi withdrew

factors led to a change in French policy, aligning more closely with Morocco.<sup>15</sup> Algeria, however, remained a vocal advocate for Sahrawis in international forums, being the first country to recognize SADR. Algeria is a member of the UN, OAU/AU, and the League of Arab States (LAS).

### 6. Spain:

Caught between its interests with Algeria and Morocco, Spain has chosen to maintain normal relations with both countries, balancing internal and international pressures. Despite its involvement in the Western Sahara conflict,<sup>16</sup> Spain has normalized relationships with both POLISARIO and Morocco.

Spain now supports Rabat's "autonomy plan" which would allow Morocco to continue exercising its sovereignty over the territory while the Saharawi people would be allowed their own government.

Very recently, Spain and Morocco successfully addressed bilateral issues where numerous agreements on trade, investment, migration, and security were signed.<sup>17</sup>

### 7. USA:

The United States, acknowledging the Madrid Treaty of 1975, supported Moroccan administrative authority without sovereignty over Western Sahara. The U.S. stance varied over the years, ranging from large-scale economic and military aid, military advisors, and logistical assistance to neutrality during President Carter's administration. However, after the 9/11 attacks, consecutive U.S. administrations emphasized that the only reasonable solution is a political compromise under UN auspices.<sup>18</sup> Although the USA has not officially recognized POLISARIO or SADR, it funds MINURSO without contributing manpower.

The Biden administration is grappling with the diplomatic repercussions of Trump's controversial recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020. While the U.S. remains committed to supporting Morocco militarily, including providing \$10 million worth of military equipment, the establishment of a promised U.S. consulate in the town of Dakhla poses a dilemma. Reversing the recognition could strain relations with Morocco, but establishing the consulate would contradict U.N. policy. Currently, the consulate in Dakhla remains inactive.<sup>19</sup>

2017, the UN Secretary-General appointed former German President Horst Köhler as the new Personal Envoy to Western Sahara. Köhler's term was marked by renewed diplomatic efforts, including the convening of roundtable talks in Switzerland in December 2018. However, he resigned from his position in May 2019 for personal reasons. On October 6, 2021, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres announced the appointment of Staffan de Mistura of Italy as his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara.<sup>27</sup>

### **C. Issues and Challenges**

From its inception, the Western Sahara conflict has transcended being merely a bilateral concern between Morocco and the POLISARIO front. Instead, it has become intricately linked to broader geopolitical considerations, particularly those shaping the relationship between Morocco and Algeria. Furthermore, over time, as the conflict has evolved, a host of new issues have surfaced, extending into various domains and perspectives.

#### **1. Sovereignty and Independence Issues:**

Morocco asserts Western Sahara as an integral part of its sovereign territory, contending that it was unjustly separated during the era of Franco-Spanish colonialism. In contrast, the POLISARIO front advocates for the right to independence through self-determination, a principle that the United Nations has consistently endorsed as the primary framework for resolving the issue since the 1960s.

#### **2. Geopolitical Issues:**

Tensions persist in the relationship between Morocco and Algeria for various reasons, with a key source being the border dispute stemming from the colonial-era delineation dictated by France. Additionally, Morocco maintains a historical claim to what it considers its "lost provinces," now situated in Western Algeria. This enduring territorial issue continues to contribute to the strained geopolitical dynamics between the two nations.

#### **3. Security Issues:**

The persistent tensions in the region, coupled with the absence of a unified central authority, have given rise to a haven for criminal and terrorist elements. This evolving scenario in the region has attracted the attention of the West, notably the United States. Transnational

support and adopted a neutral stance. Due to the crisis in Libya, the country is currently unable to play any role in the Western Sahara conflict.

#### **12. Cuba:**

During the Cold War era, Cuba played a pivotal role in supporting colonized nations striving for independence. In the context of the Western Sahara conflict, Cuba extended substantial assistance to the Sahrawis. This support included opening secondary schools and universities to Sahrawi students, providing them with advanced education opportunities. Additionally, the Cuban government supplied financial aid and weapons to POLISARIO.

