



## Africa :: Western Sahara

### Introduction :: Western Sahara

#### Background:

Western Sahara is a disputed territory on the northwest coast of Africa bordered by Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. After Spain withdrew from its former colony of Spanish Sahara in 1976, Morocco annexed the northern two-thirds of Western Sahara and claimed the rest of the territory in 1979, following Mauritania's withdrawal. A guerrilla war with the Polisario Front contesting Morocco's sovereignty ended in a 1991 cease-fire and the establishment of a UN peacekeeping operation. As part of this effort, the UN sought to offer a choice to the peoples of the Western Sahara between independence (favored by the Polisario Front) or integration into Morocco. A proposed referendum never took place due to lack of agreement on voter eligibility. The 2,700 km- (1,700 mi-) long defensive sand berm, built by the Moroccans from 1980 to 1987 and running the length of the territory, continues to separate the opposing forces with Morocco controlling the roughly 80 percent of the territory west of the berm. Ethnic tensions in Western Sahara occasionally erupt into violence requiring a Moroccan security force response.

### Geography :: Western Sahara

#### Location:

Northern Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Mauritania and Morocco

#### Geographic coordinates:

24 30 N, 13 00 W

#### Map references:

Africa

#### Area:

**total:** 266,000 sq km

**country comparison to the world:** 78

**land:** 266,000 sq km

**water:** 0 sq km

#### Area - comparative:

about the size of Colorado

#### Land boundaries:

**total:** 2,046 km

**border countries:** Algeria 42 km, Mauritania 1,561 km, Morocco 443 km

#### Coastline:

1,110 km

#### Maritime claims:

contingent upon resolution of sovereignty issue

#### Climate:

hot, dry desert; rain is rare; cold offshore air currents produce fog and heavy dew

#### Terrain:

mostly low, flat desert with large areas of rocky or sandy surfaces rising to small mountains in south and northeast

#### Elevation extremes:

**lowest point:** Sebjet Tah -55 m

**highest point:** unnamed elevation 805 m

#### Natural resources:

phosphates, iron ore

#### Land use:

**arable land:** 0.02%  
**permanent crops:** 0%  
**other:** 99.98% (2011)

**Irrigated land:**

NA

**Natural hazards:**

hot, dry, dust/sand-laden sirocco wind can occur during winter and spring; widespread harmattan haze exists 60% of time, often severely restricting visibility

**Environment - current issues:**

sparse water and lack of arable land

**Environment - international agreements:**

**party to:** none of the selected agreements

**Geography - note:**

the waters off the coast are particularly rich fishing areas

**People and Society :: Western Sahara**

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**Nationality:**

**noun:** Sahrawi(s), Sahraoui(s)

**adjective:** Sahrawi, Sahrawian, Sahraouian

**Ethnic groups:**

Arab, Berber

**Languages:**

Hassaniya Arabic, Moroccan Arabic

**Religions:**

Muslim

**Population:**

538,811 (July 2013 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 172

**note:** estimate is based on projections by age, sex, fertility, mortality, and migration; fertility and mortality are based on data from neighboring countries (July 2013 est.)

**Age structure:**

**0-14 years:** 38.4% (male 104,539/female 102,315)

**15-24 years:** 19.7% (male 53,536/female 52,814)

**25-54 years:** 33.5% (male 88,716/female 91,874)

**55-64 years:** 4.7% (male 11,870/female 13,518)

**65 years and over:** 3.6% (male 8,616/female 11,013) (2013 est.)

**Dependency ratios:**

**total dependency ratio:** 41.2 %

**youth dependency ratio:** 37.5 %

**elderly dependency ratio:** 3.7 %

**potential support ratio:** 27 (2013)

**Median age:**

**total:** 20.6 years

**male:** 20.2 years

**female:** 21.1 years (2013 est.)

**Population growth rate:**

2.96% (2013 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 11

**Birth rate:**

31.18 births/1,000 population (2013 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 41

**Death rate:**

8.64 deaths/1,000 population (2013 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 77

**Urbanization:**

**urban population:** 82% of total population (2011)

**rate of urbanization:** 3.49% annual rate of change (2010-15 est.)

**Major urban areas - population:**

Laayoune 237,000 (2011)

**Sex ratio:**

**at birth:** 1.04 male(s)/female  
**0-14 years:** 1.02 male(s)/female  
**15-24 years:** 1.01 male(s)/female  
**25-54 years:** 0.96 male(s)/female  
**55-64 years:** 0.88 male(s)/female  
**65 years and over:** 0.78 male(s)/female  
**total population:** 0.98 male(s)/female (2013 est.)

