

## The Western Sahara Crisis, how can the region be made safe?

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The Saharan region has been on the edge of history for a long time. Yet, today, its multiple resources have placed the Sahara as a coveted area. Struggles of influence have led this region to be the epicentre of the **arc of crisis**. Yet, each days, millions of migrants are trying to cross the region to come to Europe. Between wars and illegal traffics, migrants are risking their lives every minute.

What can be done in order to help this chaotic migration in a chaotic area ?



Pick-ups transporting migrants to Agadez (Northern Niger) on the 1st June 2015 ©Issouf Sanogo/AFP

## ● CONTEXT

### I) The Sahara, a huge area full of ressources

-> *What is the Saharan area?*

- **Desert and vastness**

The Sahara is the largest hot desert of the world. Its area of over **8,5 million square kilometers** is comparable to the USA or China. The desert comprises much of North Africa, excluding the fertile region on the Mediterranean Sea coast, the Atlas Mountains of the Maghreb, and the Nile Valley in Egypt and Sudan. It stretches from the Red Sea in the east and the Mediterranean in the north to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, where the landscape gradually changes from desert to coastal plains. To the south, it is bounded by the Sahel, a belt of semi-arid tropical savanna around the Niger River valley and the Sudan Region of Sub-Saharan Africa.

- **A sparsely populated area**

Despite its vastness, the Sahara is underpopulated; around **5 millions of inhabitants** lived there. Most of them are located in oasis and in deposits of raw materials. They are often **migrants** coming from other african regions. There are also local populations like Touaregs (North), Moors (West) and Toubous (Est). They are around 1,5 millions. Thus, saharan population is composed by different ethnicities.

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-> *Its natural resources*

- **Water resources**

There is water reserves in great depths called groundwater bodies which is a non sustainable solution for agriculture.

- **Primary resources**

Sahara is rich in hydrocarbons especially Sudan, Libya and Chad ; oil which was discovered in 1956 in South-Algeria and ores such as uranium in Niger (Atlit mine), iron in West-Mauritania, or phosphate in Morocco.

-> *A desert travelled by flows*

- **Saharan characterisation**

Saharan countries from West to East:

North : **Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt (Developing Countries)**

South : **Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan (Least Developed Countries)**

Saharan economy is based on exporting raw materials without any transformation. Thus, infrastructures such as cities, roads are created near dynamic areas. Yet, these cities are mainly populated of external people, coming from non Saharan region, ignoring local people, increasing tensions ie Khourigba in Morocco (200 000 inhabitants).

Northern Sahara includes around 50 cities.