The aid provided by Cuba to the Sahrawis during this period led to suspicions and concerns among certain parties. Some believed that Cuba's assistance might be influencing the Sahrawis toward adopting communist ideologies. This perception, particularly troubling for the United States during the Cold War, created an opportunity for Morocco to position itself as a bulwark against communism in the region.<sup>26</sup>

However, with the end of the Cold War and Cuba's shift toward resolving its internal challenges, the country ceased to be a significant actor in the Western Sahara conflict. The geopolitical dynamics of the post-Cold War era, coupled with Cuba's changing priorities, contributed to its diminishing role in the Sahrawi struggle for self-determination.

In April 2017, Morocco decided to restore its diplomatic relations with Cuba after a 37-year hiatus. The Kingdom affirmed that it would soon open its embassy in Havana. Nevertheless, Cuban leader Raúl Castro stated during the eighth congress of the ruling Communist Party in Cuba in April 2021 that their stance on just causes, especially the Western Sahara and Palestine issues, would not change.

#### **13. UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy (SGPE):**

Since the beginning of the conflict, the UN has attempted to resolve the issue by appointing a special envoy. James Baker III (USA), appointed in 1997, played a vital role in pushing forward negotiations. He proposed solutions known as "Baker Plan I" in 2001 and "Baker Plan II" in 2003, both rejected by the involved parties. Baker resigned in 2004, and Peter Van Walsum (NL) took over until 2008. Christopher Ross, appointed in 2009 and served until 2017. Despite his efforts and various diplomatic initiatives, he was unable to broker a mutually acceptable solution between POLISARIO and Morocco during his tenure. In

ing that a referendum would be conducted to allow the Sahrawi people to determine their future.<sup>35</sup> On November 13, 2020, the ceasefire was breached after being in effect for around 30 years. This occurred following a military operation by the Moroccan army in the buffer zone of El Guerguerat, the southernmost region of the Western Sahara, aimed at reopening the road to Mauritania, which had been closed by advocates for independence. Subsequently, the Polisario Front declared war, marking the end of the ceasefire.

The legacy of the war has left a significant challenge to address: the presence of minefields that have had profound and tragic consequences on the local population.

Another consequential consideration involves Morocco's potential withdrawal from Western Sahara. This raises the issue of managing the significant number of soldiers stationed in the region who currently utilize the expansive territory, particularly for training purposes. The military aspects of the conflict continue to pose intricate challenges that necessitate careful consideration and resolution.

## **D. Interests of the Actors**

### **1. POLISARIO/SADR:**

- a) National Sovereignty: Preserving the sovereignty of Western Sahara and ensuring that the Sahrawi people can determine their own destiny.
- b) Right to Self-Determination: Advocating for the unequivocal right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination in accordance with international norms.
- c) Non-military Resolution: Preferring a diplomatic and political resolution to the conflict rather than resorting to military actions.
- d) Negotiation: Emphasizing the necessity of negotiations as the pathway to resolving the prolonged conflict. Sahrawi authorities denounce UN silence on Moroccan violations of 1991 ceasefire in Western Sahara. In October 2022, Ibrahim Ghali, President of Western Sahara, and Secretary-General of the Polisario Front, affirmed to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres his commitment to a just, peaceful solution, aligning with international legality, UN resolutions, and African Union decisions, as stipulated by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).<sup>36</sup>

organized crime, including illicit drug trafficking,<sup>28</sup> alongside a discernible presence of the “alien” AQIM (Al-Qaeda for Jihad in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb)<sup>29</sup> and ISIS<sup>30</sup> (Islamic State in Iraq and Sham), poses a significant threat to all endeavors aimed at realizing a desired solution.

