

Western Sahara

MAL FACT SHEET



SUMMARY

Western Sahara is a territory in the northern Africa bordering Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The territory is contested between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The country is entirely engulfed by the Saharan desert.

Head of Sahrawi Republic: Brahim Gahli

Notable cities: Laayoune, Al-Dakhla, and Smara

Gov. Type: Non-self governing territory

Population: 650,000 (2026 est.)

History: Former Spanish Colony (1884), Spanish withdrawal from Western Sahara (1976), Moroccan claim to territory (1957 - now)

GEOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Western Sahara is about 266,000 sq km in total area, which is about the size of the state of Colorado.

The climate of Western Sahara varies as you move towards the interior of the country. On the coasts, the climate is much cooler due to the cold Canary currents, currents that have only minimal effects on the inland.

Given that the Western Sahara is primarily made up of desert and sand dunes, the geographical terrain is mostly flat and there are limited elevation changes across the territory.

Natural resources include phosphates, fishing, and renewable energy. Land use is divided between agricultural land (18.8%), forest (2.7%) and other uses (78%).

Most of the territory of Western Sahara is subject to extreme heat waves, which mostly occur during the summer months. Irregular and inconsistent rainfall leads to both drought and flooding. Other hazards include medium to high risks of tsunamis and seismic activity.

MODEL ARAB LEAGUE

Economy and Politics

MAL FACT SHEET

DEMOGRAPHICS

Noun: Sarhawi(s)

Adjective: Sarhawi

Ethnic Groups: 99% Arab-Amazigh (Berber), 1% Other

Languages: Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Hassaniya Arabic, and Spanish

Religions: <99% Muslim (Official; <0.1% Shia, rest Sunni), >1% Other (Christian)

Literacy: 90% (mostly due to refugee camps)

The total fertility rate in Western Sahara is consistently above 2, however, that rate has declined in recent years. The majority of the population of Western Sahara came from an influx of Moroccan settlers, beginning with the Green March in 1975.

ECONOMY AND GDP

Western Sahara's economy is described as a small-market based economy whose primary industries related to phosphate mining, fishing, and tourism. Given the disputed nature of the territory of Western Sahara, not only is there very limited economic data, but also there are large controversies surrounding resource exploitation. Moreover, given Moroccan occupation of the economic hubs many of the economic indicators (such as inflation) are directly tied to Morocco.

(Note: economic data collection is severely limited by political tensions in the area).

Real GDP (Purchasing Power Parity): \$906 million (2007)

Real GDP Per Capita: \$2,500 (2007)

Inflation Rate (Consumer Prices): 1.7% (2026), 6.66% (2022), 1.4% (2021)

GDP - Composition: 40% Services (2007)

Unemployment Rate: n/a %

Youth Unemployment: n/a %

MAIN POLITICAL CONTENTIONS

The main political contentions surrounding Western Saharan surround its push for independence. Because of its lack of self-determination, Western Sahara has often been dubbed the "last colony." Western Sahara was originally colonized by the Spanish, but they ceded control in the mid 20th century after the UN called for decolonization of the region. Spain's exit from the region led to vast tensions between the newly formed Polisario Front and the Kingdom of Morocco, a tension that is still strong today.

To establish a hold on Western Sahara, Morocco sent 350,000 settlers to the region (coined the Green March). The Polisario Front mostly operates in the southern and eastern regions of the territory and is most notably supported by Algeria. In fact, the Polisario government operates in exile from the Sahrawi Refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. Currently, several pushes have been made within the UN to push for a referendum for Western Saharan independence under the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. However, many of the most influential powers have pushed for the Moroccan autonomy plan, claiming it as the only viable solution for the future of the region. Moreover, Algeria seems to be timid about becoming an active player in the region, a significant blow to a Sahrawi independence movement. Many of the doubts surrounding independence concerns the economic and political instability of the Polisario Front.

Western Sahara: A Timeline

