

The Polisario Front has also been accused of human rights violations, though recent alleged abuses are not as well-documented by independent groups as those committed by the Moroccans. Some of those who have spoken out include Moroccans attacked or detained by Polisario supporters, as well as Polisario defectors who have fled the refugee camps, fearing for their safety and security. Such defectors have alleged that the Polisario Front stifles dissent and has restricted the free movement of people in the camps.



The Polisario leadership, in a sign of openness and accountability, has taken responsibility for certain human rights violations that occurred in the camps in the 1980s and 1990s, many of which were directed against Moroccan prisoners of war, who were imprisoned in difficult conditions that violated the Geneva Conventions and other international norms. The leadership has also recognized abuses committed against some dissident Saharawis that opposed the Polisario Front. Such abuses are largely in the past, however. Today the refugee camps are home to an incredibly open, inclusive, and tolerant society. The Polisario has focused on improving the plight of its people and burnishing its international image as well as its democratic

credentials, and has taken steps to ensure human rights in the camps are guaranteed. These steps have included efforts towards the eradication of racism, the provision of human rights training for military and police officers, and the welcoming of international reporters and observers to the camps.

As pointed out by Morocco, Saharawi refugees continue to be restricted in their movements. However, the Polisario Front has counters that this is largely due to logistical and economic factors. Most fundamentally, without internationally recognized passports, it is extremely difficult for the Saharawis to travel to foreign countries. The 1,600-mile-long Moroccan military wall, which is surrounded by a minefield, makes travel to the cities of the Western Sahara nearly impossible. Finally, as refugees, the Saharawis lack the financial resources to move outside the camps.

Nonetheless, the Saharawis move freely among the five separate refugee camps, easily passing through checkpoints at each entrance. Many Saharawis also take day trips to nearby Tindouf, spend weeks visiting family in Mauritania, travel to Spain or Italy to study or spend the grueling summer months abroad, and pass weeks or even months in the grazing lands outside of Tindouf to escape the heat of summer in the camps. Critics, however, continue to allege that the Saharawis are prisoners in the camps, restricted by both the Polisario Front and their Algerian sponsors from leaving in large numbers. While considering these allegations, however, it is important to note that Morocco, through the construction of its military wall and the mining of the de facto border between occupied Western Sahara and that controlled by the Polisario, has erected the single most significant obstacle to the free movement of people in the area.

Finally, although not directly related to human rights, along with accusations of limitations on freedom of movement, the Polisario is accused of preventing a census in the camps to determine the number of refugees actually residing there. Estimates range from 40,000 to over 200,000, while many international observers studying the conflict believe the true population is probably closer to 160,000. The prevention of a census is a strategic decision by the Polisario, as the number of both voters and soldiers at the disposal of the Saharawis' independence movement is considered a matter of national security.