### **4. Economic Issues:**

Morocco, along with other nations, has been actively investing in the territory under Moroccan control and the territorial waters of Western Sahara. These investments have heightened the conflict between Morocco and the POLISARIO, prompting the Secretary-General of the POLISARIO to lodge frequent complaints with the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The economic dimensions of the dispute add a layer of complexity to the ongoing tensions in the region.<sup>31</sup>

### **5. Humanitarian Issues:**

The Western Sahara conflict has resulted in numerous human rights abuses, including:

- a) Aerial Bombardments: Moroccan planes employing Napalm and White Phosphorus have targeted Sahrawi refugees within Western Saharan territories.<sup>32</sup>
- b) Mass Migration: Tens of thousands of Sahrawi civilians have migrated from Western Sahara to the Algerian town of Tindouf, seeking refuge from the conflict.
- c) Compulsory Expropriation: In response to the Green March<sup>33</sup>, the Algerian government compelled the expropriation and removal of tens of thousands of Moroccan civilians from Algeria.
- d) Human Rights Abuses: Both the POLISARIO Front, the Moroccan government, and the Algerian government have been implicated in human rights abuses and severe violations of the Geneva Convention. Accusations of violating the human rights of the Sahrawi people living under their control are exchanged between the POLISARIO and Morocco. This situation underscores the urgent need for addressing humanitarian concerns in the region.<sup>34</sup>

### **6. Military Issues:**

Previously engaged in hostilities, the two parties entered a ceasefire monitored by MINURSO that has been in effect since 1991. The ceasefire was predicated on the understand-

#### 4. Algeria:

- a) Fear of Moroccan Expansionism: Algeria's historical experience, particularly Morocco's claims over parts of its territory and attempts to seize southern areas in 1963, has instilled a fear of Moroccan expansionism. This fear serves as a significant driver for Algeria's active opposition to Moroccan influence in the region.
- b) Geopolitical Interest: Algeria has consistently advocated for regional sovereignty, positioning itself against Moroccan ventures and asserting its influence over the Maghreb region. Supporting an independent Western Sahara aligns with Algeria's broader geopolitical interests in the region.
- c) Prevention of Regional Dominance: Algeria's support for the self-determination of Western Sahara serves as a countermeasure to prevent Moroccan dominance and influence over the Maghreb, safeguarding its own geopolitical position.<sup>38</sup>

#### 5. Spain:

- a) Resource Exploitation: Spain's primary interest in the Western Sahara crisis was linked to the exploitation of valuable natural resources in the region. The Madrid Accord, in which Morocco and Mauritania gained rights over Western Sahara, was shaped to ensure Spain's continued access to these resources.
- b) Relations with Morocco: Spain, keen on maintaining favorable relations with Morocco, played a strategic role in shaping the Madrid Accord. This was driven by Spain's interests in securing control over its enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla and protecting the rights of thousands of Spaniards living and working inside Morocco.
- c) Spain's approach to the Western Sahara crisis reflects a balancing act between historical regrets, resource interests, and diplomatic considerations. The shift towards supporting peace and autonomy can be seen as a response to the complex historical legacy and a desire to contribute positively to the resolution of the longstanding conflict.

#### 6. United States:

- a) Regional Stability: The U.S. perceives the Moroccan autonomy proposal as a potential remedy for securing and stabilizing the region. The belief is that an independent state in Western Sahara could pose a risk to regional stability, becoming a potential sanctuary for

#### 2. Morocco:

- a) Historical Claim: Morocco contends that Western Sahara was historically part of the Moroccan sultanate, emphasizing the notion of territorial continuity before Spanish colonization.
- b) Nationalist Unity: Utilizing the Western Sahara issue to foster nationalist sentiments among Moroccans and rally them around the cause of reclaiming the 'Southern Provinces.'
- c) Economic Considerations: Critics argue that Morocco's assertion of control over Western Sahara may be motivated by the region's rich natural resources, including phosphates, fish, and crude oil. Some researchers suggest that the monarchy has exploited the protracted conflict to justify economic struggles and challenges.<sup>37</sup>
- d) Geostategic Competition: Acknowledging the broader geopolitical context, particularly the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria for dominance in the Maghreb region. The Western Sahara conflict serves as a backdrop for the ongoing competition between these two North African nations.

