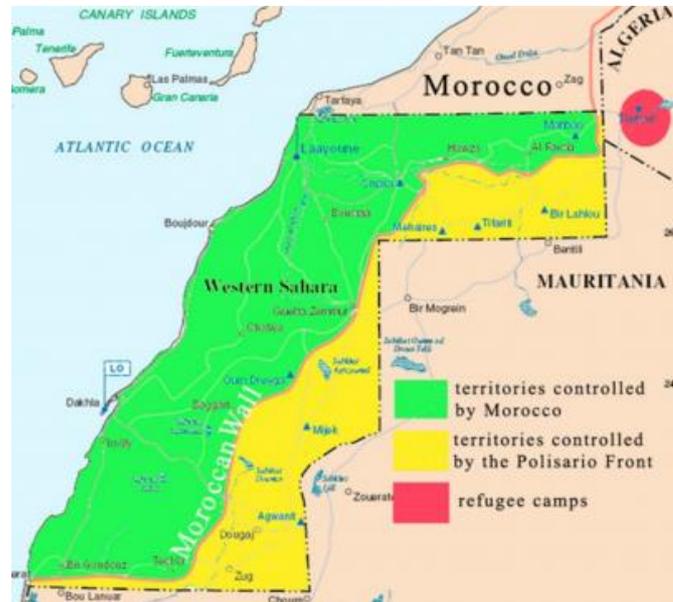


PAMUN XVI RESEARCH REPORT— The question of Western Sahara

Introduction of Topic

The Western Saharan Conflict, is the name attributed to the long lasting and still existing territorial dispute between the county of Morocco and the indigenous Sahrawi People over the lands of the Western Saharan region, located in the Northwest of Africa. An ancient Spanish colony, and right under Morocco's official southern border, the Western Saharan Region has been the primary motivator of this conflict which has torn these two sides apart ever since the complete Spanish withdrawal of the area during the 1970s. Controlling about 20% of the land in the region, the Sahrawi People have received little sympathy and cooperation from both its stronger counterpart Morocco and the international community. The

Sahrawi People, an indigenous minority in the region, have long called for the freedom of its presumed land, from Morocco's controversial rule. Having lived in the region for generations and later seeing their land be taken away, they had no option, in their eyes, but to respond. Today the Sahrawi people call upon the international community and even the UN in aiding its efforts to not only achieve its independence as a people and for its Sahrawi state (SADR), but also the universal recognition of this state. While Morocco, has continuously claimed control over the region, referring back to the country's history prior to Spanish rule, when the region was supposedly part of the "Greater Morocco". Often discriminating against the Sahrawi, separating them from their families consequently forcing them to live in small settlements and even what would be considered refugee camps, and simply ruling and taking over what they consider to be their lands, the Moroccans and their actions have continuously been condemned by the United Nations. The UN has taken upon itself, seeing a lack of will to help these people from the major players in the international community, notably the United States and France both implicated in the issue and fond supporters of Morocco, to upon many occasions attempt to solve the issue. Yet, despite numerous attempts to orchestrate referendums, produce compromises, and put in to action numerous strategies, the Western Saharan Conflict still remains a pressing issue, often over looked by the international community. Ever since a ceasefire implemented by the UN in 1991, little has



(Graphic of the Western Saharan Region, the disputed land within it, and the lands controlled by both Morocco and the Polisario. Source: Cartographic Section Department of Field Support)

changed. Despite, few altercations and attempts by the Sahrawis to continue the wave of the Arab Spring, to the region, the situation has stayed much the same.

Yet, in recent times, attention has grown on the subject with tensions reaching an all time high between both sides and the death of Mohamed Abdelaziz Ezzedine, a prominent figure in the Sahrawi fight for independence and the president of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), or the little officially recognized government of these people. With generations of children and young adults, among the Sahrawis, having never known the life their forefathers knew living their entire lives in exile, tensions have grown among the younger population to bring change. Adding to this the growing threats in the region, notably the presence of Islamic Terrorism, contribute to the fragility of the region, making the necessity for a resolution, and a unified group of African nations, greater than ever. This report will focus on the history behind this conflict, some of its major players, and some of the UN's attempts in the past to bring change, in order to see whether change can be brought and whether independence for the Sahrawis and the SADR will ever be a reality.

