

Western Sahara Conflict

Geopolitics of Natural Resources, Foreign Actors and Humanitarian Impact

1 February 2023

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Executive Summary

Mariam Morsy

The 49-year-old conflict between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), represented by the Polisario Front, recently re-erupted over the disputed territory of Western Sahara in late 2020 after decades of impasse. In mid-November 2020, the Sahrawi independence movement Polisario Front ended a 29-year UN-brokered ceasefire agreement between the two parties after Morocco infringed on the deal by entering the Gueguerat coastal border point with Mauritania, a UN-patrolled buffer zone.

The conflict dates back to 1975 after Spanish colonial forces withdrew from Western Sahara, leaving it under Morocco and Mauritania's administration based on the tripartite Madrid Accords, which disregards Sahrawi right to self-determination. Although the United Nations considered the treaty a violation of international law and refused to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, Morocco continued to deepen its control over the territory, claiming it as part of the Moroccan Kingdom. Around 80 per cent of Western Sahara's territory remains under Moroccan control to this day, while the Polisario Front controls the rest with limited international recognition. This situation has led to a draining armed struggle, numerous uprisings, vast regional division, humanitarian crises, and a long peace process with many dead-ends.

This comprehensive report dives into the conflict in Western Sahara, which has been long overlooked, to explain its history, main foreign actors, the role of natural resources, and its internal and regional implications. It does this through three sections; **Section (1)** gives a historical overview of the Moroccan claims over the Western Sahara territory and their origins and explains the main foreign actors in the conflict, from supranational and international organisations like the United Nations and the European Union to state actors like Algeria, Spain and the United States. **Section (2)** provides an explanation of the territory's natural resources and their influence on the conflict and its actors. It showcases the demographic and economic aspects of the conflict and overviews the nature of economic activities within the Moroccan-controlled territories as well as the Polisario-controlled ones. The section also explains the conflict's impact on local, regional and transatlantic trade. **Section (3)** gives an overview of the humanitarian toll of the conflict affecting the Sahrawi people, whether it is the human rights violations happening within the Sahrawi territories or the conditions in which Sahrawis live in Algerian refugee camps. Finally, the conclusion explains the pressing risks which might arise if the conflict continues without diplomatic resolve.



The Conflict's History and Foreign Actors

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History

Western Sahara is a territory located in the northwest of Africa. It borders Morocco to the north, Algeria to the northeast, and Mauritania to the east and south, with its northwest coast bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The earliest instances of Moroccan rule in Western Sahara came in the 11-13th centuries as the [Almoravid and Almohad](#) dynasties conquered and vassalised tribes in the region, bringing it under their control and laying the early foundations for a [Moroccan claim](#) in Western Sahara. With the collapse of Almohad rule in Morocco, the tribes of Western Sahara broke free. Only after a 300-year period did the [Saadi dynasty](#) stabilise the region and bring Western Morocco under its suzerainty.

The current [Alaouite dynasty established](#) itself in the 1660s taking control of Morocco and Western Sahara. The dynasty took various actions to establish their rule over Western Sahara, integrating the region into the Moroccan polity. One of the ways they did so was by establishing a presence through [administrative control](#). For example, the Alaouite sultans appointed governors and officials to [oversee the region](#) and established military garrisons to maintain order. Additionally, the dynasty invested in infrastructure projects such as building roads, ports, and other facilities in Western Sahara to improve the region's economic development. Another way in which the Alaouite dynasty strengthened its claim over Western Sahara was by promoting the idea that the area was an integral part of the Moroccan nation. They did this by emphasising the [cultural and historical](#) ties between the tribes in Western Sahara and those in Morocco proper. The dynasty also encouraged [migration](#) from Morocco to Western Sahara, which helped increase the region's population and further solidified [its cultural](#) ties to Morocco. The Alaouite dynasty also used [religious](#) and legal arguments to legitimise its claim over the territory, for example, by arguing that the region was part of the Islamic Maghreb and, as such, it was under the jurisdiction of the Moroccan sultanate. The Alaouite dynasty used a combination of military, economic and cultural strategies to strengthen its claim over Western Sahara. The dynasty controlled the territory until the late 1800s when [European empires](#) sought to [control the region](#). To counteract European incursions, the Alawi Sultan Hassan I attempted to resist European rule, ultimately seeing France subordinating Morocco and Spain taking control of Western Sahara.



As a result of the Berlin Conference of 1884, Morocco was colonised by the Kingdom of Spain and, after World War II, the territory of Western Sahara became a Spanish province. France accepted Morocco's demands for independence in November 1955. With the signing of the La Celle-St-Cloud agreements, Morocco formally achieved independence from France on March 2, 1956. In 1963, following Spain's passage of information, the UN, under [Article 73](#) (e) of the UN Charter, included Western Sahara in the list of areas that were not under the independent government, requiring a democratic referendum. In this sense, the status of Western Sahara was unknown and demanded a response. Such a response did not specify precisely the means and the details by which a referendum would need to take place. Furthermore, in April 1976, [Morocco and Mauritania](#) signed a convention on establishing a frontier line in Western Sahara. Both countries unlawfully claimed sovereignty and set illegitimate boundaries in the region, which made the UN mandate even more difficult to be applied.

As a result of France leaving Morocco, Morocco and Spain were subject to rivalries and tensions, which led to the Ifni War. Both powers agreed on a ceasefire and Spain ceded Ifni to Morocco on 5 January 1969. This was accorded in the Treaty of Angra de Cintra, which also served as the end of the Spanish colonial regime in Morocco. During these negotiations, Morocco tried to claim Ceuta and Melilla as integral parts of the country; but turned unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Morocco still does not recognise Ceuta and Melilla as part of Spain and considers these lands to be under foreign occupation. Morocco began claiming Western Sahara as its territory in the mid-1970s after the withdrawal of Spain from the region. In response to the unresolved status of Western Sahara, the United Nations Security Council established [Resolution 690](#) (1991) on 29 April 1991 at its 2984th meeting, which put in place the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) following the Secretary-General's report S/22464. Once approved by the Security Council, the settlement plan detailed the implementation for a transitional period for Western Sahara. This was mainly based on a referendum in which the people of Western Sahara would choose between independence from Morocco or integration with it. Today, the western part, which is the largest part of the territory of Western Sahara, is controlled by Morocco; the referendum has still not taken place.



Figure 1: Map showing the disputed land in Western Sahara, where the left part (western side of the line) is controlled by Morocco and the right part (eastern side) is controlled by the Polisario Front.

