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Energy and Resource Interests in the Western Sahara Dispute: Geopolitics, Sovereignty, and Economic Contestation

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ABSTRACT

The Western Sahara conflict remains one of the longest unresolved territorial disputes in the international system, rooted in decolonization, regional rivalry, and competing sovereignty claims. Beyond ideological and nationalist dimensions, the dispute is profoundly shaped by energy and natural resource interests, including phosphates, fisheries, hydrocarbons, and renewable energy potential. This paper examines how resource endowments influence the strategic calculations of Morocco and Algeria, shape international diplomacy, and affect local Sahrawi political claims. It argues that control over natural resources is not merely an economic concern but a central geopolitical driver sustaining the conflict. By situating the dispute within frameworks of resource geopolitics and international law, the study demonstrates that resource exploitation reinforces Morocco's administrative consolidation while strengthening Algeria's diplomatic resistance. The paper concludes that resource competition complicates conflict resolution by entrenching incentives for status quo maintenance and external involvement.

Keywords: Western Sahara, Resource geopolitics, Morocco, Algeria, Phosphates, Fisheries, Hydrocarbons, Territorial disputes

INTRODUCTION

The Western Sahara conflict represents one of the most enduring unresolved territorial disputes in the contemporary international system. Located in North Africa along the Atlantic coast, Western Sahara has remained contested since Spain's withdrawal in 1975, leaving behind competing claims over sovereignty, identity, and political legitimacy. Despite numerous diplomatic initiatives and United Nations–sponsored negotiations, the conflict persists in a state of prolonged stalemate, often described as a "frozen conflict" within international relations scholarship[1]. While existing literature has extensively examined the historical origins, legal dimensions, and geopolitical rivalries associated with the dispute, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the central role played by natural resources and economic interests in shaping the behavior of the principal actors. Western Sahara's significance extends beyond its political symbolism as a case of unfinished decolonization. The territory contains substantial natural resource wealth, including one of the world's largest phosphate deposits, rich Atlantic fisheries, and potential offshore hydrocarbon reserves. Such resources enhance the strategic value of the territory and transform it into a site of geo-economic competition. Scholars of resource conflict have demonstrated that resource-rich territories frequently become arenas of protracted disputes because control over natural wealth can generate revenue, strategic leverage, and international influence. In this context, Western Sahara exemplifies how material incentives can interact with political claims to sustain conflict over extended periods.

The origins of the dispute are rooted in the decolonization process of the mid-twentieth century. Spain's administration of Western Sahara as a colonial

1. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

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territory ended in 1975 amid rising nationalist mobilization and international pressure for self-determination. However, rather than leading to an internationally supervised referendum, Spain's withdrawal triggered competing claims by neighboring states and local nationalist movements. The subsequent territorial division and armed confrontation created a geopolitical deadlock that has endured for decades. The United Nations has repeatedly affirmed the principle of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, yet no final political settlement has been achieved[2]. This unresolved status has produced a complex political environment in which sovereignty remains contested, governance structures are divided, and resource exploitation raises legal and ethical questions. A central feature of the conflict is the regional rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, which shapes diplomatic alignments and strategic calculations. Analysts widely agree that the dispute cannot be understood solely as a local or bilateral issue; rather, it reflects broader regional power dynamics in North Africa. For Morocco, control over Western Sahara represents a matter of territorial integrity, national identity, and economic opportunity. Administrative integration, infrastructure investment, and resource extraction policies are often interpreted as strategies designed to consolidate sovereignty and demonstrate effective governance. From a strategic standpoint, the territory provides access to maritime routes, mineral resources, and geopolitical influence along the Atlantic corridor.

Algeria's involvement, meanwhile, is commonly interpreted through the lens of regional balance-of-power politics. Although Algeria officially frames its position as support for the principle of self-determination, scholars note that geopolitical considerations also shape its policy stance. By backing Sahrawi political aspirations, Algeria can counterbalance Moroccan regional influence and prevent the emergence of a dominant rival in the Maghreb. This regional dimension complicates conflict resolution because it transforms what might otherwise be a territorial dispute into a broader strategic competition involving national prestige, security concerns, and ideological narratives. Natural resources constitute a critical yet often underemphasized factor linking these geopolitical and political dynamics. The Bou Craa phosphate mine, for example, is among the largest of its kind globally and plays a significant role in fertilizer production markets[3]. Similarly, the fisheries off the Western Saharan coast are among the richest in the world, attracting international commercial interest. Even the possibility of offshore oil and gas reserves increases the territory's strategic importance, as states frequently seek to secure control over areas with potential future resource value[4]. These material considerations heighten the stakes of sovereignty claims and reduce incentives for compromise, as relinquishing control could entail substantial economic loss.

