

**MISSIONS ATLAS PROJECT  
AFRICA  
COUNTRY  
WESTERN SAHARA**

**Snapshots Section**

**Country Name:** Western Sahara (formerly Spanish Sahara)

**Country Founded in:** 1976

**Population:** 393,831

**Government Type: (national, regional and local)** A dispute continues between the SADR and the Moroccan government over who rules the area. The Moroccan government currently administers at least 2/3 of the territory.

**Geography/location in the world:** Western Sahara lies between Mauritania and Morocco on the Northwestern coast of Africa.

**Number of people groups:** 12

**Picture of flag:**



**Religion Snapshot**

Major Religion and % of population: Islam

Islam 100%

**Government interaction with religion:** The area administered by the Moroccan government has specific laws concerning the proselytizing of Muslims. The rules concerning religious practice among the Saharawi in the refugee camps is unknown.

## Country Profile

### Basic Facts

**Country Name:** Western Sahara

### Demographics:

The estimated population of Western Sahara is 393,831. Children up to fourteen years of age account for 45.1% of the population. There are 90,306 male children between the ages of newborn to fourteen years of age. There are 87,498 female children between these same ages. Adults between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four years of age account for 52.6% of the population. There are 101,730 males in this age category and 105,313 females. In the last age category, sixty-five years and above, there are 3,786 males and 5,198 females. This 65 and over group accounts for 2.3% of the population.

The birth rate is 39.95 births for every 1,000 people. An estimated 5.69 children are born to every woman. The infant mortality rate is 71.13 deaths for every 1,000 live births. The death rate is 11.74 deaths for every 1,000 people. The life expectancy for the total population is 53.92 years. The life expectancy for males is slightly lower at 51.64 years while the life expectancy for females is slightly higher at 56.31 years.

There are approximately 12 different ethnic groups living in Western Sahara. The Arab Berbers are the predominant group. The Saharawi are another important group.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/wi.html#Intro>

### Language:

Hassaniya Arabic and Moroccan Arabic are the official languages although Berber is also spoken by some. Because Western Sahara was a Spanish colony, some people may still speak Spanish as well. Hassaniya Arabic is derived from Arabic, Spanish, French, Swahili, and English.

### Society/Culture:

Two types of divergent culture seem to exist within the borders of Western Sahara. First, the original inhabitants of the area still attempt to find a way to live in their homeland although many have been existing in refugee camps in an area around Tindouf on the Algerian border. Secondly, the Moroccan government has allowed Moroccan citizens to settle in occupied areas under the protection of Moroccan security forces. These workers may be involved in mining projects.

Life in the refugee camps along the Algerian border is not easy. In 1976, when the conflict originally started, women and their children went to this area in the hopes of finding safety. These camps, which were built as a means of providing a temporary haven of safety during such troubling times, have continued to exist for the last thirty years as international entities have sought a solution to the political problems described in the history and government sections. Inhabitants receive food and aid from international sources but must still battle problems with

anemia and malnutrition The desert conditions of Western Sahara do not offer many economic opportunities so because of the continuing political unrest, land mines and military forces still are found in remote areas.

The area provided to the refugees have been separated into four different sections called *wilayas* and have been named after existing towns in the Western Saharan territory. Each *wilaya* is further subdivided into *dairas*, which seem to be smaller cities within the larger camp area. Within each of these smaller segments, neighborhoods also exist. The capital of the camps is *Rabouni*, which houses all of the main administrative offices.

Although the camps were originally just collections of tents and a few buildings, new construction has occurred. Schools, administrative offices, and other buildings have been constructed. A national hospital was built. Some families, who have received financial donations from outside charitable sponsors, have actually begun to open small shops. In 2006, torrential rains destroyed many of the constructed buildings. How many of these structures have been rebuilt is unknown.

People primarily exist on the food and clothing supplements provided by international relief organizations like the World Food Programme. Shipments are sent to the coast and then transported across the desert to the camps where camp administrators distribute food allotments to each family depending upon the number of people in each family. Rice is a staple food that is given. Families who desire more vegetables must either grow their own or find a way to purchase them. There are a few vegetable gardens within the camps where people struggle against the harsh environment to grow edible produce. Some international groups have worked with the Saharawi to use new innovative agricultural methods to attempt to grow more food this way.