#### 3. Mauritania:

- a) Sovereignty and Independence: Mauritania's primary interests have consistently centered around safeguarding its sovereignty, national unity, and independence.
- b) Concerns about Morocco: Historically, Mauritania viewed Morocco as a potential threat to its interests, particularly in the context of the idea of Greater Morocco. Faced with these concerns, Mauritania took specific measures to counter any perceived threats to its sovereignty.
- c) Shift in Relations with Morocco: Following the recognition of its independence by Morocco, Mauritania adjusted its stance, moving towards a supportive position. This shift was influenced by a desire to align with Morocco and share in the potential benefits, particularly those associated with the Western Sahara's abundant natural resources.
- d) Prioritizing Sovereignty: Mauritania's withdrawal of forces from Western Sahara and the declaration of no further interests in the region underscore its prioritization of national sovereignty over territorial ambitions.

strategic importance in the fight against terrorism.<sup>39</sup>

#### **8. MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara):**

- a) Mission Fulfillment: The foremost interest for MINURSO is the successful accomplishment of its mission as defined by the United Nations Security Council. This includes facilitating the implementation of the peacekeeping mandate in Western Sahara, contributing to stability, and working towards the resolution of the longstanding conflict.
- b) Global Peace and Security: MINURSO's broader interest aligns with the United Nations' overarching goal of global peace and security. By successfully executing its mandate in Western Sahara, MINURSO contributes to the larger international efforts to prevent conflict and maintain stability.

#### **9. OAU/AU (Organization of African Unity/African Union):**

- a) Commitment to Stability: The AU has a keen interest in the case of Western Sahara due to its commitment to promoting peace, security, and stability on the African continent.
- b) Advocacy for Self-Determination and Peaceful Resolution: The AU supports the right to self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, in line with the principles of the organization. The AU encourages a peaceful resolution to the conflict and advocates for the implementation of relevant United Nations resolutions and international law.
- c) Mediation for Lasting Stability: The AU's involvement includes efforts to mediate and facilitate dialogue between the parties involved to find a just and lasting solution. The organization aims to contribute to the stability of the region and address issues related to decolonization, respecting the aspirations and rights of the people of Western Sahara.

#### **10. Libya:**

- a) Qaddafi's Revolutionary Leadership: In 1969, Colonel Qaddafi's revolutionary leadership came to power in Libya. This leadership actively supported liberation wars globally, including in Western Sahara. Qaddafi aimed to share his revolutionary experiences, gain allies, and build support, particularly in North Africa.
- b) Post-Qaddafi Era: Following the fall of Qaddafi, Libya underwent significant political changes. The new authorities, represented by the National Transitional Council, faced challenges in managing internal problems. This shift in focus and priorities resulted in

terrorist activities in both the Maghreb and Europe.

- b) Counterterrorism Strategy: Recognizing the impact of the ongoing conflict on regional security, the U.S. considers resolving the Western Sahara conflict as crucial for fortifying its counterterrorism strategy in North Africa and the Sahel region.
- c) Economic Integration: The U.S. aligns its interest in resolving the conflict with broader goals of fostering regional economic integration. Addressing security concerns is seen as interconnected with promoting economic stability in the region.
- d) Strategic Partnership with Morocco: The United States views a resilient and stable Morocco as a crucial anchor in North Africa. Cultivating ties with the Moroccan autonomy proposal aligns with the U.S. interest in maintaining a robust and unwavering strategic partnership in the region.

#### **7. France:**

- a) Historical Ties and Post-Colonial Relations: France's policy of maintaining strong ties with its former colonies is a driving factor in its stance. The cultural, economic, and political interests that France holds in its ex-colonies, including Morocco, contribute to its position on the Western Sahara conflict.
- b) French Citizens in Morocco: The significant number of French citizens who stayed in Morocco after the end of French colonial rule is an influential factor. Preserving their well-being and interests aligns with France's foreign policy objectives.
- c) Economic Interests: Morocco's control over Western Sahara's natural resources, especially phosphate and fish-rich seashores, is of great economic interest to French companies. Morocco being the third-largest export market for France in Africa reinforces the economic motivations behind France's stance.
- d) Oil Exploration Agreement: The agreement between the French oil giant TotalEnergies and Morocco in 2001 to explore oil off the coast of Western Sahara further solidifies economic interests in the region.
- e) Counterterrorism Cooperation: The growing threat of terrorism after 9/11 has made the Sahel and the Maghreb regions crucial areas of interest for Western countries, including France. Morocco's proximity to France, along with its stability, positions it as a country of

not follow through with organizing the referendum.

