Briefing 2026: Western Sahara and MINURSO

Recommendations to the UN Security Council

Immediately

Renew MINURSO at full strength and with its mission to remain focused on achieving self-determination for the Saharawi people:

- any suggestion that MINURSO could be abolished or significantly altered before a negotiated solution is achieved is premature and risks undermining longer term peace in the region.
- In the case where talks do lead to an agreement, there will still be a need to implement this and MINURSO will have a crucial role to play in this given the history of conflict and mistrust.
- In the worst case outcome where talks fail, MINURSO's continued presence will also be critical in order to prevent the conflict escalating further.

Insist that contacts between the parties are conducted in an impartial and neutral manner,

- This is essential to create the conditions for **genuine negotiations that could solve the conflict through allowing the Saharawi people self-determination** – including the option of independence - rather than seeking to impose a pre-conceived outcome such as the Moroccan 'autonomy' plan.
- Any solution that does not have the buy-in of the Sahrawi people simply will not be implementable or sustainable, as well as it being a necessary pre-condition under international law

Demand an **end to arms sales to Morocco**, in the light of the ongoing conflict and the Moroccan military's use of drones to kill Saharawi, Mauritanian and Algerian civilians.

Grant MINURSO the **legal mandate to monitor, report on and intervene in matters of human rights** in territories controlled by both the Kingdom of Morocco and the POLISARIO Front. This mandate must remain in place until a referendum has been held, and its findings reported directly to the Security Council.

Update the MINURSO resolution to **formally record Morocco's persistent failure to co-operate with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** despite repeated requests to visit the occupied territory of Western Sahara, stretching back for nearly a decade.

As soon as possible

- Set a firm date for a **free and fair referendum on the future status of Western Sahara — with an option of independence** —to be carried out in Western Sahara, in line with the established international legal norm of self-determination and the UN's institutional mission to end colonisation.
- Develop a robust peace plan under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to enforce the outcome of the referendum in the event that any of the parties do not respect the decision of the Saharawi electorate.

The political process, renewed conflict and the Moroccan 'autonomy' plan

The UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy Staffan de Mistura has been active in meeting with the Polisario Front and Morocco, and with other regional powers. The Security Council must firmly support Mr de Mistura's efforts, or Morocco will simply obstruct all possibility of peace.

Armed conflict continues in the territory, as it has since Morocco's illegal breach of ceasefire positions at Guerguerat in 2020. Saharawi forces shell Moroccan positions on their military wall (the 'berm'). Morocco uses drones to attack both Saharawi forces, and civilians in the liberated territory of Western Sahara. Many civilians have been killed by Moroccan drones, including many from Mauritania and some from Algeria, Mali and Sudan who were travelling through the territory. These drones, supplied by Israel, Turkey and the US, clearly pose a lethal threat to civilians in the region.

The Moroccan 'autonomy' plan

Recently several countries, particularly the United States and Israel, have promoted Morocco's plan for Western Sahara to become an 'autonomous' province of Morocco. Far from enabling peace, this plan is simply a device for Morocco to underpin its military occupation of much of the Western Sahara and its ongoing campaign to eliminate Saharawi national and cultural identity. It is likely to lead to greater conflict.

The plan is not new. It was first proposed almost 20 years ago, in 2007. The Saharawis have had ample opportunity to consider it. They have not come to accept it. Indeed, since it was first proposed, open armed conflict has been renewed in the territory (since late 2020).

This is not surprising. The 'autonomy' plan would involve the Saharawi people accepting the authority of the Moroccan security forces that have persecuted them for 51 years. Human rights organisations report ongoing repression and abuses. Saharawis living under Moroccan rule face state violence for mentioning independence.

The 'autonomy' plan undermines the principles of the UN charter. The Saharawi people are citizens of a Non-Self-Governing Territory, with a right to self-determination. Imposing the plan is incompatible with upholding resolutions 658 (1990) and 690 (1991) of the UN Security Council, which determined there should be a referendum of the Saharawi people through which they would choose between independence and integration with Morocco.

Morocco cannot grant autonomy to Western Sahara and its people as Morocco does not have any internationally recognised sovereignty over the territory. Nor does the Moroccan autonomy proposal satisfy international norms of autonomy; the Moroccan king would control decisions.

In 2025 the UK, regrettably changed its longstanding position and said that it considers the autonomy plan to be "the most credible, viable and pragmatic basis for a lasting resolution of the dispute". However, the UK is also clear that Western Sahara is not part of Morocco; and that any solution must be "mutually acceptable to the relevant parties" and support the principle of respect for self-determination. The UK has also had a ministerial meeting with the Polisario Front for the first time.

