

## Natural Resources in the Western Sahara Conflict

**Raquel OJEDA-GARCÍA\***  
**Samara LÓPEZ-RUIZ\*\***

*Abstract:* The status of Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory pending decolonization has been frozen since the 1960s. However, the Western Sahara conflict has undergone dialectical and strategic changes on the part of the actors involved. Therefore, this article focuses on the role of natural resources in the new strategy of the Polisario Front and Morocco. In addition, it analyzes the influence of non-state actors in this new strategy and the role on the growing importance on natural resources. Finally, it reflects Spain as an institutional actor.

*Keywords:* Natural resources Western Sahara Non-state actors Polisario Front strategy

### (A) INTRODUCTION

Despite the fighting ending with a cease-fire and a peace plan in 1991, the conflict's root reasons have never been solved. However, the conflict and its battle frames have evolved. Over the last two decades, natural resources have been defined by the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, and several non-governmental organizations not only as an essential part of the Western Sahara conflict but also as a battlefield that has attracted the interest of the international community. That is why this article focuses on natural resources as a pivotal element in the new strategy articulated by the Polisario Front in the early 2000s aiming to find a Western Sahara conflict-resolution.

The starting points that allow us to make this assertion revolve around two assumptions. First, the conflict in Western Sahara is not stagnant, and second, the traditional diplomatic efforts of the Polisario to demand the holding of a referendum as a culmination of its right to a determination process were not producing the desired effects. Both, Barreñada<sup>1</sup> and Fernández-Molina<sup>2</sup> have supported the thesis of non-stagnation of the conflict. The analysis of the history and political mobilizations in Western Sahara, as well as the various protests carried out by the population in the occupied territories and by the Saharawi diaspora in other countries, show that the situation in Western Sahara is constantly changing and evolving. Similarly, the intervention of new social and political actors, as well as the implementation of new protest strategies in the face of the Moroccan occupation, social and economic inequality, and the exploitation of

\* Senior Lecturer of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Granada, rojeda@ugr.es

\*\* PhD Candidate in Political Science and Public Administration, University of Granada, samara@ugr.es

<sup>1</sup> I. Barreñada, *Breve Historia del Sáhara Occidental* (La Catarata, Madrid, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> I. Fernández-Molina, 'Towards a Multilevel Analysis of the Western Sahara Conflict and the Effects of its Protractedness', in R. Ojeda-García, I. Fernández-Molina and V. Veguilla (eds.), *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization. When a Conflict Gets Old* (Palgrave, New York, 2017), at 1-33

natural resources, allow us to maintain this thesis<sup>3</sup>. For example, the so-called “intifada” of 2005, like the Gdeim Izik camp of 2010, revealed the capacity for mobilization and, above all, the degree of discontent of the population with the authorities. Dissent, demonstrations, meetings, and the press are controlled, repressed, and repressed by the Moroccan authorities, who do not allow any crack of protest against their occupation. Consequently, the conflict is not stagnant because it is in permanent transformation.

If we add to this the introduction of the claim of the legitimate right to decide and to benefit from the exploitation of the Saharawi natural resources, the turn generated in the Saharawi claims against the Moroccan sovereign claims over the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara is even better explained. In this line, Barreñada likewise points out that these claims referring to the exploitation and benefit of natural resources gain importance and prominence thanks to the intervention of transnational actors<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the annexation of Crimea set off some alarm bells by highlighting the risks of trading with resources from occupied territories, which is why large investors study their businesses in situations of occupation carefully before undertaking them<sup>5</sup>. Israel, for its part, feels that it is being treated unequally by the EU, which treats Morocco with more exchange rate flexibility in its agreements, even though it incorporates products originating in Western Sahara<sup>7</sup>.

Next, we will analyze the changes in the strategy developed by the Polisario Front after considering its claims on natural resources; the influence that non-state actors (NSAs) have exerted and continue to have on Polisario’s policy shift, and their impact on the potential resolution of the conflict. Finally, we will reflect on the role of Spain in this evolution and on the importance of natural resources in the relations between Morocco, the Polisario, and Spain.

## (B) THE POLISARIO FRONT STRATEGY

To study the diplomatic strategy of the Polisario Front, we must start with the idea that the Western Sahara conflict affects the national policies of the state actors involved in the geopolitical rivalry along with their reciprocal relations<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, it also generates

<sup>3</sup> I. Fernández-Molina, ‘Towards a Multilevel Analysis of the Western Sahara Conflict and the Effects of its Protractedness’, in R. Ojeda-García, I. Fernández-Molina and V. Veguilla (eds.), *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara’s Protracted Decolonization. When a Conflict Gets Old* (Palgrave, New York, 2017), at 1-33

<sup>4</sup> I. Barreñada, *Breve Historia del Sáhara Occidental* (La Catarata, Madrid, 2022), at 40.