Definition of Key Terms

Western Sahara

Western Sahara is a region in the North East of Africa, near to Morocco and Algeria. This land, formerly ruled over and colonized by the Spanish, has long been the source of dispute between the Kingdom of Morocco and the indigenous Sahrawi People, who both claim the land to be theirs. Currently mostly controlled by Morocco, this land still remains disputed, with the Moroccan government having asked its people to consider this land as the country's "southern provinces", while the Sahrawi believe it to be their home, which the Moroccans took from them.

Sahrawi People

The Sahrawi People are an indigenous people of the Western Saharan region, that claim that the land controlled by Morocco belongs to them. These people have seen their families be split apart and have been forced largely live in small settlements, due to the Moroccan rule.

Polisario Front

The Polisario Front, is a rebellious party, that represents the interests of the Sahrawi People. Founded on the 10th of May, 1973, It has upon many occasions tried to liberate the Western Saharan Region and give it back to these people. It currently works under the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

SADR

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic or SADR, is the name of the little officially recognized government and state of the Sahrawi People. Not recognized as a real state by the UN, this small republic currently based in the city of Laayoune, located in Sahrawi controlled territory, acts as the official reference and representative of the Sahrawi People and is currently, and has been since its existence, been led by the Polisario Front.

Background Information

Looking at the very origins of the conflict, during the Spanish Colonial rule of the Western Saharan Region, the local Sahrawis, were a nomadic people. Living their lives independently, moving from one settlement to the next, these people, a considerable minority in the region, was never truly represented with a strong state or government. The Sahrawi were mainly made up of different tribes, thusly lacking a strong authoritative force, to led and represent them all as one. A small and weak, yet proud people, the Sahrawis were fundamentally against the Spanish rule, and consistently opposed its efforts to concur their land. Having started in the 1880s and ultimately ending in 1975, the Spanish Rule over what was then called Spanish Sahara, started to decline around the 1960s, with the passing of the, “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples” UN Resolution. This called for the decolonization of several regions, including many in Africa, notably Western Sahara. It took until 1975, for the Spanish to completely withdraw from the region, partly due to repeated pressure from the United Nations and the rise of several Sahrawis nationalist movements, including what would later be recognized as the Polisario Front, calling for the independence of the region.

With growing desire and affection for Western Sahara growing among the Sahrawi people, similar ideals were being promoted by the then Moroccan King Hassan II. Persuaded that the region belonged to the Kingdom of Morocco, seeing as it was once part of what is referred to as the “Greater Morocco”, prior to Spanish colonization, King Hassan created several campaigns trying to convince his people to follow his cause. Having even asked for a ruling from the International Court of Justice, to indicate as to who was the rightful successor to the region, which ultimately ruled in his disfavor, he was very motivated to acquire this land. Despite the disapproval of both the ICJ and the United Nations, King Hassan continued his efforts to assimilate the land, pushing and convincing Moroccans to move there and even start referring to these as Morocco’s “southern provinces”. All this finally came together in one monumental attempt by the King to gain control over the Western Saharan Region, which was later called the “Green March”. Having taken place on the 6th of November, 1974, this march called upon thousands of Moroccans to walk across the country’s shared border with Western Sahara to occupy its land. This ultimately, in order to avoid conflict, led to a withdrawal of Spanish troops in the region and the establishment of talks between Morocco, Spain, and the neighboring Mauritania. These talks, the Madrid Accords, resulted in the attribution of two thirds of the land to Morocco and the remaining to Mauritania, leaving the nomadic and unrepresented Sahrawi People with essentially nothing. Very soon after in 1975

