



STRUGGLE IN THE SANDBOX: WESTERN SAHARA AND THE “INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY”

By Michael Radu



Source: CIA World Factbook

The 100,000 square miles of sand in the Western Sahara that until November 1975 were the Spanish territory of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro--the latter an ironic name for an area lacking both water and gold--have been the subject of an international dispute ever since. The UN, former Secretary of State James Baker, the African Union, the Arab League and many others have tried to resolve the fate of an unknown number of people with an obscure past living here, but all have so far failed to balance the competing Moroccan nationalism, Algerian ambitions, wider geopolitical interests and lingering Cold War rhetoric.

There are a few accepted facts regarding the territory. First, there has never been an organized state or administration throughout the territory's history until Spain established its colony there in 1884. Sporadically until then various tribes claimed allegiance to Moroccan sultans in Fez, and occasional Moroccan incursions to points further south passed by. According to the last (1974) census, the population of the territory was 74,000 before Spain's departure. Population estimates today vary between under 300,000 and 380,000; two thirds of the people live in the capital of El

Aaiun, nearly half of them Moroccan settlers. In December 1999 the UN claimed to have identified 86,425 eligible voters for a projected referendum, while Polisario (Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia El-Hamra y Rio de Oro), the self-proclaimed "national liberation" movement of the territory, claims that its Tindouf camps' population is 155,000 (it would not permit an independent census).

The population problem is the key to the entire Sahara issue--who is a "Sahrawi" and thus entitled to decide the fate of the territory. This issue is complex and has been used, in opposite ways, by both Morocco and Polisario and its supporters. The truth is that it is impossible to make any definitive determinations on this. It was for good reason that for centuries before the colonial period Moroccan and Algerian rulers trying to control this part of the Sahara have called the area that today makes large parts of Algeria, Mauritania, Niger, Mali and the entire Western Sahara the *bled es-Siba* ("the land of dissidence"). The Arabized, Hassanyia-speaking Berber nomads never had or liked centralized authority or borders, nor do they today. The Reguibat tribe, the largest of Western Sahara, is still spread out over southwestern Algeria, Mauritania and Mali, its members going in and out of Tindouf, a province in western Algeria, as their needs require. The most important such needs are both economic--Tindouf's camps provide reliable international aid--and political: Polisario is led by Reguibat, whether they are technically Sahrawi, Mauritanian, Moroccan or Malian, and it has always relied on them to recruit its military force.

Viability

The territory has some iron and especially phosphate deposits at Bou Craa. The latter are important but often overestimated. Morocco's state-owned Office Cherifien des Phosphates/Royal Phosphates Office (OCP) is the world's largest producer and exporter of phosphate rock. It controls two-thirds of world reserves, but only 10 percent of that is from Western Sahara, and the sector is capital, rather than labor, intensive. Similarly, the rich fisheries off the coast provide income from concessions to foreign fleets but not many local jobs. Lack of water makes agriculture impossible, and there is no tourist attraction. Today the population is sustained mostly by huge Moroccan subsidies--just as the Tindouf camps are on international welfare, totally dependent on UN and Western (mostly Scandinavian) aid and Algerian political support.

Security

Western Sahara has extensive and virtually indefensible borders: 42 km with Algeria, 1,561 km with Mauritania, 443 km with

Morocco, and a 1,110 km coastline. A Polisario-led government in El Aaiun, even if not radical or Islamist, would be unable to adequately control its territory: even much stronger Morocco and Algeria have serious problems controlling their parts of the Sahara. Mauritania, Western Sahara's weak neighbor, has already been targeted by Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, formerly GSPC), and by Spring 2007 a new transnational Islamist terrorist group, Ansar al Islam fi Sahara al bilad al mulazamin ("The partisans of the Prophet in Sahara, the land of those wearing the veil") made its existence known (from Barcelona). As its name implies, the group is linked to the late Al Zarkawi's group in Iraq and includes veterans from that country--although it does not see itself as part of Al Qaeda.¹ The group's goal is the defeat or overthrow, via jihad, of the governments of Spain, France, Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and "the corrupt Polisario regime."

