

Research Briefing

29 November 2023

By Louisa Brooke-Holland

Western Sahara



Summary

- 1 UK Government position
- 2 Brief history: 1960s to 2010s
- 3 2020s: Recent developments
- 4 Further reading

Number

Image Credits

Wall from the air / image cropped. Licensed under CC-BY-SA 2.0

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing [‘Legal help: where to go and how to pay’](#) for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Sources and subscriptions for MPs and staff

We try to use sources in our research that everyone can access, but sometimes only information that exists behind a paywall or via a subscription is available. We provide access to many online subscriptions to MPs and parliamentary staff, please contact hoclinaryonline@parliament.uk or visit commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources for more information.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Contents

1	UK Government position	7
2	Brief history: 1960s to 2010s	9
2.1	1960s: Spain urged to decolonise and organise a referendum	9
2.2	1970s: Spain withdraws, conflict begins	9
2.3	1980s: Conflict continues	11
2.4	1990s: Ceasefire, UN Mission established	11
2.5	2000s: Morocco suggests autonomy	11
2.6	2010s: UN facilitated talks, no outcome	12
3	2020s: Recent developments	13
3.1	End of the ceasefire	13
3.2	US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty	13
3.3	Israel normalises relations with Morocco	14
3.4	Biden Administration policy	15
3.5	Elections in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara	15
3.6	EU agriculture and fisheries agreements annulled	15
3.7	Moroccan King reaffirms claim to sovereignty over Western Sahara	16
3.8	Spain supports Morocco's autonomy proposal	16
3.9	Ghali re-elected president of SADR	17
3.10	New UN Security Council resolution	17
3.11	Prospects for talks in 2023/24	18
4	Further reading	20



Map No. 3175 Rev. 4 UNITED NATIONS
October 2012

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

[Western Sahara map](#) by United Nations. Permission to use granted by United Nations 22 November 2023

Summary

The UK Government [regards the status of Western Sahara as “undetermined”](#). In 2023, it said it supports UN-led efforts to “reach a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.”

About Western Sahara

Western Sahara, in West Africa, is classed by the UN Special Committee on Decolonization as a [non-self-governing territory](#). These are territories “whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government”. The territory has been under the de facto control of Morocco since Spain withdrew from its former colony in the mid-1970s.

The [Polisario Front](#) leads a nationalist effort calling for the people of Western Sahara to determine their future. The Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976, with a government in exile in Algeria. Algeria continues to support the group. The Polisario Front fought an armed campaign against Morocco until an UN-negotiated ceasefire came into effect in 1991. This ceasefire [held until 2020](#).

The berm, an earthen barrier constructed by Morocco, separates the Moroccan-administered western portion along the Atlantic coast from the eastern part controlled by the Polisario.

Western Sahara has significant mineral resources mined by Morocco. The International Crisis Group says [Morocco has “poured considerable resources into the territory”](#) since the 1970s.

Numerous talks facilitated by the United Nations have yet to resolve territory’s future. Plans for a referendum, first proposed in the 1960s, to determine the future of the territory never materialised. The Polisario Front continues to press for a referendum on the territory’s future; Morocco states it holds sovereignty over Western Sahara, which it refers to as the ‘Southern Provinces’. Morocco proposes a degree of autonomy for the area.

Recent developments

Since 2020 there have been several significant developments:

- In November 2020, the Polisario Front [declared an end to the ceasefire](#) with Morocco that had held since 1991. The [UN has recorded “low level hostilities”](#) since then.
- In December 2020, the Trump Administration [recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara](#). The Biden Administration has not changed this policy.
- In March 2022, Spain [endorsed Morocco’s autonomy plan for Western Sahara](#) as “the most serious, realistic and credible” basis for solving the dispute.
- In October 2023, the [UN Security Council adopted a resolution](#) calling on all parties to resume negotiations to achieving a “just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution” which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. [The UK supported the 2023 resolution](#).

