

Forum: Historical Security Council 1973 (HSC)

Issue: Escalation of armed conflict in Western Sahara, May 10, 1973

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Introduction to the conflict:

Historically, colonialism has proven itself to be the trigger of uncountable conflicts, jeopardizing international peace, endangering the lives of civilians, and undermining the will for self-determination of the locals. Moreover, with no intention of minimizing the grievances of other territories, no continent best illustrates the problematic nature of colonialism than Africa. In hindsight, the African continent has been the catalyst for economic growth of the so-called mother country at the expense of the colony and its desire for self-determination.

That was the state of affairs in the case of the conflict over the Western Sahara in 1973. The escalation in violence arose as a result of foreign intervention, with Spain's annexation of Sahrawi territory being the main factor behind it.

One can trace the causes behind the 1973 conflict to the late nineteenth century. In 1884, following the accession of president Antonio Cánovas, the Spanish claimed a protectorate over a large portion of the Sahara, temporarily dominating it from Cape Blac to Cape Bojador.



Cánovas, father of the Spanish liberal movement, passed a constitutional amendment in 1876 that ratified monarchical power whilst also displaying clear liberal ideals. The document allowed the return of the Bourbonic bloodline to power and guaranteed Cánovas' movement a significant majority in the Spanish house of representatives, granting the prime minister near unrestricted political power thanks to the conservative MPs (members of parliament.) In return for their support, Cánovas tried to please the nationalist right by expanding Spanish territory through the takeover of Western Sahara.

Locals, enraged by the claim of ownership of the land, quickly showed their discontent by orchestrating small attacks against the Spanish. Still, their attempts to ward off the Spaniards proved futile. The establishment in 1884 of the protectorate had its undeniable consequences, ranging from the relentless exploitation of local population to the uncontrolled extraction of natural resources. It was not until 1958, however, with the creation of "Spanish Sahara" and the annexation of the area encompassing Rio de Oro and Saguia El-Hamra that the conflict as we know it today began. Most academicians attribute the difference in magnitude between both events to the creation of the United Nations (UN), considering the influence an international mediator might have had on the later stages of the conflict. (*For*



Further reference in regards to both protectorates, refer to the first and second map on page 1)

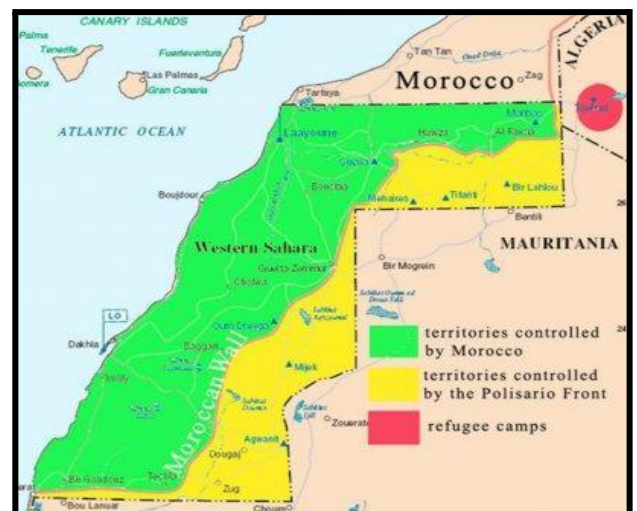
Following Morocco's declaration of independence from both France (1956) and Spain (1958) the young nation displayed its clear opposition to the idea of a Spanish Sahara, whether it be the protectorate of 1884 or the 1958 reform. Circa 1956, Morocco claimed ownership of the land under the principle that the territory was a part of pre-colonial Morocco, launching a campaign consisting of military strikes and imposing restrictions on travel and commerce by Europeans.

The reason behind Moroccan interest in Western Sahara is often disputed. One explanation revolves around economic advancement and control, since by taking Spain out of the picture Morocco would be free to become the dominant trading partner in the region. A second explanation is more geo-political: Morocco would be able to establish clearly defined borders and prevent any Spanish interference or expansionism.

Morocco, however, has not been the only African country to claim ownership over Western Sahara. Mauritania argued that the territory was theirs, advocating its annexation even before its own independence in 1960. An in-depth study of colonial politics reveals that the likelihood behind Mauritania's drive to annex Western Sahara was fueled by the century's old rivalry between France and Spain over the territory since Mauritania was a French colony at the time. While already engaged in two fronts with Morocco and Mauritania claiming control over the Western Sahara, the Spanish would soon be confronted by a third party seeking to end Spanish rule over the territory: the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro).

