



Western Sahara

Alexis Arieff

Analyst in African Affairs

April 5, 2012

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RS20962

CRS Report for Congress

Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

Since the 1970s, Morocco and the independence-seeking Popular Front for the Liberation of Saqiat al Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario) have vied, at times violently, for control of the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony. In 1991, the United Nations (U.N.) arranged a cease-fire and proposed a settlement plan that called for a referendum to allow the people of the Western Sahara to choose between independence and integration into Morocco. A long deadlock on determining the electorate for a referendum ensued. The U.N. then unsuccessfully suggested alternatives to the unfulfilled settlement plan and later called on the parties to negotiate. In April 2007, Morocco offered a plan for increased regional autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. The Moroccan government and the Polisario have repeatedly met under U.N. auspices since 2007, but have made no progress on a settlement due to their unwillingness to compromise. Informal talks are currently being mediated by U.N. Special Envoy Christopher Ross, a U.S. diplomat.

Today, Morocco controls roughly 80% of the disputed territory and considers the whole region part of its sovereign territory. In line with his autonomy initiative, Morocco's King Mohammed VI has pursued policies of decentralization or regionalization that he says are intended to empower residents of his Saharan provinces. The Polisario has a government in exile, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which is backed by neighboring Algeria. The Western Sahara issue has stymied Moroccan-Algerian bilateral relations, Moroccan relations with the African Union, and regional cooperation on economic and security issues.

The United States has not recognized the SADR or Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. The United States has supported the U.N. mediation effort, has welcomed the Moroccan autonomy proposal, and has urged the parties to focus on negotiations toward a mutually acceptable solution—an outcome that would not destabilize its ally, Morocco. Some Members of Congress support a referendum and are frustrated by delays, while others support Morocco's position and the autonomy initiative. The FY2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-74) requires the State Department to report on freedom of expression and the ability of diplomats and independent human rights groups to freely investigate conditions in the Western Sahara, prior to obligating Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds for Morocco. It has been U.S. policy that bilateral assistance funds for Morocco may not be used for programming in Western Sahara, as this would tacitly accept Moroccan sovereignty. The conference report on P.L. 112-74 states that bilateral economic assistance provided to Morocco “may be used in regions and territories administered by Morocco,” an apparent reference to the Western Sahara; however, the report language appears unlikely to alter U.S. policy in practice. The United States contributes funds, but no manpower, to the U.N. Mission for the Organization of a Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO). MINURSO was initially focused on organizing a referendum, but its current mandate emphasizes monitoring the 1991 cease-fire.

See also CRS Report RS21579, *Morocco: Current Issues*, by Alexis Arieff, and CRS Report RS21532, *Algeria: Current Issues*, by Alexis Arieff.

Contents

History	1
The Baker Plan and Subsequent Settlement Efforts	2
Human Rights Issues	4
Security Concerns: Recent Developments.....	5
Moroccan and Algerian Views.....	6
Prospects	7
United States Policy.....	8
Support for the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission (MINURSO)	8
Recent Congressional Activities.....	9

Figures

Figure 1. Western Sahara, MINURSO, and Refugee Camp Sites	2
-----------------------------------------------------------------	---

Contacts

Author Contact Information.....	9
---------------------------------	---

History

The territory now known as the Western Sahara became a Spanish possession in 1881. In the mid-1970s, Spain prepared to decolonize the region, intending to transform it into a closely aligned independent state after a referendum on self-determination. Morocco and Mauritania opposed Spain's plan and each claimed the territory. Although their claims were based on historic empires, the Western Sahara's valuable phosphate resources and fishing grounds also may have motivated them.¹ At Morocco's initiative, the U.N. General Assembly referred the question to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, on October 12, 1975, the ICJ did not find a tie of territorial sovereignty between Morocco and the Western Sahara. In response, on November 6, 1975, King Hassan II of Morocco launched a "Green March" of 350,000 unarmed civilians to the Western Sahara to claim it. Spanish authorities halted the marchers, but on November 16, Spain agreed to withdraw and transfer the region to joint Moroccan-Mauritanian administration.