Resource wealth also has broader implications for conflict dynamics. Political economy research suggests that access to valuable commodities can prolong disputes by providing financial incentives for continued control and resistance. In territorial conflicts, economic benefits derived from natural resources may strengthen administrative structures, fund political institutions, and attract foreign partnerships, thereby reinforcing the existing status quo. Conversely, rival actors may persist in contestation because they anticipate gaining access to those same resources under different political arrangements. In such cases, resource competition creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which economic interests sustain political stalemate. Another dimension that underscores the importance of this issue is the legal ambiguity surrounding resource exploitation in disputed territories. International law recognizes the principle of permanent sovereignty over natural resources, particularly for peoples of non-self-governing territories. This principle raises questions regarding the legality of commercial agreements involving Western Sahara's resources, especially when the territory's final status remains unresolved. Such legal debates influence the behavior of states, corporations, and international organizations, shaping diplomatic relations and economic partnerships. The interaction between legal norms and material interests therefore adds an additional layer of complexity to the conflict.

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2. United Nations, *Letter Dated 29 January 2002 from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs to the President of the Security Council* (New York: United Nations, 2002).

3. Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 1983.

4. Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

Despite the strategic importance of resources, much of the existing scholarship on Western Sahara has focused primarily on historical narratives, diplomatic negotiations, or normative questions of sovereignty. While these perspectives are indispensable, they do not fully explain why the conflict has proven so resistant to resolution. A growing body of literature suggests that economic incentives, particularly those linked to resource extraction, play a crucial role in sustaining protracted disputes[5]. By foregrounding the resource dimension, the present study seeks to address this analytical gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict's persistence. The primary objective of this research is to examine how energy and natural resource interests shape the strategic behavior of key actors involved in the Western Sahara dispute. Specifically, the study investigates how resource wealth influences territorial claims, diplomatic alignments, and conflict dynamics. It also explores how economic incentives intersect with geopolitical rivalry and international legal norms to create conditions that favor stalemate rather than resolution. In doing so, the research contributes to broader debates within international relations concerning the relationship between natural resources and conflict persistence. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to integrate geopolitical, economic, and legal perspectives into a single analytical framework. By situating the Western Sahara conflict within the broader literature on resource politics and territorial disputes, the research highlights how material interests can shape political outcomes and prolong unresolved conflicts. Such an approach not only deepens scholarly understanding of the Western Sahara case but also offers insights applicable to other resource-rich contested territories worldwide.

Historical Background of the Western Sahara Dispute:

Colonial Foundations of the Conflict:

The origins of the Western Sahara dispute can be traced to the late nineteenth century during the era of European imperial expansion, when colonial powers partitioned Africa into territorial units that frequently disregarded indigenous political structures and sociocultural boundaries. Spain formally established control over the territory in 1884, designating it as Spanish Sahara and administering it as an overseas province rather than a protectorate[6]. This colonial arrangement differed from other African territories that gradually transitioned toward self-rule in the mid-twentieth century; Western Sahara remained under Spanish authority until the mid-1970s, making it one of the last regions on the continent to undergo decolonization. Spanish colonial administration introduced centralized governance structures designed primarily to serve strategic and economic interests, particularly maritime positioning along the Atlantic and access to mineral resources. The discovery of extensive phosphate deposits in the Bou Craa region during the 1960s increased the territory's strategic importance and strengthened Spain's incentive to retain control. However, colonial governance did little to foster political institutions capable of sustaining independent statehood. Scholars argue that such extractive colonial systems often create fragile postcolonial environments by prioritizing economic exploitation over political development. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, global decolonization movements and international pressure intensified demands for self-determination in Western Sahara. The United Nations placed the territory on its list of Non-Self-Governing Territories and called for a referendum to allow the local population to determine its political future. Nevertheless, competing territorial claims by neighboring states complicated this process and transformed the decolonization question into a geopolitical dispute.