On May 10th, 1973, the Polisario front was founded by its first secretary general Brahim Ghali, a Sahrawi college student that along with other rebels dedicated themselves to end European imperialism in Western Sahara. Defined as an anti-colonial paramilitary group, the front was created to resist Spanish occupation and establish an independent nation of Sahara. Mostly made up of Sahrawi nomadic groups and small militias, the group aimed at declaring independence from Spain and establishing an independent nation-state nation. The group viciously fought against Spanish colonialism by employing guerrilla warfare to counter Spain's superior weaponry and military forces.

The front quickly grew because of significant support from Arab governments (Morocco, Libya, Algeria and Mauritania) that, due to their political alignment, benefited from removing Spanish control (and their restrictions) from Western Sahara. A careful look at the Polisario supporters allows us to recognize Alegria as its "angel" investor, being the one who contributed the most to the creation and mission of the group. Algeria provided the front with arms, training, financial aid, and food. The Polisario employed tactics that went against international regulations, for example by relying on underage soldiers and violating the Geneva conventions. The Polisario slowly seized Spanish territory by force and claimed it as their own. Needless to say, the Polisario's military endeavors were also beneficial to the other parties (Mauritania and Morocco), and their desire to end Spanish



dominance and thus secure control over the region. (*For further clarification please refer to the map within page 2*)

When analyzing the involvement of the Polisario, it's noteworthy to state that the Front hit Spain at its lowest moment. From 1939 until his death in 1975, the European power was ruled by Francisco Franco, a fascist leader. The Spanish people heavily sympathized with Franco's nationalist ideology and supported his every move and foreign policy. The centralization of power in the hands of Franco heavily tied the status of the nation to the leader's personal condition.

Franco's ill-health handicapped Spain's ability to confront the unfolding crisis and unleashed political pandemonium of colossal magnitude. The effects were devastating for Spain due to the lack of consensus in parliament which eventually would lead to the implosion of the Spanish government. Mounting opposition to the government and the conflict in the Western Sahara, led by a fervent democratic youth movement, likewise resulted in a significant reduction in military spending. Faced with a weakened and fractured Spain, the Polisario launched their assault against Spain in an effort to finally subdue European entanglement in the region.

It is important to mention that the three parties opposing Spanish domination (the Polisario Front, Mauritania and Morocco) acted simultaneously but independently. Each had its own agenda. The Polisario Front aimed at creating a sovereign, independent nation-state free from foreign interference. Morocco wanted to stop Spanish expansionism while also eliminating a significant trade competitor, and Mauritania opposed Moroccan control as much as it opposed Spanish control. Previously fixated on dismantling the "Spanish Sahara," none of the three parties seemed to represent a threat for the others. Despite the fact that they regarded Spain and the heritage of Spanish colonialism as the enemy, this unanimity did not make them allies.

Although outside the framework of our deliberations, the subsequent "neutralization" of Spain as an active threat resulted in an unforeseen vacuum that triggered an escalation of violence between all participants. Mauritania, already weakened by the conflict and fearing reprisals from either of the two remaining parties, opted to tone down the hostilities, unlike the other two contenders (the Polisario Front and Morocco). The conflict and brutality committed by all sides resulted in thousands of civilian casualties and immense collateral damage.

Glossary of key terms.

Protectorate: Term within international relations which refers to a state under protection by another state. This mechanism creates an overall dependency by the protected, who enjoys autonomy in regards to internal affairs, while still recognizing the suzerainty of a more powerful state without being a possession. Most often, they are established *de jure* by a treaty but can also be established *de facto*.

De jure: Legality that refers to practices that regardless of the real-life application is contemplated within the law and legally recognized. This term is the antonym of *de facto*.

De facto: Legality that refers to practices that regardless of their dubious legal validity are conducted. This term is the antonym of *De jure*.

Fascism: Authoritarian form of government, inherently nationalist and usually involving the indiscriminate use of military forces for political intents. Consequently, due to its autocratic nature, fascism undermines democratic values and disregards democracy as a whole.

Colonialism: Political mechanism in which a powerful state exploits a weaker foreign state(colony) with economic benefits in mind. The term is highly tied with imperialism, being

usually described as the “aftermath” of imperialism because imperialistic expansion often was followed by colonialism.

Imperialism: political term used to define the extension of power by a state through territorial acquisition or by extending its political and economic control. The concept comprehends that “acquisition” of either territorial, political or economic control was frequently achieved through military takeovers or other practices that overruled the democratic will of the people.

Virtù: theoretical term created by philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, focusing on the martial ability of a leader but also including a broader collection of traits necessary for maintenance of the state. The concept has been misconstrued in the past and used to justify immoral or unjust acts under the pretense “it’s for the greater good of the nation.” Machiavelli develops this concept and others in his political *magnum opus* “The prince.”