The independence-seeking Popular Front for the Liberation of Saqiat al Hamra and Rio de Oro, or Polisario, founded in 1974, forcefully resisted the Moroccan-Mauritanian takeover. In the 1970s, about 160,000 Sahrawis (broadly used to refer to the people of Western Sahara) left the Western Sahara for refugee camps in Algeria and Mauritania. With Algeria's support, the Polisario established its headquarters in Tindouf, in southwest Algeria, and founded the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976. Mauritania could not sustain a defense against the Polisario and signed a peace treaty with it, abandoning all claims in August 1979. Morocco then occupied Mauritania's sector and, in 1981, began building a berm or sand wall to separate the 80% of the Western Sahara that it occupied from the Polisario and the Sahrawi refugees. Morocco's armed forces and Polisario guerrillas fought a long war in the desert until the United Nations (U.N.) arranged a cease-fire and proposed a settlement plan in 1991.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 690 (1991) established the United Nations Mission for the Organization of a Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) and called for a referendum to offer a choice between independence and integration into Morocco. However, over the next decade, Morocco and the Polisario differed over how to identify voters for the referendum, with each seeking to ensure an electoral roll that would support its desired outcome. In March 1997, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan named former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker III as his personal envoy to break the deadlock. Baker brokered an agreement to restart voter identification, which was completed in 1999 with 86,000 voters identified. MINURSO then faced more than 130,000 appeals by individuals, backed by Morocco, who were denied voter identification. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1301 (2000) asked the parties to consider alternatives to a referendum. The U.N. concluded that processing appeals could take longer than the initial identification process and that effective implementation of the settlement plan would require the full cooperation of Morocco and the Polisario, and the support of Algeria and Mauritania. Because Morocco and the Polisario would each cooperate only with implementation that would produce its desired outcome, full cooperation would be difficult or impossible to obtain. The U.N. also stated that it lacked a mechanism to enforce the results of a referendum.

¹ The possibility of oil and gas reserves (as yet unproven) off the Atlantic coast surfaced years later and has probably increased both sides' desire for the region, but the lack of a resolution to the Western Sahara dispute deters exploration.

Figure I. Western Sahara, MINURSO, and Refugee Camp Sites



Source: CRS graphics

The Baker Plan and Subsequent Settlement Efforts

The Secretary-General's June 2001 *Report on the Western Sahara* proposed a framework agreement, subsequently known as the Baker Plan, to confer on the population of the Western Sahara the right to elect executive and legislative bodies and to control a local government and many functional areas. The executive would be elected by voters identified as of December 1999, that is, by an electorate favoring the Polisario and excluding Moroccan-supported appellants. Morocco would control foreign relations, national security, and defense. A referendum on final status would be held within five years, with one-year residence in the Western Sahara then the sole criterion for voting. That electorate would favor Morocco by including its settlers as well as

native Sahrawis.² Annan hoped that Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria, and Mauritania would negotiate changes acceptable to all. After Baker met representatives of Algeria, Mauritania, and the Polisario, however, Annan, on his and Baker's behalf, doubted the parties' political will to resolve the conflict and cooperate with U.N. efforts.³ The Security Council could not agree on a new approach, and both sides (and Algeria) rejected partition.

In January 2003, Baker presented a compromise that did not require the consent of the parties.⁴ It would lead to a referendum in which voters would choose integration with Morocco, autonomy, or independence. Voters would be Sahrawis on the December 1999 provisional voter list, on the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees repatriation list as of October 2000, or continuously resident in the Western Sahara since December 30, 1999 (therefore including Moroccan settlers). The U.N. would determine the voters, without appeal. In the interim, a Western Sahara Authority would be the local government and Morocco would control foreign relations, national security, and defense.