<sup>5</sup> S. López-Ruiz and M.L. Grande-Gascón, ‘Pension funds: guarantors of international legality in Western Sahara? Evidence from Norway and Sweden’, *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021) 1180-1203 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2021.1917123]

<sup>6</sup> O. Kanevskaia, ‘EU labelling practices for products imported from disputed territories’, in A. Duval and E. Kassoti (eds.), *The Legality of Economic Activities in Occupied Territories* (Routledge, London, 2020), at 112-136

<sup>7</sup> E. Kassoti, ‘The Legality Under International Law of the EU’s Trade Agreements Covering Occupied Territories: A Comparative Study of Palestine and Western Sahara’, *CLEER Papers Series* (2017/3) 1-58

<sup>8</sup> L. Sour, ‘The Western Sahara conflict in the Algerian Moroccan relations: Understanding the geopolitical rivalry in the struggle for hegemony in the Maghreb Region’, *Revista UNISCI/UNISCI Journal* (2022) 9-26 [doi: <http://dx.doi.org/130>]

an impact in the region and at the international level<sup>9</sup> because external powers seek to balance their interests. The Polisario Front and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) continually protest through diplomatic instruments for the appropriation of their natural resources.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the Polisario has used the legal route with the filing of complaints<sup>11</sup> (Allan 2016) to the EU justice (judgments of the EU General Court of Justice and the EU Court of Justice of 2015 and 2018) and South Africa in 2017.<sup>12</sup>

The events demonstrate how the control of natural resources has been a recurring element in the origin and evolution of the conflict. It should not be forgotten that, initially, Spain, among its conditions for withdrawing from the territory, received fishing rights off the coast of Western Sahara for 20 years and the right to establish joint venture companies with Morocco to explore and extract minerals in the territory.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Morocco agreed to freeze its claims to Ceuta and Melilla until Spain recovered Gibraltar.<sup>14</sup> However, natural resources are not used only as a carrot and a stick. During the last decades, the export of natural resources has been used by Morocco as an occupation legitimizing strategy. However, the Polisario Front has fought those claims in court successfully. Nonetheless, despite none of the courts invoking the law of occupation, they based themselves instead on the principle of self-determination and the law governing the administration of non-self-governing territories, including the principle of permanent sovereignty over natural resources. Therefore, the outcomes of the four last European Judgments on Western Sahara judicial proceedings were politically favorable for Polisario because they confirmed that Western Sahara is not a part of Morocco and that Morocco cannot contract freely on behalf of Western Sahara.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the judicial battles, in November 2020, the armed conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco intensified following the blockade of the Guerguerat crossing by Saharawi civilians and their expulsion by the Moroccan military, with the consequent violation of the peace agreement signed in 1991. This fact came true in the prediction made by Cooper et al. when they stated that for all practical purposes, and even if the cease-fire of 1991 is still respected, the conflict in Western Sahara is thus still going on. The recent incident brings back to the table the stalemate of the conflict. To this must be added the breakdown of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Algeria and Morocco's increasing pressure on third countries to tilt their foreign policy to the side of the Moroccan position. In this line, Morocco was favored by the recognition of

<sup>9</sup> I. Fernández-Molina, 'Towards a Multilevel Analysis of the Western Sahara Conflict and the Effects of its Protractedness', in R. Ojeda-García, I. Fernández-Molina and V. Veguilla (eds.), *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization. When a Conflict Gets Old* (Palgrave, New York, 2017), at 1-33

<sup>10</sup> J. Smith, 'The taking of the Sahara: the role of natural resources in the continuing occupation of Western Sahara', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 263-284 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1080234]

<sup>11</sup> J. Allan, 'Natural resources and intifada: oil, phosphates and resistance to colonialism in Western Sahara', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2016) 645-666 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2016.1174586]

<sup>12</sup> R. Irwin, 'Terrains of legality and sovereignty: adjudicating the ownership of Western Sahara's phosphate in South Africa', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021) 1137-1159 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2021.1917121]

<sup>13</sup> M.B. Bishku, 'Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa: In the shadow of the Western Sahara dispute', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* (2021) 273-289 [doi: 10.1177/23477989211017568]

<sup>14</sup> T. Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill Books, New York, 1983), at 223.