1

UK Government position

Successive governments have reaffirmed the UK's support for "UN-led efforts to reach a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara."¹

The UK Government considers the status of Western Sahara to be "undetermined".² It has described Morocco as the "de facto administering power" and must ensure that "economic activities under its administration are conducted to the benefit and in the interests of the people of Western Sahara."³

The UK says it consistently supports language in UN Security Council Resolutions "that encourages the parties to continue their efforts to enhance the promotion and protection of human rights in Western Sahara, including the freedoms of expression and association."⁴

The UK holds a regular Strategic Dialogue with Morocco. The fourth session was hosted in Rabat (the Moroccan capital) in May 2023 and attended by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the United Nations.⁵ At the most recent dialogue, the UK:

Reaffirmed its commitment to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution to the question of Western Sahara based on compromise, in the context of arrangements consistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations. The UK reiterated its long-standing position on Western Sahara in support of the UN resolutions and the importance of principles, including self-determination.⁶

The UK also holds a strategic dialogue with Algeria. The second was held in November 2023. On the Western Sahara, the UK statement reiterated its

¹ PQ185142 [[Western Sahara: armed conflict](#)], 22 May 2023; PQ 1780 [[Western Sahara: peace negotiations](#)], 24 November 2023

² See, for example, PQ 18578 [on [Western Sahara: Morocco](#)], 18 June 2021

³ Department for Business and Trade, and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Overseas business risk: Morocco](#), 6 September 2023 [accessed 3 October 2023]

⁴ PQ 201859 [[Western Sahara: human rights](#)], 24 October 2023

⁵ FCDO, [Fourth session of the Moroccan-UK Strategic Dialogue and second session of the Association Council of the UK-Morocco Association Agreement: joint declaration](#), 11 May 2023

⁶ As above

support of a “just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution” and said that:

The two sides reaffirmed their full support to the efforts of the UN Secretary-General’s Personal Envoy, Mr Staffan de Mistura as well as MINURSO [the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara]. The two countries expressed their concern at the humanitarian situation in the Tindouf refugee camps and reiterated the need for further humanitarian support.⁷

⁷ FCDO, [Algeria-UK strategic dialogue November 2023: Joint statement](#), 16 November 2023

2 Brief history: 1960s to 2010s

The below provides a non-exhaustive summary of developments and legal consideration on the status of Western Sahara.⁸

The area now known as Western Sahara came under Spanish control in the late 19th century, although it has long been claimed by Morocco.

The United Nations has been involved in attempts to resolve the status of Western Sahara since the 1950s and Spain registering it as a non-self-governing territory with the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation in 1963.⁹ Numerous talks facilitated by the United Nations have yet to resolve territory's future. Plans for a referendum to determine the future of the territory never materialised. The Polisario Front continues to press for a referendum on the territory's future; Morocco states it holds sovereignty and has proposed a degree of autonomy for the area.

2.1 1960s: Spain urged to decolonise and organise a referendum

In the 1960s the UN General Assembly adopted resolutions urging Spain to decolonise the territory and organise a referendum on self-determination for the indigenous population, the Sahrawis.¹⁰ However, it was not until the 1970s that Spain, as the administering power for the territory, began to plan for a referendum.

2.2 1970s: Spain withdraws, conflict begins

The 1970s was a key decade in setting the parameters of Western Sahara's current status.

⁸ Timelines are available on the [UN MINURSO website, which provides a chronology](#) up to 2017, and BBC country profile, [Western Sahara](#), 31 January 2023

⁹ UN Department of Political Affairs, Trusteeship and Decolonization, [The question of Western Sahara at the United Nations](#) [PDF], 1980

¹⁰ UN General Assembly [resolution 2072 \(XX\)](#) [PDF] of 17 December 1965 and [resolution 2229 \(XXI\)](#) [PDF] of 20 December 1966. The demand for a referendum was repeated annually from 1967 to 1973 – UN MINURSO, [chronology of events](#), accessed 21 November 2023

In 1973 the Polisario Front (the short form of Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y de Río de Oro) was formed by Sahrawi nationalists who sought a rapid transition to independence and who were prepared to fight to achieve this.

In October 1975 the International Court of Justice, which had been referred the matter by the UN General Assembly, [issued an Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara](#). The Court found that while there were some legal ties between Morocco and some tribes living in the territory, it concluded that the information presented to it “do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity.”¹¹ ICJ Advisory Opinions do not bind states, but can be an authoritative indicator of the status of international law relating to a particular situation.