Since most of the inhabitants of both areas are Muslims, they dress very conservatively. Women cover themselves in order to maintain the propriety required by religious law and to help protect their skin from the damaging rays of the sun. As girls mature and reach a marriageable age, they will don a *melhfa*, a piece of colorful material which serves as an outer covering for the head and body. Some women also wear the *hijab*. Men usually wear some type of headgear and longer sleeves in order to escape the sun's damage to the skin.

Interestingly, women may actually have a higher status in the camps than in other areas. Women hold positions of leadership and can serve as doctors, midwives, and teachers. Parents often still arrange marriages for daughters; however, divorce is possible. Women who have divorced may have the freedom to re-marry a man of their choice.

Yet, differences in gender roles still exist culturally. Usually, girls are assigned different types of household tasks while boys herd any livestock that the family might own. As girls mature, they are expected to assume more responsibilities and allow their mothers the freedom to assist with community projects. Boys and girls do not usually play together in mixed groups. The girls often play inside with dolls or will play in the streets with their friends. Boys will play marbles or some type of sports. Both attend local primary schools and usually hope to attend secondary school internationally if given the opportunity.

Most of the children now have been born in the refugee camps or at least have spent most of their lives there. These children know of the occupied territories but may not completely understand all of the political struggles. However, as they mature, children usually become more aware and concerned about the seemingly unending dispute over their homeland. Some of the children have knowledge of other countries either because they have participated in the Spanish summer program or because they have relatives who have migrated.

While these children have received hospitality from Spanish families, the Saharawi people are also famous for their own sense of the importance of hospitality. Offering hospitality is done with a sense of honor by the host. Sometimes the offer of hospitality will include the important tea ceremony.

*Note: Information has been gathered from these articles. These articles may express opinions about the current political situation that are biased towards a certain type of political ideology. Opinions expressed in the articles do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the authors of this website.*

“Thirty Years of Waiting” *Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 2007, Vol. 31 Issue 4, p88-92.

Anderson, Ericka. “Polisario 'Berlin Wall' Must Be Demolished.” *Human Events* Vol. 64, Issue 18, pg. 10

Hanson, Ronny. “Generations in Exile from Africa’s Last Colony.” *Forced Migration Review*. March 2007 Issue 27, pg. 76.

[http://www.thewip.net/contributors/2007/05/saharawispart\\_i\\_1.html](http://www.thewip.net/contributors/2007/05/saharawispart_i_1.html)

<http://saharawiyazeina.blogspot.com/search/label/Research%20paper>

<http://www.cru.uea.ac.uk/~e118/WS/wsahara.htm>

[http://www.wfp.org/country\\_brief/indexcountry.asp?region=6&section=9&sub\\_section=6&country=012#WFP%20Activities](http://www.wfp.org/country_brief/indexcountry.asp?region=6&section=9&sub_section=6&country=012#WFP%20Activities)

<http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/llreport3/llreport3-8.htm>

## **Government:**

There are basically two types of government entities within the territory known as Western Sahara. The northern two-thirds of the country are controlled by the Moroccan government. The Polisario Front, a Saharawi freedom organization which has been seeking complete autonomy for the region since 1976, operates an exiled government from Algeria. The Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro) established the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) under the leadership of Mohamed Abdelaziz. While many countries have recognized the SADR as the legitimate source of authority over the area, the Moroccan government still retains the actual authority. (Please see the history section for a complete explanation.)

## **Economy:**

Information about the economy can again be divided into two separate categories. In the areas controlled by Morocco, people engage in fishing and phosphate mining. Others continue to live as nomads raising livestock like camels, sheep, and goats. Generally, the incomes of these families are not as high as of those residing in Morocco proper. In 2006, the EU signed a contract with the Moroccan government which allowed for fishing in the territorial waters off the coast of Western Sahara.

Both SADR and the Moroccan government have attempted to sign similar agreements which would allow international companies to engage in oil explorations off the coast, too.

Those living in the refugee camps have few economic opportunities. As has been mentioned, families who have received aid from international sponsors have used this additional money to start small businesses when possible. However, most families still rely heavily upon the provisions of food and supplies provided through relief organizations.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/wi.html#Intro>  
<http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/lreport3/title.htm>

### **Literacy:**

The literacy rate for Moroccans living in the northern parts of Western Sahara is unavailable and the literacy rates for those living in the southern half of the country is uncertain. For the Saharawi living in the refugee camps, however, the literacy rate is about 95%. In 1975, when Spanish forces withdrew from the area, only about 5% of the Saharawi people could read and write. However, inhabitants of the camps have used the opportunities provided by international organizations to improve the literacy rate and educational opportunities for themselves and their children.