In response to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN General Assembly approved Resolution 3292 on December 13, 1974. This resolution requested the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to provide an advisory opinion on whether Western Sahara, at the time of Spanish colonization, was a territory belonging to no one (terra nullius). If not, the ICJ was asked to consider the legal ties between the territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity.

In its advisory opinion, the ICJ concluded that Western Sahara belonged to the native Western Saharans during the time of Spanish colonization. The court found no evidence of legal ties of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and Morocco. However, both Morocco and Mauritania disregarded the ICJ's opinion.<sup>40</sup>

## **2. Creating the MINURSO**

In August 1988, extensive efforts by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity (OAU)/(AU) led to a 'principle' agreement on a ceasefire between POLISARIO and Morocco. Following two years of consultations and negotiations, on June 18, 1990, UN Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar proposed a comprehensive plan outlining the role of the United Nations in Western Sahara.

The plan encompassed several key elements:

- a) Establishment of a ceasefire between POLISARIO and Moroccan forces,
- b) Withdrawal of all troops to designated areas,
- c) Creation of MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara),
- d) Formation of a Voter Identification Commission, and
- e) Agreement to hold a referendum on the question of Sahrawi self-determination 24 weeks after initiating the entire process.

On April 29, 1991, the Security Council unanimously endorsed this plan and officially established MINURSO through Resolution 690. Implementation of the ceasefire agreement commenced on September 6, 1991, under the supervision of the Mission, with the referendum scheduled for late January 1992.

Libya being less engaged in external interests, including those beyond its borders.

## **11. Cuba:**

a) Cold War Dynamics: During the Cold War, Cuba aligned itself with the socialist camp and chose to support the POLISARIO in its conflict against Morocco. This alignment was influenced by the broader division of the world into two ideological camps.

b) US-Cuban Rapprochement: Since 2015, there has been a thaw in relations between the United States and Cuba, leading to a rapprochement. This shift in diplomatic relations suggests that Cuba is exploring new avenues of engagement and cooperation, possibly seeking new interests with the United States.

## **12. SG'sPE (Secretary-General's Personal Envoy):**

a) Personal Success in Conflict Resolution: The success of the Personal Envoy in their mission is directly linked to their personal experience and effectiveness in the field of conflict resolution. The envoy's reputation is built based on their ability to achieve success or make progress in the mission assigned to them.

b) Achieving Success in the Mission: The primary interest of every SG'sPE is to achieve success in the mission assigned to them. This success is not only reflective of their personal reputation but also contributes to the broader goal of finding a resolution to the Western Sahara conflict.

## **E. Options and Roadmap**

### **1. Western Sahara and International Law**

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted its first resolution on what was then known as Spanish Sahara on December 16, 1965. This marked the UN's initial involvement in the Western Sahara crisis, urging Spain to decolonize the territory through a referendum. The referendum was intended to give the Saharawi people the right to self-determination, allowing them to choose between integration with Spain or independence.

Spain agreed to organize the referendum and conducted a census in 1974, counting 73,497 individuals over 18 years of age in the territory. However, despite its promise, Spain did



had resided in Western Sahara in the preceding year. Unfortunately, despite negotiations, both parties rejected the plan.

Following the plan's failure, Baker emphasized in his meeting with the Security Council that the UN should compel one or both parties to agree on a solution, or else there would be no resolution to the conflict. He presented four options to the Council, urging them to choose one: 1) Implement the settlement plan and referendum without the parties' competition; 2) Review the initial 'Baker Plan' while considering the parties' interests; 3) Investigate the option of a division of territory; 4) End MINURSO. Responding to this proposal, the Security Council adopted resolution 1429 in July 2002, inviting Baker to find a political solution and propose any method leading to self-determination. Baker then put forth a new document, the "Peace Plan for Self-Determination for the People of Western Sahara," known as the 'Baker Plan II.'