Morocco objected, mainly questioning why the U.N. was reviving the referendum option; it also was upset by the use of the word "independence" instead of the vaguer "self-determination" to describe an option.⁵ In April 2004, Morocco declared that it would accept only autonomy as a solution.⁶ It called for negotiations only with Algeria, insisting that the Western Sahara is a bilateral geopolitical problem. Underlying these views was a rejection of any challenge to Morocco's physical possession of the territory. Algeria concluded that the Baker Plan was a "gamble" that should be taken and the Polisario accepted it, too. Algeria declined to negotiate, insisting that it is not a party to the dispute and not a substitute for the Sahrawis. The Polisario rejected autonomy and insisted on the right to choose self-determination in a referendum.

James Baker resigned as the Secretary-General's personal envoy in June 2004. The Baker Plan has not been mentioned in Security Council resolutions since then. In July 2005, Annan appointed Danish diplomat Peter van Walsum as his new envoy. Van Walsum indicated that he could not draft a new plan because Morocco would only endorse one that excludes independence, while the U.N. could not endorse a plan that excludes a referendum with independence as an option. He concluded that the remaining options were deadlock or direct negotiations. Since the former was unacceptable, responsibility rested with the parties. Van Walsum also reported that the Western Sahara was not high on the international political agenda and that most capitals seek to continue good relations with both Morocco and Algeria. Hence, they acquiesce in the impasse.⁷

Security Council Resolution 1754 (2007) called on Morocco and the Polisario to negotiate without preconditions on a political solution that will provide for the self-determination of the people of the Western Sahara. In 2007 and 2008, the two sides met and held consultations with van Walsum four times at Manhasset, NY, but neither was willing to discuss the other's

² U.N. Security Council, *Reports of the Secretary-General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara*, S/2001/613, June 20, 2001, and S/2002/41, January 10, 2002. U.N. documents are accessible via <http://www.un.org>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ U.N. press release, June 2, 2003. The plan is in annex II of the U.N. Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2003/565, May 23, 2003.

⁵ "Morocco Says 'Nothing New' in Algeria's Statements on Western Sahara," *Al-Jazeera TV*, July 17, 2003, via BBC Monitoring Middle East.

⁶ U.N. Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2004/325/Add.1, April 23, 2004, "Reply of the Kingdom of Morocco to Mr. Baker's Proposal Entitled 'Peace Plan for the Self-Determination of Western Sahara.'"

⁷ U.N. Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2006/249, April 19, 2006.

proposals—that is, Morocco’s for autonomy and the Polisario’s for a referendum. Algeria, Mauritania, and other interested countries were present. In April 2008, van Walsum stated that “an independent Western Sahara is not a realistic proposition,” prompting the Polisario to accuse him of bias in favor of Morocco, call for his replacement, and refuse to return to negotiations. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon did not reappoint van Walsum in August 2008.

In January 2009, the U.N. Secretary-General named U.S. diplomat Christopher Ross as his new personal envoy for the Western Sahara. Ross suggested that the parties hold small, informal preparatory meetings, and an initial session was held in Vienna in August 2009. Ross has since convened repeated rounds of informal talks, most recently in March 2012, without any apparent concrete progress toward a settlement. Ross also made his first visit to the region as envoy the same month. Following the most recent round of talks, Ross stated that “each party continued to reject the proposal of the other as the sole basis for future negotiations, while reiterating their willingness to work together to reach a solution.”⁸ However, he has noted progress in renewing confidence-building measures such as family visits and telephone communications between Western Saharan residents and the refugees.⁹ Such measures are supported by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Ross has also recently urged the parties to use the talks to address issues associated with governance, such as environment and natural resources, as well as demining, without prejudice to the final status of the territory.

Human Rights Issues

Within Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, direct criticism of the monarchy’s stance on territorial sovereignty is not tolerated. This, along with the suppression of protests in the region and de facto restrictions on access by independent human rights researchers and independence advocates, has contributed to concerns over freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Advocates have also expressed concern over freedom of expression and of movement in the Polisario-administered refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria.¹⁰

The U.S. State Department’s most recent annual human rights report refers to “reports that government security officials committed arbitrary or unlawful killings”; “credible reports that security forces engaged in torture, beatings, and other mistreatment of detainees,” especially of Sahrawi independence advocates; and “unconfirmed reports of politically motivated disappearances.” At the same time, the State Department’s report notes that, given Moroccan control, “human rights conditions in the territory [have] tended to converge with those in the

⁸ Reuters, “Still No Breakthrough in Western Sahara Talks,” March 13, 2012.