when the Spanish withdrew from the region, conflict erupted between the Sahrawis, the Moroccans, and Mauritania, ultimately resulting in a 16 year armed dispute known as the Western Saharan War. The Sahrawis did manage to take over the Mauritanian portion of the land, quickly after the agreement, yet in the years to come thousands were killed on both sides and many Sahrawis were taken away from their homes, displaced as refugees. Since then, with the war having formally ended in 1991, thanks to a UN administered ceasefire, little has happened. Despite the construction during the 1980s of a “protective” wall by the Moroccans to essentially separate the Moroccan and Sahrawi lands, there were few events, only some small and failed attempts, to bring freedom to the Sahrawis and their land. The most notable of these was during the wave of the Arab Spring in 2011, where several Sahrawis attempted to bring this wave of political restructuring to the Western Saharan Region, which only proved to be unsuccessful. Since then the current situation has reached a stalemate, despite several attempts by the UN to solve the dispute. Yet in recent times as mentioned above, the changing political climate and circumstance of the region has highlighted the urgency of a resolution in this long lasting matter.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

The following is a list of some of the major countries involved in the territorial dispute over the Western Saharan Region. Seeing as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) are not formally and universally recognized as an independent nation, they will not be included, this being said their involvement in this issue has been stated and explained numerous times throughout this report.

Morocco

Morocco’s involvement in this matter is clear, seeing as it is one of the two major players, with SADR, directly involved in the Western Saharan Territorial dispute. Ever since the withdrawal of the Spanish, and even partly during its rule, from the region, Morocco has claimed the disputed land as its own. Claiming that it was once part of a “Greater Morocco”, they have continuously justified their actions behind their supposed history. Yet, although this may or may not be true, invalid in the eyes of the ICJ, much criticism has been made on Morocco, for having ulterior motives to gaining this land. It is true that the Western Saharan Region, is both a mineral rich and densely fish populated region. Many critics have accused Morocco of creating so much infrastructure and revitalizing the area to simply benefit from its natural resources. Yet, Mustapha El-Khalfi, Morocco’s government spokesman, has gone on record for an article on Al Jazeera’s site claiming that, “concerning fishing deals with the European Union and the exploitation of phosphates and natural resources of the region, the national natural resources management happens according to the requirements of development and the needs of the population, not through the logic investment of the region’s resources,” Although it simply results to bias, and whom you may choose to believe, it is true that Morocco is a large player in this issue and that its interpretation of events and its desires must be understood and kept in mind, just like those of the Sahrawis.

France and the United States

Both France and the United States, have played significant roles in this issue, primary acting as supporters of the Moroccan side. Firstly, it is crucial to remember that Morocco was once a French colony. Although Morocco is now independent and had been for some time, France has always made it a desire of theirs to maintain good relations with them. This spawn from trade, to political cooperation, to even support in the Western Saharan Conflict. Due to this France has been a strong help and supporter of the Moroccans. Furthermore, there are other reasons, which the United States share as well, for their continued support. Most notably is the war on terror and Morocco's geographic placement. Having a strong ally like Morocco in Africa, has proven to be very beneficial for both nations in their war on Islamic Terrorism, all over the world, and more specifically in the continent. Adding on to this, many critics have also stated that these nations choose to support Morocco for its natural resources. Despite the need for a strong ally in the region, and France's history with the country, the country's newfound natural resources can not be denied or forgotten.

Algeria

Contrary to the aforementioned nations, Algeria has long been an avid supporter of the Sahrawi cause. Ever since the withdrawal of the Spanish, the Algerians have openly stated that they believed that most, if not all the land belonged to the Sahrawi People. Even today, many of these people find themselves living in refugee camps in parts of Algeria, and its armed forces have received much aid from this country. Now, although they have supported the Sahrawis in the past, it is an undeniable truth that there is a rivaled history between Algeria and Morocco. Both being previous French colonies, and both competing to assert themselves as the dominant force in Northern Africa, there have long been tensions between the two. Now, not to undermine the intentions or efforts of the Algerian government, but it is important to keep in mind that one reason why they may be helping the Sahrawi, is perhaps to oppose the Moroccans.