Foreign Actors

In the conflict in Western Sahara, two sides are directly involved as primary actors: the Kingdom of Morocco, which claims sovereignty over the Western Saharan territory and has significantly profited off of its natural resources over the last few decades, and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a partially recognised state seeking independence for Western Sahara from Morocco and which is represented by the Polisario Front. As will be shown, both actors have historically relied heavily on leveraging their economic resources, political relationships, and international public support to build their cases for their respective sovereignty claims in the eyes of the international community. International consensus on the recognition of sovereignty is a powerful diplomatic tool towards gaining new land and one which foreign actors are, in turn, ready and willing to use towards their own strategic goals. In recent years, international actors have generally opted to support Morocco's autonomy plan



while not officially supporting either party's sovereignty claims. This grants Western Sahara autonomy under the Moroccan Kingdom, which the Polisario Front has stated is [against](#) its right to self-determination.

United Nations

The history of the United Nations in the Western Saharan conflict goes back to the mid-1960s when the UN endorsed the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination and recognised Western Sahara as a "[non-self-governing territory](#)", irrespective of Morocco's already existing claim of sovereignty. The UN has since upheld the territory's independence in numerous [resolutions](#) throughout the last few decades via its General Assembly and Security Council, and recognises the Polisario as the legitimate representative of its people. The 1991 brokered [peace agreement](#) put in place the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which has since been renewed each year (or every six months, more recently) despite a lack of progress towards a solution. In recent years, following the breakdown of the ceasefire negotiated initially by MINURSO, the UN's handling of the situation has come under [criticism](#) by the international community.

In 1999, while inching closer to a referendum and a likely win for Sahrawi independence, the UNSC pulled back due to the lack of an enforcement mechanism for the vote's outcome and the possible violence between the two parties. The UN then encouraged both parties to negotiate without a referendum. Its call for "[a mutually acceptable political solution](#)" is said to have set in motion a push towards a conflict end where Morocco had to agree on Western Sahara's independence. As an ensuing effect, the conversation tilted from 'Sahrawi independence' to 'Sahrawi autonomy under Morocco'.

African Union

The African Union has recognised the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic since 1984 and has disputed Morocco's sovereignty claims. Upon the Republic's initial inclusion in the organisation (which was technically the AU's predecessor), Morocco withdrew its membership in protest. Since its rejoining in 2017, the Kingdom has sought the Republic's expulsion and has [lobbied](#) individual AU members to pull their support of SADR recognition.

In 2022, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, the legal body of the AU, [ruled](#) that Morocco was in violation of the Western Saharan right to self-determination and that AU member states had a responsibility to assist the Sahrawi people. The court highlighted an ideological and historical alignment in writing "the notion of self-determination has strong resonance with Africa and carries a special and deep meaning to its people" as a "right to survival as people". Likewise, [in 2015](#), the court ruled that Morocco did not have the legal right to explore natural resources in Western Saharan lands. There has been some support and



discussion of an increased role of the African Union in negotiations between the two parties as a complement to MINURSO. However, its [capability](#) has been doubted and Morocco has claimed that the polity is biased towards its opponent.

European Union

The European Union (EU) has adopted a mixed stance regarding Western Sahara, both within the organisation and with respect to its members. Support for Morocco or the rights of the Sahrawi Republic has historically been dependent on natural resources (especially in the case of fisheries), trade, human rights stances, geopolitics and geographical proximity to Morocco (including territorial disputes). Generally speaking, the EU has undergone serious internal disagreement over the question of Western Sahara, and has had conflict and overlap among members who support human rights in the territory and those who seek to continue the trade and diplomacy benefits that come from supporting Morocco's claims. This has created an uneven history of public support for both sides, with financial and political favouring the Moroccan control over the UN-recognised right to self-determination for the Sahrawi people. For example, in one political move, the European Parliament [voices support](#) for the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people and calls for Morocco to end its human rights abuses. However, in another move, the EU blatantly ignored the explicit request from Sahrawi organisations to [exclude their territory from fishing agreements](#) that ultimately netted Morocco \$810 million from 1992 to 1999 – with fishing rights [“almost exclusively taking place in Western Saharan waters”](#) and with no apparent benefit to the local Sahrawi population.

While natural resources and fisheries will be explored in depth in the following section of this report, they are an essential factor to discuss when looking at foreign actors and their role in the ongoing dispute. There are clear material benefits to gain in continuing trade for both sides but at the expense of the Sahrawi right to self-determination. As put forth by one analysis, Morocco's trade deals with foreign governments (including, and especially, the EU) has allowed them to expand informal support of their sovereignty claims and [“create an impression of international support”](#) for its claims. In 2011, in the case of a fisheries agreement that would have allowed Morocco to grant EU members permission to fish off the coast of Western Saharan waters, the divide within the EU was clear when EU lawmakers [shut down its deal](#) (a rare occasion within the body) due to the politics of supporting Morocco's claim to Western Saharan land through the agreement. In this same example, those EU and Moroccan officials involved in the deal completely [avoided bringing up](#) the inclusion of Western Saharan waters, even though it was implicitly understood that Morocco would include them in the agreement. The EU then [deliberately misrepresented](#) the language of various UN resolutions that claimed the Sahrawis' right to the land and that Morocco was not legally allowed to sell their resources, while avoiding answering whether the fishing was taking place. This commitment to often misleading and vague language forms a vital crux of the EU stance towards Western Sahara.



In September 2021, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that Western Sahara is “[separate and distinct from Morocco](#)” and, therefore, should not be included within the scope of the EU’s trade deals with Morocco. From 2016 onward, the court ruled that the local population was not consulted in previous arrangements, violating international law. It also ruled that trade agreements were to be [annulled](#) and that no future deals should be made without consultation of the Polisario Front. However, the EU has still pushed through [trade deals](#) despite the rulings. Support for either side of the conflict becomes visible among its members. In late 2022, along with eight non-EU countries, EU members [Ireland and Luxembourg](#) sent a joint letter asking Morocco to “take all necessary measures to ensure respect for the human rights of all people in Western Sahara” and “to respect the human rights of the Saharawis, including their right to self-determination”, respectively. [Sweden and Germany](#) have also independently called Morocco’s presence in Western Sahara an “occupation”.

However, in large part and for many years, many states have also adhered to [a neutral stance](#) or have sought to generally stay out of the conflict, and not interfere with the more delicate political situation of their fellow EU member Spain (and France, to a lesser extent). In January 2023, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell [confirmed](#) that the EU supports the UN-led process to end the conflict. The organisation affirmed that they respect “the serious and credible efforts made by Morocco” and reiterated their support for Morocco’s autonomy plan. Several EU member states have [shown support](#) for its Western Saharan autonomy plan, including France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands.

Algeria

Unique in its outright and consistent support of the Polisario Front, Algeria began its support of the group after the country started to view Morocco as [expansionist](#) in the mid-1970s. As their neighbour to the east, Algeria has consistently been the primary and strongest foreign supporter of the Polisario, backed by their historical and geographical proximity as well as by mutual strategic benefits. Relations between Morocco and Algeria have heavily informed the conflict to date. Morocco has held the Polisario as an Algerian [proxy](#); it is unknown exactly how much sway Algeria has within the group, but it is known that the organisation is [highly dependent](#) on Algeria for arms and other resources.