Different countries such as Algeria, Spain, Cuba, and Libya have reportedly accepted Saharawi students into boarding schools or colleges so that they could pursue their education. Also, through a special summer program, many Spanish families sponsor and host hundreds of Saharawi children's visits to Spain. Teens and young adults who have benefited from these educational opportunities often return to share the information with other inhabitants so that all may benefit.

<http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/lreport3/lreport3-5.htm>

### **Land/Geography:**

Western Sahara is located between Mauritania and Morocco. Its geographic coordinates are 24 30 N, 13 00 W. Its current size is equal to that of the state of Colorado.

The country is generally divided into these main geographic areas: Laayoune (the capital), Boujdour, Essemara, and Qued Essemara. However, politically Western Sahara is subdivided by a defense wall that the Moroccan government built.

Most areas of Western Sahara are very dry and covered with sand and stones. There are some mountainous areas in the south and northeast. Offshore air currents can produce condensation in certain areas, but rain does not occur often.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/wi.html#Geo>  
<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/world/A0861916.html>

## History

The Berbers migrated into the area now known as Western Sahara sometime during the Middle Ages. Bedouins came later and made their home in this area with little natural resources. Generally nomadic, these people divided themselves into different clans based upon their knowledge of ancient lineages.

The Spanish government claimed the area now known as Western Sahara around 1884. They first colonized the southern half which they called Rio de Oro. In 1934, they chose to proclaim their sovereignty over the northern half, Saguia el Hamra. They formally declared these two parts to be known as Spanish Sahara, an overseas province, in 1958.

The Saharawis desired independence from Spain and began to fight against the Spanish presence. Their independence fighters were commonly known as the Polisario Front. In 1976, the Spanish officially withdrew from the area and ceded control of the northern half to Morocco and the southern half to Mauritania.

After continuing efforts towards independence by the Polisario Front, the Mauritanian government decided to give them control of the area in 1979. Morocco, however, seized control of this southern half that the Mauritians had formerly claimed.

The Polisario Front and Moroccan troops had clashes throughout the 1980's. Morocco encouraged settlers to enter the disputed lands and then built a wall of defense and stationed troops along the wall in order to quell attacks. Beginning in 1988 and cumulating in 1991, the UN worked to broker a peace deal between the two warring factions.

Eventually both Morocco and the Polisario Front agreed upon the terms of the peace agreement, which called for a referendum where all eligible voters could cast their vote to determine the fate of the area. Another problem, however, ensued over which people should be considered eligible to vote. The last census in Western Sahara was done by the Spanish in the mid-1970's. The vote on the referendum was supposed to have occurred in 1992 and then again in 1994, but continual disagreements about the eligibility of voters kept this from occurring.

As the stalemate continued, James Baker, a special UN envoy, suggested a new plan where Western Sahara could be an autonomous area within Morocco and that the referendum vote would occur after four years and would include Moroccan settlers. This suggestion came in 2001. The Polisario Front did not accept such an idea so in 2004 James Baker suggested an alternative idea where Western Sahara would be a semiautonomous region within Morocco but the original referendum vote would be held five years later to decide whether the area would become independent (as originally promised by the UN), continue as an autonomous region, or integrate with Morocco. The Polisario Front agreed, but the Moroccan government did not approve of the plan. In 2004, Baker chose to resign. At this date, the question as to who will control the geographic area known as Western Sahara is still being debated. The Polisario Front still continues to claim power over the area while the Moroccan government actually controls most of the area.

<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/world/A0861918.html>

<http://www.arso.org/05-1.htm>  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/nea/825.htm>  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country\\_profiles/3466917.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/3466917.stm)

## Christian History

Early churches were established in North Africa during the days of the Roman Empire as Christians boarded trading ships and ventured forth to share the good news of the gospel. By 200-198 A.D. Christians had established several strong churches and were ministering to widows and orphans in the area. Many Berbers may have accepted Christ during this time. However, as different Roman emperors began the cycle of intense persecution, many early believers lost their lives as martyrs.

When Islamic invaders began their conquest of North Africa during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Christians were forced to convert to Islam or face the possibility of martyrdom or persecution. Many were forcibly converted while others struggled against the strong pressures of the Islamic authorities. Eventually, almost all of the Christians converted to Islam.