<sup>15</sup> P. Wrangé, 'Self-Determination, Occupation and the Authority to Exploit Natural Resources', *Israel Law Review* (2019) 3-29 [doi: 10.1017/S0021223718000274]

its sovereignty over the disputed territory by the Trump Administration in November 2020, and the non-reaction (so far) by the Biden Administration. This recognition also influenced at least 15 to change their position: over 15 consulates have been opened in the Western Sahara region<sup>16</sup>, being the Jordanian Consulate in Laayoune the most notable opening.

However, as previously mentioned, the judgments of the General Court of the European Union, September 2021, recognized the Polisario Front not only as the Saharawis's representative but also as a party to the process of self-determination of that territory. The judgments also highlighted that Western Sahara's status is separate and distinct from Morocco, but most importantly, there is an obligation to ensure the consent of its people in case of implementation of the Association Agreement on that territory. The latter was not achieved and, therefore, the Court annuls the Council's decisions concerning, on the one hand, the Agreement between the EU and Morocco modifying the tariff preferences granted by the EU to products of Moroccan origin and, on the other hand, their sustainable fisheries partnership agreement<sup>17</sup> (CURIA EU 2021). In the same vein, the High Court of Justice of New Zealand pronounced on his judgment, adding that Western Saharan phosphate's importations are a reputational risk to New Zealand's wider interest.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the relevance of the issue of natural resources in geopolitical, economic, and social terms, there are few studies on the exploitation and importation of natural resources from Western Sahara, despite the centrality of this issue in geopolitical terms. Only a hundred publications, both, academic and grey literature, are pronounced on this subject<sup>19</sup> Most of these works are legal studies fundamentally referring to the respect or not of international law for the exploitation of these resources<sup>20</sup>, with a residual representation of studies of a political nature<sup>21,22,32,4</sup>. Among the latter, very few address the analysis of the foreign policy of the affected or interested states (Spain, Morocco,

<sup>16</sup> Middle East Monitor, 'Morocco: 15 Africa consulates in Western Sahara', *Middle East Monitor* (30 October 2020).

<sup>17</sup> General Court of the European Union, 'Press Release No 166/21 Judgments in Case T-279/19 and in Joined Cases T-344/19 and T-356/19 Front Polisario v Council', *General Court of the European Union* (29 September 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Sahara Press Service, 'New Zealand High Court: Morocco has no sovereignty or administrating power over Western Sahara', *Sahara Service Press* (16 March 2021).

<sup>19</sup> J. Allan and R. Ojeda-García, 'Natural resource exploitation in Western Sahara: new research directions', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021) 1007-1136 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2021.1917120]

<sup>20</sup> J. Allan and R. Ojeda-García, 'Natural resource exploitation in Western Sahara: new research directions', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021) 1007-1136, at 1129-30 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2021.1917120]

<sup>21</sup> N. White, 'Conflict stalemate in Morocco and Western Sahara: Natural resources, legitimacy and political recognition', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2015) 339-357 [doi: 10.1080/13530194.2014.949220]

<sup>22</sup> F. Kamal, 'The role of natural resources in the building of an independent Western Sahara', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 345-359 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1080235]

<sup>23</sup> V. Veguilla, 'Social protest and nationalism in Western Sahara: struggles around fisheries and housing in El Ayun and Dakhla', *Mediterranean Politics* (2017) 362-382, at 1129-30 [doi: 10.1080/13629395.2016.1215046]

<sup>24</sup> S. Zunes, 'Western Sahara, resources, and international accountability', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 285-299 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1080233]

France, the United States, Algeria, the SADR, and the EU<sup>25,26,27</sup>. Hence, the need to claim greater academic attention to improving decision-making processes in foreign policy oriented to the exploitation and importation of Sahrawi resources.

### (C) THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

In the realm of political decision-making processes, the role of NSAs is increasingly determinant<sup>28</sup> (Voltolini 2016). These actors have highlighted the questioning of the legality of the EU and its member states' policies on the exploitation, transport, and import of Western Sahara's natural resources. The most relevant NSAs in the Saharawi case are the following NGOs: Western Sahara Resource Watch, Western Sahara Campaign UK, Western Sahara Campaign Australia, and ODHE, belonging to the civil society of different countries. Other types of NSAs are academic and think tank researchers.<sup>29,30,31,32,33,34,35,36,37</sup> Western Sahara being a non-self-governing territory according to the UN, the exploitation of its natural resources can only be carried out by the administering power (which remains Spain), for the benefit of the Saharawi people and, in any case, with their consent.

