

**Questions Concerning Western Sahara; Advisory  
Opinion of the International Court of Justice,  
16 October 1975\***

On 16 October 1975, the International Court of Justice delivered the Advisory Opinion which the General Assembly of the United Nations had requested on two questions concerning *Western Sahara*.

With regard to Question I, "Was Western Sahara (Río de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (*terra nullius*)?," the Court

- decided by 13 votes to 3 to comply with the request for an advisory opinion;
- is unanimously of opinion that Western Sahara (Río de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain was not a territory belonging to no-one (*terra nullius*).

With regard to Question II, "What were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?," the Court

- decided by 14 votes to 2 to comply with the request for an advisory opinion;
- is of opinion, by 14 votes to 2, that there were legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco of the kinds indicated in the penultimate paragraph of the Advisory Opinion;
- is of opinion, by 15 votes to 1, that there were legal ties between this territory and the Mauritanian entity of the kinds indicated in the penultimate paragraph of the Advisory Opinion.

The penultimate paragraph of the Advisory Opinion is to the effect that:

The materials and information presented to the Court show the existence, at the time of Spanish colonization, of legal ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and some of the tribes living in the territory of Western Sahara. They equally show the existence of rights, including some rights relating to the land, which constituted legal ties between the Mauritanian entity, as understood by the Court, and the territory of Western Sahara. On the other hand, the Court's conclusion is that the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity. Thus the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory.

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\*The summary of the Court's opinion presented herein was prepared by the Registry of the International Court of Justice.

**Propriety of Giving an Advisory Opinion  
(paragraphs 23-74 of Advisory Opinion)**

Spain put forward objections which in its view would render the giving of an opinion incompatible with the Court's judicial character. It referred in the first place to the fact that it had not given its consent to the Court's adjudicating upon the questions submitted. It maintained (a) that the subject of the questions was substantially identical to that of a dispute concerning Western Sahara which Morocco, in September 1974, had invited it to submit jointly to the Court, a proposal which it had refused: the advisory jurisdiction was therefore being used to circumvent the principle that the Court has no jurisdiction to settle a dispute without the consent of the parties; (b) that the case involved a dispute concerning the attribution of territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara and that the consent of States was always necessary for the adjudication of such disputes; (c) that in the circumstances of the case the Court could not fulfil the requirements of good administration of justice with regard to the determination of the facts. The Court considers (a) that the General Assembly, while noting that a legal controversy over the status of Western Sahara had arisen during its discussions, did not have the object of bringing before the Court a dispute or legal controversy with a view to its subsequent peaceful settlement, but sought an advisory opinion which would be of assistance in the exercise of its functions concerning the decolonization of the territory, hence the legal position of Spain could not be compromised by the Court's answers to the questions submitted; (b) that those questions do not call upon the Court to adjudicate on existing territorial rights; (c) that it has been placed in possession of sufficient information and evidence.

Spain suggested in the second place that the questions submitted to the Court were academic and devoid of purpose or practical effect, in that the United Nations had already settled the method to be followed for the decolonization of Western Sahara, namely a consultation of the indigenous population by means of a referendum to be conducted by Spain under United Nations auspices. The Court examines the resolutions adopted by the General Assembly on the subject, from resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, to resolution 3292 (XXIX) on Western Sahara, embodying the request for advisory opinion. It concludes that the decolonization process envisaged by the General Assembly is one which will respect the right of the population of Western Sahara to determine their future political status by their own freely expressed will. This right to self-determination, which is not affected by the request for advisory opinion and constitutes a basic assumption of the questions put to the Court, leaves the General Assembly a measure of discretion with respect to the forms and

procedures by which it is to be realized. The Advisory Opinion will thus furnish the Assembly with elements of a legal character relevant to that further discussion of the problem to which resolution 3292 (XXIX) alludes.

Consequently the Court finds no compelling reason for refusing to give a reply to the two questions submitted to it in the request for advisory opinion.

**Question I: “Was Western Sahara (Río de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the Time of Colonization by Spain a Territory Belonging to No One (*terra nullius*)?”**  
(paragraphs 75-83 of Advisory Opinion)

For the purpose of the Advisory Opinion, the “time of colonization by Spain” may be considered as the period beginning in 1884, when Spain proclaimed its protectorate over the Río de Oro. It is therefore by reference to the law in force at that period that the legal concept of *terra nullius* must be interpreted. In law, “occupation” was a means of peaceably acquiring sovereignty over territory otherwise than by cession or succession; it was a cardinal condition of a valid “occupation” that the territory should be *terra nullius*. According to the State practice of that period, territories inhabited by tribes or peoples having a social and political organization were not regarded as *terrae nullius*: in their case sovereignty was not generally considered as effected through occupation, but through agreements concluded with local rulers. The information furnished to the Court shows (a) that at the time of colonization Western Sahara was inhabited by peoples which, if nomadic, were socially and politically organized in tribes and under chiefs competent to represent them; (b) that Spain did not proceed upon the basis that it was establishing its sovereignty over *terrae nullius*: thus in his Order of 26 December 1884 the King of Spain proclaimed that he was taking the Río de Oro under his protection on the basis of agreements entered into with the chiefs of local tribes.