The following month, Morocco’s King Hassan II launched a “Green March” of 350,000 Moroccan civilians into Western Sahara, to reaffirm Morocco’s claim on the territory.¹²

Spain, which had previously undertaken a census with a view to organising a referendum on the future of the territory, opted to withdraw. In February 1976, the Spanish Government informed the United Nations it had ended formally ended its presence in Western Sahara.

However, the future of the territory was left unresolved.

After the Spanish left, Morocco and Mauritania both claim the territory. In 1975 fighting broke out between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan and Mauritanian armies. Mauritania renounced all claims to Western Sahara in 1979.¹³

The Polisario Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) from its base in the Algerian town of Tindouf in 1976. Algeria’s Government continues to support the Front and opposes Moroccan activity.¹⁴

The UN General Assembly adopted two Resolutions during this period describing Western Sahara as occupied. The General Assembly’s Resolutions are not legally binding or declaratory of a situation, but may be considered as part of the wider majority view of the international community at that time. In 1979, the General Assembly said that it was:

Aware of the profound concern of the United Nations, the Organisation of African Unity and the non-aligned countries at the aggravation of the

¹¹ ICJ Advisory Opinion, [Western Sahara](#), 16 October 1975, [1975] ICJ Rep 12 (PDF).

¹² [Why a quarter of a million Moroccans marched into the Sahara](#), BBC News, 4 November 2015

¹³ UN MINURSO, [chronology](#), accessed 29 November 2023

¹⁴ Arab Center Washington DC, [The Polisario Front, Morocco and the Western Sahara conflict](#), 22 June 2021

situation prevailing in Western Sahara because of the continuation and extension of the occupation of that Territory.¹⁵

The General Assembly, referring to the factual situation in November 1979, also deplored “the aggravation of the situation resulting from the continued occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco and the extension of that occupation recently evacuated by Mauritania.”¹⁶

2.3 1980s: Conflict continues

The Polisario Front continued to fight with Morocco throughout the 1980s.

An estimated 173,000 Sahrawi refugees now live in five refugee camps around Tindouf in Algeria, which lies on the border between Mauritania, Morocco and Western Sahara.¹⁷

In 1988 Morocco and the Polisario agreed on United Nations mediated “settlement proposals”, aiming for a ceasefire and the holding of a referendum for the people of Western Sahara to choose between independence and integration with Morocco.¹⁸

2.4 1990s: Ceasefire, UN Mission established

A ceasefire was subsequently declared in 1991, with the UN settling up a mission to help oversee the referendum and the ceasefire: the [UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara](#) (MINURSO).¹⁹

However, the parties have never been able to agree on who should be allowed to vote and no referendum has been held.

2.5 2000s: Morocco suggests autonomy

In 2007 both the Polisario and Morocco submitted different proposals to the UN.

¹⁵ UNGA Res 34/37, “[Question of Western Sahara](#)”, 21 November 1979, UN Doc A/RES/34/37 (PDF), preamble.

¹⁶ UNGA Res 34/37, “[Question of Western Sahara](#)”, 21 November 1979, UN Doc A/RES/34/37 (PDF), para 5.

¹⁷ Oxfam International, [Covid-19: New cases confirmed near Sahrawi camps, 173,000 refugees at risk](#), 8 May 2020; Crisis Group, [The youth movement in Sahrawi refugee camps](#), 25 April 2018; ACAPS, [Algeria: Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf](#), 19 January 2022

¹⁸ UN MINURSO, [background](#), accessed 29 November 2023

¹⁹ [UN Security Council resolution 690 of 29 April 1991](#)

Morocco proposed autonomy for the Sahara region whilst retaining sovereignty.²⁰ Under Morocco's plan, the Western Saharan population would have administrative, legislative and judicial powers, but Morocco would control defence and external relations and "the constitutional and religious prerogatives of His Majesty the King."²¹

The Polisario Front rejected Morocco's claim to the territory, citing the ICJ ruling, and recommitted to a referendum on self-determination in its proposal. The Polisario accepted the plan proposed in 2003 by James Baker, then the personal envoy of the UN Secretary-General, for a referendum to offer three options: independence, integration into the Kingdom of Morocco and self-governance.²²