Since the [mid-1970s](#), Algeria has provided protection and land in its southwestern Tindouf province for those who fled Western Sahara and those who wish to stay close to return or fight. From their position in Algeria, the Polisario Front has been able to have freedom of movement, a much larger ability to organise militarily, and easy access to Western Saharan land. The region holds approximately [173,000 Sahrawi refugees](#) in five camps, some of whom have been there since the conflict first broke out. Tindouf is part of the larger Draa Valley, which was given to Algeria via France’s [postcolonial drawing](#) of the Algerian-Moroccan border; since the 1960s, Morocco has sought to claim these lands, culminating in an outright 1963 war between the two countries. Notably, a crucial part of Algeria’s support for the Sahrawi Republic is



rooted in the “[sanctity of postcolonial boundaries.](#)” By pushing back on Morocco’s territorial expansion via the Polisario, Algeria can further safeguard its disputed lands, potentially limit a larger border with Morocco, and advocate for the respect of postcolonial boundaries (which, in turn, supports its claim to the Draa Valley). Algeria’s approach has enabled it to act as a “[shadow fighter](#)” whereby the state can undermine Morocco’s political goals and aim towards regional hegemony while maintaining a degree of distance from the action.

Furthermore, concerning regional strategy, a few more fundamental considerations help explain Algeria’s stance. With increasing support to the Polisario Front, Algeria has been able to counterbalance Morocco’s regional influence and assert its own power. For example, Algeria is the lead MENA gas exporter to the European Union and has leveraged this role in support of the Polisario. Since the beginning of the ongoing Russian War in Ukraine, Algeria has agreed to increase its gas supplies to European countries, except Spain, due to their announcement regarding Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Spain

Within the EU, the case of Spain is fundamental to understanding EU-Western Sahara relations, as the country is unique in its geographic and economic exposure. During the last rule of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, Spain voiced their support for Morocco being the sovereign of Western Sahara, breaking decades of ambivalence and unclear position. Even if Spain has *de facto* supported the Moroccan side in the conflict, there had not previously been such explicit confirmations in Spanish foreign policy. This situation is partly explained by the crossroad in which Spain is found; if it supports Morocco, Algeria can use its leverage as the top gas exporter to the UN. Suppose Spain were to support Algeria and the Polisario Front. In that case, Morocco could punish the Iberian country by weaponising their shared borders between Melilla and Ceuta, two Spanish enclaves on the African continent that Morocco has historically contested. As seen with Morocco’s weaponisation of migrants in the late crisis of Melilla, in which 30 people died trying to cross the wall between Spanish and Moroccan territory, and with Ceuta, where Moroccan border control [allowed up to 12,000 people](#) to cross the border over two days in order to seek leverage from Spain. An economic aspect is added to this crossroads as well, whereby Spain is Morocco’s [top trading partner](#) and, per the fishery disputes previously discussed, Spain is also the EU member with the most reliance on Moroccan fishing agreements. Finally, there is [support](#) for the Sahrawi amongst the Spanish public, forcing Spain into a quagmire that long informed its stance of neutrality.

United States

The United States has held a strong [diplomatic relationship](#) with Morocco for over a century. It has also been a critical supporter of Morocco in the Western Sahara conflict for several reasons. Bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, Morocco is a crucial region



between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and is of vital strategic importance to the US. The US has historically looked to Morocco as a reliable partner in the [fight against terrorism](#) in the region, and has provided economic and military assistance (including running joint military drills) to Morocco in this regard. During the Cold War through the present day, the US has [feared](#) the potential destabilisation of the region in the event of Sahrawi statehood.

In December 2020, then-president Donald Trump announced US support and official recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Saharan territory in exchange for Morocco’s normalisation of relations with Israel, a key US ally in the Middle East and a direct supporter of the Trump presidency, as part of the [Abraham Accords](#). This was a massive win for Morocco and equally complicated the matter for other foreign actors involved; reports indicated that Moroccan delegates in the EU were more [inflexible](#) in their negotiations with member states after the win.

Under Trump’s predecessor Joseph Biden, US congressional leaders have [requested that Biden reverse the decision](#), calling Moroccan rule over the area “illegitimate”, and have also sought to refer to Western Sahara as distinct from Morocco in their annual aid appropriation bill. Nonetheless, the Biden administration remains ambiguous and has not reversed the decision. In deciding whether to change course, the Biden administration is caught between angering Israel and Morocco over the deal’s reversal and angering its anti-terrorism partner Algeria, all while leaving itself open to claims of supporting human rights abuses, including the right to self-determination.

Other Foreign Actors

Lastly, numerous other actors support the Polisario Front for various reasons. The Sahrawi diaspora has been a vocal actor abroad, with refugees and their descendants holding protests in recent years in [Spain, Algeria, Mauritania, and Belgium](#). In late 2022, South Africa [showed strong support](#) for Western Sahara on the grounds of anti-exploitation and self-determination, calling it a “country” in the process and drawing comparisons to its [own history of apartheid](#). Various Latin American countries, including Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela have recognised the SADR. At a UN Human Rights Council session in mid-2020, [Namibia and Timor-Leste](#) vocalised support for the Sahrawi Republic when the two nations recommended that Spain refrain from economic activities that infringe on the Sahrawi right to self-determination and called such actions “illegal” and “inexcusable”.

Table and Degree of Support

| Morocco | Polisario Front |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| - United States: high | - Algeria: extremely high |



| | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Spain: high- France, Italy, Belgium: moderate- Egypt, Senegal, Mali, Guinea and Gabon: low | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- South Africa: moderate- Cuba, Venezuela and Namibia: low- African Union: low |
|---|---|

In addition to being the last remaining African nation to be decolonised, Western Sahara's non-self-governing status is unique due to the [significant lack of UN-backed administration](#) to achieve self-determination for the Sahrawi people. After the initial implementation of the MINURSO in 1991, one of the referendum's secondary functions included the development of a planned transitional period that would allow Sahrawi voters to determine the governance of the territory. This transitional period included [an action plan for identifying and registering Sahrawi voters](#) and facilitating the return of Sahrawi refugees to choose independence or formal integration with Morocco. However, despite registering [86,386 voters by 1999](#) under plans set out by the Houston Agreements, no referendum took place, leaving the region's governance question in further limbo. Reasons for the lack of action from the UN are predominantly attributed to disputes over who would organise the referendum, with allegations that Morocco aimed to [inflate the electorate to include Moroccans of Western Saharan descent](#) to swing the vote in their favour. In addition, [increased backing from European allies, such as France](#), has left Morocco with a veto-backed power in the UN Security Council that is capable of supporting its decisions on how to govern the region, leading to severe mistrust from Polisario that a referendum would be conducted fairly.



