

The Western Sahara dispute

Why in news?

Algeria recently announced that it would “immediately” suspend its 20-year-old treaty of friendship with Spain.

What is the Treaty of friendship?

- A Treaty of friendship, neighborliness, and cooperation was signed between Algeria and Spain in 2002.
- Since 2002, this treaty has led to a close partnership between the two countries on migration flows, anti-human trafficking measures, as well as in the economic, financial, educational, and defense sectors.

What is the Western Sahara region?

- Western Sahara is a vast, sparsely-populated desert region in Northwest Africa.
- It is bordered by Morocco in the North, Algeria in a small northeastern patch, and Mauritania in the East and South.
- It also has a long coast with the Atlantic Ocean in the West and Northwest.
- It is a region rich in phosphates and other minerals and has a lucrative fishing industry on its Atlantic coast.
- This former Spanish colony is home to the nomadic indigenous Sahrawi tribe whose main language is Hassaniya Arabic.



When and how did the dispute over Western Sahara begin?

For decades, Morocco has claimed control over Western Sahara while the ethnic Sahrawi fight for their right to self-determination.

- In 1884, Spain began its colonization of Western Sahara and in the mid-1900s, turned it into a Spanish province called Spanish Sahara.
- Spain united the two main regions of Western Sahara — Rio De Oro and Saguia el Hamra— to constitute its province.
- In 1957, a year after gaining independence, Morocco laid claim to Western Sahara that the region was once part of the Moroccan Kingdom.
- In 1960, neighboring Mauritania also laid claim to parts of the region.
- By the early 1970s, the pressure on Spain to vacate its colonies in Africa and the ensuing political climate gave rise to the Sahrawi insurgency in Western Sahara.
- The insurgency was led by a politico-military group called the Polisario Front.

The Polisario Front— also called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra

and Rio de Oro founded in 1973 with the help of Libya and Algeria. It had historic ties with the indigenous population of Western Sahara.

- It waged a successful guerilla war against the Spanish colonialists, and Spain withdrew from the region in 1975.
- On February 27, 1976, a day before Spain formally exited the province, the Polisario Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Western Sahara.
- While SADR does not have Western recognition, it has been recognized by 70 countries and is a member of the African Union.
- Both Morocco and Mauritania moved troops to Western Sahara to assert their claims.
- The Polisario Front, backed by Algeria's diplomatic and military aid, continued the guerilla resistance, demanding their withdrawal.
- Algeria hosts the headquarters of the SADR government, along with refugee camps for Sahrawis.

What is the role of ICJ?

- In 1975, the UN General Assembly asked the International Court of Justice to intervene in this matter.
- The Court ruled that there was no evidence "of any ties of territorial sovereignty" between Western Sahara and either Morocco or Mauritania.
- It also stated that there were indications that some tribes in the territory were loyal to the Moroccan Sultan.
- It reaffirmed the UNGA 1541 resolution that called for the region's decolonization and complete compliance with the principle of self-determination.
- This heralded a 16-year-long war between Polisario and the two occupying countries.
- However, Mauritania signed a peace treaty with Polisario in 1979, consequently withdrawing from the region.
- A United Nations-mandated ceasefire ended the war in 1991, with the promise of holding an independence referendum in Western Sahara.
- The war has forced almost 200,000 Sahrawis to flee to neighboring Algeria, where Polisario is running refugee camps and a government-in-exile.



What is the aftermath of the 1991 Ceasefire?

- By 1991, Morocco had taken control of about 85% of the territory.
- Moroccan troops have built a huge sand wall called the Berm, a buffer zone lined with land mines.
- It extends from the Atlantic coast of Western Sahara to the mountains of Morocco, dividing the territories they control from that of the Polisario Front.
- **Morocco Plan** - The UN finally succeeded in bringing both Morocco and Polisario to the negotiating table in 2007.
- Terms of the agreement - Morocco proposed to grant Western Sahara limited autonomy under which the Sahrawis would run their government but under Moroccan sovereignty.
- Besides this, Morocco would continue to control the phosphate reserves and fisheries, defense, and foreign affairs.
- Polisario rejected these plans and has continued to call for independence.
- Algeria has also opposed the Moroccan proposal.

What are the recent developments?

- Historically, Spain had supported the United Nation's mandate to hold a referendum in Western Sahara to allow self-determination.
- The referendum has not taken place yet, stalled by issues like determining who is eligible to vote.
- But in March 2022, Spain endorsed a plan by Morocco.
- This recent shift in policy is described as a "new stage" and the associated reason is
 - The United States, under former President Donald Trump, became the first country to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.
 - This acceptance was a concession by the United States for Morocco to normalize its ties with Israel.
- As a result of this, Algiers recalled its Ambassador to Madrid to deliberate on the issue.
- Algeria had also cut diplomatic ties with Morocco in 2021 over the Western Sahara issue.

Reference

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