⁹ Gala Riani, “Morocco and Polisario Front Hold Western Sahara Talks Without Breakthrough,” *Global Insight*, January 24, 2011.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Human Rights in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf Refugee Camps*, December 19, 2008. The report concluded that in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, “the right of persons to speak, assemble, and associate on behalf of self-determination for the Sahrawi people and on behalf of their human rights is repressed by Moroccan authorities... through laws penalizing affronts to Morocco’s ‘territorial integrity,’ through arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, restrictions on associations and assemblies, and through police violence and harassment that goes unpunished.” With regard to the refugee camps, the report concluded that “at the present time, the Polisario effectively marginalizes those who directly challenge its leadership or general political orientation, but it does not imprison them. It allows residents to criticize its day-to-day administration of camp affairs. In practice, camp residents are able to leave the camps, via Mauritania, if they wish to do so. However, fear and social pressure keeps those who plan to resettle in Western Sahara from disclosing their plans before leaving.”

kingdom.”¹¹ Many recently reported abuses were connected to clashes in November 2010 in and around the Moroccan-administered regional capital, Laayoune (alt: El Ayoun or Al Ayun), following the Moroccan security forces’ forcible dismantling of a Sahrawi protest camp. According to Human Rights Watch, following the initial confrontations, Moroccan security forces detained hundreds of Sahrawis and reportedly participated, along with Moroccan civilians, in “retaliatory” attacks on civilians and homes.¹² Moroccan authorities reject this characterization of the events and contend that violence was orchestrated by members of the Polisario.¹³

Advocacy groups and some international diplomats have called for increased independent human rights monitoring in the Western Sahara and the Tindouf refugee camps.¹⁴ In early 2011, Morocco’s King Mohammed VI announced the creation of a new official human rights monitoring body, the National Human Rights Council (CNDH), as part of a series of reforms proposed in response to domestic and regional political tumult. The CNDH has a regional section responsible for reporting on the Western Sahara. Whether the council will conduct credible investigations into conditions in the region remains to be seen.

Security Concerns: Recent Developments

In October 2011, three European aid workers were kidnapped from the Polisario-administered refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, by an unknown armed group. Some news reports have suggested that the attacks may have been carried out with the complicity of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional criminal-terrorist network. However, the group issued a rare denial of involvement two months later, and subsequently, a previously unknown AQIM splinter faction, calling itself Jamaat Tawhid wal Jihad fi Garbi Afriqiya (roughly, Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa), claimed responsibility for the kidnappings.¹⁵ The incident remains opaque and unresolved. Moroccan officials and some analysts sympathetic to Morocco’s position regularly cite fears that an independent Western Sahara would be a weak state vulnerable to infiltration by terrorist groups, organized crime, and other security threats.¹⁶ The Polisario disputes this characterization, claiming it is better at combating terrorism than the Moroccan authorities.¹⁷

¹¹ State Department, “Western Sahara,” Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, April 8, 2011.

¹² Human Rights Watch, “Western Sahara: Beatings, Abuse by Moroccan Security Forces,” November 26, 2010.

¹³ For further description of this and other incidents, see State Department, “Western Sahara,” Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, op. cit.; and State Department, “Background Note: Morocco,” at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/5431.htm>.

¹⁴ Proposals that MINURSO’s mandate include a provision for human rights monitoring were not included in the latest one-year renewal, on April 30, 2011. Morocco, backed by its ally, France, strongly opposes such a role for MINURSO. Instead, the U.N. Security Council resolution renewing MINURSO’s mandate “stress[es] the importance of improving the human rights situation in Western Sahara and the Tindouf [Polisario-controlled] camps, and encourag[es] the parties to work with the international community to develop and implement independent and credible measures to ensure full respect for human rights, bearing in mind their relevant obligations under international law.” U.N. doc. S/RES/1979 (2011).