Economy and the Geopolitics of Natural Resources

Natural Resources: Impact on the Conflict

Antonio Visani

Western Sahara is rich in natural resources, especially fish stocks and phosphate. This section will present the situation and explain how the region's natural resources influence the conflict.

First, Western Sahara's coastal area is rich in fish stocks, playing a strategic importance in Morocco's fishing sector. In 2018, the region [accounted for](#) 78 per cent of Morocco's total annual coastal catches. Today, [Morocco](#) is the world's fifth largest exporter of fishery products and its exports have grown by 580 per cent over the last 20 years, mainly due to the intensive exploitation of Western Sahara's fish stocks. According to an [FAO 2018 report](#), most species in Western Sahara's coastal area are classified as fully exploited or overexploited. Moreover, as leaked US diplomatic cables [show](#), Western Sahara's fishing industry is controlled by the Moroccan army, including factories specialising in fishmeal and fish oil production. To date, Morocco has signed agreements with the EU, Russia and Japan that allow vessels from those countries to fish in the area. In particular, Russia has been [granted](#) 140,000 tonnes of catch yearly, while the EU has 100,000. The EU-Morocco fishing agreement is particularly noteworthy. Indeed, while the EU does not fully recognise Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, the EU Commission has [included](#) 144 Moroccan-controlled factories based in Western Sahara in Morocco's list of approved establishments for exporting fishery products to the European Union. In other words, Western Sahara does not have a country-sheet list of its own – unlike French Polynesia and New Caledonia, for instance – but is included in the country-sheet list of Morocco. In 2018, the Court of Justice of the European Union [ruled](#) that Morocco has no sovereignty over Western Sahara and no legal right to operate in the region. Still, fish imports from Western Sahara, officially labelled as Moroccan, still enter the EU, mainly through the German port of Bremen.

Second, Western Sahara has considerable phosphate reserves, an essential commodity in the production of fertilisers. In particular, Western Sahara [accounts for](#) 20 per cent of Morocco's phosphate exports, contributing to the country's dominance of the global phosphate market with an 85 per cent share. In particular, the Moroccan government manages the Bou Craa mine in Western Sahara through the state-owned enterprise Office Chérifien de Phosphates (OCP). The site [produces](#) around 2.4 million tons annually, 14 per cent of the world's production. Phosphate rocks extracted from the mine are placed on the world's longest conveyor belt and transported 100 kilometres to the west, to the El Aaiùn harbour. In total, Bou Craa has [estimated reserves](#) of 500 million tonnes. Figure 2 [shows](#) that in 2020, the largest importer of Western Saharan phosphate is India, followed by New Zealand, Brazil and China. However, due to the awareness campaign of Saharawi NGOs, several shipping companies have stopped their



shipments from the region. The number of third-country importing companies has decreased from 15 in 2011 to 8 in 2020.

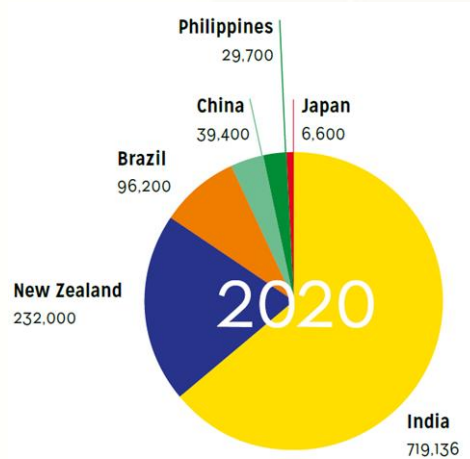


Figure 2: Imports of Western Sahara's phosphate, in tons.

Western Sahara's abundance of natural resources has considerably impacted the conflict. Firstly, the control over phosphate resources was one of the reasons for Morocco's occupation of the region in 1975. After the then-king of Morocco, Hassan II, suffered two coup attempts, he centred his strategy to regain legitimacy on the country's economic performance, which was largely based on phosphate exports. Indeed, at the time, the country [depended](#) on phosphate: 24 per cent of its total exports came from the commodity, and the OCP employed more workers than any other company in the nation. Thus, the control of the Bou Craa mine had strategic importance for Rabat. Secondly, the natural resource wealth of the territories occupied by Morocco has played a key role in unifying the Sahrawi people around a common cause, leading to widespread support by Sahrawis of Polisario's ideology of an egalitarian society with sovereignty over the region's resources. The phosphate industry currently [employs](#) around 3000 workers, of which only 21 per cent are Sahrawis, and most are employed in the lowest-paid jobs such as cleaning. For example, the value alone of Morocco's exports of fishmeal from the occupied territory to Türkiye is [three times greater](#) than the entire yearly amount that is donated in multilateral aid to the 165,000 Sahrawi refugees living in camps in Algeria, who do not receive any compensation from the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources. This increases the grievances of the Sahrawi population, thus exacerbating the conflict. [For example](#), during the Gdeim Izik protest of 2010, 20,000 Sahrawi protested in the desert near El Aaiún, chanting the slogan "the Sahrawi people suffer whilst their wealth is looted". Thirdly, Morocco has leveraged its control of Western Sahara's natural resources to obtain a *de facto* recognition of its occupation. Indeed, while no country recognises Morocco's sovereignty over the region, trading natural resources from the territory provides [a backdoor](#) acceptance of the status quo.



Administration of Western Sahara

Ruy Scalamandré

Since four-fifths of the territory of Western Sahara is *de facto* administered by the Kingdom of Morocco, this subsection provides insights into fundamental economic and social administrative issues within Western Sahara and how it impacts people living within the *de facto* Moroccan territory, as well as life for people living in the territory claimed by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). This, of course, has significant challenges and obstacles. Firstly, the SADR [has no official capital](#) or administrative subdivisions, as is the case in Moroccan-administered territories. Secondly, the Kingdom of Morocco has [minimal](#) budget transparency within its internationally-recognised borders, so there is little reliable data on how exactly Rabat administers Western Sahara. Notwithstanding, this subsection will conduct a socioeconomic analysis explaining who the key players in Western Sahara's economic activity are, what administrative tasks (if any) are undertaken by Morocco, and of course, the impact on the people living within Western Sahara.

Demographic and Economic Overview

According to official [United Nations data](#), Western Sahara has a total land area of 266,000 km² (just over 100,000 mi²) and a population of 612,000 people, of which [only a fifth](#) are estimated to be part of the labour force. That means that Western Sahara has a population density of 2.30 people per km², which would be the [third-lowest](#) ranked country in terms of population density, just ahead of Namibia and Greenland. Like Namibia and Greenland, the territory of Western Sahara is largely inhospitable. Western Sahara is overrun by the dunes and expansive heat of the Sahara Desert, which is especially felt in [inland towns](#) like Samara, where temperatures can exceed 40°C (104°F).