Guerrilla warfare: warfare tactics involving the use of military techniques rooted in deceit, sabotage, secrecy and the “hit-and-run” concept. This type of warfare makes up for a difference in numbers between opposing forces and tends to be appreciated as “the warfare of the people”, having been the preferred tactic by freedom fighters. Although different from conventional warfare, guerrilla warfare is not exempt from abiding all the due international regulations and has been previously questioned for the involvement of child soldiers or other war-related offences.

Franquismo: Spanish political movement that rooted for fascist leader Francisco Franco, supporting his political career as a whole. *Franquismo* was the ruling ideology in Spain from 1939 to 1975, being praised by the more conservative sectors of current politics for the enormous economic growth he generated through imperialistic expansion. Its fundamental to understand that the movement's ideology had strong ties with Italian fascism, heavily advocating for anti-communism and conservative values.

Nationalism: The adherence to one's own nation and support of its interests, while also especially excluding or prejudicing the interests of other nations.

Patriotism: The adherence to one's own nation and support of its interests, without the necessary implication of harming the prospect of growth of other nations.

Leges sine moribus vanae: Latin expression used in law that roughly translates to “Laws without morals are useless,” implying the importance of moral principles on the grounds of the law.

Major parties and their involvement in the cause.

Delegates should take into consideration that there might be other parties involved that could have not been included in this section for either the sake of conciseness or the fact that they joined the conflict after 1973.

Morocco:

Morocco's involvement in the Western Sahara conflict is rooted in its opposition to Spanish control over the region. After gaining independence from Spain in 1956, Morocco asserted historical claims to Western Sahara, arguing that it was an integral part of pre-colonial Morocco. Morocco's stance against the first Spanish protectorate of 1884 and its subsequent reform demonstrated a consistent opposition to foreign control. Morocco's motivation behind its involvement in the conflict is often questioned; entertaining either the possibility they wanted to stop Spanish expansionism from affecting them or profiting by eliminating Spain as a competitor. The escalation of the conflict eventually resulted in Morocco colliding with Polisario's interests, even though they had previously funded their mission.

Mauritania

Mauritania's commitment towards securing the Western Sahara as their own territory is noticeable, going back even before their independence in 1960. Their claim is sometimes seen against the backdrop of the long-standing rivalry between France and Spain over

territorial dominance. The creation of the "Spanish Sahara " in 1958 reaffirmed Mauritania's pursuit of Western Sahara, further fueling their eagerness towards securing the territory. The involvement of Mauritania in protests against Spanish control implicated even more people in the conflict, nearly doubling the opposing forces.

Spain

Spain's involvement in the conflict over Western Sahara can be traced back to the late 19th century when it claimed a protectorate over a significant portion of the Sahara, facing local resistance. However, it wasn't until 1958 that the conflict, as known today, began with the creation of "Spanish Sahara," encompassing Río de Oro and Saguia El-Hamra. Spain's weakened position during political restructuring and Franco's declining health in 1973 provided an opportunity for the Polisario Front and others to intensify its efforts against colonial rule.

The Polisario Front

Founded on May 10th, 1973, the Polisario front is an anti-colonial paramilitary group, created to resist Spanish occupation and establish an independent nation of Sahara. Originating from Moroccan collages, the front began as a reduced group of students led by their first secretary general, Brahim Ghali, and progressively became mostly made up of Sahrawi nomadic groups and small militias. The Polisario front quickly grew in significance, being supported by Arab governments that benefited from removing Spanish control from Western Sahara. The front was target of public scrutiny more than once, being criticized for their wrongful interpretation of Machiavelli's "virtu", shielding their wrongdoing under the pretense of doing the best for their soon-to-be-national interests. The group has been labeled as either patriotic or nationalist, mostly depending on the perspective chosen.

Algeria:

While not actively a part of the conflict, this sovereign state is often considered as the sponsor behind the Polisario Front, having helped them from day one. Some parts of the international community look down upon Algeria's decision to fund the Polisario, finding it an inflammatory choice facilitating warmongering. Moreover, some blame Algeria as another cause behind the conflict aside of Spanish expansionism.

Relevant international legislation on similar crises.

Berlin Conference

The Berlin Conference, held from November 1884 to February 1885, was a significant legislation on the topic of colonization in Africa by European powers during the late 19th century. The conference took place in Berlin and was organized by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of the German Empire. The primary purpose of the conference was to establish guidelines for the colonization and division of African territories among European powers in order to prevent conflict over competing claims. During the conference, participants drew arbitrary boundaries on maps with absolute disregard for ethnic, cultural, or historical factors, consequently, dividing existing preexisting African communities for their own interest.