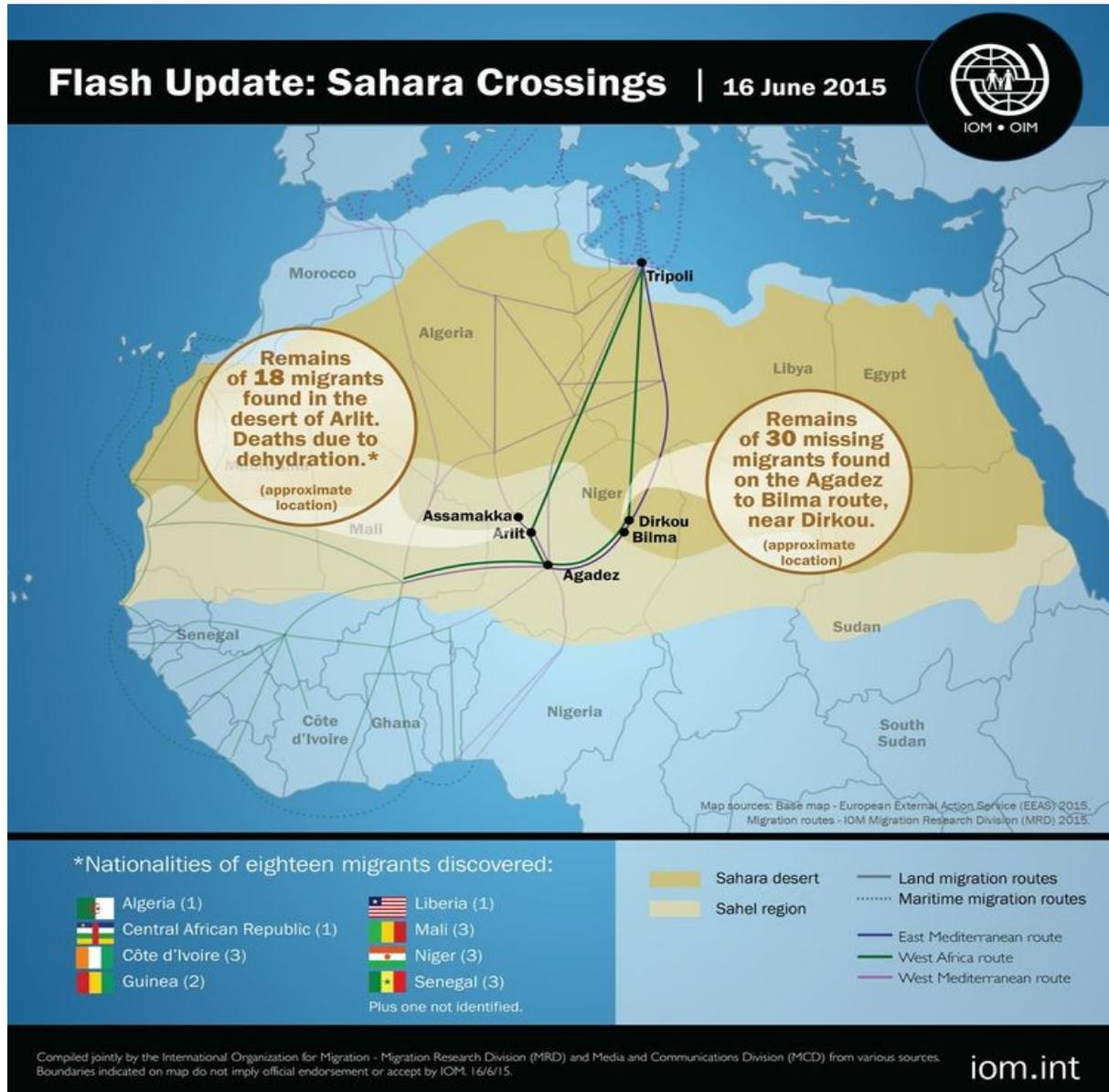
Southern Sahara includes around 10 cities.

=> **different levels of development**

- **Intense flows**

Sahara is not self sufficient, it depends on external supplies in order to feed and equip the population through goods imports. Then, Sahara exports its raw materials.

Sahara is part of the “Mondialisation Grise” which generates a huge illegal traffic networks because of Saharan vastness and inaccessible borders, hard to control. Moreover this traffic is developing because of migration. Indeed, the destabilisation of the region after the Arab Spring has led to an influx of population. Thus, **refugees camps are financed by the EU, yet, it has diverged into a slave market.** These illegals traffics are more important than legal traffic, which let the parallel economy grow.



## II) A conflictual zone

-> *Tensions related to borders*

- **The colonial legacy and its generated ongoing conflicts**

After the 60s independence of the French West Africa, 1963 was created the Organisation of African Unity which claimed that no borders had to be contested to avoid any conflicts. Yet, borders conflicts had not be avoided.

- 70s : Libya had illegally annexed the Aouzou strip which was a region controlled by the Chad. The Chad was military supplied by France. The Aouzou Strip became the object of a fierce sovereignty dispute after Libya occupied the region in 1973 and unilaterally annexed it in 1975. Over the next 15 years, armed conflicts periodically erupted between Libya and Chad as each nation tried to assert its control over the strip.