Competing Territorial Claims and Spain's Withdrawal:

As Spain prepared to withdraw from Western Sahara in 1975, Morocco and Mauritania advanced historical claims to the territory. Morocco argued that certain Saharan tribes had pledged allegiance to the Moroccan monarchy prior to Spanish colonization, while Mauritania emphasized ethnocultural links between Sahrawi populations and Mauritanian communities[7]. To assess these claims, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion in 1975 acknowledging that historical ties existed but concluding that they did not amount to territorial sovereignty and that the principle of self-determination should guide the territory's political

5. Le Billon, "Political Ecology of War."

6. Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1983).

7. Erik Jensen, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2016).

future[8]. Despite this legal opinion, political developments quickly overtook diplomatic deliberations. Morocco organized a mass demonstration known as the Green March, in which thousands of civilians entered the territory to assert Morocco's claim symbolically. Shortly thereafter, Spain signed the Madrid Accords, transferring administrative authority over Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania without conducting the promised referendum. Many analysts view this agreement as a decisive turning point that transformed the decolonization process into an international territorial dispute.

Rise of Sahrawi Nationalism and Armed Conflict:

Nationalist mobilization within Western Sahara preceded Spain's withdrawal. In 1973, the Polisario Front was founded as a liberation movement advocating independence for the Sahrawi people. After Spain relinquished control and neighboring states asserted authority over the territory, the movement declared the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1976 and initiated armed resistance against Moroccan and Mauritanian forces[9]. Mauritania withdrew from the conflict in 1979 following sustained military pressure, formally renouncing its territorial claims. Morocco subsequently assumed control over most of Western Sahara and consolidated its presence through administrative integration and the construction of defensive fortifications. The armed conflict continued throughout the 1980s, producing large-scale displacement. Many Sahrawis fled to refugee camps in southwestern Algeria, which provided political, logistical, and humanitarian support to the Polisario Front. This phase of the conflict marked a significant transformation from a colonial dispute into a regional geopolitical contest. The involvement of neighboring states and external actors internationalized the conflict and increased its complexity. Analysts note that once a territorial dispute becomes embedded within broader regional rivalries, its resolution becomes considerably more difficult because it becomes tied to issues of prestige, security, and strategic influence.

Ceasefire and Prolonged Stalemate:

By the late 1980s, military stalemate and mounting international pressure created conditions conducive to negotiations. In 1991, a United Nations–brokered ceasefire ended large-scale hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front. The agreement established a UN peacekeeping mission tasked with monitoring the ceasefire and organizing a referendum that would allow the Sahrawi population to choose between independence and integration. However, disagreements over voter eligibility, political conditions, and procedural arrangements prevented the referendum from taking place. Over time, negotiations stalled, and the conflict entered a prolonged phase often described as a frozen or unresolved dispute. Scholars characterize this situation as a condition of suspended resolution in which formal hostilities are limited but political disagreement persists. At present, Morocco administers the majority of Western Sahara and promotes economic development initiatives intended to strengthen its claims of effective governance. The Polisario Front controls a smaller eastern portion of the territory and continues to advocate for self-determination through diplomatic channels. The absence of a final settlement reflects the enduring interaction of historical grievances, geopolitical rivalry, and economic interests. This prolonged stalemate illustrates how incomplete decolonization processes can generate persistent conflicts when sovereignty, identity, and strategic considerations intersect.

Resource Geography of Western Sahara:

Western Sahara's resource geography constitutes one of the most significant structural dimensions of the conflict, shaping territorial claims, diplomatic alignments, and the economic strategies of regional actors. The territory, located along the Atlantic coast of northwest Africa, is sparsely populated yet endowed with valuable natural resources, including phosphates, fisheries, and potential hydrocarbon reserves. These resources have transformed Western Sahara from a seemingly peripheral desert region into a strategically significant geo-economic zone within North Africa and the broader Atlantic system. One of the most prominent resources in Western Sahara is phosphate, particularly from the Bou Craa mine, which is among the world's largest known phosphate deposits. Phosphates are essential for fertilizer production and thus play a critical role in global agriculture and food security. Control over this resource has substantial economic implications, as Morocco, which administers most of the

8. International Court of Justice, *Western Sahara Advisory Opinion*, October 16, 1975.

9. I. William Zartman, "Time for a Solution in the Western Sahara Conflict," *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 4 (2007).

territory, has integrated Bou Craa's output into its national phosphate industry. Scholars argue that the economic value of this deposit strengthens Morocco's incentive to maintain administrative control, as it contributes to export revenues and enhances the country's strategic importance in global commodity markets[10]. The infrastructure connecting the mine to the coast—including one of the world's longest conveyor belts—demonstrates the degree of investment directed toward resource extraction and export.