The change in the Polisario Front's strategy toward the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict, makes us reflect on its relationship with NSAs and their influence on the latter's claims centered on the respect of the permanent sovereignty of the Saharawi

<sup>25</sup> A. Campos and V. Trasomontes, 'Recursos naturales y segunda ocupación colonial del Sahara español', *Les Cahiers d'ITEMA* (2015) 24-25

<sup>26</sup> V. Trasomontes 'El territorio del Sáhara Occidental y sus intereses económicos: Reflexiones para España', *Pre-bie3*(2014) 19

<sup>27</sup> M. Dawidowicz, 'Trading Fish or Human Rights in Western Sahara? Self-Determination, Non-Recognition and the EC-Morocco Fisheries Agreement.', in D. French (ed.), *Statehood and Self-Determination: Reconciling Tradition and Modernity in International Law* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013), at 250-276

<sup>28</sup> B. Voltolini, 'Non-state actors and framing processes in EU foreign policy: The case of EU Israel relations', *Journal of European Public Policy* (2016) 1502-1519 [doi: 10.1080/13501763.2015.1085429]

<sup>29</sup> E. Hagen, 'Saharawi conflict phosphates and the Australian dinner table', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 377-393 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1083541]

<sup>30</sup> J.J. Smith, 'The taking of the Sahara: the role of natural resources in the continuing occupation of Western Sahara', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 263-284 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1080234]

<sup>31</sup> B. Saul, 'The Status of Western Sahara as Occupied Territory Under International Humanitarian Law and the Exploitation of Natural Resources', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 301-322 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1075969]

<sup>32</sup> F. Kamal, 'The role of natural resources in the building of an independent Western Sahara', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 345-359 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1080235]

<sup>33</sup> Saul, B. (2015). The status of Western Sahara as occupied territory under international humanitarian law and the exploitation of natural resources. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 27(3), 301-322.

<sup>34</sup> J. Allan, 'Natural resources and intifada: oil, phosphates and resistance to colonialism in Western Sahara', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2016) 645-666 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2016.1174586]

<sup>35</sup> J. Byron, 'The greenwashing of Africa's last colony: the case of Western Sahara', (University of Helsinki, 2017)[Doctoral dissertation]

<sup>36</sup> J. Byron, 'The greenwashing of Africa's last colony: the case of Western Sahara', (University of Helsinki, 2017)[Doctoral dissertation]

<sup>37</sup> J.L. Soroeta, 'The Conflict in Western Sahara after Forty Years of Occupation: International Law versus Realpolitik', *German YB Int'LL* (2016) 187-222.

people over the natural resources existing in their territory. In the beginning, the strategy of the Polisario Front in the international sphere was their right to independence through the holding of a referendum and denouncing human rights violations. However, the current strategy of the Polisario Front and NSAs supporting these rights of the Sahrawi people is more focused on claiming their right to manage, exploit and benefit from the natural resources existing in the territory.<sup>383940</sup>

There is evidence that non-state actors are involved in the conflict in different ways like reporting human rights violations. Hence, we wonder about the role of NSAs as vectors of change that influence the path of the conflict. Ojeda-García<sup>41</sup> analyzed the NSAs' actions aimed at generating new frameworks for action and studying the levels at which they move, national, international, and supranational. The article is inspired by the study conducted by Voltolini<sup>42</sup> on the lobby exercised by NSAs in the foreign policy of the European Union in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Voltolini's theoretical proposal, constructivism in international relations, as well as the elaboration of an analytical framework focused on (1) the role, (2) the framework, and (3) the level of activity of these actors, was applied to the case of NSAs in the Western Sahara conflict, who defend the Saharawi people's right to exploit and benefit from their natural resources. Being classified as non-renewable and therefore having a negative economic, political and social impact today, but also for future generations of Saharawis<sup>43445</sup>, she addresses phosphates, fisheries, oil, and agriculture. Her research allows us to identify the critical role played by NSAs, especially NGOs. However, interviews with the heads of the main NSAs reveal that a new change is taking place in the framework of the conflict<sup>46</sup>. Currently, renewable energies, based on solar, wind, and sand energy, begin to be the focus of their claims and analysis, since they represent a long-term undermining of the Saharawi people's rights and, on many occasions, remain unnoticed.