Successive UN Security Council resolutions have taken note of the Moroccan proposal and the Front's response. Resolution 2703, adopted in October 2023, states:

Taking note of the Moroccan proposal [for autonomy] presented on 11 April 2007 to the Secretary-General and welcoming serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution; also taking note of the Frente Polisario proposal presented 10 April 2007 to the Secretary-General.²³

2.6 2010s: UN facilitated talks, no outcome

Sporadic talks facilitated by the UN, and others, have been held in the intervening years. Two round-table meetings involving Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania were held in December 2018 and March 2019.²⁴ Further talks were planned, but were never arranged after the UN envoy resigned for health reasons.²⁵

²⁰ Moroccan Government, [Moroccan initiative for negotiation an autonomy statute for the Sahara region](#), accessed 13 November 2023; [Morocco's autonomy plan for the Western Sahara](#), France 24, 7 April 2022

²¹ Moroccan Government, [Moroccan initiative for negotiation an autonomy statute for the Sahara region](#), accessed 13 November 2023

²² UN, [Proposal of the Frente Polisario for a mutually acceptable political solution that provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara](#) [PDF], 16 April 2007

²³ UN, [Security Council extends UN Mission for Referendum in Western Sahara by one year, with two Members abstaining on resolution](#), SC/15471, 30 October 2023

²⁴ United Nations, [Situation concerning Western Sahara](#) [PDF], S/2019/787, 2 October 2019

²⁵ International Crisis Group, [Relaunching negotiations over Western Sahara](#), 14 October 2021

3 2020s: Recent developments

3.1 End of the ceasefire

In November 2020, the Polisario Front [declared an end to the ceasefire](#) that had held since 1991.²⁶ Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Front, blamed Morocco for breaking the ceasefire, and said the organisation would resume its armed struggle against Morocco.²⁷

The UN has recorded “low level hostilities” since then. The UN Mission says it is often not able to independently confirm the number and location of reported firing incidents or verify their impact.²⁸

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, says the continued hostilities and lack of a ceasefire is a “major setback” to the achievement of a political solution.²⁹

3.2 US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty

In December 2020 the Trump Administration said it recognised Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara.³⁰

Previously, the US had not recognised either Moroccan or the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)’s sovereignty over the territory.³¹

The Trump Administration also endorsed Morocco’s autonomy proposal as the “only basis” for a solution to the conflict, describing the prospect of an independent Sahrawi State as “not a realistic option”:

[...] the United States recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and reaffirms its support for Morocco’s serious,

²⁶ [Polisario leader says Western Sahara ceasefire with Morocco is over](#), Reuters, 14 November 2020

²⁷ [Polisario leader says Western Sahara ceasefire with Morocco is over](#), Reuters, 14 November 2020

²⁸ United Nations, [Situation concerning Western Sahara, S/2023/729](#), 3 October 2023. Incidents since the resumption of hostilities are chronicled in the Secretary-General’s [annual reports to the Security Council](#).

²⁹ United Nations, [Situation concerning Western Sahara, S/2023/729](#), 3 October 2023

³⁰ White House, [Proclamation on Recognizing The Sovereignty Of The Kingdom Of Morocco Over The Western Sahara](#), 10 December 2020

³¹ Congressional Research Service, [Western Sahara](#) (PDF), RS20962, 8 October 2014; See for example White House, [Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Kingdom of Morocco](#), 22 November 2013

credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory. The United States believes that an independent Sahrawi State is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution.³²

The US also committed to opening a consulate in Dakhla in the Western Sahara.³³ At the time of writing, no progress on this has been made.³⁴

3.3 Israel normalises relations with Morocco

President Trump's support of Morocco's claim to sovereignty was linked to an agreement by Morocco to normalise relations with Israel in December 2020.³⁵

The Trump Administration had recently brokered agreements to normalise relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain in the [Abraham Accords](#).³⁶ A subsequent joint statement with Israel and Morocco highlighted both Morocco's decision to normalise ties with Israel and US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.³⁷