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In 1988, however, the two countries agreed to settle the dispute peacefully, and in 1990 they submitted the dispute to the International Court of Justice (The Hague, Neth.). In 1994 the court dismissed Libya's claims to the strip, and Libya withdrew its troops from the area.

- Morocco and Western Sahara conflict : The Western Sahara, also called Rio de Ora, has been independent in 1975 but then invaded by Morocco. Thus, local people (also called Sahrawi) had created the Polisario front, supported by Algeria (and the USSR during the Cold War period). It has created massive population displacements. As a result, a wall separating Western Sahara has been built by the Moroccan authorities. But spanning 2,700km, the Berm is 12 times the length of the Berlin Wall and four times that of the West Bank wall. A ceasefire had been declared in 1991. Yet, nowadays, the situation is blocked. A peacekeeping mission called the United Nations Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was formed. But many say it has failed to live up to its name. Indeed, Morocco refused to give up this region for economic reasons as it has phosphate deposits.

-> *A destabilized area*

- **The development of terrorists movements**

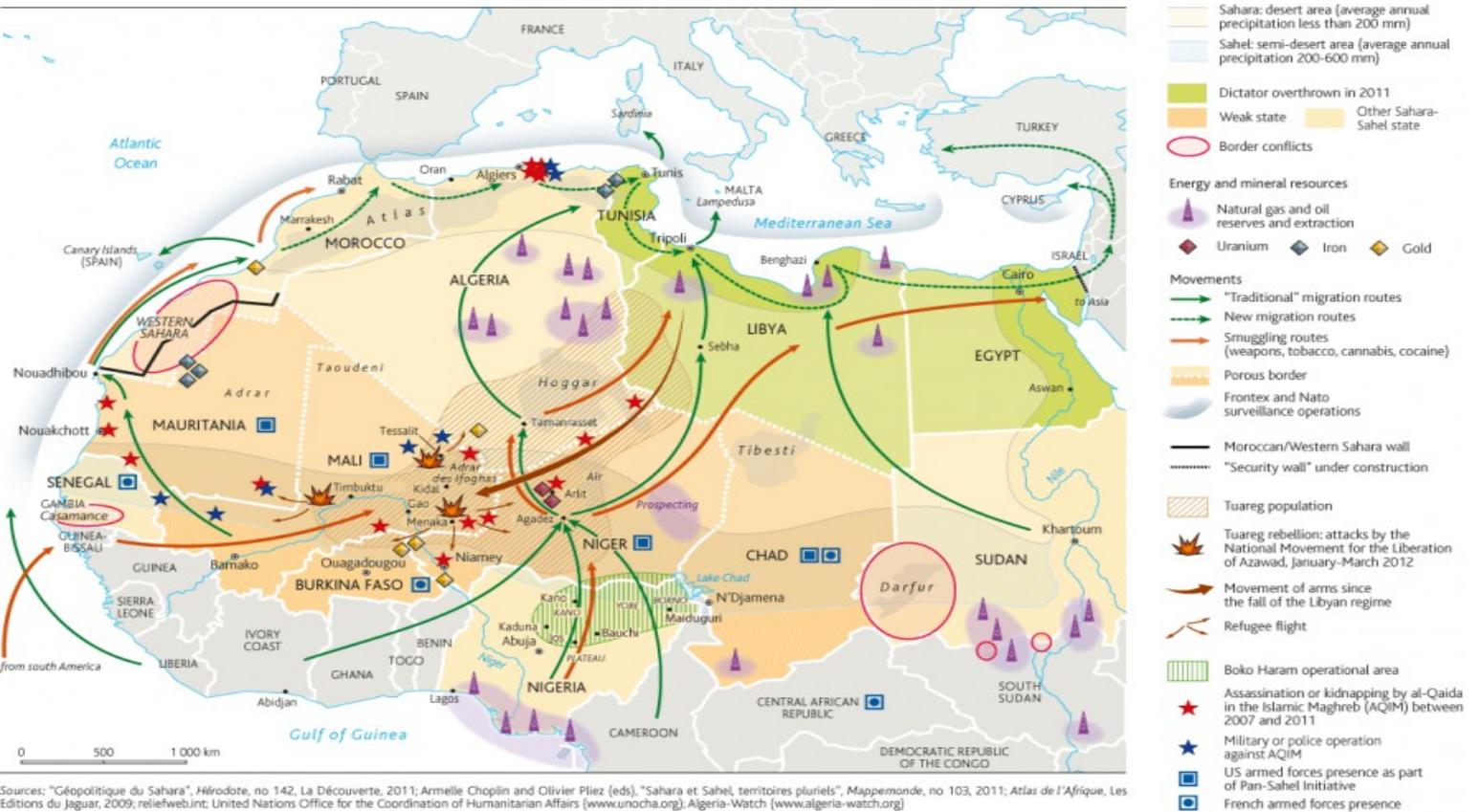
Today, the region is known for its basis in worldwide terrorists movements such as AQIM, Ansar Dine, Boko Haram... mainly located in the South as southern countries are less powerful militarily speaking. These movements could have implanted their roots deeply in the region as they benefited from the "Chaos Decade" of the 90s, in addition to an economic and social background of underdevelopment and poverty, supported by corrupt governments, where they can find many potential recruits.