In addition to phosphates, Western Sahara's coastal waters are among the richest fishing zones in the Atlantic due to nutrient-rich upwelling currents. These fisheries support both regional livelihoods and international commercial agreements. Fishing rights have been central to diplomatic negotiations, particularly between Morocco and external partners such as the European Union, which has at times included Western Saharan waters in bilateral fisheries agreements. Critics contend that such arrangements raise legal and ethical questions, especially concerning whether resource exploitation benefits the indigenous Sahrawi population or primarily serves external economic interests. The fisheries sector therefore represents not only an economic asset but also a point of contention in debates over sovereignty and self-determination.

Potential offshore oil and gas reserves further increase the strategic value of Western Sahara. Although large-scale hydrocarbon production has not yet materialized, exploratory contracts granted to multinational companies have generated controversy. These activities have been criticized by international legal experts who argue that resource exploitation in disputed territories must comply with the wishes and interests of the local population. Even the possibility of hydrocarbon wealth heightens geopolitical competition, as states often seek to secure future energy resources to strengthen national power and economic resilience. The spatial distribution of these resources reinforces the territorial dimension of the conflict. Most major resource sites—including the Bou Craa phosphate mine and productive fishing zones—are located within areas currently administered by Morocco rather than those controlled by the Polisario Front. This uneven distribution creates asymmetrical economic leverage, allowing Morocco to derive tangible benefits from the territory while limiting the economic capacity of the Sahrawi nationalist movement. Such asymmetry can influence negotiation dynamics by providing one party with stronger material incentives to preserve the status quo. Resource geography also intersects with infrastructure development and settlement policies. Investments in roads, ports, and urban centers within Moroccan-controlled zones facilitate extraction and export, while simultaneously integrating the territory economically with Morocco. Analysts note that such integration can function as a strategy of territorial consolidation, embedding the disputed region within national economic systems and making separation more costly[11]. Thus, resource geography is not merely a physical characteristic but a political instrument shaping governance, demographic patterns, and international perceptions of control.

Morocco's Strategic Interests in the Western Sahara Conflict:

Morocco's position in the Western Sahara conflict is shaped by a complex convergence of geopolitical, economic, historical, and domestic political considerations. Its strategic interests in the territory extend beyond mere territorial control and reflect broader calculations related to regime legitimacy, regional influence, resource security, and international diplomacy. Understanding Morocco's motivations requires analyzing these interrelated dimensions, which collectively explain the state's persistent commitment to maintaining authority over most of Western Sahara. One of Morocco's primary strategic interests is territorial integrity and regime legitimacy. Since its independence in 1956, the Moroccan monarchy has promoted the idea of a unified national territory that includes Western Sahara, framing the issue as a matter of national sovereignty rather than a negotiable political dispute. The monarchy has historically used the Western Sahara issue to foster national unity and consolidate domestic political support. Analysts note that the territorial claim has become deeply embedded in Moroccan national identity and political discourse, making any concession politically risky for ruling elites. The monarchy's legitimacy is therefore partly tied to defending what it

10. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

11. Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1983)

describes as its "southern provinces," and relinquishing the territory could be perceived domestically as a sign of weakness[12].

A second major interest lies in regional geopolitics and strategic competition with Algeria. The rivalry between Morocco and Algeria is one of the defining features of North African politics, and Western Sahara functions as a central arena in this competition. Morocco views Algerian support for the Polisario Front as an attempt to counterbalance Moroccan influence and limit its regional leadership aspirations. From a realist perspective, maintaining control over Western Sahara strengthens Morocco's geopolitical position by expanding its territorial reach, increasing its Atlantic coastline, and enhancing its strategic depth. Scholars argue that this rivalry transforms the conflict from a bilateral territorial dispute into a broader regional power struggle. Economic and resource interests also play a crucial role. Western Sahara contains valuable natural resources, including phosphates, fisheries, and potential offshore hydrocarbons. Control over these resources provides Morocco with tangible economic benefits and contributes to its long-term development strategy. The Bou Craa phosphate mine, for instance, is integrated into Morocco's national phosphate industry and supports export revenues. Access to rich fishing waters further strengthens Morocco's economic incentives to maintain administrative authority. Economic integration policies—such as infrastructure projects, subsidies, and investment programs in the territory—demonstrate Morocco's intention to embed Western Sahara within its national economy[13]. These policies not only generate economic returns but also reinforce Morocco's administrative presence on the ground.