Even before the appearance of this group, the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM, now associated with AQIM) has been involved in the area. Mauritians have been involved in the former's operations in Spain and participated in the latter's attacks against their country, including one in June 2005 that killed seventeen Mauritanian soldiers. As recently as January 2007, AQIM targeted the Paris-Dakar auto rally, which crosses Western Sahara.²

Considering this increasingly dangerous environment, an independent and defenseless Western Sahara could only be seen as an ideal theater for Islamists to set up in the Sahel--the desert area between the Atlantic and the Sudan--thereby offering an additional threat to the entire region. It would be another Somalia, at the western end of the Sahara. Alternatively, Western Sahara would have to continue to be completely dependent on Algeria for defense--as Polisario has been since its inception, thus increasing tensions with Morocco. It is unlikely that any international force, like the present UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), could provide for the security of a potential Sahrawi state, given both the UN's past record everywhere and the enormous force size that would be needed to police the area.

Politics and international context

Polisario has established firm control over the people of Tindouf over its thirty year history. It has been led since 1978 by the same person, Mohamed Abdelaziz, and its Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is a Potemkin village. Proclaimed in February 1976, its people are mostly non-Arab Berbers, based in Algeria. It is a party-state along the lines of traditional Leninist systems, where elections are fictive events rather than expressions of popular will. None of this is surprising: it follows Polisario, which was founded in 1973 by Morocco Communist Party member Mustapha Sayed El Ouali. If the experience of other "national liberation movements," such as Namibia's SWAPO, Zimbabwe's ZANU, Algeria's FNL, the PLO, etc.--is any indication, a Polisario-run Western Sahara is likely to be authoritarian, aggressive and poor.

During the violent phase of the conflict with Morocco, which started in 1975 and ended in 1991, Polisario captured numerous Moroccan soldiers, but it was only in August 2005 that it freed the last prisoners it still held. The 404 men had been imprisoned for almost 20 years and were the world's longest-held prisoners of war. Their treatment while in captivity was so atrocious that it even attracted the condemnation of France Liberte, a militant human rights organization led by Danielle Mitterand who was previously a strong supporter of Polisario's goals. This episode is not an encouraging sign of its ability to run a state responsibly or decently.

Indeed, the Tindouf camp population is closely controlled by Polisario's forces and the nearby Algerian military, both of whom restrict access by outsiders, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Considering that the UN pays for the refugees, this means that aid distribution lacks all transparency, which in turn has resulted in rampant corruption on the part of Polisario's leadership. All of these are facts confirmed by a steady stream of high-ranking defectors. They, and a few outsiders, also confirm that Algeria directs all Polisario operations, both in Tindouf and abroad. That raises the question of a Polisario-led sovereign state's ability, or willingness, to act independently from Algiers, and of the threat it may become to Morocco.

For Morocco, the Sahara issue is vital. Despite the enormous costs involved in maintaining large numbers of troops along the security wall it has built on the borders between Western Sahara, Algeria and Mauritania, and despite massive subsidies to the territory, the national consensus has not weakened. Indeed, not only the public as a whole, but even political forces opposed to the government support the annexation of Western Sahara by the kingdom.

Ultimately, the persistence of the Western Sahara issue on the international agenda is a throwback to the Cold War, combined with Algerian geopolitical calculations. Algeria, Polisario's protector from the beginning, wants to expand its influence to the Atlantic and thus weaken its perennial Maghreb rival, Morocco. Prior to its present military-dominated regime, Algiers' FLN governments also shared a common "socialist" ideology with the exile Sahrawi elites; now, geopolitics and anti-Moroccan sentiment play the dominant role. All this even though Rabat and Algiers are both threatened by Islamist terrorism and close cooperation would clearly be in the best interests of both.

The African Union has long supported Polisario and its so-called Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. It admitted it as a member in

¹ Antonio Baquero and Jordi Corachan, Actividad Extremista en el Desierto. Un nuevo grupo terrorista magrebí amenaza a Espana, *El Periodico* (Barcelona), July 12, 2007; Jean-Pierre Tuquoi, L'ombre du terrorisme irakien au Maghreb, *Le Monde*, July 30, 2007

² Al-Qaeda 'behind' Mauritania raid, BBC NEWS, June 6, 2005; Le rallye Dakar cible en Mauritanie, *Le Figaro*, January 11, 2007.

