

The Sahrawi and the Right to Self-Determination

The Sahrawi are a nomadic people of the Western Sahara, in the area of present-day Mauritania, southern Morocco, and extreme southwestern Algeria. Their culture is a blend of Arab, Berber and black African characteristics. They are composed of many tribes and are largely speakers of the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic.

By the early 20th century, France and Spain had split the northwest of Africa and drawn artificial borders on the desert sand.

The Sahrawi were told that they were now Spanish and that their land was now the 'Spanish Sahara.' In 1975, King Hassan II of Morocco organized the Green March to claim the Western Sahara.

Hundreds of thousands of Moroccan civilians marched south towards the border. Spain was no longer able to sustain its colonial adventure and the Western Sahara was partitioned between Morocco and Mauritania. Morocco occupied the northern two thirds of the territory and Mauritania, the southern one. Both countries were particularly interested in this territory with the largest deposits of phosphates in the world, very rich fisheries and possibly, plenty of oil under its surface. The Sahrawi were no longer Spanish. They were told that they were Moroccan. Or Mauritanian. These desert nomads have been waiting since 1975 for their fundamental human rights to independence and self-determination.

The United Nations (UN) asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to investigate. This highest court of law in the world delivered its legal opinion – Morocco had no valid claim to territorial sovereignty¹ over Western Sahara, and the Sahrawi indigenous population were the rightful sovereign heirs² of the territory. Morocco defied international law and invaded the Sahrawi territory.

Glossary

1 independence – **2** future possessors



As the Sahrawi nomads' liberation movement, the Polisario Front, became locked in fierce war with Morocco, the UN issued a number of alarmed messages reiterating to Morocco that its actions were intolerable.

The Sahrawi people have spent the last forty years fighting off Morocco's illegitimate presence on Sahrawi soil and contesting against Morocco's refusal to cooperate in a UN-led self-determination process. Morocco knows that if it allows the self-determination vote to occur, the Sahrawi will most likely choose independence rather than remain under an illegal colonial military occupation.

The war with Morocco also meant the decline of a traditional nomadic way of life that had once been a sign of identity for the Sahrawi culture. The wall that divides the country also prevents the free movement of the Bedouins and their herds, as do the thousands of landmines and unexploded cluster bombs scattered around the Western Sahara.



activities

↓ READING COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions.

- Who are the Sahrawi?
- What is their culture like?
- What language do they speak?
- Who colonised northwestern Africa in the 20th century?
- What happened in 1975?
- Why were Morocco and Mauritania so interested in this region?
- Has Morocco territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara?
- What is the Polisario front?
- How has the Sahrawi culture changed over time? Why?
- Which human rights are defied in the Sahrawi territory?

↓ MATCHING

Match a word in the first column with one in the second column, then provide the Italian equivalents.

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| 1 Artificial | A Opinion |
| 2 Colonial | B Movement |
| 3 Desert | C Law |
| 4 Territorial | D Adventure |
| 5 Legal | E Nomads |
| 6 International | F Occupation |
| 7 Military | G Borders |
| 8 Free | H Sovereignty |

↓ VOCABULARY

Explain in your own words the meaning of the following terms.

- Nomadic
- Blend
- Self-determination
- Fierce
- Rightful
- Herds
- Decline
- Intolerable

↓ TRANSLATION

Translate the following sentences into Italian.

- The Sahrawi culture is a blend of Arab, Berber and black African characteristics.
.....
.....
.....
.....
- The Sahrawi were told that they were now Spanish and that their land was now the "Spanish Sahara."
.....
.....
.....
.....
- Morocco occupied the northern two thirds of the territory and Mauritania, the southern one.
.....
.....
.....
.....
- These desert nomads have been waiting since 1975 for their fundamental human rights to independence and self-determination.
.....
.....
.....
.....
- The war with Morocco also meant the decline of a traditional nomadic way of life that had once been a sign of identity for the Sahrawi culture.
.....
.....
.....
.....