Another strategic dimension is international diplomacy and alliance-building. Morocco has pursued an active diplomatic campaign to secure recognition of its claims and to neutralize support for Sahrawi independence. This includes cultivating partnerships with influential global actors and promoting autonomy proposals as a compromise solution. By framing its autonomy initiative as realistic and pragmatic, Morocco seeks to position itself as a constructive actor in the eyes of the international community while simultaneously preserving sovereignty over the territory. Diplomatic successes—such as support from certain states for its autonomy plan—strengthen Morocco's negotiating position and reduce pressure for a referendum on independence[14]. Security considerations further reinforce Morocco's strategic calculus. Moroccan policymakers often argue that instability in Western Sahara could create a security vacuum vulnerable to transnational threats such as terrorism, smuggling, and organized crime in the Sahel region. By maintaining administrative control and deploying security forces, Morocco presents itself as a provider of stability in a volatile region. This security narrative is frequently used to justify its presence in the territory and to persuade international partners that Moroccan governance contributes to regional order. Domestic development strategy also intersects with Morocco's territorial policy. The government has invested heavily in infrastructure, urban development, and social programs in Western Sahara, portraying these initiatives as evidence of its commitment to improving local living standards. Such investments serve both practical and symbolic purposes: they promote economic growth while signaling long-term political commitment to the territory. Development projects, therefore, function not only as economic tools but also as instruments of territorial consolidation and international legitimacy.

Algeria's Strategic Interests in the Western Sahara Conflict:

Algeria's strategic interests in the Western Sahara conflict are rooted in a combination of geopolitical competition, ideological commitments, regional security calculations, and domestic political considerations. Although Algeria is not a direct claimant to the territory, it has played a central role as the principal supporter of the Polisario Front and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Its involvement is therefore best understood not as peripheral diplomacy but as a calculated foreign policy stance shaped by long-standing national interests and regional ambitions. One of Algeria's

12. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

13. Toby Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

14. Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier, *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms, and Geopolitics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

foremost motivations is regional balance of power. Since independence in 1962, Algeria has sought to position itself as a leading political and military power in North Africa. The rivalry with Morocco—exacerbated by historical border disputes and ideological differences—forms a critical backdrop to its Western Sahara policy. Supporting Sahrawi self-determination enables Algeria to counter Moroccan regional influence and prevent Morocco from consolidating strategic dominance in the Maghreb. Analysts frequently interpret Algeria's stance through a realist lens, arguing that backing the Polisario Front functions as a geopolitical balancing strategy rather than solely an altruistic commitment to decolonization[15]. By sustaining the dispute diplomatically and politically, Algeria ensures that Morocco remains regionally constrained.

A second major dimension is Algeria's ideological and historical commitment to anti-colonialism and self-determination. Having fought a prolonged war of independence against French colonial rule, Algeria's political identity has long been tied to principles of national liberation and opposition to territorial annexation. This historical experience informs its official narrative that Western Sahara represents Africa's last unfinished decolonization case. Algerian leaders consistently frame their support for Sahrawi independence as a principled stance aligned with international law and United Nations resolutions advocating self-determination. This ideological framing strengthens Algeria's diplomatic legitimacy, particularly among states and movements that prioritize post-colonial sovereignty norms. Strategic security considerations also shape Algeria's policy. Western Sahara lies adjacent to Algeria's southwestern borders, a region already affected by instability in the Sahel. Algerian policymakers have historically feared that Moroccan control over the territory could extend Rabat's strategic reach and potentially encircle Algeria geopolitically. Maintaining a friendly or independent Sahrawi entity would create a buffer zone separating Algeria from Moroccan territorial expansion. In this sense, support for the Polisario Front serves not only ideological or diplomatic purposes but also concrete security interests tied to border stability and regional military balance[16].