1984, leading to Morocco's departure from the organization. That decision was made as a result of the influence of radical states (and their Soviet and Cuban friends at the time), especially Qaddafi's Libya (which has since changed its mind on the issue). How important the Soviet and radical ideological elements were is demonstrated by the fact that in 1989, prior to "real socialism's" collapse, 79 countries recognized SADR, but only 36 did so in 2006. It should also be pointed out that the Arab League, which is dominated by non-radicals, has always supported Morocco's "territorial integrity"--i.e. its annexation of the territory.

The United States and France, both of which have close ties with Rabat, have supported Morocco's claims, Washington perhaps less openly than Paris but equally strongly. Indeed, President Sarkozy's reaffirmed his support for the Moroccan position on Sahara during his July 2007 visit to Algiers. The United Nations, however, has kept Western Sahara on its list of non-self-governing territories since the 1960s, when it was the Spanish Sahara.

Perspectives

By April 2007 the UN had implicitly recognized its inability to fix the Sahara problem and the failure of its envoy James Baker's second plan (2003), which proposed an interim 5-year Western Sahara Authority to be followed by a referendum. The Security Council asked Rabat and Polisario to engage in direct talks, in the presence of Peter Van Walsum, personal envoy for Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general. Those talks started in Manhasset, New York, but so far (August 2007) the only result has been a joint decision to hold further talks. The main problem is that Morocco is prepared to talk about any issue other than independence, whereas Polisario's declared goal remains just that -- whether immediate or later on, following some sort of temporary Moroccan sovereignty but also autonomy under UN supervision. Indeed, Khalihenna Ould Errachid, the chief adviser on Western Sahara to King Mohamed VI of Morocco, said there was a need for compromise and "a renunciation of extremist positions and demands," which in translation means rejection of Polisario's basic demand.³ On the other hand, Morocco did radically change its position, from decades of treating Western Sahara as just another province of the kingdom to the acceptance of a separate, autonomous status.⁴ That, however, is the maximum extent of Rabat's concessions, given the nationalist consensus regarding Morocco's ownership of the territory.

Meanwhile Madrid, longtime supporter of Polisario's position, changed policy and now supports the UN direct talks approach, while also proclaiming its support for "self determination," which is a disappointment for Polisario but has little impact ultimately.⁵ The main obstacles for a permanent solution remain the same as they were at the beginning: primarily Algeria, but also the chorus of NGOs and their sponsors in the European Left (especially the Spanish communists and friends elsewhere in Europe), who are electorally weak at home but influential on the UN corridors and the media.

Ultimately, the solution is in Algeria's hands. If or when Algiers lifts its protection from Tindouf, and the UN stops subsidizing Polisario, a Western Sahara within the Kingdom of Morocco, with some political autonomy but still essentially part of Morocco and inevitably subsidized by Rabat, remains the only rational, and internationally safe solution. The question is how long Algeria, still threatened by Islamists (as Morocco increasingly is) and by now devoid of the old Soviet bloc and "non-aligned" diplomatic and political support, will continue to place its unattainable regional ambitions (such as access to the Atlantic) ahead of a more practical national security interest that requires cooperation with its Moroccan neighbor.

The rest is just lingering nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s, when "anti-colonialism" and "anti-imperialism" were fashionable, regardless of common sense, or economic and security realities. The issue of Western Sahara, and Polisario itself, which is now increasingly weakened by internal divisions, are remnants of a passed era and should be buried, quietly if possible. Even if Washington didn't have long-standing and close security and political ties to the Kingdom of Morocco, for the United States in a post 9/11 world, the threat of another potential jihadist black hole in Africa (in addition to the Sahel or Somalia) is serious enough to warrant pressing for a permanent solution on Western Sahara. Washington's growing security and economic ties with Algiers should also help toward a solution.

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³ Morocco and Polisario in new talks, *Al Jazeera*, August 10, 2007.

⁴ Bernabe Lopez García, *Iniciativas de negociacion en el Sahara Occidental: historia de la busqueda de una 'solucion politica,'* Real Instituto Elcano, ARI No. 85/2007, July 23, 2007.

⁵ L. Ayllon, *El Gobierno dice que la resolucion de la ONU sobre el Sahara coincide con su posicion*, ABC, May 1, 2007.