- Algerian example : A civil war opposing the National Liberation Front of Algeria to the Islamist groups. These latter were opponents during the Algerian elections in 1962. The FLN had officially won the elections, yet, the Islamists responded with a guerilla. Thus, they became a small group removed in the Sahara, they had founded AQIM. They leaned against misery and the failure of the development promised after the independence. Moreover, the extremely young population (the main part of population is under 25 years old) did not see any other future perspective.

Moreover, France is still omnipresent in the region via military bases as the region was a main French colony. France is protecting the current regime to have privileged access to resources. Yet, France could not support this alone anymore and called recently for help. As a result, the G5 Sahel has been created and financed by Europe, the USA and Saudi-Arabia in order to counter terrorism in the region.

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- In 2012, two operations have been carried out in Mali, yet, it has been extended to Chad, Niger... as Saharan countries are trying to get peace through 2015 with no success.



### III) Migrants in Sahara



Thus, due to these instabilities, thousands of people decide to flee from their country. Yet, as they are escaping poverty, they get stuck into a world of violent crimes. Thousands who dream of a better life in Europe face horrors of modern slavery on way across the Sahara to Libya.

Coulibaly Yahyah, 25, from Ivory Coast suffered serious burns after being doused with petrol and set on fire by his Libyan kidnappers. Photograph: IOM

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The dangers of attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, in overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels, have been highlighted by a series of desperate rescue missions and thousands of deaths at sea in recent years. In a week, at least 245 people were killed by shipwrecks, bringing the toll for this year alone to 1,300.

Less well-known are the dangers of Libya itself for migrants fleeing poverty across West Africa. The country's slide into chaos following the 2011 death of dictator Muammar Gaddafi and the collapse of the government have made it a breeding ground for crime and exploitation. Two rival governments, an Isis franchise and countless local militias competing for control of a vast, sparsely populated territory awash in weapons, have allowed traffickers to flourish, checked only by the activities of their criminal rivals.

Last year, more than 180,000 refugees arrived in Italy, the vast majority of them through Libya, according to UN agency the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). That number is forecast to top 200,000 this year – and these people form a lucrative source of income for militias and mafias who control Libya's roads and trafficking networks.

Migrants who managed to reach Europe from Libya have long told of being kidnapped by smugglers, who would then torture them to extort cash as they waited for boats. But in recent years this abuse has developed into a modern-day slave trade – plied along routes once used by slaving caravans – that has engulfed tens of thousands of lives.

The new slave traders operate with such impunity that, survivors say, some victims are being sold in public markets. Most, however, see their lives and liberty auctioned off in private. Indeed, only most of deaths in Saharan stayed unknown as there is no help operation for migrants.