Data on Western Sahara's economy is rather limited; [Moody's Analytics'](#) latest estimates for GDP are from 2007 and sit at \$906 million, adjusted to purchasing power. This means that GDP per capita is just under \$1,500 – although there is no formal data for GDP per capita (as for most indicators) published by the [IMF](#) or [World Bank](#). According to the same country profile published by Moody's Analytics, the economy of Western Sahara is driven by “fishing, phosphate mining, tourism, and pastoral nomadism,” with most of the economic activity occurring in *de facto* Moroccan territory. The administration of public and civil services is also based on [the same laws](#) that apply in the internationally recognised territory of Morocco.

Public Services and Access

Despite being governed under the same laws, the data on access to public services in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara is limited. However, this subsection will focus on access to three essential public services – education, healthcare, and transport – in Western Sahara.



Education

Under Moroccan law, primary education is [compulsory and free](#) for all until the age of 15. However, in Morocco, access to education is limited – especially in remote areas and among females – with over [10 per cent](#) of Moroccan children not enrolled in any form of primary education. However, it is difficult to paint a picture of the state of education in Western Sahara due to an absence of reliable data. Notwithstanding, it can be inferred that the number of young children out of school is greater in Western Sahara than in the internationally recognised Moroccan territory; the [United States Department of Labour](#) makes the troublesome claim that “children in Western Sahara are subjected to the worst forms of child labour”. This suggests that the quality of education received in Western Sahara is significantly stunted by the material circumstances Western Saharan children are exposed to. In the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, schools exist within refugee camps. A photo gallery published by [The Guardian](#) demonstrates that although children – including neurodiverse children or children needing additional educational support – have access to education, much of that education is reliant upon NGOs. Further, the photos from the schools within the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic also expose the low quality of infrastructure and school buildings under the Saharan sun. In a [journal article](#), Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh explains that the role of schools in the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is fundamental for Sahrawi society; schools are a place for socialisation among Sahrawi children and “were amongst the first structures to be built in the camps,” later secondary schools were also built.

Healthcare

The Kingdom of Morocco operates its own National Health Service (NHS), so, in theory, healthcare is free at the point-of-care. However, the United States’ [International Trade Administration](#) reports that two-thirds of healthcare spending in Morocco comes from the private sector despite the fact that the private sector accounts for only 15 per cent of all patient care. This indicates a substantial underfunding of Morocco’s NHS, which implies that healthcare access and quality within Moroccan-administered Western Sahara is precarious at best. Similarly, in Western Sahara, healthcare access faces similar issues because of precarity in funding. [Al Fusaic](#), a think-tank that aims “to encourage knowledge and open-mindedness in cross-cultural engagement while challenging common stereotypes that mischaracterise” the Middle East and North Africa, explains that Western Sahara’s NHS is – like its education system – heavily reliant [on foreign aid and donations](#) and thus funding for healthcare within the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is especially exposed to donor countries’ foreign policies and economic ability to provide aid. This is particularly worrying because of the high volume of [endemic communicable diseases](#) in Western Sahara, including Hepatitis A and B, Lassa fever, and meningitis.



Transport

Satellite imagery shows that most of the highway network within Western Sahara is in the Moroccan-administered areas of Western Sahara, with road networks eastwards of The Berm in Western Sahara being mainly desert paths laid out by frequent traffic. For example, images of the [town of Mijek](#) show numerous desert paths leading in and out of the town in various directions. Some towns, like [Agounit](#), are more formally linked because of the presence of UN forces, but there are no paved roads.

The road network in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara builds upon the highway network of Morocco, with three main roads connecting Western Sahara to the internationally recognised borders of Morocco. The westernmost of these is the *Route Nationale 1* (N1), a type of secondary road that falls short of highway standards, as the upper-speed limit for this type of road is [100kph](#) (62.5mph) in rural areas. The N1 runs southwards from Tangier in Northern Morocco, passing through Rabat, El-Jadida, and Essaouira before reaching Laâyoune in Western Sahara. At Tarfaya, within internationally recognised Moroccan borders, the N1 bifurcates; one route continues to Laâyoune inland, passing through [Tah](#), and the second road links Tarfaya to Fom el-Oued – a seaside town west of Laâyoune. This route continues southwards to the border with Mauritania at [Guerguerat](#), linking Laâyoune with numerous seaside villages and the *Route Nationale 3* (N3), which runs inland to [Awsard](#) from the seaside resort town of [Dakhla](#). Moving eastwards, the R101 – another secondary road – breaks from the N1 in [Tantan](#) and runs southwards to [Samara](#). The last road that crosses into Western Sahara from Morocco is the R103 which runs southwards from [Assa](#) to Samara, crossing The Berm. In addition to these roads, a handful of marked and paved roads run from the Atlantic coast to Moroccan-administered towns and villages in Western Sahara. Travel vloggers like [Got2Go](#) on YouTube show that civilian navigation of the road network in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara is not so complicated. However, there are many checkpoints where authorities check passports or other identification documents.



Figure 3: Vehicles of a UN patrol team deployed to monitor the ceasefire. In the Smara area of Western Sahara. Image by UN Photo/Martine Perret Creative Commons BY-NC-ND.

Commercial air travel to Western Sahara is only possible in the Moroccan-administered areas and limited to Laâyoune (EUN) and Dakhla (VIL), meaning citizens of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic are virtually cut off from the outside world. Smara also has an airport (SMW), but it is scarcely used. Flights to and from Laâyoune and Dakhla are mainly domestic flights by Royal Air Maroc. [Dakhla](#) serves three Moroccan cities – Agadir, Casablanca, and Laâyoune. In addition to domestic flights, Binter Canarias operates a service from Gran Canaria to Dakhla. Likewise, [Laâyoune](#) is connected to Dakhla by air, as well as Casablanca and Agadir. Royal Air Maroc also operates its own service to Gran Canaria from Laâyoune and Binter Canarias. Nevertheless, neither Dakhla nor Laâyoune is directly connected to Rabat or other major cities in Morocco, like Tangier or Marrakech. In addition to the commercial routes, there are numerous marked and unmarked airstrips for military use by the Moroccan Army and the United Nations. An example of such airstrips is in Mehbes, where there is a United Nations [airstrip](#) and an [unmarked airstrip](#), visible via satellite images.



Conflict Impact on Local, Regional and Transatlantic Trade

Ella Startt

Algeria and Morocco's Economic Relationship

The paralysing conflict over Western Sahara's sovereign status has dramatically impacted the prosperity of the Maghreb Arab Union (AMU), which is a political and economic multilateral union that unites Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia. Since the early 1990s, the AMU has signed over [30 multilateral treaties](#) and agreements to improve economic, social, and cultural cooperation. Of these agreements, only five have been ratified, which solely cover trade tariffs, agricultural trade, investment guarantees, deals on double-taxation and the trade of Phyto-sanitary products between all five countries. [Trade in the AMU represents only 2% of the region's GDP, according](#) to the World Bank, making it one of the lowest trading blocs in the world. As a union initially created to encourage cross-border trade and simplify economic channels with the EU market, the AMU's biggest thorn has been the border closure between Morocco and Algeria due to the Western Sahara dispute since 1994, effectively blocking the free movement of goods, services, and capital between the two largest Maghrebi states. Trade between both countries is logistically and financially challenging, as it requires transit at the French port of Marseilles to bypass border closures.