Apart from the NSAs' capacity to influence, we consider it necessary to take into consideration another factor, the context, since the increasing emphasis on natural resources is also due to a change in the political, social, and economic context of Western Sahara. In 2001 Morocco began exploiting the natural resources of the occupied

<sup>38</sup> E. Hagen and M. Pfeifer, *Profit over Peace in Western Sahara: How commercial interests undermine self-determination in the last colony in Africa* (Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> B. Saul, 'The Status of Western Sahara as Occupied Territory Under International Humanitarian Law and the Exploitation of Natural Resources', *Global Change, Peace & Security* (2015) 301-322 [doi: 10.1080/14781158.2015.1075969]

<sup>40</sup> J. Allan, 'Natural resources and intifada: oil, phosphates and resistance to colonialism in Western Sahara', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2016) 645-666 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2016.1174586]

<sup>41</sup> R. Ojeda-García, 'The role of non-state actors in the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021) 1229-1254 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2021.1917125]

<sup>42</sup> B. Voltolini, 'Non-state actors and framing processes in EU foreign policy: The case of EU Israel relations', *Journal of European Public Policy* (2016) 1502-1519 [doi: 10.1080/13501763.2015.1085429]

<sup>43</sup> E. Hagen and M. Pfeifer, *Profit over Peace in Western Sahara: How commercial interests undermine self-determination in the last colony in Africa* (Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> J. Allan, 'Natural resources and intifada: oil, phosphates and resistance to colonialism in Western Sahara', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2016) 645-666 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2016.1174586]

<sup>45</sup> J. Byron, 'The greenwashing of Africa's last colony: the case of Western Sahara', (University of Helsinki, 2017) [Doctoral dissertation]

<sup>46</sup> R. Ojeda-García, 'The role of non-state actors in the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources', *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021) 1229-1254 [doi: 10.1080/13629387.2021.1917125]

territory of Western Sahara with the granting of licenses for the exploration and future exploitation of oil in waters adjacent to the Western Sahara territory. But it had also been almost ten years since the approval of the Peace Plan between Morocco and the PF, the arrival of the new monarch in 1999, Mohamed VI, and the beginning of the exploitation of other resources, apart from fishing. The UN's reaction was the drafting of the 2002 Corell report, which precisely establishes the right of the Saharawi people over their resources along with the need to obtain the consensus of the Saharawi people for them to be exploited by the "administering power" (with all the debate raised by the consideration of Morocco as *de facto* administering power, thus violating international law, an issue that persists to this day). SADR, for its part, at different times between 2005 and 2010, with the granting of licenses to other international companies for the exploitation of oil and other natural resources, put the focus of foreign policy interest on the economic relevance of its economic wealth and the consideration of the conflict at the international level. According to some analysts, the change toward soft diplomacy began in 2007. The event that triggered it was the presentation of the Autonomy Plan by Morocco, which obviated the possibility of a negotiation that includes holding a referendum as a fundamental element of the self-determination process. But we should also point out that one of the main NSAs in the field of natural resources, WSRW, began its actions in 2004.

The approval of the Fisheries Agreement, in 2012, especially with the publication of the ruling of the EU General Court in 2015 and the two subsequent judgments of the EU Court of Justice in 2018, shaped a new "frame" in the case of Western Sahara. It is the opening of the judicial channel to prevent the conflict from being forgotten and to continue claiming its rights as a non-self-governing territory. Following the latest agreement between the EU and Morocco signed in February 2019, the PF's reactions to the same through its lawyer Gilles Devers have not been long in coming. The economic relevance of natural resources and their impact on the performance of other NSAs, such as companies interested in trading with Saharawi natural resources is part of this new framework. Especially, the emphasis on the violation of the Saharawi people's rights, as Morocco takes advantage of its status as occupying power of the territory to exploit them and benefit without the consent of the Saharawi people. Awareness and reactions to the impact of this violation of international law by Morocco are more successful than with the PF's previous diplomatic strategy of denouncing the non-holding of the referendum for self-determination.

### (1) Impact of non-state actors on strategy change

The change in the "framework" of action refers to the growing interest in the question of the exploitation of natural resources as an economic issue shown by the Polisario Front and SADR, as well as the opening of the judicial channel demanding the enforcement of their permanent sovereignty over natural resources and their right to dispose of and benefit from them.