Each year, thousands of migrants are trying to go to Europe. However, Morocco/Spain gateway is now well-guarded. It is then replaced by the Niger/Algeria gateway, and even the Niger/Libya gateway. The travel's price is 150 000 francs CFA (230 euros) per person following migrants testimonies. Pick-ups load with passengers are bringing their human cargos every Monday to Libya in poor security and health conditions. Since the beginning of the year, more than 45 000 migrants had joined Italy through libyan costs.

Yet, Nigerian authorities had rescued 5 100 migrants since January. Niger has passed a law in May 2015, which sanctions the smugglers who incur up to 30 years of prison. Yet, most of them are part of ECOWAS region, which encounters 15 States members, containing Nigeria. This region allows free human flows between the state.

Europe's help feels needed. Many migrants camps have been promised, yet, none of them have been financed. The International Organisation for Migration said that the only way to help these countries was development in order to avoid people's departures. However, more than 150 000 migrants are waited in Agadez each year.

● **Timeline of events**

**1884 :**

Spain colonized the region now known as Western Sahara.

**1934 :**

Western Sahara becomes a Spanish province, and becomes known as the Spanish Sahara.

**1965 :**

The UN urges the decolonization of Western Sahara

**1973 (May) :**

The Polisario Front, Frente Polisario, FRELISARIO or simply POLISARIO, a Sahrawi rebel national liberation movement working for ending the occupation of Western Sahara first from Spain and since 1975 from Morocco. The movement took up arms. Some 100,000 refugees still live in POLISARIO's camps in Algeria.

**1975:**

Beginning of guerrilla warfare between the POLISARIO and the Moroccan Army

**1975 :**

Morocco asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to decide its claims of sovereignty over Spanish Sahara, with Mauritania later joining the claim. On October 16th, 1975, the ICJ issued an advisory opinion, concluding that “the materials and information presented to it do not establish any time of territorial sovereignty between the territory Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity,” thus ruling in favor of the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people.

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**November 6, 1975 :**

immediately after the decision of the ICJ, Moroccans participate in “The Green March” (known to Sahrawis as “The Black March”) when King Hassan II of Morocco called on 300,000 civilians to move into and claim Spanish Sahara as their own. The Moroccan government used the mass demonstration strategically to force Spain to hand over the disputed, autonomous semi-metropolitan Spanish Province of Sahara to Morocco."

**1975 (Nov) :**

By 1975, in the face of growing international pressure and fierce fighting by the newly formed Polisario, Spain is ready to relinquish what was then called Spanish Sahara. Following the Spanish evacuation of Spanish Sahara, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords on November 14, 1975, leading to both Morocco and Mauritania moving in to annex the territory of now known as Western Sahara.

**1975 (Dec) :**

Spanish Sahara becomes known as Western Sahara.

**1976 (Feb) :**

Spain withdraws on February 27th, 1976. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is proclaimed by the Polisario Front in Bir Lehlu, Western Sahara. Moroccan planes bombard Sahrawi civilians fleeing the conflict with napalm and cluster bombs. Tens of thousands of Sahrawis take refuge in Tindouf, located in the south-western part of the Algerian desert. Their descendants remain there to this day.

**1979 (Aug) :**

When Mauritania, under pressure from POLISARIO guerrillas, abandoned all claims to its portion in August 1979, Morocco moved to occupy that sector shortly thereafter and has since asserted administrative control over the whole territory.

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### 1981 - 1987 :

The Moroccans build a 2,500 km wall separating the Free Territories of Occupied Sahara.

### 1984 :

Morocco leaves the Organization of African Unity in protest at the SADR's admission to the body, and it has not rejoined since. POLISARIO claims to have killed more than 5,000 Moroccan soldiers between 1982-85.

### 1988 :

Moroccan and POLISARIO representatives agree on the joint **OAU-UN Settlement Plan**, which envisioned a cease-fire and a transitional period followed by a referendum, which would enable the people of Western Sahara to choose between independence and integration.

