

# A Liberation War in Western Sahara

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(All photos by Limam Bachir.)

The story of Western Sahara is one of resistance, one of plunder, and one of colonialism. It is a story that is shrouded in ignorance and mystery as it is rarely discussed in international media.

## **What is happening in Guerguerat?**

For historical context, the sovereignty of Western Sahara has been disputed between the Moroccan government and the POLISARIO Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia El Hamra and Río de Oro) since 1975. That year, Spain withdrew its colonial power from the territory. Despite the claims for independence of the Saharawi people and the promise of a referendum of self-determination made by the Spanish government, the Western Sahara territory was ceded to Morocco and Mauritania in the Madrid Accords. Mauritania gave back what it had occupied to the Saharawis recognizing Western Sahara as a country, but Morocco violently occupied two-thirds of the territory.

As a consequence of the occupation, half of the Saharawi population fled to find refuge in Tindouf (Southern Algeria) and the other half stayed in the occupied territory. A war took place between Morocco and the POLISARIO from 1975 until 1991. At that point, with the mediation of the UN and the promise of a referendum of self-determination for the Saharawi people, a ceasefire was agreed. In its resolution 690, the UN Security Council established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINUSRO).

Until today, the UN has failed to provide a referendum. MINURSO remains ineffective amidst a vacuum of international leadership and initiative to continue the stagnant political discussion of this issue. For instance, MINURSO allowed for mass exploitation of Western Saharan resources and failed to force Morocco to enter serious negotiations while allowing it to veto the settlement plan developed by former US Secretary of State James Baker. UN Secretary-General Guterres has not yet named a special Personal Envoy for Western Sahara for 18 months, whose responsibility is to lead the political process, and understandably, we have seen political negotiations come to a total halt.

During that time, Saharawi people in the occupied territory have been violently oppressed by the Moroccan government, according to multiple human rights organizations. Saharawi people resorted to living in the refugee camps in Tindouf, with the help of international organizations, some supporting countries (as Algeria) and individual charity. In the meantime, Morocco is slowly but effectively succeeding in “normalizing” their illegal, violent and oppressive annexation of the Western Sahara (In 2009 it was readmitted in the African Union, after years of expulsion due to the occupation).

### **Why the 2020 Saharawi protests?**

Together with the ceasefire of 1991, a Military Agreement was signed between MINUSRO and the Polisario Front in 1997 and between MINUSRO and Morocco in 1998. It established an area of 5km wide to the South and East of the Moroccan military wall, named the Buffer String, where entry of troops, arms or ammunition and defence infrastructure are not allowed for either party.

In 2001, Morocco started constructing an asphalted road through Guerguerat towards the Mauritanian border with commercial ends. The UN Security Council opposed this action but it did not intervene, leaving the conflict unaddressed and letting the tension to escalate in the region. In response to this breach, in October 2020, Saharawi civilians started nonviolently protesting in Guerguerat against this road and the breach in the Moroccan military wall.

### **Who broke the ceasefire?**

Guerguerat is inside the restricted area that marked the Military Agreement no. 1. Therefore, Morocco breached this agreement on November 13th when it sent troops to stop the protesters and moved heavy-duty vehicles, including 16 graders, into the area, as confirmed by MINUSRO.

“But it must be understood that it was never the desire of the Saharawis, who had trusted with goodwill in the diligent work of the UN for 29 years, to resort to arms to claim a legitimate right recognized by international law such as self-determination,” said Mustapha M-Lamin, secretary of Zemmur, Association of Sahrawis in Valencia.

Since Moroccan colonization and even after the ceasefire in 1991, the Moroccan government has kept on violating all human rights. An example of Moroccan brutality is the massacres of Igdem Izik. It was a peaceful protest on November 8, 2010, where more than 20,000 Saharawis in 80 white tents started a camp outside Layun, the capital of Western Sahara, to protest against

the human right violations and to get international attention. Tragically, the camp was all burnt by the military planes. They killed protesters, including a 14-year-old boy, and injured and imprisoned hundreds of them, most of whom are still in prison to this day.