#### **4. The Baker Plan II**

Baker Plan II, not anticipated to fully satisfy both parties, introduced significant differences compared to Plan I. A key distinction lay in the eligibility criteria for voters. While Plan I allowed anyone who had lived in Western Sahara the year before the referendum to vote, Plan II proposed three combined criteria: 1) inclusion on the UN Identification Commission's list from December 30, 1999, 2) being on the UNHCR list of Western Sahara refugees from October 31, 2000, and 3) the ability to prove one's residence in Western Sahara before December 30, 1999.

Morocco welcomed the plan with reservations, while POLISARIO outright rejected it. However, on July 11, 2003, POLISARIO unexpectedly declared its acceptance of Baker Plan II. This proclamation was swiftly met with Morocco's definitive refusal of the plan.

Feeling desperate due to the lack of progress in resolving the Western Sahara conflict, Baker announced his resignation on June 1, 2004. Since then, the Baker Plans have not been mentioned in any Security Council resolution.<sup>41</sup>

#### **5. The United Nations did not give up until the present day.**

The United Nations persisted in its efforts to address the Western Sahara conflict. In July 2005, Kofi Annan appointed Peter van Walsum, a Danish diplomat, as his new Personal Envoy to Western Sahara. Van Walsum recognized the impasse, acknowledging that Mo-

Both Morocco and POLISARIO initially agreed to use the results of the 1974 Spanish census to identify participants in the referendum. However, Morocco's reluctance to proceed with this plan became apparent. King Hassan asserted that an additional 120,000 Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara and Sahrawis residing in Morocco should be allowed to participate in the referendum.

This demand prompted the commission to create a new voter list acceptable to both parties. Over the course of nine years, the commission investigated all 120,000 claims made by King Hassan. The Moroccan government employed various tactics to impede the referendum process, leading to continuous postponements. Eventually, in 1996, the referendum was indefinitely suspended, resulting in a deadlock in the resolution of the conflict.

In January 1997, following the appointment of Kofi Annan as the Secretary-General of the United Nations, renewed efforts to find a just solution to the Western Sahara conflict were initiated. Secretary-General Annan selected James A. Baker III, former US Secretary of State, to serve as the United Nations' Special Envoy to Western Sahara. Baker was tasked with evaluating the feasibility of organizing a referendum or exploring whether POLISARIO and Morocco were prepared to make political concessions regarding an autonomy agreement.

Building on the shared desire of both parties to achieve a referendum, Baker successfully brokered the Houston Agreements, reinvigorating the referendum process. However, this success was short-lived. After the Identification Commission completed the identification of voters in 1999, Morocco challenged the eligibility of nearly 79,000 voters, leading the Identification Commission to restart the entire process. This setback prompted Kofi Annan to believe that the referendum approach might not be viable, urging Baker to explore the possibility of a political concession.

#### **3. The Baker Plan I: a 'third way'**

In June 2001, James A. Baker III presented the Security Council with a draft "Framework Agreement on the Status of Western Sahara," commonly referred to as the "Baker Plan." This proposal introduced the concept of Western Sahara becoming an autonomous region within Morocco, with internal governance facilitated through an assembly and elected executive. The plan outlined a process whereby, after five years of implementation, a final status referendum would be conducted, with the voter list including all individuals who

2021. In response to inquiries about the purpose of this visit, the Deputy Spokesperson for the Secretary-General Farhan Haq, stated that de Mistrura “anticipates further deepening consultations with all stakeholders to explore constructive avenues for advancing the political process in Western Sahara throughout these regional engagements.”<sup>43</sup>

## F. Potential Solutions for the Western Sahara Conflict

Considering the numerous attempts to resolve the Western Sahara conflict, the following are possible solutions ranked in order of likelihood:

### 1. Stalemate:

The current geopolitical landscape, particularly the focus on conflicts in the Middle East specifically in Ghaza-Palestine, has shifted attention away from the Western Sahara conflict. Given the entrenched positions and interests of the involved parties, it is likely that the conflict will persist for an extended period.