The conflict has directly impacted the growth of illegal trafficking between Western Saharan territories, South Algeria and Mauritania. The second border closure between Algeria and Morocco following the Western Sahara War in 1975 led to increased [illegal imports of Moroccan products into Algeria](#). In the late 1980s, lower fuel prices in Algeria led to increased petroleum products smuggling into Morocco, which further entrenched regional reliance on illegal trafficking. [Both governments tolerated these clandestine activities](#) as they provided citizens from both countries with necessities that both governments could not provide to their respective citizens, along with a source of income for the growing unemployed population in both countries. As these illegal trends normalised, more sectors began to engage with black markets, which inevitably complexified government regulation. In the early 2000s, illegal markets began to [include migrant smuggling](#) from sub-Saharan African countries and developed into a major transit safe haven for drug trafficking out of South America and into Europe. Whilst both Algerian and Moroccan governments have attempted to crack down on such activity, these complex clandestine regional networks continue to grow. Since 2015, the illegal trade of cigarettes, cannabis, psychotropic drugs, counterfeit medicines, and cocaine has continued to rise.



Regional Trade (North Africa, Sahel, and the Greater African Continent)

In 1984, Morocco withdrew from Africa's regional organisation, the Organisation of African Unity, following its decision to admit the SADR as a member. As a result, Morocco heavily focused on economic partnerships with the EU and the US, entering into a bilateral [Free Trade Agreement with the US in 2006](#) and an [Advanced Status agreement with the EU in 2008](#). Whilst Morocco maintained a presence in African markets, trade with the continent only represented [6.4%](#) of Morocco's overall trade globally. The global financial crisis seriously hampered trading relationships with Morocco's northern partners in 2008, and consequentially, [many private Moroccan companies](#) began moving into markets in Western and sub-Saharan Africa. In the last decade, [Moroccan banks](#) have expanded primarily into West Africa and have played a crucial role in developing local financial markets by hiring and training local workers. Similarly, the last decade has also seen an increase in [Moroccan insurance companies](#) spreading into West and Central African states. Morocco also heavily invests in the [telecommunications](#) sector, which, together with the banking sector, made up 88% of its FDI stocks in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2015, Morocco drastically increased the country's [direct investments in the continent](#) when it provided Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Gabon with USD 600 million, making it the second largest investor in African development.

While Morocco maintained a strong economic partnership with its traditional pro-Moroccan allies in the region (like Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire), the Kingdom began investing in countries that have traditionally been highly supportive of the Polisario Front and the SADR's right to self-determination, such as Ethiopia and Nigeria. An example of Morocco's economic expansion includes signing a [deal between the Moroccan phosphate conglomerate OCP and Ethiopia in 2016](#) to build a giant fertiliser production plant and [Morocco's investment into building a gas pipeline for Nigeria](#). Morocco used its positive economic influence in the region as political leverage to [re-enter Africa's dominating regional organisation, now called the African Union \(AU\), in 2017](#).

Morocco has also strategically weaponised renewable energy to hinder international support for the Saharawi cause. As part of its plan to become self-sufficient and increase exports by growing both its traditional and renewable energy sectors, Morocco has connected Western Sahara to its power grid. This expansion of energy infrastructure in southern occupied territories not only makes Morocco dependent on Western Sahara but also makes other African states dependent on Morocco's occupation. The Kingdom began building [two diesel factories](#) in the Western Saharan cities of Laâyoune and Dakhla between 2015 and 2016, and finished the construction of a [100 kv wind farm in Laâyoune](#). Morocco has also been planning the development of a powerline connecting Morocco's power grid to Mauritania's via Dakhla, which would export renewable energy to West Africa. As part of its 2030 road map to renewable energy, solar plants in Western Sahara are expected to provide 30% of Morocco's Wind Programme projection capacity.



In parallel, Morocco has been using mutual interests in energy infrastructure development across the continent to appease African states that are traditionally hostile to Moroccan actions. It engaged in plans to build a Nigerian-Moroccan gas pipeline that would connect all Western African countries to Nigeria's gas supply, swaying Nigeria away from a hard pro-Sahrawi stance. Furthermore, Morocco's state electricity and water company has provided Mali, a strong supporter of the SADR, with aid in electrical infrastructure projects. Morocco's current energy politics will likely continue to garner support from states, including those currently unreceptive to Morocco's claims in Western Sahara, as global warming increases and states search for immediate solutions.

Transatlantic Trade (European Union & the United States)

The conflict has also impacted transatlantic supply chains. In 2013, the European Union (EU) and Morocco finalised [an agreement](#) allowing European vessels to fish in Western Saharan waters. The agreement immediately sparked controversy as it was seen as a direct violation of international law. In 1975, the [International Court of Justice](#) stated that none of the information the court was presented had established Moroccan or Mauritanian ties with the territory of Western Sahara. In 2002, a [UN Legal Opinion](#) concluded that the exploitation of natural resources in Western Sahara without the Sahrawis consent was illegal. Nevertheless, in the Morocco-EU agreement, Morocco negotiated without the Polisario Front on the fate of Western Saharan territory. Since 2016, the [EU Court of Justice, the High Court of England and Wales, and South Africa's High Court](#) have all reiterated the UN's 2002 opinion. In 2021, the European Court [annulled](#) the Moroccan-EU fishing deals due to the Polisario Front's lack of input.

These legal controversies, in conjunction with successful lobbying by regional NGO groups, particularly the [Western Sahara Resource Watch](#) (WSRW), caused many US and European companies profiting from Western Saharan resources to divest in the region. The Spanish company [Calvo](#), which had collaborated with a Moroccan company on the manufacturing of fishery products, pulled out of the region in 2008 after WSRW had exposed the company's partnership with the Moroccan company. In 2010, numerous Northern European companies, including Norwegian fish oil producer [GC Rieber Oils](#), pulled out of the region as domestic public opinions became more aware of the illegal exploitation of Western Saharan resources.

Although legal controversy mainly surrounded fishing rights, companies operating in other sectors also fielded public criticism while doing business with Morocco over Western Saharan resources. In the energy sector, the Spanish company [Iberdrola Renovables](#) decided to pull out of an agreement with Morocco to study the construction of a 200MW wind farm in Western Sahara after WSRW lobbied the company and informed it of the potential illegality of any such agreement without the Sahrawis consent.



