

## **The Western Sub-Sahara Conflict: Pakistan's Perspective**

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### **Background**

The Western Sahara conflict between Morocco and the Western Sahara's pro-independence Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO) goes back to the end of Spanish colonial rule over Western Sahara in 1975. While Morocco advocates for autonomy under its sovereignty, the Polisario Front insists on a full and independent state. The intense fighting between the parties led to UN intervention, and a ceasefire was reached on 6 September 1991. A UN mission, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), was established to monitor the ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario, and to organise a referendum. The conflict has reignited in recent years, threatening regional stability especially after the collapse of 1991 UN brokered ceasefire in 2020.

In October 2024, the Security Council extended MINURSO's mandate for another year, stressing the urgency of a compromise-based political solution and the need to align MINURSO's strategic focus and UN resources towards achieving it. The

next vote on the mandate is scheduled for October 2025. The upcoming vote will undoubtedly be fraught with tension, and the potential for further escalation of the conflict remains a significant concern for regional stability. Ongoing hostilities and the absence of a definitive ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front continue to impede progress towards resolving this long-standing dispute. Pakistan has cultivated strong and amicable relations with Morocco and aims to foster positive ties with Algeria and other key stakeholders. Thus, as we approach the UN voting in October 2025, it is crucial that Pakistan's support reflects its national interests and remains consistent with its established policies. This strategic alignment will not only enhance Pakistan's diplomatic standing but will also contribute to its long-term goals in the region.

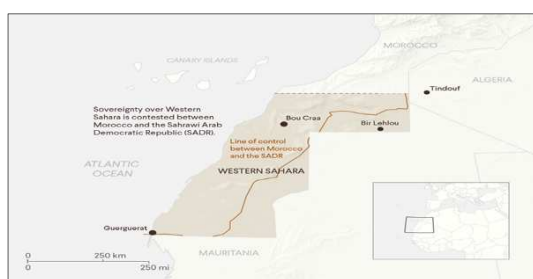
The conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front, seeking independence for Western Sahara, stems from the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1975. After Spain withdrew from Spanish Sahara (later Western Sahara), Morocco and Mauritania divided the territory. The Polisario, backed by Algeria, declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and launched a

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military campaign. Mauritania withdrew in 1979, leaving Morocco in control of most of the territory. Morocco subsequently built a defensive "sand berm," effectively controlling 80 per cent of Western Sahara, while the Polisario held the remaining 20 per cent.

### A Brief History of the Conflict



Source: Council for Foreign Relations

A UN-mediated settlement plan in 1991 established a ceasefire, a UN buffer zone along the berm, and a mission (MINURSO) to organise a self-determination referendum. However, the referendum never occurred due to Moroccan objections, and subsequent negotiations stalled. In 2007, Morocco proposed an autonomy plan, rejected by the Polisario for denying Sahrawi self-determination. The Sahrawi population is divided between Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, yet familial and tribal ties persist across the divide despite differing political allegiances.

Hostilities reignited between 2019 and 2021, escalating regional tensions. Morocco secured recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara by

convincing several nations to open consulates there. In November 2020, the ceasefire collapsed after Morocco intervened in the UN buffer zone, prompting the Polisario to resume attacks. The Trump administration's recognition of Moroccan control further inflamed tensions, as did Algeria's severing of diplomatic ties with Morocco in August 2021.

Consequently, the divide between Morocco and its allies, and the Polisario Front and Tindouf refugees, has widened. Pro-independence Sahrawis, disillusioned with mediation, see armed struggle as the only path to self-determination, preparing for a protracted conflict. The 2021 appointment of a UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, offers a potential avenue for renewed ceasefire talks. The UN and the United States are working to revive UN-led negotiations to stabilize the conflict and mitigate regional tensions.