Mauritania

Mauritania played a major role in the Western Saharan Conflict, in the early beginning of the dispute. After the Spanish withdrawal of the region, and the distribution of this land that followed, Mauritania was the heir to a third of the Western Saharan Region, Morocco receiving the rest and ultimately leaving out the Sahrawis. A strong effort to regain their land, then followed from the Sahrawi People, thusly starting the Western Saharan conflict. Yet, Mauritania quickly gave in to the Sahrawi forces, willingly handing over their share of the disputed land. Ever since, Mauritania has kept a neutral stance on the dispute between Morocco and the Sahrawis.

The United Nations

Although very obvious the United Nations is the primary organization involved in this conflict. As it will be covered more in depth later, the UN has upon many occasions tried to bring resolution to the

Western Saharan Dispute. Whether it be with the Settlement of Baker Plans, among others, the launch of a Peacekeeping mission in the region, or even the numerous attempts to hold a referendum on the independence of the Sahrawi people, the UN proved its determination to bring change. This being said, the numerous actions taken by the UN proved unsuccessful, partly leading to reason for which this conflict is still relevant today.

Timeline of Events

| Date | Description of event |
|--|---|
| December 26th 1884 - February 26th, 1976 | Spanish Colonization and Rule over Western Sahara |
| December 14th, 1960 | Passing of Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (UN Resolution 1514) |
| May 10th, 1973 | Foundation of Polisario Front |
| November 6th, 1974 | Green March |
| November 14th, 1975 | Madrid Accords |
| 1975 - 1991 | Western Saharan War |
| 1980 - 1987 | Construction of Moroccan Wall |
| 1991 | Settlement Plan (UN Ceasefire) |
| 1997 | Houston Agreement |
| 2000 - 2003 | Baker Plans |
| April 30th, 2007 | Passing of UN Resolution 1754 |
| 2007-2008 | Manhasset Talks |
| May 31st, 2016 | Death of Polisario Leader Mohamed Abdelaziz Ezzedine |

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, 14 December 1960, Resolution 1514

- Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara, 19 April 2006, **(S/2006/249)**
- Resolution 1754, 3 April 2007, **(SC/9007)**
- Report of the Secretary-General on the status and progress of the negotiations on Western Sahara, 25 January 2008, **(S/2008/45)**
- Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara, 14 April 2008, **(S/2008/251)**
- Resolution 1813, 30 April 2008, **(S/RES/1813)**
- Resolution 1781, 30 April 2009, **(SC/9650)**

Main Issues

The following are a list of issues, which have all in turn acted as obstacles to achieving concrete progress regarding the Western Saharan Conflict.

Conflicting Views, Agendas, and Histories

It can come as no surprise that both the Sahrawi and Moroccan people, both have very different and often conflicting wishes, desires, and interpretations of events, which have often gotten in the way of progress. As it was clearly shown, in the past proposal submitted by Morocco, which the Sahrawi openly opposed, and the other UN resolutions like the Baker Plans, which the Moroccans were wildly against, that finding middle ground between both sides is a difficult task. The situation the two sides are leaving themselves in, in which they both believe in and desire very different things, as it has been shown in the past, has halted any productive action being taken. The very fact that a referendum was pushed approximately three times, and finally never took place, seeing as both nations couldn't come to an agreement about its logistics, proves that the only way for something to be achieved is through compromise. As vague as it may sound, the UN must realize the differences between these nations and develop plans and legislation which can fit the needs of both parties.

International Agendas

Both the United States and France, have openly stated, in the past, their support for Morocco in the Western Saharan Conflict. Although there may be several reasons as to why this is the case, there has been much criticism made on these nations, saying that they have lost their neutrality in this affair at the expense of their national agendas. Partly considering that Morocco was an ancient French colony, and one of the country's strongest allies, as well as a key ally in the African Continent for the United

States, considering its advantageous geographical placement for both its natural resources and ability to fight the war on terror, it may be understandable why these nations have chosen to support Morocco. Yet it seems that this “loyalty” has proven to be very detrimental to any actual progress being made. Upon many occasions, the US and France, both members of the Security Council P5 nations, have used their enhanced powers in the committee to either prevent the discussion of this topic, or prevent the passing of any legislation that worked against their own and the Moroccan interests. This has been a late obstacle to progress, and one that the UN to date has been very unsuccessful in overcoming. This issue does not only refer to the Western Saharan Conflict, this technique has also been used several times before to protect individual national interests. It simply goes to show, that there is an inherent flaw in the framework of the United Nations, and one that, if not fixed soon, can not possibly lead to progress for issues like the Western Saharan Conflict.