¹⁵ Paul Schemm, “Report: Al-Qaida in North Africa denies Algeria kidnappings, confirms snatching French in Mali,” Associated Press (AP), December 9, 2011; Agence France Presse (AFP), “Algérie: des dissidents d’Aqmi revendiquent l’enlèvement de 3 Occidentaux,” December 10, 2011.

¹⁶ On regional security threats, see Anouar Boukhars, *Simmering Discontent in the Western Sahara*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2012.

¹⁷ CRS interviews with Polisario officials in the Tindouf refugee camps, April 2011.

Moroccan and Algerian Views

Almost since independence, Morocco and Algeria have competed for regional preeminence, and the Western Sahara is where the contest is now focused. The two neighbors are rivals with different decolonization histories and different political systems. Algeria emerged from a bloody revolution with a leftist orientation, while the Moroccan monarchy survived relatively intact from a much less violent struggle with France. From the beginning, the Western Sahara issue has unified Moroccans and reinforced support for the monarchy.

King Mohammed VI has strongly reasserted Morocco's claim to the region since he ascended to the throne in July 1999. Although the territory may be a financial liability due to the cost of Moroccan infrastructure investments and reported financial benefits provided to Moroccan settlers, its known and potential resources may be a long-term economic boon.¹⁸ Beyond their insistence on territorial integrity, Moroccan authorities also see the Western Sahara as a check on Algeria's regional ambitions being pursued via what they consider to be Polisario surrogates. In April 2001, the king suggested decentralization as the best option for the Sahara and, in November 2002, he declared that a political solution must respect Morocco's territorial integrity.¹⁹ Morocco has poured investment into the region to reinforce its claim to sovereignty. On April 11, 2007, Morocco presented an autonomy plan for the Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty, without the prospect of independence, for negotiation to the U.N. Secretary-General.²⁰ In July 2011, Morocco adopted a new constitution via referendum; the king has repeatedly stated his belief that the document's broad provisions on government decentralization and regional development constitute the basis for a just resolution of the Western Sahara issue.²¹

Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a former activist in the Algerian revolution against French colonial rule, became president of Algeria in April 1999. He and his countrymen see the Western Sahara as one of the world's last decolonization campaigns. If the Polisario won control of the region, Algeria would also benefit by gaining access to the Atlantic Ocean. Should the issue simply simmer, it is still a low-cost way to keep Morocco bogged down. While insisting that it is not a party to the conflict, Algeria has unwaveringly supported the Polisario's desire for self-determination. Algeria and the Polisario reject the Moroccan autonomy plan and insist on a referendum on self-determination. With strong ties in Sub-Saharan Africa, Algiers may be partially responsible for the SADR's African Union (AU) membership and for many African governments' recognition of the SADR. Latin American governments also have recognized it: the Polisario has specifically received support from South Africa and Venezuela. Morocco suspended its membership in the

¹⁸ Moroccan government support for the settler population has reportedly contributed to tensions within the territory along ethnic and political lines. See Boukhars, *Simmering Discontent in the Western Sahara*, op. cit.; and Driss Bennani, "Sahara. La bombe à retardement," *TelQuel*, November 2011.

¹⁹ Reuters, "Moroccan King Buries W. Sahara Referendum Idea," November 7, 2002.

²⁰ Text accessible via <http://www.maec.gov.ma/>. The Polisario says it, too, had presented a proposal to the U.N. on April 7, 2007, calling on the U.N. to organize a referendum to allow the Sahrawi to choose among three options: independence, merger with Morocco, or autonomy. If they chose independence, then the Polisario offered to negotiate with Morocco to ensure its economic and security interests and deal with the issue of what the Front refers to as Moroccan "settlers." "Polisario Front Head Favours Dialogue with Morocco, Denies Al-Qa'idah Presence," Al-Jazeera TV, December 12, 2008, BBC Monitoring Middle East, December 14, 2008.