Morocco and Israel have since deepened ties. In November 2021, Morocco and Israel signed a defence agreement, focusing on security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and future arms sales.³⁸ In July 2023, Israel recognised Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara.³⁹ At the time of the announcement of normalisation of ties with Israel in 2020, the Moroccan King said "the measures do not in any manner affect Morocco's ongoing and sustained commitment to the just Palestinian cause" and he reiterated its commitment to a two-state solution.⁴⁰

³² White House, [Proclamation on Recognizing The Sovereignty Of The Kingdom Of Morocco Over The Western Sahara](#), 10 December 2020

³³ US State Department, [Join Declaration: The Kingdom of Morocco, the United States of America and the State of Israel](#), 22 December 2020

³⁴ US State Department, [Departmental press briefing](#), 18 July 2023

³⁵ [Israel, Morocco agree to normalise relations in US-brokered deal](#), Al Jazeera, 10 December 2020; US State Department, [Join Declaration: The Kingdom of Morocco, the United States of America and the State of Israel](#), 22 December 2020

³⁶ House of Lords Library, [Abraham Accords: UK government policy](#), 5 September 2023

³⁷ US State Department, [Join Declaration: The Kingdom of Morocco, the United States of America and the State of Israel](#), 22 December 2020

³⁸ [Morocco, Israel sign first-ever defence agreement in Rabat](#), Al Jazeera, 24 November 2021

³⁹ [Israel recognises Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara](#), Reuters, 17 July 2023; Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Moroccan King Mohammed VI invites PM Netanyahu to visit Morocco](#), 19 July 2023

⁴⁰ [Israel and Morocco agree to 'full diplomatic relations', says Trump](#), The Guardian, 10 December 2020

3.4 Biden Administration policy

The Biden Administration has not reversed Trump’s proclamation on Moroccan sovereignty. In July 2023, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Millar said the policy announced in December 2020 “has not changed”.⁴¹

However, the Biden Administration has shifted the language on Morocco’s autonomy proposal from that used by its predecessor. The Biden Administration has described Morocco’s autonomy proposal as “one potential approach” rather than Trump’s assertion that it was the “only basis” for a solution.⁴²

3.5 Elections in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara

Morocco administers about three-quarters of the territory, running along the Atlantic Coast, which it calls the Southern Provinces. The Southern Provinces are represented in Morocco’s Parliament. According to Freedom House, candidates in the election cannot contest the region’s status.⁴³

Elections were held in September 2021. Morocco said the reported high rates of participation represented a “new confirmation, through the ballot box, of the unwavering commitment of citizens of the southern provinces to their Moroccaness.”⁴⁴

The Polisario Front said the elections “cannot have any effect on the legal status of Western Sahara.”⁴⁵

3.6 EU agriculture and fisheries agreements annulled

In September 2021 the European Court of Justice (ECJ) annulled two trade and fisheries agreements between the EU and Morocco. The ECJ ruled in favour of the Polisario Front, which argued the agreements had been

⁴¹ US State Department, [Department press briefing](#), 18 July 2023

⁴² White House, [Proclamation on Recognizing The Sovereignty Of The Kingdom Of Morocco Over The Western Sahara](#), 10 December 2020 US State Department, [Departmental press briefing](#), 15 May 2023; United Nations, [S/PV.9460](#), 30 October 2023

⁴³ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Western Sahara](#), accessed 10 November 2023

⁴⁴ United Nations, [Situation concerning Western Sahara](#) [PDF], S2022/733, 3 October 2022

⁴⁵ As above

reached without the consent of the people of Western Sahara. The ECJ agreed, stating the Front Polisario “is recognised internationally as a representative of the people of Western Sahara.” The Court also cited a judgement from 2016 and reaffirmed its view of the “separate and distinct status” of Western Sahara.⁴⁶

Hugh Lovatt, a senior policy fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations, said the ruling will have “far-ranging implications for the EU’s relations with Morocco.”⁴⁷

The Court allowed the agreements to remain in place for a certain period. The EU Council and Commission have appealed and a final ruling is expected later in 2023, although the fisheries agreement expired in July 2023.⁴⁸