Humanitarian Impact

Human Rights Violations in Western Sahara

Guido Larocca

The conflict's impact on the Sahrawis human rights is significant. Nonetheless, the dispute over Western Sahara remains obscure and absent from mass media. Moroccan military and security forces in Western Sahara routinely commit grave human rights violations against Sahrawi civilians, including arbitrary arrests, torture and sexual violence. Police brutality and violent repression of Sahrawi activists is a daily occurrence. Although Morocco justifies its repression on the grounds of [anti-terrorism](#) activities, in reality, the harsh actions of security forces are directed against non-violent demonstrations, peaceful protesters, journalists, human rights activists, or any person that expresses support of the Sahrawi cause for self-determination.

The Berm and Moroccan Military Aggression

The Western Sahara wall, also known as the Berm, is a 2700-kilometre (1500-mile) sand wall that separates the Moroccan-controlled areas from the Polisario-controlled ones. The wall has multiple adverse effects on the human rights of the Sahrawi people, ranging from their physical security to their economic situation.

Its construction began in 1980 and was progressively extended until completion in 1987. More than 120,000 Moroccan soldiers patrol the wall through bunkers and fortifications. The physical separation of the Western Saharan territory into two harms the lives of Sahrawis in many ways. As a nomadic people, freedom of mobility is essential for Sahrawis; restrictions on movements are detrimental to Sahrawi economic activities traditionally [dependent on livestock](#). The Berm poses a significant danger to the lives of Sahrawis, as it is the [longest minefield](#) in the world, with an estimated [9 million](#) landmines scattered throughout the wall. The wall is not constructed of only sand, either: [barbed wire and electric fences](#) splice through the 10-foot-high sand barrier, with human sentries located every seven miles. The humanitarian organisation Action on Armed Violence estimates that since 1975 there have been [2500 victims](#) of landmines and cluster munitions. The effects of landmines are particularly grievous, as they are designed to produce serious injuries resulting in the loss of limbs, creating lifelong disabilities for their victims.



[Figure 4](#): Image of the Berm.

Morocco is rumoured to have started employing [armed drones for targeted killings](#), a tactic violating international humanitarian law. The first strike was reportedly carried out in 2021, with the Polisario Front claiming that its police chief was killed. Last year, Algeria denounced a Moroccan drone strike that killed three civilians. While these claims have not been independently verified, the Moroccan air force is known to possess several models of [combat-capable drones](#).

Arbitrary Arrests and Forced Disappearances

It is challenging to estimate the number of forcibly disappeared with accuracy. However, the Association for the Families of Saharawi Prisoners and the Disappeared (AFAPREDESA), forecasts that [400](#) Sahrawis are missing. An Argentinian database of the victims of the 1970s and 1980s disappearances in Argentina also contains a list of [disappeared Sahrawi names since 1975](#). Most forced disappearances occurred between 1975 and 1991 during the war, but this practice has not been completely [abandoned](#), though it is not carried out on the same scale as during the war.

Arbitrary detention of Sahrawi civilians is a standard procedure of Moroccan security forces, with most detainees subjected to unfair trials. The [Gdeim Izik](#) prisoners represent one of the most symbolic cases of arbitrary detention. In 2010, a group of Sahrawis erected a protest camp in the desert area of Gdeim Izik on the outskirts of Laâyoune. The purpose of this camp was to protest the poverty and human rights abuses Sahrawis suffered under the Moroccan occupation. The camp started as a non-violent demonstration, but Moroccan security forces proceeded to



dismantle it, resulting in riots between the police and camp residents. Between 3 and 36 Sahrawi civilians died, and Morocco claimed [11 police officers](#) were killed due to the riots. Of the hundreds of Sahrawi arrested in connection to the riots, 25 men were referred to a military court. Confessions by the detainees were the primary source of evidence for the convictions, but the court refused to investigate the defendant's claims that confessions were extracted under [torture](#). Though Morocco ended military trials for civilians in 2015 and the Gdeim Izik prisoners were granted a retrial in a civilian court, the convictions based on torture were [upheld](#) for all but two of the defendants.

Children are not safe from the Moroccan security force's repression either. In 2020, a 12-year-old girl was [kidnapped](#) from her school by police and taken into custody. The motive was that the girl was wearing a military-style jacket with the Sahrawi flag on it. The case highlights the degree of intensity of the repression Sahrawis are subjected to; even the mere displaying of the Sahrawi flag is a cause for arrest.

The Moroccan state also engages in permanent acts of [harassment](#) against human rights organisations, lawyers, journalists and any individual denouncing the human rights situation in Western Sahara. One alarming example of Morocco's offensive against human rights activists is the case of Sultana Khaya. Security forces stormed into her house and [raped](#) her along with other female members of her family. In a related incident, five women activists that expressed support for Khaya were beaten by police officers, with two of the women reporting that they were [sexually assaulted](#). Human rights activists are also victims of espionage by Moroccan authorities. Since 2017, journalists, lawyers, and activists have been [targeted](#) by the Israeli organisation NSO's Pegasus spyware, including Maati Monjib, the co-founder of the NGO Freedom Now.

Settlements

Shortly before Spain's withdrawal from the region, Morocco's King Hassan II [encouraged its citizens](#) to participate in a massive demonstration to claim sovereignty over Western Sahara. Around 350,000 Moroccans [crossed](#) into the former Spanish colony in four days, advancing 10 kilometres into the Saharan territory. This first Moroccan advance was symbolic and eventually translated into a colonisation enterprise, one that included economic benefits to encourage settlement in Western Sahara.

Moroccan settlement violates Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits an occupying power from transferring its civilian population into occupied territory. Sahrawis face [discrimination](#) as employers favour Moroccan settlers in the phosphate mining industry. Besides creating "facts in the ground," Morocco's settlement policy has been used as a safeguard against an independence referendum by guaranteeing a Moroccan [demographic majority](#) that would influence voting in Rabat's favour.



Sahrawi Refugees and Immigrants

Joakim Enrique Carli

The conflict has led to massive displacements of Sahrawis since its beginning 49 years ago. Currently, the occupied areas of the territory are only inhabited by [20 per cent of the population \(105,000 Sahrawi inhabitants\)](#). The rest of the population consists of 34 per cent Moroccan military personnel (180,000) and 46 per cent Moroccan civilian settlers (245,000). This is a result of the Green/Black March, where 300,000 Moroccans moved into the Sahrawi territories and began their settlement, leading to the Sahrawi people becoming a minority in their own land. The sparse population of Sahrawis in the occupied areas is also prevalent in the liberated territories under the control of the Polisario Front, where an estimated 49,000 Sahrawis currently live. The contrast to this settlement of Sahrawis in Western Sahara is stark compared to the amount of Sahrawis living outside the territories. In Tindouf, Algeria, [around 200,000 Sahrawi](#) refugees are spread across four large refugee camps: El Aaiun, Smara, Dajla and Auserd, named after large cities in Western Sahara. A fifth camp, Bojader, also houses the exile government institutions, which govern the camp in collaboration with the Polisario Front.