### The Divisive International Stance

Foreign actors have struggled to develop a cohesive strategy for Western Sahara. UN efforts to appoint a new envoy repeatedly failed after May 2019 due to rejections from both Morocco and the Polisario Front. Only in October 2021 did Staffan de Mistura, a veteran diplomat, assume the role. Morocco views the Polisario as a separatist group, while the Polisario considers itself a national

liberation movement combating Moroccan occupation. Morocco refers to the territory it controls as "the southern provinces," while the Polisario calls it "occupied Western Sahara" and designates the area beyond the sand berm as "the liberated territory." The Polisario blames Morocco's attempts to impose a new status quo and UN inaction for its return to armed conflict, seeking a return to the 1991 Settlement Plan and a self-determination referendum. Conversely, some believe Polisario should accept Moroccan autonomy before talks.

External powers are divided and largely unwilling to intervene. The UN Security Council's response to the renewed conflict in 2020 was initially marked by inaction, reflecting divisions between pro-Polisario (e.g., Russia, some African and Latin American nations) and pro-Morocco (e.g., France, many Arab and West African governments) member states. These divisions concerned the level of pressure to exert on Rabat and the extent of international scrutiny. The Polisario has ruled out a return to the 1991 ceasefire, aiming to strengthen its position through continued fighting. The conflict also divides the African Union, where members are hesitant to pressure Morocco, even if they don't fully agree with its policies.

The US retains some credibility as a neutral actor. Despite traditionally favouring Morocco, France has never seriously considered recognising Rabat's

sovereignty. Spain attempts to balance its position, while Germany faces ongoing tensions with Morocco. The EU limits itself to supporting UN-led diplomacy, hesitant to intervene in a divisive issue primarily managed by France and Spain. These divisions, coupled with Morocco's insistence on addressing Western Sahara only within the UN framework, hinder the African Union's ability to mediate effectively.

To sum up, the rift between Morocco/allies and the Polisario Front/Tindouf refugees has deepened. Disillusioned with mediation, pro-independence Sahrawis increasingly view armed struggle as the only route to self-determination, bracing for a prolonged conflict. So, despite ongoing disagreements over Western Sahara, the next vote on the mandate is scheduled for October 2025. The UN's continued involvement remains crucial, though its efficacy is constantly debated by all parties, including Morocco, the Polisario Front, and neighboring Algeria.

### **Pakistan's Stance on Western Sahara Conflict, and Bilateral Cooperation between Pakistan and Morocco- Recommendations**

Given the divisive international stance on this conflict, Pakistan's stance must align with its national interests and its previous policies.

- Given Pakistan's historical support for Moroccan independence in 1952 and its

non-recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Republic, Pakistan should continue to maintain its support for Morocco's position on this separatist issue.

Pakistan should maintain balanced relations with Algeria and Mauritania. It is important that its support for Morocco does not negatively affect its ties with these countries or with others that oppose Morocco. Pakistan should emphasize its respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations and seek peaceful resolutions to all conflicts, including Kashmir, under the auspices of the United Nations.

- Pakistan faces a similar situation domestically, in the shape of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist group like the Polisario Front. Both of these groups are non-state actors and are considered terrorist organisations. By supporting Morocco, Pakistan could strengthen its position against separatist movements such as like-minded terrorist organisations. The support to Morocco could also foster international backing for Pakistan's policies regarding separatist forces.
- Apart from political support to Morocco, there are several opportunities lie between Morocco and Pakistan that need to be tapped in. To date, bilateral trade has generally favored Morocco, necessitating exploration of how Pakistan can leverage Morocco's Free Trade Agreements. Untapped potential suggests bilateral trade could reach \$9.67 billion, contingent on both nations diversifying their exports. Pakistan's support for Morocco could facilitate streamlining pending trade agreements like Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), and finally the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), visa relaxations, transit facilities, establishment of tax-free zones, and setting up more Joint Business Councils.
- Although defence cooperation exists between the two countries, primarily through joint exercises and training, increased collaboration, particularly in arms and equipment trade, is necessary. Such a development would not only enhance the interoperability of their armed forces but also contribute to a more balanced and reliable security partnership.