

The Saharawis are ethnically mixed descendants of Berbers, Arabs, and Black Africans. They speak an Arabic dialect called Hassaniya and have practiced Sunni Islam since the late 7th century. The Saharawis come from 22 different tribes, although tribal affiliation has much less importance today than in previous centuries. Before the arrival of Spanish colonists, the Saharawis lived nomadic lives, travelling from central Mauritania to southern Morocco and into eastern Algeria. The majority, though, lived and herded camel and goats throughout the territory that today is known as the Western Sahara.

The Saharawis have always been fiercely independent. In the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, the nomads banded together to defend their homeland against exploratory expeditions by the Spanish and Portuguese. At the Conference of Berlin in 1884, Spain obtained a protectorate in the Saharawis' homeland that would eventually become known as the Spanish Sahara. Spanish colonization did not come easily, however, as the Saharawis' intimate knowledge of the desert allowed them to stage a lengthy resistance struggle. It was not until the 1930s that Spain, with the help of the French, was able to "pacify" the Saharawis and begin to formalize its control. In the 1950s, the Spanish discovered the Western Sahara's great phosphate wealth, and began to invest in infrastructure and administration in a colony that they had largely left vacant. To encourage Saharawis to work in the phosphate mines, the Spanish set up schools and cheap housing in some of the main Western Saharan cities close to the mines at Bou Craa. With these new opportunities, many Saharawis began to give up their nomadic lifestyles and settle in the cities. It was in these years that the first ideas of a Saharawi nation began to emerge. When Morocco's invasion in 1975 forced Spain's hasty withdrawal, the Saharawis continued their resistance; this time against the neighboring North African state. Thanks to their 35-year struggle for independence from Morocco, the Saharawis have a very highly developed sense of national identity that is based on the linking of a modern state with older Saharawi traditions. While most Saharawis today live a more sedentary lifestyle, there are still many that herd camel across the desert. Centuries-old nomadic games are still taught to the children. Traditional, unique clothing is still worn by Saharawis of all ages: a blue, robe-like dara'a and a black turban for the men, and colorful, full-body melfas for the women.



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