²¹ "Moroccan King Says New Draft Constitution 'Modern, Democratic,'" Rabat Al-Aoula Television in Arabic, June 17, 2011; via U.S. government Open Source Center; Maghreb Arab Press (MAP), "HM the King addresses the nation on 36th anniversary of Green March," November 7, 2011.

Organization for African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the AU, in 1984, and has not joined the AU because of the AU's acceptance of the SADR.

Prospects

Morocco's response to the 2003 Baker Plan and subsequent official statements indicated a diminished willingness to compromise at the same time that Algeria and the Polisario then appeared more willing to compromise. The Polisario has since become less compromising in its insistence on self-determination, while Morocco will not bend on its autonomy proposal. In other words, the current impasse is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

The Polisario periodically threatens a return to armed struggle, but it appears unable to resume a military campaign without the aid and presumably the permission of Algeria, which are not expected. Algeria is focusing on its economy and international image and is concerned about resurgent Islamist terrorism. It has nurtured closer ties with the United States, France, and Spain that would be strained if it allowed a return to violence over the Western Sahara. Moreover, some of the Polisario's threats may only be rhetoric to enable entrenched leaders to appease vocal young militants. In addition, the Polisario is vastly outmatched by about 100,000 Moroccan troops stationed in the Western Sahara. With civilian support services, the Moroccan presence in the region may total 300,000. The Moroccan army has an estimated total strength of over 185,000, with 150,000 more personnel in reserves. The Polisario has instigated popular demonstrations for independence in the Western Sahara, but it has not resorted to terrorism that would cost it sympathy abroad, and denies all Moroccan allegations that it has links to Al Qaeda.

The Western Sahara is a transit point for illegal Moroccan, Sahrawi, Sub-Saharan African, and other migrants attempting to reach the Canary Islands (Spain) by boat. Morocco and the Polisario have justified violations of the cease-fire as actions to curb smuggling. As it has bolstered its forces to respond to illegal immigration, Morocco has tightened its hold on the region.

As long as the Western Sahara issue is unresolved, relations between Morocco and Algeria are unlikely to be fully normalized. Algeria has indicated that it is willing to develop bilateral relations without a resolution to the conflict, but Morocco has insisted that the Western Sahara is too important an issue to set aside, noting that Algeria shelters and hosts people who carry weapons against Morocco. The border between the two countries has been closed by Algeria since 1994. Since early 2011, however, senior leaders on both sides—including King Mohammed VI and President Bouteflika—have repeatedly publicly stated a desire to improve bilateral relations. The changing regional context, due to the political upheaval of the “Arab Spring,” may be a driving factor in the rapprochement. Due to the Western Sahara dispute, the Arab Maghreb Union, of which both are members, has long been inactive; however, the governments of the region are currently discussing ways to reinvigorate it.²²

²² The Arab Maghreb Union, including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, was founded in 1989 to promote regional cooperation.

United States Policy

The United States supported the U.N. settlement plan and the Baker Plan. It has not recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara or the SADR as a sovereign government. President George W. Bush expressed understanding of “the Moroccan people’s sensitivity over the Sahara issue” and said that the United States did not seek to impose a solution.²³ Then-U.S. Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns described Morocco’s 2007 autonomy plan as “a serious and credible proposal,” and the State Department has since urged the parties to focus on establishing a mutually acceptable autonomy regime in their negotiations.²⁴ In November 2009, during a visit to Morocco, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that there had been “no change” in U.S. policy on Western Sahara under President Barack Obama—that is, that the United States supports the U.N.-led mediation effort and will not stake out positions about how U.N. mediation might best resolve the issue.²⁵

In an appearance with then-Moroccan Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri in March 2011, Clinton stated that the United States views the Moroccan autonomy plan as “serious, realistic, and credible—a potential approach to satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity.” She also reiterated U.S. support for the U.N.-backed talks aimed at “resolving this issue.”²⁶ In public remarks with Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci in January 2012, Clinton stated, “We continue to support efforts to find a peaceful, sustainable, mutually agreed upon solution to the conflict. We support the negotiations carried out by the United Nations, and we encourage all parties, including Algeria, to play an active role in trying to move toward a resolution.”²⁷

