

Morocco's claims on the territory rely on the fact that the Western Sahara is part of the Greater Maghreb – territory in Northern Africa that was historically allied with the Moroccan Sultanate and fought as part of the Moroccan Liberation Army against Spain. The Moroccan monarchy claims that historical economic, religious, and military ties between the Moroccan sultan and the Saharawi tribal councils prove that Morocco has always exercised authority over the Western Sahara. The International Court of Justice acknowledged such ties but determined that they were not sufficient to prove Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.

Additionally, there are numerous cultural and historic bonds between the people of southern Morocco and the people of the Western Sahara. These have been emphasized by the Moroccans to strengthen their territorial claims. Given that there are now hundreds of thousands of Moroccans living in the Western Sahara – many of whom have lived there for a generation – and that the Moroccan government has offered autonomy to the region, Morocco is strongly opposed to possible independence for the Saharawis. Morocco's position is that any talk of independence is unacceptable, as this would undermine the territorial integrity of the Moroccan state. Morocco believes that the nationalism of the Saharawi people has been exaggerated, and that the conflict springs more from historic Algerian-Moroccan rivalry and the generous support Algeria has provided the Polisario Front than from any legitimate Saharawi desire for freedom or independence.

Those who associate with the Polisario Front in Morocco are considered traitors, as made clear by King Mohammed VI in a public speech made on October 9, 2009, the anniversary of the 1975 Green March:

*"One is either a patriot or a traitor. There is no halfway house.... As for the adversaries of our territorial integrity...they know, better than anyone else, that the Sahara is a crucial issue for the Moroccan people, who unanimously support the Throne, which is the guarantor of the nation's sovereignty, national unity, and territorial integrity.... I think the most fitting tribute we can pay them [Moroccan martyrs] is by remaining true to our pledge not to give up or bargain over as much as a grain of sand from our Sahara."*

Because of the primacy given to the Western Sahara by the King and his ministers, for the Moroccan people, the "Moroccaness" of the Western Sahara is unquestioningly accepted. Speech or activities suggesting otherwise are considered crimes against the state, and Moroccans firmly believe that the Western Sahara has always been and should rightfully be a part of their country. In 2007, Morocco submitted its proposed solution to the Western Saharan conflict to the United Nations, calling for a referendum that allowed the residents of the Western Sahara to vote on becoming an autonomous region of the Kingdom. If autonomy were approved – which would be likely under the plan, as it allows Moroccans living in the Western Sahara to vote – Saharawis would be in charge of local administration, education, and health and social programs, while the Moroccans would administer defense and foreign policy for the region. All visible signs of sovereignty – currency, citizenship, and the flag – would be Moroccan. The

Moroccan government argues that autonomy is the most realistic solution, based on the control it already exerts over much of the region and its historic claims to Western Sahara.

Moroccan control is well-established over the two-thirds of the Western Sahara it occupies. It has invested in phosphate mines, provided subsidies and tax breaks for Moroccans who move to the territory, it patrols its 1,500-mile long border wall, suppresses any pro-independence activities through the presence of its powerful security and intelligence services, and entices potential Polisario defectors with offers of government positions, houses, and stipends. While no country officially recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, steadfast political support from France in the UN Security Council, a strong lobby in the U.S., the broad backing by the Arab world, and a lack of involvement of the international community has allowed it to continue its occupation.