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Western Sahara and the UN: a Litany of Failures and a Confluence of Possibilities.

by

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Introduction

Western Sahara: The Desert Land of Riches

Western Sahara is a desert territory in north-west Africa that borders Morocco to the south, Mauritania to the north and Algeria to the west (see map on p.12). The territory covers an area of about 252,120 sq km (97,344 sq miles), has a population of about 270,000 mostly inhabiting the main city of *Laayoune*. The inhabitants, the Saharawis, are nomadic Arabs who subscribe to Islam. What has attracted imperial interests is that the territory is rich in phosphates, marine resources and is believed to have offshore oil deposits. Western Sahara fell under Spanish rule in 1884, becoming a Spanish province in 1934. Saharawi nationalism, emboldened by the independence wave sweeping through Africa as well as the invasion and occupation of the desert territory by Morocco and Mauritania, forced Spain to hand over the territory to the two in 1976.¹ To resist recolonization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO) Front immediately declared the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and established a government in exile.² Mauritania withdrew and formally rescinded its claim to the territory in 1979 due to POLISARIO resistance and Morocco's hostility. Since then, this territory has been the subject of a long-running dispute between Morocco and the Algerian-backed POLISARIO Front.

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¹ In November 1975, King Hassan II of Morocco instructed more than 300,000 Moroccans to march into the territory in defiance of an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling. The Green March was designed to force Spain to hand over the territory to Morocco and Mauritania. The UN failed to condemn it.

² The POLISARIO-led government in exile is based in Tindouf, Algeria and since 1976 POLISARIO has been hosted and backed by the Algerian government.