**Infant mortality rate:**

**total:** 57.5 deaths/1,000 live births  
**country comparison to the world:** 30  
**male:** 62.51 deaths/1,000 live births  
**female:** 52.3 deaths/1,000 live births (2013 est.)

**Life expectancy at birth:**

**total population:** 61.9 years  
**country comparison to the world:** 189  
**male:** 59.65 years  
**female:** 64.23 years (2013 est.)

**Total fertility rate:**

4.15 children born/woman (2013 est.)  
**country comparison to the world:** 37

**HIV/AIDS - adult prevalence rate:**

NA

**HIV/AIDS - people living with HIV/AIDS:**

NA

**HIV/AIDS - deaths:**

NA

**Education expenditures:**

NA

**Literacy:**

NA

**Government:: Western Sahara**

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**Country name:**

**conventional long form:** none  
**conventional short form:** Western Sahara  
**former:** Rio de Oro, Saguia el Hamra, Spanish Sahara

**Government type:**

legal status of territory and issue of sovereignty unresolved; territory contested by Morocco and Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro), which in February 1976 formally proclaimed a government-in-exile, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), near Tindouf, Algeria, led by President Mohamed ABDELAZIZ

**Capital:**

none

**time difference:** UTC 0 (5 hours ahead of Washington, DC during Standard Time)  
**daylight saving time:** +1hr, begins last Sunday in April; ends last Sunday in September

**Administrative divisions:**

none (territory west of the berm under de facto Moroccan control)

**Suffrage:**

none; (residents of Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara participate in Moroccan elections)

**Executive branch:**

none

**Political pressure groups and leaders:**

none

**International organization participation:**

AU, CAN (observer), WFTU (NGOs)

**Diplomatic representation in the US:**

none

**Diplomatic representation from the US:**

none

**Economy:: Western Sahara**

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**Economy - overview:**

Western Sahara has a small market-based economy whose main industries are fishing, phosphate mining, and pastoral nomadism. The territory's arid desert climate makes sedentary agriculture difficult, and Western Sahara imports much of its food. The Moroccan Government administers Western Sahara's economy and is a key source of employment, infrastructure development, and social spending in the territory. Western Sahara's unresolved legal status makes the exploitation of its natural resources a contentious issue between Morocco and the Polisario. Morocco and the EU in July 2006 signed a four-year agreement allowing European vessels to fish off the coast of Morocco, including the disputed waters off the coast of Western Sahara, but this agreement was terminated in 2011. Oil has never been found in Western Sahara in commercially significant quantities, but Morocco and the Polisario have quarreled over who has the right to authorize and benefit from oil exploration in the territory. Western Sahara's main long-term economic challenge is the development of a more diverse set of industries capable of providing greater employment and income to the territory.

**GDP (purchasing power parity):**

\$906.5 million (2007 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 206

**GDP (official exchange rate):**

\$NA

**GDP - real growth rate:**

NA%

**GDP - per capita (PPP):**

\$2,500 (2007 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 183

**GDP - composition, by sector of origin:**

**agriculture:** NA%

**industry:** NA%

**services:** 40% (2007 est.)

**Agriculture - products:**

fruits and vegetables (grown in the few oases); camels, sheep, goats (kept by nomads); fish