The decisions made at the Berlin Conference had far-reaching consequences for Africa, laying the groundwork for the subsequent exploitation of their natural and human resources. Furthermore, the artificial borders established heavily impacted the continent, creating unnecessary situations where world powers fought each other for more territory, contributing to conflicts and challenges that persisted till 1973. The conference is often criticized for its role in promoting exploitation and oppression in Africa, presenting delegates with a clear example on what approaches not to take. The absence of African representation and the Eurocentric composition of the Berlin conference is a probable cause behind its failure.

Delegates should try to advocate for African representation during the deliberation process and bear in mind how any hypothetical division of land might be grounds for new conflicts.

Algerian referendum on independence.

The Algerian War of Independence (1954 -1962), was a breaking point in Algerian history, but also set a precedent in regards to colonial independence processes. Fueled by decades of colonial oppression, the Algerian people sought to break free from French rule and actively fought against the tyrannical regime. The conflict was marked by brutality on both sides, with atrocities being committed by both French and revolutionary forces alike. The war ultimately led to Algeria gaining its independence on July 3, 1962 after holding a referendum over the legitimacy of the Algerian claim.

The tragic revolutionary process in Algeria proved fruitful, ending up with the upholding of democratic values and establishing what some historians consider amongst the most successful revolutions for its direct effects. The referendum in itself was met with an almost unanimous consensus, meeting near null opposition of French forces, who withdrew from Algeria almost instantaneously. However, one must keep in mind the likelihood that the consensus was a direct result of France's military defeat and unwillingness to continue with the conflict.

Delegates should take into consideration democratic values, making sure that the will of the people is respected. On another hand, delegations should establish the necessary mechanisms to ensure that all parts uphold the resolution, thinking how deal with offenders and establishing how to oversee how the conflict progresses.

Timeline of events

- 1884:
 - Spain claims a protectorate over a significant portion of the Sahara, dominating it from Cape Blanc to Cape Bojador.
- 1954:
 - Algeria began its independence war against France
- 1956:
 - Morocco gained independence from Spain.
 - Opposing the idea of Spanish Sahara, Morocco ascertains owning the territory on historical grounds.
 - Moroccan protests fail to push back the Spanish protectorate.
- 1958:
 - Spain reforms the protectorate, creating "Spanish Sahara" by annexing Rio de Oro and Saguia El-Hamra to the preexisting territory.
- 1958-1973(Circa):
 - Morocco disputes Spanish control over Western Sahara, claiming it as part of pre-colonial Morocco.
 - Mauritania claims ownership over Western Sahara
 - Mauritanian and Moroccan demonstrators protest against Spanish control
- 1960:
 - Mauritania gained independence from France.
- 1962:
 - Algeria gained independence from France.
- 1973:

- May 10th: The Polisario Front, an anti-colonial movement mostly composed of Sahrawi people, is created to resist colonialism and establish an independent Western Sahara.
- Spain, under the leadership of Francisco Franco, faces internal issues and political instability due to Franco's health issues.

Possible solutions.

The intricate nature of the issue presents delegates with a rather difficult situation, having to take into consideration a plethora of factors. Delegates will need to prioritize the democratic will of the Sahrawi people without disregarding the individual interests of the other parties. Delegates must try to reach a general consensus. Avoid getting bogged down in territorial issues. Instead, endeavor to write a resolution that helps restore and preserve the peace, and keeps foreign intervention to a bare minimum.

Furthermore, it is important to remain objective as any sign of a political bias could escalate the conflict even further. Establishing a ceasefire while negotiations are taking place is a plausible solution that could prevent more civilian deaths and decrease the tensions between all parties. Additionally, a commitment to respecting the principles of self-determination should be the foundation of any proposed solution, fostering a collaborative spirit and avoiding unnecessary territorial disputes.

Last and most important, delegates must bear in mind the Latin fundamental *Leges sine moribus vanae*, making sure to preserve and respect the principle of law while at the same time ensuring the moral integrity behind the measures taken. The conflict did not just entail the violation of international law, it also led to violations of humanitarian law.

Bibliography and useful material

- [Brief documentary on the geographical and historical evolution of territory distribution in Western Sahara.](#)
- [Video introduction to the historical background.](#)
- [C-24\(Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence of Colonial Countries and Peoples\) official webpage.](#)
- [Biography of Francisco Franco: an overview of his political career and life.](#)
- [Paper on the legalities behind guerrilla warfare and humanitarian law, published by the ICRC\(International Committee of the Red Cross\) and written by Prof.Michel Veuthey](#)
- [UN peacemaker tool: General database of peace agreements.](#)
- [Historical overview of the Algerian independence war.](#)
- [Legal terminology glossary.](#)
- [Historical assessment of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885](#)
- [UN \(United Nations\) peacekeeping operations principles and guidelines.](#)
- [The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries.](#)
- [Spanish research paper on Spain's colonialist intervention on Western Sahara, written and published by Jesús Martínez Milán.](#)