Domestic political factors further reinforce Algeria's position. The Western Sahara issue has often been used by Algerian political elites to cultivate nationalist sentiment and legitimize state authority. By presenting itself as a defender of oppressed peoples and a champion of anti-colonial justice, the Algerian government strengthens its domestic political narrative and reinforces national unity. This symbolic dimension is particularly significant during periods of internal political tension, when external causes can serve as rallying points for public support. Scholars note that foreign policy positions rooted in national ideology often acquire enduring significance because they become embedded in state identity and political discourse. Another important strategic interest involves diplomatic influence and leadership in Africa. Algeria has historically sought to maintain a prominent role within continental institutions such as the African Union. Supporting Sahrawi independence aligns Algeria with a bloc of African states that recognize the SADR and advocate for decolonization. This stance enhances Algeria's diplomatic credibility as a defender of international legal norms and strengthens its leadership profile among states that share similar historical experiences of colonialism. By contrast, Morocco's position has at times generated divisions within African diplomacy, allowing Algeria to cultivate alliances among states sympathetic to the Sahrawi cause. Economic considerations, though less central than geopolitical and ideological factors, also play a role. Algeria's hydrocarbon-based economy relies heavily on energy exports and regional stability. Preventing Morocco from gaining exclusive access to Western Sahara's natural resources—such as phosphates and fisheries—can be seen as part of a broader effort to avoid strengthening a regional rival's economic position. While Algeria does not directly benefit economically from the territory, limiting Morocco's resource advantage indirectly supports Algeria's strategic objective of maintaining regional parity.

Role of International Actors in the Western Sahara Conflict:

The Western Sahara conflict has evolved into an internationalized dispute in which external actors play

15. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

16. International Crisis Group, *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, Middle East/North Africa Report no. 66 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007).

decisive roles in shaping diplomatic dynamics, influencing negotiation frameworks, and sustaining the political status quo. While the conflict originated as a decolonization issue following Spain's withdrawal in 1975, it has since become embedded in broader global power relations, involving multilateral organizations, regional bodies, major powers, and transnational economic actors. The involvement of these external stakeholders has both facilitated conflict management and, paradoxically, contributed to its persistence.

One of the most significant international actors is the United Nations (UN), which has functioned as the primary mediator and institutional framework for conflict resolution. Since 1991, the UN has overseen the Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), established to monitor the ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front and to organize a referendum on self-determination. Despite decades of diplomatic efforts, the referendum has not taken place due to disagreements over voter eligibility and political conditions. Scholars argue that while UN involvement has succeeded in preventing a return to full-scale war, it has struggled to produce a lasting political settlement, highlighting the limitations of international mediation in protracted territorial disputes[17]. The UN's role therefore illustrates both the strengths and constraints of multilateral conflict management. Regional organizations have also shaped the trajectory of the conflict, particularly the African Union (AU). The AU recognizes the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a member state, reflecting its institutional commitment to anti-colonial principles and territorial self-determination. This recognition has provided diplomatic legitimacy to the Sahrawi cause and strengthened its international visibility. At the same time, Morocco's relations with the AU have historically been affected by this stance, demonstrating how regional institutional positions can influence interstate diplomacy. Analysts note that the AU's involvement has reinforced the normative framing of the conflict as a decolonization issue rather than merely a bilateral territorial dispute.

Major global powers have also exerted considerable influence through diplomatic recognition, economic partnerships, and strategic alliances. States such as the United States, France, and Spain have maintained varying degrees of support for Morocco, often motivated by strategic, economic, and security considerations. For instance, Morocco's role as a counterterrorism partner and regional ally has contributed to its favorable relations with Western powers. France, in particular, has consistently supported Morocco's autonomy proposal within international forums, illustrating how geopolitical alliances can shape diplomatic outcomes. Such support can strengthen Morocco's bargaining position while reducing international pressure for a referendum, thereby affecting the balance of negotiations. The European Union (EU) represents another influential actor, primarily through trade and fisheries agreements with Morocco that have included Western Saharan territory or waters. These agreements have generated legal and political controversy, especially regarding whether they comply with international law governing resource exploitation in non-self-governing territories. Critics argue that economic partnerships involving Western Sahara risk legitimizing Moroccan administrative control, while supporters contend that such agreements promote regional development and stability. This debate demonstrates how economic diplomacy can become entangled with questions of sovereignty and legal status, blurring the line between commercial engagement and political recognition[18].

