

In addition to a referendum on self-determination, the protection of human rights, and the cessation of natural resource exploitation, the Polisario Front leadership advocates the dismantling of the Moroccan military wall that divides the Western Sahara in two. The Saharawis refer to the Moroccan barrier as the Wall of Shame, not only because it divides the 160,000 Saharawi refugees in Algeria from their families and friends in the Moroccan-held territory, but also because it threatens the lives and livelihoods of the hundreds of Saharawi nomads that still wander through the Western Sahara's deserts.



In the 1970s, the Saharawi People's Liberation Army (ALPS) achieved several military victories against Mauritanian and Moroccan troops. In 1980, however, Morocco began the construction of a long barrier of simple sand embankments meant to impede the movement of Saharawi soldiers. Between 1980 and 1987, five heavily fortified walls were added to the east and south, completely cutting off the Saharawi soldiers and refugees from their home cities, such as Laayoune and Smara. Today, the wall is 1,500 miles long – almost half the size of the Great Wall of China – and consists of alternating sand and rock walls and deep ditches.

Despite the signing of the 1991 ceasefire, both parties actively patrol their respective sides of the wall outside of the demilitarized zone on the east side of the wall, as stipulated in the truce. Along the western side of the berm, Morocco maintains over 120,000 troops reinforced by heavy military installations positioned every seven miles, which include radar, artillery, and tanks. In addition to troops and tanks, millions of landmines surround the wall. Though the exact number of mines on the eastern side of the wall is unknown, estimates range from one million to over 10 million, and the UN consistently ranks the Western Sahara as one of the 10 territories most contaminated by landmines and unexploded ordinances (UXOs).

For its part, the Polisario – which also was responsible for the laying of mines in the 1980s – refuses to publish the numbers of ALPS soldiers that currently patrol the wall, citing it as a matter of national security. The Saharawi Army operates in seven regions throughout the Western Sahara, but the numbers actively serving in each region are a closely guarded secret by the leadership, which has not ruled out a return to war.

Despite the grave dangers presented by Moroccan troops, millions of landmines, and inhospitable conditions, hundreds of Saharawis have made nighttime journeys across the wall to escape the Moroccan occupation and join their families and friends in the refugee camps outside Tindouf.