3.7 Moroccan King reaffirms claim to sovereignty over Western Sahara

In November 2021, in his annual speech marking the anniversary of the 1975 Green March, King Mohammed VI said Morocco “is not negotiating over its Sahara”. The King declared “the Moroccanness of the Sahara never was - and never will be - on the negotiating table,” adding Morocco is “negotiating in order to reach a peaceful solution to this artificial regional dispute.”⁴⁹

During a visit by the UN Secretary-General in November 2022, King Mohammed VI reaffirmed Morocco’s position of settling the dispute “on the basis of the autonomy initiative, within the framework of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Kingdom.”⁵⁰

3.8 Spain supports Morocco’s autonomy proposal

Until April 2022, Spain had remained neutral over the future of Western Sahara.

⁴⁶ [General Court of the European Union, press release no 166/21](#) [PDF], 29 September 2021; Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Western Sahara](#), accessed 10 November 2023.

⁴⁷ Hugh Lovatt, [Western Sahara, Morocco, and the EU: How good law makes good politics](#), [European Council on Foreign Relations](#), 30 September 2021

⁴⁸ [EU-Morocco fisheries deal stuck pending court decision on self-determination claim](#), [Euroactiv](#), 18 July 2023

⁴⁹ Morocco Government, [HM the King delivers speech to nation on 46th anniversary of Green March](#), 8 November 2021

⁵⁰ Morocco Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [His Majesty King Mohammed VI, may God assist him, received on Wednesday, November 23, 2022 at the Rabat Royal Palace, Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. António Guterres](#), 23 November 2022

In April 2022, during a visit to Rabat, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan as "the most serious, realistic and credible" basis for resolving the dispute.⁵¹ The visit marked a significant improvement in relations with Morocco, which had soured the previous year over the treatment of the Polisario's leader in Spain.⁵² Another [visit to Rabat in February 2023 signalled a further mending of ties](#), with the Prime Minister leading a delegation of Spanish ministers to sign around 20 deals to boost trade and investment.⁵³

Algeria, which has long supported the Polisario Front, responded by suspending its 2002 friendship treaty with Spain in 2022.⁵⁴

3.9 Ghali re-elected president of SADR

Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Front, was re-elected President of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and of the Polisario Front in January 2023. He has served as president since 2016.⁵⁵

According to Freedom House, the Polisario Front does not allow other political parties to compete in elections and has cracked down on political dissent.⁵⁶

3.10 New UN Security Council resolution

On 30 October 2023 the [Security Council adopted resolution 2703](#), extending MINURSO's mandate for a further year.

Resolution 2703 emphasises the "need to achieve a realistic, practical, enduring and mutually acceptable political solution" and calls on Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania to work with the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy to facilitate the negotiation process.⁵⁷

Russia abstained on the resolution. While supporting the work of MINURSO, Russia said none of its comments were considered in the drafting of the

⁵¹ Moroccan Foreign Ministry, [Joint Statement adopted at the end of talks between HM King Mohammed VI, President of Spanish Government Pedro Sanchez](#), 7 April 2022; [Morocco, Spain patch up diplomatic feud after Spanish shift on Western Sahara](#), Reuters, 8 April 2022

⁵² [Morocco, Spain patch up diplomatic feud after Spanish shift on Western Sahara](#), Reuters, 8 April 2022, Spain, seeking better ties with Morocco, shifts stance on Western Sahara, New York Times, 19 March 2022. See also: Alissa Pavia, Giorgio Cafiero, [What's behind Spain's about-face on Western Sahara](#), Foreign policy in focus, 20 March 2023

⁵³ [Spain, Morocco seek reset of testy relationship at Rabat summit](#), Al Jazeera, 2 February 2023

⁵⁴ [Algeria suspends cooperation with Spain over Western Sahara](#), Al Jazeera, 8 June 2022

⁵⁵ BBC Monitoring profile of Brahim Ghali, accessed 27 November 2023

⁵⁶ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Western Sahara](#), accessed 10 November 2023

⁵⁷ United Nations, [Resolution 2703 \(2023\)](#) [PDF], 30 October 2023

resolution, and criticised “vague wording” and the “inappropriate” references to what it calls the “no longer relevant round table format”, which it does not support. Russia favours direct negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front and supports a solution that stipulates self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.⁵⁸

Algeria will sit on the UN Security Council in 2024 and 2025.

