

The Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia al-Hamra and the Rio del Oro [called Polisario, based on its Spanish acronym] has been the unified voice of the Saharawi movement for independence and statehood since 1973. That year, a group of Saharawi university students studying in Morocco began to form a new anti-Spanish movement, focused on armed resistance. Among the Polisario's founders were the charismatic Ilwali Mustafa Sayid and his brother, Bechir. Ilwali would become the Front's first secretary general and would retain the position until his death during armed action in 1976. The organization began as a group of a dozen guerrilla fighters, but by the time a UN decolonization delegation arrived in May 1975, it found that the overwhelming majority of Saharawis supported independence and backed the Polisario.



Over the course of its 37 year struggle for independence for the Saharawi people, the Polisario Front has remained the leader of the independence movement largely because it has remained a tolerant and inclusive entity, similar to many of the secular, anti-colonial independence movements that sprung up throughout the Third World during the Cold War. The Polisario is focused specifically on freedom and statehood, and all other identities – of tribe, religion, gender, and age – are relegated to secondary status. Furthermore, the Polisario Front is far from an elite organization; any Saharawi that supports self-determination is welcome under the Polisario banner. Through the meetings of its General Congress every three to four years, the Polisario allows all Saharawis to participate in the directing and organization of the movement. In democratic elections, those in the refugee camps, who have fled the occupied territories of the Western Sahara, and émigrés abroad elect delegates – around 1,400 – who convey the

opinions of their constituencies to the General Congress.

Since its founding, the Polisario has focused on the inclusion of women and youth. Today, they participate actively through the National Union of Saharawi Women (UNMS) and the National Youth Union (UJSARIO), who send members to the General Congress and are directly linked to the highest levels of the Polisario leadership. The Saharawis pride themselves on both the advanced status of women within their movement and the prominent role played by young people.

For the Polisario, the Western Sahara is a clear-cut case of decolonization and thus self-determination. Citing UN resolutions and the International Court of Justice's 1975 decision, the Polisario calls for a democratic referendum that allows the Saharawis themselves to decide their political future. This is the pivot upon which all Polisario arguments revolve. Thus, while the leaders approved of UN Special Envoy James Baker's Peace Plan – which would have allowed some Moroccan settlers to vote after a five-year transition period – they usually reject any planned referendum that allows the Moroccans in the Western Sahara – some of whom have been there for decades – to vote. So, while the Saharawis submitted some challenges to the UN's final voter list produced in the late 1990s, the Polisario was largely approving of the list, which ruled out Moroccans.

“We don't espouse any ideology or try to spread any religion – all we want is freedom.”
-Teeba, Saharawi refugee

In addition, any solution that does not include independence as an option is unacceptable to the Polisario Front. While they usually speak of independence and statehood, the leaders insist that they are willing to incorporate the Western Sahara into Morocco if the Saharawi people decide to do so in a free and fair referendum that also provides the option of SADR statehood. Based on UN principles of decolonization and self-determination, the Polisario maintains that its 16-year armed struggle against Morocco was justified, and that a return to arms would be equally warranted. Nonetheless, because of the UN's insistence that it would arrange a referendum in the early 1990s, the Polisario continues to put its faith in the United Nations system, to the chagrin of many Saharawis.

The Polisario leadership consistently references human rights violations and natural resource exploitation by Morocco in the occupied territory of the Western Sahara, calling on the international community to step in to end such violations.

Finally, while the Polisario Front is expressly focused on self-determination and gaining independence, it has expanded its rhetoric to address a number of other issues. It is supportive of North African regional integration, economic and military agreements with Morocco, trade and security agreements with Europe and the United States, and the establishment of a multi-party democracy. Of course, all of these points are contingent on a referendum on self-determination.

Despite its continued position as the leader of the independence movement, the Polisario is not without challenges. Its current Secretary General, Mohammed Abdelaziz, has been in power for over 30 years, and many of the other leaders have held positions for decades. The Saharawi youth and much of the refugee population – while still supportive of the Polisario – have begun to clamor for a change in strategy, seeking a return to their homeland by any means necessary after over three decades of conflict and strife.