### 1991 :

**The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)**, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, is established under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 690 as part of the Settlement Plan, which had paved way for a cease-fire in the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the contested territory of Western Sahara. This settlement included plans for a referendum on self-determination for early 1992. Guerrilla warfare ends.

### July –

The UN forms the [MINURSO](#) Identification Commission to oversee the referendum, which has since been continually postponed due to conflicts between the Polisario and Morocco over who has the right to vote in the referendum. **September 3** – King Hassan II addresses a letter to UN Secretary General Javier Felipe Pérez to take “urgent measures so as things get back to their initial situation, including the removal from the territory of these armed gangs,” referring to the Polisario. The UN calls for a ceasefire in the region after receiving the letter, ending the [Western Saharan War](#).

### 2001:

Former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker proposes autonomy for Saharawis under Moroccan sovereignty, a referendum after a four-year transition period, voting rights for Moroccan settlers resident in Western Sahara for over a year. Polisario and Algeria reject the proposal.

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**2003:**

The U.N. proposes Western Sahara become a semi-autonomous region of Morocco for a transition period of up to five years, to be followed by a referendum on whether the territory should become independent, semi-autonomous or integrated with Morocco. Polisario endorses the plan but Morocco rejects it, saying it will never give up sovereignty.

**October 2006:**

Morocco calls a U.N. report critical of its human rights record in Western Sahara biased in favor of the Polisario Front.

**December 2006:**

The Moroccan advisory council proposes autonomy, burying the prospect of independence.

-- Polisario has already dismissed autonomy and the council's draft proposal.

**April 10, 2007:**

Polisario says it proposes a "flexible" peace plan at the United Nations. Morocco unveils its plan the next day.

**Aug 11:**

Two days of U.N.-sponsored talks end with no breakthrough but agreement to meet again.

**Dec 12:**

Rabat urges the U.N. to stop Polisario leaders from holding a congress at which they will propose preparing to resume war with Morocco.

**Dec 21:**

Polisario says war may break out again if U.N.-sponsored talks fail.

## ● Key Terms

### **POLISARIO :**

an independence movement opposing Moroccan control of the Western Sahara, a former Spanish territory that Morocco annexed instages beginning in 1976.

### **The Settlement Plan :**

an agreement between the ethnically Saharawi Polisario Front and Morocco on the organization of a referendum, which would constitute an expression of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, leading either to full independence, or integration with the kingdom of Morocco

### **Arc of Crisis :**

The "arc of crisis" has been defined as an area stretching from the Indian subcontinent in the east to the Horn of Africa in the west. The Middle East constitutes its central core.

### **self sufficient :**

A self-sufficient economy does not trade with other countries because it can produce its goods and services using its natural resources, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy.

### **ECOWAS :**

The Economic Community of West African States is a regional organisation of 15 West African countries established on 28 May 1975. Its main goal is the promotion of the economic integration among its members. Indeed, ECOWAS is one the five regional pillars of the African Economic Community (AEC).

### **G5 Sahel :**

An institutional framework for coordination of regional cooperation in development policies and security matters in central Africa.

● **For more detailed explanation...**

- <https://mondediplo.com/2012/04/05sahel>
- <http://www.mepc.org/journal/time-solution-western-sahara-conflict>
- Saharan slavery : <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/may/13/modern-slavery-african-migrants-libya>
- Morocco and Western Sahara conflict : <http://education.seattlepi.com/western-saharamorocco-conflict-5889.html>
- <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/05/western-sahara-struggle-freedom-cut-wall-150528065625790.html>
- UN peacekeeping operations : <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en>
- G5 Sahel explanation : <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/g5-sahel-counterterrorism-force-explained-171102071159524.html>
- Immigration in Sahara and Morocco: <http://www.france24.com/fr/20170221-maroc-immigration-sahara-occidental-moyen-pression-union-europeenne>