



The Campaign to End the Occupation of the Western Sahara Newsletter

## [Eye on Western Sahara](#)

April 11, 2024



Sahrawis watch soldiers march in a parade during the celebrations marking the 45th anniversary of the declaration of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), at a refugee camp on the outskirts of the southwestern Algerian city of Tindouf (©picture-alliance/AP)

Welcome to Eye on Western Sahara, the monthly newsletter of the US-based Campaign to End the Moroccan Occupation of Western Sahara ([freewesternsahara.org](http://freewesternsahara.org)). The Campaign is a diverse coalition of individuals committed to international justice and respect for national self-determination. The campaign is broad and non-partisan and includes people from across the entire political spectrum.

### [The Other Occupation](#)

By Stephen Zunes april 11, 2024

The Hamas terrorist attack on Israel this past October and the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip which has followed has put much of the world's attention on Israel and Palestine, not just in regard to the tragic events of the past six months, but to the Palestinian struggle for self-determination against what the United Nations recognizes as a 56-year occupation.

This increasing focus on that longstanding conflict provides an opening for those of us concerned about another UN-recognized occupation which has been going on for 48 years—that of Morocco over Western Sahara. It

serves as a reminder that Israel is not the only Western-backed occupying power. And it gives us an opportunity to emphasize the importance of upholding principles of international law everywhere.

The U.S. Campaign Against the Moroccan Occupation does not take a position regarding Israel/Palestine. Nor does it take positions on any other issue outside of its support for the right of the people of Western Sahara for self-determination. Speaking for myself, however, as a longtime supporter of Palestinian rights, it is frustrating that the Western Saharan struggle has received so little global attention and popular support relative to Palestine. This is particularly unfortunate in light of the fact that the Sahrawis' liberation struggle has studiously avoided many of the pitfalls of the Palestinian struggle. The Western Saharan independence movement is united under the leadership of a single entity--the Polisario Front. Not every Sahrawi agrees with every policy of the Polisario leadership, but they recognize them as their sole legitimate representatives and have not established rival organizations.

The Polisario Front is democratic and its leadership is accountable. Official corruption is minimal and free competitive elections are held regularly for both its legislative and executive branches.

Though the vast majority of Sahrawis are devout Muslims, the Polisario Front is secular, believing that matters of faith and practice should be between individuals and God. Women have equal rights to inheritance and divorce, they keep their maiden names, and they have positions of leadership both within the Polisario and in the nonviolent resistance movement inside the occupied territory.

The Polisario Front has never engaged in terrorism and has strictly adhered to the Fourth Geneva Convention and the laws of war. They are fighting Moroccan forces occupying their country, not Moroccan civilians, including the Moroccan settlers whose presence in the occupied territory is illegal under international law.

The Polisario Front has never questioned Morocco's right to exist and has pledged to respect Morocco's strategic interests and its internationally-recognized borders, even the parts of southern Morocco with a predominantly Sahrawi population which Spain separated from the rest of Western Sahara late in the colonial period.

Despite all this, the Biden administration has refused to call for a two-state solution to the conflict between Morocco and Western Sahara as it has for Israel and Palestine. Indeed, the Biden administration is the only government in the world, besides the Netanyahu government in Israel, to have formally recognized Morocco's illegal annexation of Western Sahara. While U.S. government maps do not include the occupied West Bank as part of Israel, they do show Western Sahara as part of Morocco with no demarcation between Morocco and the occupied territory. The Biden administration is effectively recognizing the right of conquest.

The United States has long emphasized that political leaders in the Arab/Islamic world need to renounce terrorism and to respect democracy, religious tolerance, women's rights, and the rule of law. When violent autocratic governments and movements have challenged the interests of the United States and its allies, Washington has not hesitated to provide allied government with the means to suppress these regimes and armed groups, providing arms and other support, and have even gone to war utilizing American forces.

It is ironic, therefore, that the United States is providing Morocco, an autocratic monarchy, with the military and diplomatic support to prevent the Polisario from establishing a democratic secular state in their homeland which renounces terrorism, respects women's rights, and practices religious pluralism. An independent Western Sahara under the leadership of the Polisario would seem to be just the kind of government the United States would want to see in that part of the world.

It is critical that U.S. policy be focused not just on attacking and punishing the extremists, but supporting and rewarding the moderates as well. Demanding an end to the Moroccan occupation and supporting the Western Saharans right to self-determination is a way to do just that.

On Capitol Hill, supporters of Western Sahara's right of self-determination have not only included both Democrats and Republicans, but have included some of the strongest supporters of the Palestinians as well as some of the strongest supporters of Israel. In a time of growing political polarization, the question of Western Sahara is one that can bring people together. It is not about left and right. It's about respecting fundamental principles of international law for which nations came together in the aftermath of World War II to ensure that all peoples have the right to self-determination and that no country has the right to expand its territory by military force.

This is the "rules-based international order" that President Biden frequently invokes in regard to Ukraine, yet seems to ignore when it comes to Western Sahara.

Though the ongoing tragedy in Israel and Palestine is certainly worthy of our attention, it is critical that the people of Western Sahara not be forgotten. We must remind the international community that there is another occupation going on, victimizing a people who have never engaged in terrorism and who simply want to have a peaceful democratic future on their own land. The United States must decide if it wants to continue to be on the side of those who would deny them that right or join the growing number of nations who support the people of Western Sahara in their quest for self-determination.

In solidarity with the Sahrawi people,

Stephen Zunes,  
Torgny Segerstedt Visiting Research Professor  
University of Gothenburg  
Gothenburg, Sweden

Professor of Politics  
University of San Francisco  
San Francisco, CA