### 2. Direct Negotiations:

#### a) Without Preconditions:

Despite past unsuccessful bilateral negotiations under UN auspices, engaging in direct negotiations without preconditions and with sincere intentions could still provide an avenue for achieving a mutually acceptable political solution, as urged by the Security Council.

#### b) After the Emergence of New Conditions:

Significant changes, such as a peaceful uprising like the one in May 2005 in Moroccan-controlled territories, internal transformations within one of the parties, or a strong international will by the United Nations to enforce a solution, even under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, could potentially create a conducive environment for negotiations.

### 3. Violent Conflict:

If all diplomatic and negotiation efforts fail, the option of a return to armed conflict becomes a possibility. However, this outcome is undesirable and should be avoided due to its severe humanitarian consequences.

These possibilities underscore the complex and challenging nature of the Western Sahara

rocco would not accept any plan endorsing “independence” for Sahrawis, while the UN would not propose a plan excluding a referendum with independence as an option. He declared that the only options were a stalemate or direct negotiations, asserting that both parties held the responsibility for finding a solution. Van Walsum noted that Western Sahara was not a prominent international concern, with most countries seeking good relations with both Morocco and Algeria, leading to an acceptance of the stalemate.

In 2007, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1754 (2007), urging Morocco and POLISARIO to negotiate, without preconditions, for a political solution supporting the self-determination of the Sahrawi people. Despite meetings and consultations in 2007 and 2008, facilitated by Van Walsum, no progress was made. In April 2008, Van Walsum’s statement that “an independent Western Sahara is not a realistic proposition” drew criticism from POLISARIO, who accused him of bias toward Morocco, leading to demands for his replacement and a refusal to resume negotiations.

In 2009, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed Ambassador Christopher Ross, a U.S. senior career diplomat, as his Personal Envoy. Ross organized informal meetings to prepare the parties for full talks but faced challenges in achieving progress. In May 2012, Morocco accused Ross of providing “biased and unbalanced guidance,” withdrawing confidence in him. Despite the criticism, Ki-moon maintained Ross in his position.

Despite ongoing critiques of MINURSO’s perceived bias, Ross made his first visit to Western Sahara (under Moroccan administration) in 2012. He proposed a new approach relying on “shuttle diplomacy” between Morocco and POLISARIO, but unfortunately, the conflict persisted.<sup>42</sup> Following his departure, the UN Secretary-General appointed former German President Horst Köhler as the new Personal Envoy to Western Sahara in 2017. Köhler’s term saw a renewed focus on diplomatic endeavors, including the organization of roundtable talks in Switzerland in December 2018. However, he resigned from his position in May 2019 due to personal reasons. On October 6, 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres announced the appointment of Staffan de Mistrura of Italy as his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara.

Continuing his diplomatic endeavors to propel the political process forward, Staffan de Mistrura initiated a regional tour during the month of September 2023. This marked his inaugural visit to Western Sahara since assuming the role of Personal Envoy in November

ulation during the interim period.

- Ensure an environment conducive to freedom of expression and economic activities; allow advocacy activities and campaigning at an advanced stage of the referendum preparation.

#### **6. Mandatory Referendum:**

- Organize a mandatory referendum for the voting-age population, determined by the interim civil administration.
- Include registered and temporary ID-holding residents in the voting process.

#### **7. UN Announcement of Referendum Results:**

- UN announces the results of the referendum.
- Hand over authority from the interim civil administration to the chosen entity, marking the conclusive end of the long-standing conflict.

### **H. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the root cause of the enduring conflict in Western Sahara lies in the policies adopted by the European colonial countries, especially those that divided the African continent between these countries. Likewise, the Moroccan military incursion cannot be ignored, regardless of whether it is justified or not. This incursion triggered a prolonged battle with the Sahrawi people led by POLISARIO, posing a persistent threat to peace and security in North Africa.