The Court therefore gives a negative answer to Question I. In accordance with the terms of the request for advisory opinion, “if the answer to the first question is in the negative,” the Court is to reply to Question II.

**Question II: “What Were the Legal Ties of This Territory with the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian Entity?”** (paragraphs 84-161 of Advisory Opinion)

The meaning of the words “legal ties” has to be sought in the object and purpose of resolution 3292 (XXIX) of the United Nations General Assembly. It appears to the Court that they must be understood as referring to such legal ties as may affect the policy to be followed in the decolonization of Western Sahara. The Court cannot accept the view that the ties in question could be limited to ties established directly with the territory and without reference to the people

who may be found in it. At the time of its colonization the territory had a sparse population that for the most part consisted of nomadic tribes the members of which traversed the desert on more or less regular routes, sometimes reaching as far as southern Morocco or regions of present-day Mauritania, Algeria or other States. These tribes were of the Islamic faith.

Morocco (paragraphs 90-129 of the Advisory Opinion) presented its claim to legal ties with Western Sahara as a claim to ties of sovereignty on the ground of an alleged immemorial possession of the territory and an uninterrupted exercise of authority. In the view of the Court, however, what must be of decisive importance in determining its answer to Question II must be evidence directly relating to effective display of authority in Western Sahara at the time of its colonization by Spain and in the period immediately preceding. Morocco requests that the Court should take account of the special structure of the Moroccan State. That State was founded on the common religious bond of Islam and on the allegiance of various tribes to the Sultan, through their caids or sheikhs, rather than on the notion of territory. It consisted partly of what was called the Bled Makhzen, areas actually subject to the Sultan, and partly of what was called the Bled Siba, areas in which the tribes were not submissive to him; at the relevant period, the areas immediately to the north of Western Sahara lay within the Bled Siba.

As evidence to its display of sovereignty in Western Sahara, Morocco invoked alleged acts of internal display of Moroccan authority, consisting principally of evidence said to show the allegiance of Saharan caids to the Sultan, including dahirs and other documents concerning the appointment of caids, the alleged imposition of Koranic and other taxes, and acts of military resistance to foreign penetration of the territory. Morocco also relied on certain international acts said to constitute recognition by other States of its sovereignty over the whole or part of Western Sahara, including (a) certain treaties concluded with Spain, the United States and Great Britain and Spain between 1767 and 1861, provisions of which dealt *inter alia* with the safety of persons shipwrecked on the coast of Wad Noun or its vicinity; (b) certain bilateral treaties of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whereby Great Britain, Spain, France and Germany were said to have recognized that Moroccan sovereignty extended as far south as Cape Bojador or the boundary of the Río de Oro.

Having considered this evidence and the observations of the other States which took part in the proceedings, the Court finds that neither the internal nor the international acts relied upon by Morocco indicate the existence at the relevant period of either the existence or the international recognition of legal ties of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and the Moroccan State. Even taking account of the specific structure of that State, they do not show that Morocco displayed any effective and exclusive State activity in Western Sahara. They do however provide indications that a legal tie of allegiance existed at the

relevant period between the Sultan and some, but only some, of the nomadic peoples of the territory, through Tekna caids of the Noun region, and they show that the Sultan displayed, and was recognized by other States to possess, some authority or influence with respect to those tribes.

The term "Mauritanian entity" (paragraphs 130-152 of the Advisory Opinion) was first employed during the session of the General Assembly in 1974 at which resolution 3292 (XXIX), requesting an advisory opinion of the Court, was adopted. It denotes the cultural, geographical and social entity within which the Islamic Republic of Mauritania was to be created. According to Mauritania, that entity, at the relevant period, was the Bilad Shinguitti or Shinguitti country, a distinct human unit, characterized by a common language, way of life, religion and system of laws, featuring two types of political authority: emirates and tribal groups.

Expressly recognizing that these emirates and tribes did not constitute a State, Mauritania suggested that the concepts of "nation" and of "people" would be the most appropriate to explain the position of the Shinguitti people at the time of colonization. At that period, according to Mauritania, the Mauritanian entity extended from the Senegal River to the Wad Sakiet El Hamra. The territory at present under Spanish administration and the present territory of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania thus together constituted indissociable parts of a single entity and had legal ties with one another.

The information before the Court discloses that, while there existed among them many ties of a racial, linguistic, religious, cultural and economic nature, the emirates and many of the tribes in the entity were independent in relation to one another; they had no common institutions or organs. The Mauritanian entity therefore did not have the character of a personality or corporate entity distinct from the several emirates or tribes which comprised it. The Court concludes that at the time of colonization by Spain there did not exist between the territory of Western Sahara and the Mauritanian entity any tie of sovereignty, or of allegiance of tribes, or of simple inclusion in the same legal entity. Nevertheless, the General Assembly does not appear to have so framed Question II as to confine the question exclusively to those legal ties which imply territorial sovereignty, which would be to disregard the possible relevance of other legal ties to the decolonization process. The Court considers that, in the relevant period, the nomadic peoples of the Shinguitti country possessed rights, including some rights relating to the lands through which they migrated. These rights constituted legal ties between Western Sahara and the Mauritanian entity. They were ties which knew no frontier between the territories and were vital to the very maintenance of life in the region.

For these reasons, the Court (paragraphs 162 and 163 of the Advisory Opinion) gives the replies above indicated.