Neighboring states and regional powers beyond North Africa have also influenced the conflict indirectly through diplomatic alignment and multilateral voting patterns. Some states support Morocco's autonomy initiative as a pragmatic solution, while others advocate for a referendum on independence. These divisions within the international community have contributed to diplomatic stalemate by preventing the emergence of a unified global position. The lack of consensus among external actors reduces pressure on the parties to compromise, thereby prolonging negotiations. Transnational corporations constitute another category of international actors whose involvement is often overlooked in traditional geopolitical analyses. Companies engaged in phosphate extraction, fisheries, and exploratory energy projects have economic interests in Western Sahara's natural resources. Their contracts and

17. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

18. Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier, *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms, and Geopolitics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

investments can shape political realities on the ground by strengthening administrative structures and infrastructure in Moroccan-controlled areas. Scholars in political economy emphasize that when private economic interests become tied to disputed territories, they can create incentives for maintaining the status quo, complicating efforts toward conflict resolution. Humanitarian organizations and advocacy networks also play an important role, particularly in addressing the conditions of Sahrawi refugees living in camps in Algeria. These actors provide humanitarian assistance, monitor human rights conditions, and raise international awareness about the conflict. Although they lack direct political authority, their reports and advocacy campaigns influence public opinion and policy debates in donor countries. Civil society involvement demonstrates that international influence is not limited to states and intergovernmental organizations but also includes non-state actors capable of shaping discourse and norms.

Resource Politics and Conflict Persistence:

The persistence of the Western Sahara conflict cannot be fully understood without examining the role of resource politics, which has created structural incentives for maintaining the status quo rather than pursuing compromise. Natural resources in disputed territories often transform conflicts from ideological or territorial disputes into economic contests, thereby altering the strategic calculations of involved actors. In Western Sahara, the presence of valuable phosphates, rich fishing grounds, and potential hydrocarbon reserves has intensified the stakes of territorial control, embedding economic considerations within political decision-making.

Economic Incentives and Stalemate:

Economic incentives associated with resource extraction contribute significantly to the continuation of the conflict. Control over Western Sahara's resources provides tangible financial benefits, particularly for Morocco, which administers most of the territory. Revenues derived from phosphates and fisheries strengthen state capacity and reinforce administrative infrastructure in the region. Scholars argue that when one party derives material benefits from a disputed territory, it may become less willing to negotiate concessions, as maintaining control yields immediate economic returns[19]. Such incentives can produce a structural stalemate, where neither side perceives compromise as advantageous. For the Polisario Front, relinquishing claims would mean forfeiting potential future access to resources, while for Morocco, concessions could result in the loss of existing economic gains. This mutual calculation entrenches the conflict by aligning political positions with economic interests.

Resource-Driven Territorial Rigidity:

Resource wealth can also produce territorial rigidity, a condition in which states adopt inflexible negotiating positions due to the perceived strategic importance of resource-rich areas. In Western Sahara, major resource sites are geographically concentrated in zones under Moroccan administration, reinforcing Morocco's determination to retain territorial authority. Analysts note that natural resource distribution often shapes bargaining behavior by increasing the perceived value of specific territories, making compromise politically and economically costly[20]. The concentration of valuable assets in particular regions thus transforms geographic space into strategic capital. Territorial claims become more than symbolic assertions of sovereignty; they become mechanisms for controlling economic assets essential to national development and international trade.

Strategic Cost of Compromise:

The strategic cost of compromise represents another critical factor sustaining the conflict. For Morocco, any arrangement that could lead to independence or shared sovereignty might weaken its regional position, reduce access to resources, and undermine domestic legitimacy tied to territorial unity. For Algeria, reducing support for Sahrawi self-determination could diminish its geopolitical leverage *vis-à-vis* Morocco and weaken its image as a champion of anti-colonial principles. From a political economy perspective, actors engaged in resource-linked disputes often perceive compromise as a loss rather than a gain, particularly when resources are nonrenewable or

19. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

20. Philippe Le Billon, "The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts," *Political Geography* 20, no. 5 (2001): 561–84.

globally valuable. This perception raises the political and strategic costs of negotiation, making stalemate appear preferable to uncertain settlement outcomes[21].

Impact on the Local Population:

While geopolitical rivalries and resource politics dominate international discussions, the most profound consequences of the Western Sahara conflict are experienced by the local Sahrawi population. Decades of unresolved status have produced humanitarian, social, economic, and political challenges that continue to affect daily life for those living both within the territory and in refugee camps across the border. One of the most significant impacts is prolonged displacement. Since the outbreak of conflict in the mid-1970s, tens of thousands of Sahrawis have lived in refugee camps in southwestern Algeria, where many families have remained for generations. Long-term displacement has created a situation of protracted refugeehood, characterized by dependency on humanitarian aid, limited economic opportunities, and restricted mobility. Research on protracted refugee situations indicates that extended displacement often leads to structural poverty, reduced access to education and employment, and psychological stress associated with uncertainty about the future[22]. For Sahrawi refugees, the absence of a political settlement has meant that temporary camps have effectively become semi-permanent settlements.