Despite numerous efforts by the UN and the international community, a mutually agreed solution to the conflict remains elusive. The urgency for a prompt, equitable, and viable resolution is crucial for the region's residents to achieve their aspirations for integration, growth, and peace.

I contend that a peaceful, fair, and enduring solution requires the implementation of the Sahrawi people internationally recognized right to self-determination. This process should adhere to democratic principles and international norms, allowing them to choose independence, integration into Morocco, or another negotiated agreement. The political will

conflict, requiring sustained international efforts and diplomatic initiatives to reach a just and lasting solution.

### **G. Proposed Seven-Step Plan for Western Sahara Conflict Resolution:**

#### **1. Formation of a UN Peacekeeping Force:**

- Establish a UN force with personnel and equipment capable of deploying in Western Sahara after the withdrawal of existing forces (Moroccan and POLISARIO).
- Require Morocco to provide the UN with all minefield maps along the separation wall mined during the armed conflict.

#### **2. Interim International Civil Administration:**

- Secure a UN Security Council resolution under Chapter VII to establish an interim international civil administration.
- This administration will assume control over management, social and economic organization, and preparation for subsequent phases.

#### **3. Return of Interested Sahrawi People:**

- Facilitate the return of Sahrawi individuals from POLISARIO camps and other global locations.
- Ensure returnees are civilians, devoid of arms or external organizational affiliations, giving POLISARIO leaders the choice to return under UN safety guarantees or remain in exile.

#### **4. Comprehensive Statistical Process:**

- Initiate a comprehensive statistical process to create a database of the civilian population.
- Provide temporary resident IDs under UN protection, emphasizing continuous updates (births, deaths, marriages, divorces) during the interim period.

#### **5. Prohibition of Political Affiliations:**

- Prohibit political affiliations, organizational activities, and partisanship among the pop-

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of both parties, coupled with a serious consideration of their future relations, is essential for achieving a mutually satisfactory solution under UN auspices and in accordance with international legality and norms.

Given the current impasse where stakeholders maintain steadfast positions and pursue similar interests, the future of this persistent conflict remains uncertain, and only time will reveal its outcome.

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**Consensualisme vs Décentralisation au Liban Vers Où:  
Peuvent-ils coexister ou l'un est une négation de l'autre ?  
Étude en perspective comparée**

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### Résumé

Cette étude traite la problématique de la décentralisation administrative consensuelle, et ses conséquences sur la rationalisation du système hypercentralisé à spécificité locale. Étant donné que l'expérience a montré qu'aucune agence centrale n'est en mesure de gérer seule les ressources de l'État, aujourd'hui, le Liban semble prêt à restructurer l'administration obsolète et accorder aux autorités territoriales des tâches plus étendues. Toutefois le Liban sera-t-il en mesure de corriger la centralisation excessive, en raison des propositions qui prévalent, et l'émergence d'une démocratie de proximité accentuée ? ou bien la quasi-impossibilité d'entente est un empêchement d'achever la transition ? Dans cet essai, nous discutons des enjeux d'un nouveau système de gouvernance administrative élargie, puis nous essayons de percevoir comment le Liban pourrait les surmonter pour atteindre la formule pertinente, nonobstant le processus de gouvernement qui jusqu'à présent n'a aucune volonté de renoncer à la concentration des pouvoirs, même si c'est par l'intermédiaire de son personnel régional.

**Mots clés:** Décentralisation consensuelle, État central unifié, gouvernabilité, participation, clivage, hypercentralisation, déconcentration.

### Abstract

This study treats the problematic of consensual administrative decentralization, and its consequences on the rationalization of the hypercentralized system with local specificity. Given that experience has shown that no central agency is capable of managing state resources alone, today Lebanon appears ready to restructure the obsolete administration and grant territorial authorities more extensive tasks. However, will Lebanon be able to correct excessive centralization, due to the prevailing proposals, and the emergence of an accentuated local democracy? or is the almost impossibility of agreement an obstacle to completing the transition? In this essay, we try to discuss the challenges of a new system

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