3.11 Prospects for talks in 2023/24

Staffan de Mistura became the UN Secretary General’s new envoy to Western Sahara in November 2021. He held bilateral talks with key stakeholders, including the UK, in New York in March 2023.⁵⁹

However, the parties have yet to agree on both the format of any future talks and who should be involved.

According to the UN Secretary-General’s report to the Security Council in July 2023, these are the positions of some of the key stakeholders:

- Morocco: Believes its autonomy proposal is the only viable outcome of a political process and favours a reactivation of the roundtable format.
- Polisario Front: Believes self-determination should be the basis of any process, wants to be the main interlocutor of Morocco in future negotiations.
- Algeria: Considers itself as an observer, rejects the roundtable format.⁶⁰

In October 2023, the UN Secretary-General spoke of his concern about developments in Western Sahara and the risk that the “deteriorated state of affairs has become entrenched.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ United Nations, [S/PV.9460](#), 30 October 2023

⁵⁹ United Nations, [Situation concerning Western Sahara, S/2023/729](#), 3 October 2023

⁶⁰ United Nations, [Situation concerning Western Sahara, S/2023/729](#), 3 October 2023. These positions are also discussed in the International Crisis Group, [Paving the way to talks on Western Sahara](#), 20 July 2023

⁶¹ United Nations, [Situation concerning Western Sahara, S/2023/729](#), 3 October 2023

1 Phosphate production

Morocco and Western Sahara is second only to China in producing phosphate, a critical mineral essential to the production of fertiliser, green energy and other technologies.⁶² It also sits on the largest the largest phosphate reserves in the world.⁶³

The Bou Craa mine in Western Sahara, established in the early 1970s during the Spanish period, is reportedly one of the largest phosphate mines in the world.⁶⁴ Phosphate rock is transported to the Atlantic coast along what has been described as the world's "longest conveyor belt system," which is visible from space.⁶⁵

Phosphate rock is on the [EU's list of critical raw minerals](#) and Morocco is the EU's main supplier of phosphate.⁶⁶

Phosphate is not on the UK Government's list of minerals with high criticality for the UK. However, it is on the watchlist of the Government's Critical Mineral Expert Committee, meaning it is identified as a mineral which is increasing in criticality.⁶⁷

⁶² KSB, [the global phosphate market](#), 4 April 2023

⁶³ US Geological Survey, [Mineral commodity summaries 2023 – Phosphate](#), p132-133

⁶⁴ Fred Pearce, [Phosphate: A critical resource misused and now running low](#), Yale School of the Environment, 7 July 2011

⁶⁵ Earth Observatory (NASA), [World's longest conveyor belt system](#), 14 December 2022

⁶⁶ European Commission, [Critical Raw Materials](#) and [Study on the critical raw materials for the EU 2023](#), accessed 27 November 2023

⁶⁷ Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Resilience for the Future: The UK's Critical Minerals Strategy](#), 13 March 2023

4 Further reading

Status of negotiations

- International Crisis Group, [Paving the way to talks on Western Sahara](#), 20 July 2023
- International Institute for Strategic Studies, [The end of the ceasefire in Western Sahara](#), Strategic Comments, November 2021
- International Crisis Group, [Relaunching negotiations over Western Sahara](#), 14 October 2021

Political freedoms and human rights

- Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Western Sahara](#)
- Amnesty International, [Amnesty International Report 2022/23: Morocco and Western Sahara 2022](#)
- Human Rights Watch, [World Report 2022: Morocco and Western Sahara](#)
- US State Department, [2022 country reports on human rights practices: Morocco](#)

Regional relations

- Francisco Serrano, [Morocco and Algeria's regional rivalry is about to go into overdrive](#), Middle East Institute, 9 November 2023
- Thomas Hill, [A newly assertive Algeria seizes an opportunity](#), US Institute of Peace, 19 January 2023
- Hugh Lovatt, [Western Sahara, Morocco, and the EU: How good law makes good politics](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, 30 September 2021

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)