Within Moroccan-administered areas of Western Sahara, socio-economic conditions are shaped by uneven development and contested political status. Moroccan authorities have invested in infrastructure, housing, and public services, which has improved material conditions in some urban centers. However, critics argue that such development is unevenly distributed and may primarily benefit settlers or state-aligned populations rather than indigenous Sahrawis. Human rights organizations have also reported concerns related to freedom of expression, political participation, and civil liberties in the territory. These reports suggest that unresolved sovereignty disputes often produce governance environments where security considerations take precedence over civil rights protections. Identity and cultural preservation constitute another major dimension of impact. The prolonged conflict has fragmented Sahrawi society geographically and politically, dividing communities between refugee camps, Moroccan-controlled territories, and diaspora populations. Such fragmentation complicates the transmission of cultural traditions, language practices, and collective identity. Scholars note that protracted territorial conflicts frequently generate identity polarization, as competing national narratives attempt to shape the loyalties of local populations[23]. In Western Sahara, this dynamic manifests in competing efforts to influence education, media, and public discourse.

Economic marginalization is also a persistent challenge. Although the territory contains valuable natural resources, local populations often have limited direct access to the economic benefits derived from them. In resource-rich conflict zones globally, it is common for revenues to flow primarily to central governments or external actors rather than to local communities. This pattern can produce grievances, especially when residents perceive that their land's wealth is being exploited without their meaningful participation or consent[24]. Such perceptions may reinforce political discontent and deepen mistrust toward governing authorities. Psychological and generational effects further underscore the human cost of the conflict. For younger generations born into displacement or contested governance, the absence of a clear political future can shape life opportunities, aspirations, and identity formation. Studies on conflict-affected populations show that prolonged uncertainty often leads to feelings of marginalization and political alienation, particularly among youth who have never experienced stable statehood or recognized citizenship. These long-term social consequences demonstrate that unresolved territorial

21. Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

22. Gil Loescher and James Milner, *Protracted Refugee Situations: Political, Human Rights and Security Implications* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2005).

23. Toby Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

24. Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

disputes are not merely diplomatic problems but deeply human crises.

Legal Dimensions of Resource Exploitation in Western Sahara:

The exploitation of natural resources in Western Sahara is highly contested because the territory is classified by the United Nations as a Non-Self-Governing Territory, meaning its resources legally belong to its people. Under international law, extraction of phosphates, fisheries, or hydrocarbons is considered lawful only if it reflects the wishes and benefits of the Sahrawi population. The 2002 UN Legal Counsel opinion clarified that resource activities are not automatically illegal, but they violate international law if conducted without local consent. Trade agreements and commercial activities involving Western Saharan resources have therefore faced legal scrutiny, with critics arguing they may legitimize territorial control or breach international norms. Courts and legal bodies have reinforced the view that Western Sahara has a distinct legal status separate from Morocco. Overall, international law has become a key arena of contestation, used by different actors to justify competing claims and shape the political trajectory of the conflict.

Conclusion:

The Western Sahara conflict illustrates how territorial disputes can persist when geopolitical rivalry, economic interests, legal ambiguity, and historical legacies converge to reinforce stalemate. The analysis demonstrates that Morocco's sovereignty claims, Algeria's strategic calculations, and the Polisario Front's self-determination demands are sustained by mutually reinforcing incentives that make compromise politically and strategically costly. The presence of valuable natural resources further intensifies these dynamics by linking territorial control with economic gain, thereby hardening negotiating positions. International actors have played a stabilizing yet inconclusive role: while multilateral diplomacy has prevented large-scale war, divergent global interests and inconsistent legal interpretations have hindered a definitive settlement. Legal debates over resource exploitation and sovereignty status reveal that international law functions not only as a normative framework but also as a strategic instrument employed by competing parties. Ultimately, the conflict endures because its structural drivers remain unresolved. A sustainable resolution will require an integrated approach that reconciles geopolitical interests, ensures lawful and equitable resource governance, and prioritizes the political rights and welfare of the Sahrawi people. Without addressing these interconnected dimensions, the dispute is likely to remain a protracted conflict characterized by diplomatic deadlock and ongoing humanitarian consequences.

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