Some Christian influence remained even after the vast majority of people had converted to Islam through the presence of captured slaves. Notorious pirates raided ships in the Mediterranean Sea and captured peoples of all nationalities—including European Christians. These slaves, while usually mistreated, were the only Christians in that society. Usually, because of the harsh conditions, these Christians died quickly; yet, they were the only ones that could share the gospel.

Today, there are only small numbers of believers. Most of Western Sahara is Muslim. A few people converted to Catholicism during the years of Spanish colonialism, but most remained Muslims.

Daniel, Robin: *This Holy Seed*, Tamarisk Publications: Harpenden, Herts, 1992.

Groves, G.P., *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, Vol. I and III, Lutterworth Press: London, 1955.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761554128\\_7/Algeria.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761554128_7/Algeria.html)

<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/world/A0859770.html>

[http://www.ewtn.com/new\\_evangelization/africa/history/countries1.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/new_evangelization/africa/history/countries1.htm)

<http://www.historyofjihad.org/africa.html>

[http://www.faithfreedom.org/Articles/SSStephan/islamic\\_slavery.htm](http://www.faithfreedom.org/Articles/SSStephan/islamic_slavery.htm)

<http://am.novopress.info/index.php?p=386>

## Religion

*Due to the political situation which causes instability in the area, not much specific information is available about Western Sahara. Generalities have been drawn from information provided by Operation World concerning Morocco.*

## Non Christian

*Islam*—Most of the people living in the area are staunch Muslims who practice a form of folk Islam. They strictly follow the five pillars of Islam while still holding beliefs of the impact of the supernatural world upon their daily lives. Such beliefs encourage the use of magical healing arts by local religious leaders called *marabouts*.

*Catholic*—The Catholic church first built the Prefecture Apostolic of Spanish Sahara and Ifni in 1954. Its name was changed in 1970 and again in 1976. Today it is called the Prefecture Apostolic of Western Sahara. In 2004, there were two parishes in the area that were served by three priests. There were approximately 110 people attending mass. Acacio Valbuena Rodríguez served as the leader of the prefecture.

*Orthodox*—No information is available. There are three Orthodox congregations in Morocco.

### **Christian/Evangelical**

There are no known evangelical churches in Western Sahara. There are eleven Protestant denominations in Morocco and one Anglican Church.

### **People Groups**

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**Arab, Moroccan (7,500)**

The Moroccan Arabs speak Moroccan Arabic. They are predominantly Sunni Muslims. They are one of the least reached people groups.

The number of evangelical Christians is unknown. The Bible has been translated into their language, and the Jesus film is accessible. Gospel recordings exist.

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**Bedouin, Arosien (6,500)**

The Arosien Bedouins speak Hassaniyya Arabic. They predominantly practice a form of Sunni Islam. There are no known evangelical believers. The Bible has not been translated into their language, but the Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible.

Bedouins are a very proud people who have been nomads for centuries. Due to the establishment of political borders many have found themselves forced to change their traditional lifestyles in favor of more sedentary existences.

Those who continue to exist as nomads will usually live in tents that are separated into three sections. The men's quarter, the first section, allows men to gather and discuss important issues at the end of every day. The second section, known as the family section, allows women and children to socialize privately. The third section serves as a kitchen area.

Family honor is very important to Bedouins. Children are raised to obey their parents and to work hard. Men and women have different but equally important tasks. Men will watch over the herds while women care for the sheep herd and spin the tents and clothes for their families.

Traditionally, when young couples are married, a very specific protocol must be followed. The young wife may remain in the tent of her parents and discreetly slip away to join her husband in



another tent for the first year of marriage. During the second year, she may reside close to her husband's family and will not be considered a mature woman until she has born at least two children. Sometimes her first child is adopted and raised by her own mother. When a young woman has proven that she is a mature woman, she will be allowed to have her own tent. These types of customs are changing as nomads adapt to the influences brought by encounters with other people groups.

Boulay, Sébastien. "The Role of Architecture in Society: Structuring of the Family Unit Among Moorish Pastoral Nomads of Mauritania" *Nomadic Peoples*, 2007, Vol. 11 Issue 1, p49-67.

**00000**

**Bedouin, Tajakant (5,000)**

The Tajakant Bedouins speak Hassaniyya Arabic too. They are also Sunni Muslim.