No solution that is imposed can lead to lasting peace in the region. This plan is not a realistic proposal for peace.

Context: the UN Security Council and the Western Sahara conflict

1. The UN needs to resolve the Western Sahara conflict, not only for the sake of the Saharawi people, but in the interests of regional political and economic stability, the integrity of international law and a rules-based international order.

History

2. In 1973 the POLISARIO Front was formed by Saharawis to fight for independence from Spain, then the colonial power. In 1975 Spain withdrew and Morocco invaded; the Saharawi population was split between Moroccan rule and refugee camps. The POLISARIO Front fought Morocco.

3. Since then, generations of Saharawis have grown up in exile. Many who were forced to flee their homes in 1975 have died in exile. Thousands have been killed or tortured by Moroccan security forces.

4. The UN brokered a ceasefire after 16 years of war, in 1991. Morocco and the POLISARIO Front (recognised by the UN as the representative of the Saharawi people) signed up to the UN settlement plan, which promised that the people of Western Sahara would be able to achieve their self-determination through a free and fair vote on their future. Becoming part of Morocco was to be an option in the referendum, as was independence. The UN had brought hope.

5. Yet Morocco obstructed self-determination, refusing to accept that the Saharawi people should have the option of independence. Moroccan security forces continued to clamp down brutally on Saharawi freedom of expression in occupied Western Sahara. The UN has appeared unwilling and powerless to stand up to Moroccan aggression.

6. In 2000, autonomy under Moroccan rule – as a precursor to a referendum - was first proposed by UN Envoy James Baker. In 2007, Morocco presented its own autonomy proposal which denied the Saharawi people their right to choose independence. This has been consistently rejected by the POLISARIO Front.

Today

7. In 2020, Morocco violated the terms of the ceasefire with an incursion across the agreed lines of control and occupied new territory. Since then, five more years of violent conflict have ensued. Many civilians have been killed in Moroccan drone strikes on travellers in Western Sahara.

8. The Security Council has still not taken effective action, such as demanding a halt to arms sales to Morocco. Inaction just reinforces Morocco's longstanding strategy of non-compliance with UN resolutions knowing that there will be no consequence.
9. MINURSO still has no mandate to monitor and report on human rights in Western Sahara. Yet Moroccan forces continue to abuse the human rights of Saharawis living in the occupied territory[1].

[1] Amnesty International 2026 "The State of the World's Human Rights", p261.

10. Saharawi activists remain imprisoned by Morocco for over 15 years following the 2010 Gdeim Izik protest camp, despite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention calling for their release[2]. Particular concerns are raised about the deteriorating health of spokesperson and hunger striker Naâma Asfari.

11. A factual amendment to the resolution proposed in 2024 regretting that the OHCHR had not been able to visit Western Sahara for the ninth consecutive year was not passed due to abstentions by various Member States including the UK, France and US.

12. Morocco has increased illegal exports of phosphates from Western Sahara[3], and continues to profit from the territory's other resources, including renewable energy. Meanwhile the Saharawi people are not represented in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process and face rising climate hazards.

13. The Saharawi people's right to self-determination remains unrealised despite the presence of MINURSO, which was established to organise a referendum on self-determination. Morocco continues its 35 year obstruction of the peace process to which it signed up in 1991.

14. The Polisario remain committed to a limited military strategy and political solution; but support for a more aggressive position is rising among the younger generation of Saharawis.

15. The US, the UK and the EU all condemn Russia's invasion and occupation of part of Ukraine and have imposed sanctions. But when it comes to Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara the silence is deafening.

16. The UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, needs strong support from the Security Council to find a way to cease hostilities and break the political deadlock between Morocco and the Frente POLISARIO.

Conclusions

Morocco's obstruction of the peace process and violations of human rights in Western Sahara continue to foster instability in the territory.

The denial of the Saharawi people's right to self-determination continues to exacerbate feelings of tension, frustration and discontent, fuelling the flames of conflict.

Despite Saharawi civilians being at risk of state violence for simply mentioning self-determination, peacekeeping troops stationed in Western Sahara are not empowered to take any action. This is indefensible; MINURSO must be granted a mandate to monitor and maintain human rights.

If the United Nations and international community are committed to peace and a rules-based international order, they must reject attempts to impose the Moroccan 'autonomy' plan, and follow the steps outlined in this briefing to save lives and stave off further deterioration in Western Sahara.

[2] Opinion 2023/23

[3] P is for Plunder 2024, Western Sahara Resource Watch.