Morocco is allowed to do that freely since they have media blockade. The UN did not do much to stop the Moroccan government from doing so or to keep its promises for Saharawis and most international media have ignored the conflict and all the human rights violations taking place there.

Despite all that, Saharawis never responded violently; they still held onto the hope of the UN promise for a referendum on self-determination.



### **International Response to Western Sahara**

We often forget that it takes two to tango, and the war that broke out recently between Morocco and Western Sahara could only continue because the international community stood idly by. They either willfully ignored the human rights violations that they seemingly condemn or even actively helped Morocco by backing the Moroccan military.

From the lack of action, it is clear that the international community is placing their self-interest over their morality, over decolonization and human rights. The EU and many other countries in the international community benefit from Morocco exploiting the fishing industry and the phosphate reserves in Western Sahara, for example. Morocco is the EU's most stable trading partner in North Africa, so although illegal and in breach of their own Court of Justice rulings, risking their relationship with Morocco is not beneficial. The ECJ ruled in February that the EU's fisheries agreement with Morocco was only valid if it did not include the disputed Western Sahara territory, but these rulings do not appear to have held the Commission back in terms of this illegal trade. Evidently, the French company *Compagnie maritime d'affrètement* -

*Compagnie générale maritime* (CMA CGM) opened a trade route in Morocco-occupied Western Sahara without consent from the Polisario Front.

It is, simply put, in their interest to keep the status quo as is. Everyone stands to benefit from this arrangement except for the Saharawis, who are the overlooked victims in this situation. According to Aljazeera, “Morocco has recently opened consulates and embassies in the territory, trying to bolster its sovereignty claim [over Western Sahara] with international support, [and this] strategy has been effective: out of 84 countries that previously recognized Polisario (the governing body of Western Sahara), 44 recently rescinded their support and recognition.”

As unbelievable as it sounds, colonization still exists in the 21st century. Western Sahara is the last colony in Africa and more unbelievably, the UN’s position and that of the international community has recently shifted towards Morocco under a shallow guise of support for a referendum with a choice for independence. The international community is ignoring international law and the principles of the UN charter. How many more decades will it take for colonialism to be completely eradicated? How long must they wait?



### **International Response to the Broken Ceasefire**

Now, with the outbreak of war, the international community is once again turning a blind eye to the numerous human rights violations occurring to our fellow human beings, including a 12-year-old girl being tortured by the Moroccan police, of human rights activists mysteriously disappearing and being tortured, of a total of 25 young Saharawis being arrested in the last days, the youngest reportedly 12 years old and most reported to be between 16 and 17 years old on the 14th and 15th of November, while they were protesting against the Guergarat breach.

As mentioned above, the connections between the Moroccan military and the US military have grown in recent years, which we can see in how Washington is Morocco’s largest supplier of

arms. This bolster relationship is largely due to Morocco's cooperation with constructing AFRICOM, US military command in Africa, hosting one of the largest training exercises organized by AFRICOM, the African Lion annual exercise for countries all over Africa. It is important to note that Morocco chose to launch the military incursion in violation of the ceasefire the same day the military commanders were in Morocco for the African Lion exercise. In addition to that, in October 2020, the US and Morocco signed an accord to strengthen military cooperation and military readiness over the next decade.

Not only is the international community not condemning human rights violations and expediting the decolonization process, but they are also benefiting from Morocco's exploitation and actively helping Morocco, which contradicts their public stance. We must call upon the international community as a whole for action upon the matter that respects human rights, international law, and the UN charter. It is our duty to always put what is right over self-interest. Let us not let down our fellow human beings in this war and put an end to these atrocities before it is too late.

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### **Author's bio**

Leila Belkacem

I was born and raised in refugee camps in southern Algeria for Saharawis. As a young girl, the camps were the world for me since I knew nothing else. However, as I grew up, I started finding out about my truth as a refugee in another country, an identity I didn't want to accept. I knew by then we were colonized, and we needed to do something. However, the camps were like a boxing ring: the harder we fought for our rights, the greater the backlash was.

Nevertheless, my voice was starting to be heard as I left the camps to pursue my education in the Netherlands. There, I started with some friends the "Under the Sun" project to raise awareness about the forgotten conflict of Western Sahara and help my family back in the refugee camps.