There are no known evangelical Christians. The Bible has not been translated into their language, but the Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible. (See above description for further cultural information)

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**Berber, Tekna (99,000)**

The Tekna Berbers speak a language called Tachelhit. They are one of the least reached people groups. The people are predominantly Sunni Muslim. The number of evangelical Christians is unknown. Portions of the Bible were translated between 1906 and 1925. The Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible. Gospel recordings exist.

The Tekna Berbers are probably descendents of some of the first inhabitants of the region. They are semi-nomadic moving from place to place in search of better grazing lands for their herds.

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**French (40)**

The French that live in this area speak French and are most likely diplomats or expatriate workers.

The number of evangelical Christians is unknown. The Bible, the Jesus film, and other Christian resources are available in their language.

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**Imragen (20,000)**

The Imragen people speak Hassaniyya Arabic. They are one of the least reached people groups. The people are predominantly Sunni Muslim. There are no known evangelicals. The Bible has not been translated into their language, but the Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible.

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**Izarguien (30,000)**

The Izarguien people speak Hassaniyya Arabic. They are one of the least reached people groups. They predominantly practice Islam. There are no known evangelical Christians. The Bible has not been translated into their language, but the Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible.

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**Moor (45,000)**

The Moors speak a language called Hassaniyya Arabic. They are one of the least reached people groups. They predominantly practice Islam. There are no known evangelical Christians. The Bible has not been translated into their language, but the Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible.

The Moors are descendents of the Bani Hassan tribe who came to Africa in the 1500 and 1600's. Their society is based upon a tribal structure with class differentiations. The highest class level is *adma* which consists of two subgroups—the warriors and the religious leaders. The next class level is called the *lahma* and consists of commoners who act as servants to the higher class. The lowest class consists of descendents of slaves who were captured in previous centuries during times of raiding. They usually perform the most menial tasks and are subject to the commands of people from the higher classes.

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**Regeibat (65,000)**

The Regeibat speak Hassaniya Arabic. They are one of the least reached people groups. They are one of the least reached people groups. They predominantly practice Islam. There are no known evangelical Christians. The Bible has not been translated into their language, but the Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible.

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**Saharawi (217,000)**

The Saharawi people are a politically divided group which spreads from areas in Western Sahara, Morocco, refugee camps on the Algerian border, and the Canary Islands. They speak a language called Hassaniyya Arabic. Descendents of the Berbers and their slaves, this people are caught between Morocco's continued desire to dominate Western Sahara, the Algerian government's desire for Western Sahara to be independent, and members of their own people who also desire an independent Western Sahara.

The refugee camps are given donations of food and other supplies and are reported to be well-run with democratically appointed leaders who make decisions based upon traditional tribal laws. However, these people have been forced to remain in the camps because of the insecure situation of Western Sahara.

The people practice folk Islam, and there are no known evangelical Christians. The Bible has not been translated into their language, but the Jesus film and other Christian videos are accessible.

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### **Spaniards (400)**

The Spaniards living in this area speak Spanish and are most likely descendants of settlers who migrated when the area was a former Spanish colony. Others may be expatriates or diplomats who have chosen to live and work in the area. They are predominantly Roman Catholic. The number of evangelical Christians is unknown. The Bible, the Jesus film, and other Christian resources are available in their language.

### **Missiological Implications**

1. Evangelical Christians and churches should pray that the political uncertainties will be overcome so that evangelism and church planting might be a reality.
2. Evangelical Christians and churches should develop strategies for sharing the Good News with followers of Islam. These methods should be taught to any local believers who might be found. The efforts to win followers of “folk Islam” should be intensified among the Saharawi who number well of 200,000.
3. Evangelical Christians and churches should introduce methods of house church or other small group efforts to bring the peoples to Christ. These methods would possibly lead to less persecution from the majority religion.
4. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to introduce the methods of Bible storying as a method of evangelizing people in Western Sahara. Storying might prove to be a most effective means of witness among the women.
5. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to render physical aid to the people in the refugee camps.
6. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to introduce educational materials and aids to the people, especially those in the refugee camps.

## Pictures



## Links

- <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/wi.html#Intro>
- <http://www.joshuaproject.net/countries.php>
- <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0759052.html>
- <http://www.globalaid.net/projects/saharawi-people-project-2003/>
- <http://www.arisheshinemorocco.org/ja//content/blogcategory/13/279/>
- [http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/10/country\\_facts/main3352397.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/10/country_facts/main3352397.shtml)