Relative International Importance

As controversial as it may be, it is the harsh reality, the fact that many nations have overlooked this problem and that little has been accomplished to bring change, is partly due to the relative unimportance of this conflict to the international community. The African continent, is one that suffers from many, far more pressing issues which require the attention of more of the major global players. Whether it be the growing threat of terrorism growing in the continent, disease in some parts, or even the rule of dictatorships and presence of mass corruption, the conflict between an indigenous people and a strong relatively stable nation and necessary ally, does not attract nations to help. It is important for the UN to realize that many of its member states, do not feel the need or desire to get themselves involved. This conflict simply seems to small and too far to an actual consensus for increased international aid. However, this does not simply mean that the Sahrawi People are to be left alone, but rather question whether the previous approach to solving this problem is indeed the correct one, seeing as the independence of an entire people is on the line.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

When it comes to solving the territorial dispute of the Western Saharan Region, between Morocco and the indigenous Sahrawi People, there have been many attempts in the past by the United Nations, to find a solution to this problem. The first and foremost attempt to bring closure to this issue was the 1991 Settlement Plan. This plan had the goal of orchestrating a referendum for the people living in Western Sahara, both Sahrawi and Moroccan, to decide upon the sovereignty and self-determination of the region. It was meant to decide whether the region would either join Morocco or become its own state. Yet due to numerous complications, this referendum never took place, and despite numerous attempts, years later, to hold it again, the Houston Agreement acting as a primary example of this, it was still never played out. While having failed there, the plan did manage to implement a ceasefire, ultimately

ending the Western Saharan War and implementing a Peacekeeping force called MINURSO or the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, which was tasked to maintain and monitor the ceasefire and, although unsuccessful, try to create a referendum.

Following these two came the Baker Plans. These two, created by former US Secretary of State James Baker, a then UN official working on the Western Saharan Conflict, were once again attempts to bring self-determination to the region through the form of a referendum. The first aimed to allow the Sahrawis to manage their own issues, despite some which would fall under Moroccan control. While the second, called for the execution of once again a referendum and the self rule of the Sahrawis. These were meant to replace the previous implemented policies (Settlement Plan and Houston Agreements) but similarly to its predecessors proved to be unsuccessful, partly due to a lack of will to cooperate from both the Moroccan and Sahrawi side.

The situation was then later reversed in 2005-2007, when the Moroccans themselves tried to provide an ulterior solution to the conflict. In its proposal, which was approved by both the United States and France among others, Morocco aimed to bring autonomy to the region, yet the actual contents of the proposal caused for the Sahrawis to strongly oppose its implementation. The proposal was in fact never intended to have a very long lifespan, seeing as it has very often been regarded as a piece of intentional provocation from the Moroccans as opposed to a measure to bring legitimate progress. This later led to the passing of UN Resolution 1754, which essentially called for increased talks between both parties. These talks held in Manhasset, New York, ultimately led to nothing leaving the situation, seeing as the two sides could once again not come to similar terms, in the same state as it was before.

Possible Solutions

The Western Saharan Conflict is one that has been taking place for decades, and an issue which is in desperate need for resolution, before its presumably imminent return to armed conflict. Above were stated some of the many issues surrounding this conflict. The following is a list which either aims to solve these issues or more generally act as potential guidelines in solving the Western Saharan Conflict.

- Compromise with or simply by-pass nations stepping in the way of progress (as shown in the past with the US and France for example) in order for meaningful dialogue to be held.
- Persuade and provide incentives for other member states to either pressure the countries getting in the way, or to simply come up with solutions on their own
- Rethink, reconsider, alter, and potentially remove the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the region (MINURSO).

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