These refugee camps are located in harsh desert conditions; average temperatures exceed 40 degrees celsius during summer months, and winter temperatures are around 10 degrees. This affects opportunities for agricultural production, the keeping of livestock, and the need for water and shelter in the camp areas. As a result, inhabitants [rely entirely on full humanitarian resistance](#) to meet basic needs. Humanitarian conditions information is insufficient, and the exact number of people in need is difficult to determine. Therefore, effective policy to address the situation and provide sufficient humanitarian assistance is impeded, negatively impacting the crisis response. Hygiene access and sanitary conditions are also below standard, [increasing the risks](#) of diseases.

As the priority of conflict has [progressively faded from the international agenda](#) over the past decade, Sahrawis living in Tindouf are further isolated and confronting these harsh conditions on their own. The prolonged conflict keeps new generations of Sahrawis away from reclaiming their land's heritage. They have [been born in refugee camps](#) and know nothing apart from their life in exile, where they cannot decide their paths. The prospects of education for Sahrawi youth in the refugee camps are limited, as primary schooling is the only offer with decent capacity inside the camp areas. To gain further education, they must leave the camps to study in other places in Algeria. The Algerian state sponsors the education of many Sahrawi children. However, it remains challenging to keep students from [dropping out of the secondary education](#) offered because of the limited education they receive in primary schooling in the refugee camps.



Furthermore, a diaspora of [50,000 Sahrawis](#) is settled in Europe, mostly in Spain. This is not only due to the geographical proximity but also because Spain is a former colonial ruler of Western Sahara. The migration flows from Tindouf are [a source of financial remittances](#) which comprises an important part of the economy in the camps, as well as a destination for trading goods out of camp areas into Europe. Apart from this, commercial activity is [somewhat present](#) in the form of grocery stores, clothing stores, handcrafted products, furniture stores and hairdressers. However, the activity is largely informal and does not secure economic self-sufficiency.

Economic activities in Sahrawi refugee camps are insufficient to provide adequate resources to people living there, as 30 per cent of refugees in Tindouf camps are currently food insecure and 58 per cent are at risk of food insecurity, according to the [World Food Programme](#). 94 per cent of refugees in camps depend on humanitarian food assistance and access to water is severely limited, making them further rely [on water trucks](#) from humanitarian agencies. Malnutrition is a common problem resulting from the lack of access to food and water. Over half the female population of Sahrawi refugees between 15 and 49 years, and children under the age of 5, suffer from anaemia, possibly due to a deficiency of iron in their diets. Furthermore, Sahrawi refugees struggle with other mineral and vitamin deficiencies, and the prevalent undiversified diets have also led to [obesity](#) problems among Sahrawi women in camps. The already dire situation is only worsening after a [75 per cent cut in food](#) rations between March and August 2022. This is due to funds for humanitarian relief being slashed by the negative economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent food and fuel price increases, and the adverse global impact of the war in Ukraine.

On a positive note, the WFP saw a donation of [5.8 million Euros](#) to cover the basic food needs of the Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf in November 2022. Other active measures are implemented to address the immediate concerns of food insecurity risks in the Tindouf camps, as well as create jobs and stimulate economic growth. In 2019, [Triangle Generation Humanitaire, along with the World Food Programme](#), built a fish farm to breed Tilapia fish locally. The initiative seeks to ensure 12 permanent employees, provide entrepreneurship training to 20 Sahrawi youths, and contribute to reducing food insecurity risks present in refugee camps.

Conclusion: Pressing Risks from Intractable Conflict

Ethan Dinçer

As this report has established, the conflict in Western Sahara is exceptionally complex, spanning decades with numerous regional and international actors actively playing a role in the conflict's economic and humanitarian outcomes. While many in the international community refrain from pressuring a diplomatic resolution based on previous International Court of Justice and UNSC rulings, life in Western Sahara and in Sahrawi refugee camps continues to prove



exceedingly challenging. Brahim Ghali, the Secretary-General of the Polisario Front, who was re-elected just last week for an additional three-year term, has vowed to intensify “[armed struggles](#)” against Moroccan forces the Front sees as in continual violation of the 1991 ceasefire. The UN-backed truce [broke down](#) in November 2020 when Morocco sent troops to disperse Sahrawi protestors blocking the sole highway between Western Sahara and Mauritania in Guerguerat. The Guerguerat region is one of few demilitarised regions in Western Sahara and has been historically monitored by UN peacekeepers.

Given these recent developments since 2020, it is crucial to highlight the most pressing political risks emerging from this seemingly intractable conflict: imminent humanitarian crisis and regional economic depravity.

1. Continued Regional Economic Depravity

Maghreb and Sahel regional economic prosperity continues to suffer as the Morocco-Algeria border remains closed. The ineffectiveness of the Maghreb Arab Union – constituting only 2% of the region’s trade – is just one example of an economically dysfunctional region, filled with *de facto* accepted clandestine and smuggling networks that deliver both Moroccan and Algerian polities with necessary goods. Continued international economic deals with Morocco in Western Saharan territory threatens to further concretise this regional inefficiency: when both foreign bodies and corporations sign deals with Morocco that exploit Western Sahara’s natural resources, whether it be fisheries or phosphate reserves, Algeria and the Polisario Front are incentivised to seek economic retaliation. In addition, economic deals with Morocco that utilise Western Saharan resources serve to legitimate Morocco’s sovereignty claims, implicit endorsements that organisations such as the Western Sahara Resource Watch aim to dismantle. This international economic complexity vis-à-vis trade deals and natural resources distils regionally into a highly unstable economic network that has the potential, but ultimately fails, to boost the economies of neighbouring states beyond Algeria and Morocco, including Mauritania, Tunisia, and Libya of the AMU in addition to Spain and France. To counteract this regional economic depravity, foreign investments must follow the guidelines as set out in the 2002 UN legal opinion and 1975 International Court of Justice ruling to avoid further economic retaliation between Algeria and Morocco.

2. Critical Humanitarian Devastation

The condition of refugee camps in Tindouf signal the high possibility of critical humanitarian devastation and inter-camp conflict. With many camp refugees living in Tindouf since the start of the nearly 50-year conflict, these areas require immediate humanitarian intervention given the desert climate and lack of resources in near proximity. The lack of humanitarian data on



Sahrawi refugees, combined with the 75 per cent cut in humanitarian food rations between March and August 2022 and immense lack of education and hygiene, constitute a significant political risk for the region. Given that a majority of Sahrawis reside outside of Western Sahara in these Algerian camps signals not only risk for the immediate border region near Tindouf, where the Polisario Front could become aggressive towards Morocco as international aid diminishes, but also in Algeria's own foreign policy presence. As the EU's lead MENA gas exporter, Algeria's allegiance to the Sahrawi people means that they carry international leverage to secure further aid for the Sahrawis. However, this leverage should not undermine the harsh reality that 200,000 Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf are critically dependent on humanitarian aid, a reliance that could destabilise the immediate region should it cease even more.