**Industries:**

phosphate mining, handicrafts

**Industrial production growth rate:**

NA%

**Labor force:**

144,000 (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 178

**Labor force - by occupation:**

**agriculture:** 50%

**industry and services:** 50% (2005 est.)

**Unemployment rate:**

NA%

**Population below poverty line:**

NA%

**Household income or consumption by percentage share:**

**lowest 10%:** NA%

**highest 10%:** NA%

**Budget:**

**revenues:** \$NA

**expenditures:** \$NA

**Fiscal year:**

calendar year

**Inflation rate (consumer prices):**

NA%

**Exports:**

\$NA

**Exports - commodities:**

phosphates 62%

**Imports:**

\$NA

**Imports - commodities:**

fuel for fishing fleet, foodstuffs

**Debt - external:**

\$NA

**Exchange rates:**

Moroccan dirhams (MAD) per US dollar -  
8.6 (2012)  
8.07 (2011)  
8.42 (2010)  
8.06 (2009)  
7.53 (2008)

## Energy :: Western Sahara

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### Electricity - production:

90 million kWh (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 201**

### Electricity - consumption:

83.7 million kWh (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 200**

### Electricity - exports:

0 kWh (2012 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 148**

### Electricity - imports:

0 kWh (2012 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 149**

### Electricity - installed generating capacity:

58,000 kW (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 183**

### Electricity - from fossil fuels:

100% of total installed capacity (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 42**

### Electricity - from nuclear fuels:

0% of total installed capacity (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 204**

### Electricity - from hydroelectric plants:

0% of total installed capacity (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 208**

### Electricity - from other renewable sources:

0% of total installed capacity (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 141**

### Crude oil - production:

0 bbl/day (2012 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 145**

### Crude oil - exports:

0 bbl/day (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 206**

### Crude oil - imports:

0 bbl/day (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 142**

### Crude oil - proved reserves:

0 bbl (1 January 2013 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 204**

### Refined petroleum products - production:

0 bbl/day (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 144**

### Refined petroleum products - consumption:

1,948 bbl/day (2011 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 188**

### Refined petroleum products - exports:

0 bbl/day (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 143**

### Refined petroleum products - imports:

1,702 bbl/day (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world: 184**

**Natural gas - production:**

0 cu m (2011 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 209

**Natural gas - consumption:**

0 cu m (2010 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 209

**Natural gas - exports:**

0 cu m (2011 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 207

**Natural gas - imports:**

0 cu m (2011 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 79

**Natural gas - proved reserves:**

0 cu m (1 January 2013 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 206

**Carbon dioxide emissions from consumption of energy:**

316,700 Mt (2011 est.)

**country comparison to the world:** 187

**Communications :: Western Sahara**

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**Telephone system:**

**general assessment:** sparse and limited system

**domestic:** NA

**international:** country code - 212; tied into Morocco's system by microwave radio relay, tropospheric scatter, and satellite; satellite earth stations - 2 Intelsat (Atlantic Ocean) linked to Rabat, Morocco (2008)

**Broadcast media:**

Morocco's state-owned broadcaster, Radio-Television Marocaine (RTM), operates a radio service from Laayoune and relays TV service; a Polisario-backed radio station also broadcasts (2008)

**Internet country code:**

.eh

**Transportation :: Western Sahara**

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**Airports:**

6 (2013)

**country comparison to the world:** 174

**Airports - with paved runways:**

**total:** 3

**2,438 to 3,047 m:** 3 (2013)

**Airports - with unpaved runways:**

**total:** 3

**1,524 to 2,437 m:** 1

**914 to 1,523 m:** 1

**under 914 m:**

1 (2013)

**Ports and terminals:**

Ad Dakhla, Laayoune (El Aaiun)

**Military :: Western Sahara**

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**Manpower fit for military service:**

**males age 16-49:** 79,489

**females age 16-49:** 87,362 (2010 est.)

**Manpower reaching militarily significant age annually:**

**male:** 5,523

**female:** 5,429 (2010 est.)

**Transnational Issues :: Western Sahara**

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**Disputes - international:**

many neighboring states reject Moroccan administration of Western Sahara; several states have extended diplomatic relations to the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" represented by the Polisario Front in exile in Algeria, while others recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara; most of the approximately 90,000 Sahrawi refugees have been sheltered in camps in Tindouf, Algeria since the 1980s