U.S. support for the U.N. peace effort is given in the context of valued U.S.-Moroccan relations. U.S. officials view Morocco as key regional ally, collaborator in countering terrorism, constructive player in Middle East policy, and leader in Arab efforts to reform and democratize. U.S. officials would prefer a solution to the Western Sahara dispute that would not destabilize Mohammed VI’s rule. They also believe that a settlement would enhance regional stability and economic prosperity.

Support for the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission (MINURSO)

MINURSO was most recently re-authorized under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1979, on April 27, 2011. As of February 2012, the mission comprised 233 uniformed personnel and 101 international civilian personnel. The United States does not contribute personnel to MINURSO, but assists in funding the mission under the U.N. system for assessed contributions. The United States allocated \$12.1 million in FY2011 and \$21.9 million in FY2012 for MINURSO through the State Department’s Contributions to International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA) account. The State Department has requested \$16.5 million for FY2013.²⁸ Former U.S. Ambassador to the

²³ Message by President Bush to King Mohammed VI, MAP, via BBC Monitoring Middle East, December 3, 2003.

²⁴ “‘Serious and Credible,’ in Washington’s Own Words,” <http://www.autonomyplan.org>—which appears to be an official Moroccan government website—and U.S. State Department, response to question, May 2, 2008.

²⁵ Voice of America, “Clinton Stands By UN Mediation for Western Sahara,” November 6, 2009.

²⁶ State Department, “Remarks with Moroccan Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri,” March 23, 2011.

²⁷ State Department, “Remarks With Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci,” January 12, 2012.

²⁸ State Department, FY2013 *Congressional Budget Justification*—Department of State Operations.

U.N. John Bolton suggested that MINURSO was a costly operation that had helped to perpetuate the status quo, while current U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice so far has agreed with the common U.N. and State Department view that it has effectively maintained the cease-fire.

Recent Congressional Activities

Many Members of Congress have endorsed Morocco's position on the Western Sahara, including its autonomy initiative. Others support a referendum and/or are concerned about human rights and political freedoms in the region. Congressional concerns over human rights and the Western Sahara issue have sometimes been stated in annual foreign aid appropriations legislation. The FY2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-74, enacted December 23, 2011) states that, prior to the obligation of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds for Morocco, "the Secretary of State shall submit a report to the Committees on Appropriations on steps being taken by the Government of Morocco to (1) respect the right of individuals to peacefully express their opinions regarding the status and future of the Western Sahara and to document violations of human rights; and (2) provide unimpeded access to human rights organizations, journalists, and representatives of foreign governments to the Western Sahara." The accompanying conference report states that: "The conferees note that funds provided in title III of this Act [bilateral economic assistance] for Morocco may be used in regions and territories administered by Morocco. The conferees remain concerned with resolving the dispute over the Western Sahara and urge the Department of State to prioritize a negotiated settlement." It has been U.S. policy that bilateral assistance funds for Morocco may not be used for programming in Western Sahara because doing so would tacitly acknowledge Moroccan sovereignty. The conference provision appears unlikely to lead to a change in this policy.

Similar reporting requirements were included in the conference report accompanying the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-117) and in an explanatory statement accompanying the FY2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-8). The FY2008 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 110-161) provided for the allocation of an additional \$1 million in FMF funding for Morocco if the Secretary of State certified, among other things, that Morocco was allowing all persons to advocate freely their views regarding the status and future of the Western Sahara through the exercise of their rights to peaceful expression, association, and assembly and to document violations of human rights in that territory without harassment.

In August 2004, U.S. Senator Richard Lugar led a mission to the region that resulted in the release of 404 Moroccan prisoners of war who had long been held by the Polisario.

Author Contact Information

Alexis Arieff
Analyst in African Affairs
aarieff@crs.loc.gov, 7-2459