The involvement of NSAs in this change is shown by actions of a political nature that move between argumentation and confrontation and whose addressees are the policy-makers or the executives of the large companies that trade in Saharawi resources. Most



of the relations between the NSAs and the Polisario Front have been informal. Although, it is possible to recognize some regular meeting points, for example (EUCOCO), more recently the Sahara Rice, as well as meetings at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. In this framework-building process, the role of WSRW must be highlighted. They work in a network and collaborate with practically all NSAs, thus not only influencing the rest of NSAs by preparing campaigns, establishing strategies, and providing information and expertise, but also influencing the PF. As an example of the critical role of WSRW in the framework-building process, we like to note that they are the first actor who tries to bring renewable resources to debate.

#### (D) THE ROLE OF SPAIN AS INSTITUTIONAL ACTOR

The letter sent by the President of the Spanish Government to the Moroccan monarch, on March 14, 2022, recognizes in its lines that it intends to open a “new page in Spanish-Moroccan relations”. The first paragraph sets out the main elements of the new roadmap, “Spain recognizes the importance of the Western Sahara issue for Morocco, as well as Morocco’s serious and credible efforts within the framework of the United Nations to find a mutually acceptable solution. In this regard, Spain considers the Moroccan autonomy initiative, presented in 2007, as the most serious, realistic, and credible basis for resolving this dispute”. The publication of this letter showed the change in the Spanish government’s foreign policy or, at least, their public staging. The immediate consequence was a cooling of relations between the Polisario Front and Spain, immediately followed by the strong rejection of the content of this shift. Algeria’s reaction was not long in coming either, with the blocking of bilateral relations and the questioning of gas supplies, in a context deeply marked by the war in Ukraine and an unstable international market.

The geopolitical value of Morocco for Spain is unquestionable, as well as the pressures it has exerted on different European states after the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara by the Trump Administration in December 2020. If we add to that the control of migratory flows and terrorism, the reasons explaining seems to arise. But what is Spain’s interest in Western Sahara? The debate on the economic interest in the Saharawi natural resources has not been resolved. Reports by some NSAs such as NOVA, ODHE, and WSRW show the activities carried out by Spanish companies and, therefore, the interest in maintaining the status quo.<sup>47</sup> Neither the compensations that the EU must pay for the signing of the agreements with Morocco are not so high concerning the total expenditure of the European budget, nor the turnover and profits of the companies fishing in Saharawi waters are excessively high. Bearing this in mind, for other analysts, Spain’s interest in Western Sahara and the exploitation of its resources are not economic but geopolitical.<sup>48</sup> In any case, the study of other cases, such as Norway and its sovereign wealth funds<sup>49</sup>, shows that respect for international law is not contrary

<sup>47</sup> CBS & SDF, ‘Los tentáculos de la ocupación: Informe sobre la explotación de los recursos pesqueros del Sáhara Occidental en el marco de la ocupación del Estado marroquí’, *Observatori de Drets Humans y Empreses; Shock Monitor* (Barcelona, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> I. Barreñada, *Breve Historia del Sáhara Occidental* (La Catarata, Madrid, 2022)

<sup>49</sup> S. López-Ruiz and M.L. Grande-Gascón, ‘Pension funds: guarantors of international legality in Western Sahara? Evidence from Norway and Sweden’, *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021) 1180-1203, at 1199



to obtaining profits and maintaining stable and profitable trade relations. Their results point out that some NSAs use economic instruments to discourage trade in Western Sahara's natural resources, inactivating the strategy used by Morocco to legitimize its occupation.

Finally, Spain must consider the cost that its political decision may have with another state supplier of natural resources, such as Algeria, who decided suspend the treaty of friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation signed with Madrid in 2002 in June 2022, after Spain reversed decades of neutrality on the Western Sahara conflict. Until now, deliveries have continued relatively normally but the bill is expected to rise considerably. Algeria has been renegotiating with Algerian company Sonatrach and the Spanish company Naturgy for months, to try to revise the gas supply contract's prices. While the terms of the contract are protected by a confidentiality clause, the bill, according to experts, could rise by 70% for Spain. Madrid wanted to believe that the angry response of Algiers, which supports the Sahrawi independence fighters of the Polisario Front, would be short-lived. However, since the breakdown of the friendship and cooperation treaty between the two countries, all trade has stopped, except for gas and oil. Algiers decided to freeze bank debits for foreign trade operations of products and services to and from Spain, costing more than €50 million only to the Frits, Glazes and Ceramic Pigments' sector. The lost revenue for the Spanish economy could be disastrous. Only between June and July, the halt in transactions between the two countries resulted in €235 million in lost revenue for the Spanish economy<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> S. Morel, 'Trade relations between Spain and Algeria at a standstill', *Le Monde* (14 October 2022).

