



## A NOTE ON THE WESTERN SAHARA

By Harvey Sicherman

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In September 2007, the late Michael Radu wrote an important E-Note, titled “Struggle in the Sand Box: Western Sahara and the ‘International Community’.” He put the last two words in quotation marks because the struggle seemed to illustrate a distressing fact about international relations. The phrase international community was devoid of constructive meaning when it came to resolving long overdue problems. Instead, he pressed for a U.S.-brokered solution before the issue became entangled in “another potential jihadist black hole in Africa....” This note reviews the Western Sahara issue and international efforts to resolve it, including the most recent exchanges.

### WHAT HAPPENED

The Sahara struggle emerged from an international problem – decolonization – and a regional rivalry – Algeria versus Morocco. After World War II, the U.N. was charged with overseeing the end of the European empires and a large number of new states emerged, especially in Africa. Some of these territories, however, were contested by neighboring powers; the Western Sahara, which had never been a state, proved to be one of them. When Spain, in control since 1884, decided to leave the area in the early seventies, Morocco advanced a claim based on history and tribal allegiances. Algeria, however, aspired to dominate the Maghreb and sponsored a national liberation movement called Polisario, which if successful, would flank Morocco on the Atlantic coast.

Unwilling to accept this prospect, Morocco’s flamboyant King Hassan II led an unarmed “Green March” of 350,000 of his subjects into the Western Sahara on November 6, 1975, as Spain prepared to leave. In a short time, Morocco had essentially seized the territory. There followed a typically nasty “national liberation war” (1975-1991) that the Moroccan army defeated, notably through a massive earthen beam that prevented infiltration across the desert borders with Algeria and Mauritania. A sometimes tense standoff became the status quo.

Predictably, the mix of “decolonial” ideology and the Moroccan-Algerian rivalry produced an incoherent international approach. Even determining the population has proved hazardous. The Spanish counted 74,000; estimates since suggest 300-400,000, which include 100,000 settlers. Two-thirds are now urban, largely in the capital of El Aioun; those under Polisario control, in the Tindouf camps, are said to number 155,000.

Then there is the international political lineup, itself frozen in a Cold War era amber. The African Union, under Algerian and Libyan sway, admitted a fictional entity to membership – the “Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic” (SADR) – in 1984. In protest, Morocco left the Union. Seventy-nine countries also recognized the SADR but by 2006 only twenty-six did so, as the end of the Cold War deflated the “national liberation” ideology. The Arab League, however, has always supported Morocco, as have the United States and France.

### THE BAKER MISSION

The U.N.’s first attempt to sort this out in 1990 – the “Settlement Plan” – recognized that Morocco had won the war and controlled most of the territory but also stipulated “self-determination” through a referendum. (For these purposes, the U.N. claimed there were 86,425 eligible voters as of 1999.) The idea that a mostly nomadic population already under either Moroccan or Polisario control, and with no history of state structures, might become a successful polity was dubious, to say the least. Nonetheless, a rudimentary U.N. organization (MINURSO) was charged with execution of the Settlement Plan. Six futile years passed until, the U.N. Secretary General recruited former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker in 1997 to fix the problem to the satisfaction of all the parties. He developed a Framework Agreement, approved by the UNSC on February 27, 2002, for a political agreement that provided for self-determination apparently on the basis of local autonomies within a

unified territory. Morocco had earlier accepted the principle of local empowerment but Polisario and Algeria, its primary backer, rejected this scheme and indeed even the U.N. Framework in favor of partition, hotly rejected by Morocco.

After two more years, the U.N. Security Council had to admit yet another failure. Baker was then asked to draw up a fresh solution, this time without the requirement that all must agree. The new plan posited a West Sahara Authority to run the territory for five years to be followed by a referendum with a choice of Morocco, autonomy, or independence.

Rabat quickly saw the Authority as a denial of Moroccan sovereignty over the region while possibly preparing the way for Polisario political activity in areas now held by Morocco. Despite the Security Council's recommendation of this hybrid, Morocco strongly rejected "Baker II" while Algeria and Polisario agreed to it only with many conditions. Baker soon detected that the U.N. would not (or could not) impose its will and so he became the main victim (or beneficiary) of the exercise when he resigned in June 2004, freeing himself of the burden.

## THE AUTONOMY PLAN

This dreary record, until now a full employment opportunity for U.N. diplomats, has taken its place with other long-suffering disputes both in the Middle East and elsewhere. Since the Baker mission, however, several factors have contributed to yet another international effort to end the contest.

The first is expense. Thus far, Morocco has borne the cost of running the territories while the international donor community paid for the refugees claiming to be "The Sahrawi Republic." As the territory itself offers few natural resources beyond a modest phosphate industry and some fishing grounds, the Moroccans have wearied of the subsidies. As for the Polisario-controlled refugees, the international donors are weary, less money is available and other, more demanding natural disasters are more compelling. Thus, both sides have economic pressures for change.

Second, the dispute has been overshadowed by more urgent and dangerous business. As the international terror problem has become better understood, the North African governments are acutely aware that they, even more than the Europeans and Americans, are the targets of al Qaeda and its regional affiliates. Combating such groups has become an interest shared by the United States, the E.U., and the Maghreb, bringing together Washington and Algeria, for example, in a way unimaginable when Polisario was created.

Third, as the terrorist preference for sanctuaries in weak or failed states has developed apace, the idea of a Polisario republic grows more and more dubious. The last thing the world or Africa needs is yet another dependent, inept, and chaotic territory pretending to be a state.

Fourth, the Europeans and the Maghreb states are far more aware – and wary – today of the consequences of a failure to develop their economic potential. For the European side of the Mediterranean, a growing Maghreb economy and freer political institutions relieves immigration pressure. Similarly, all the Maghreb states need the benefit of trade to deal with a young and too often idle work force. Yet regional trade remains minuscule. The Algeria-Morocco border is closed pending resolution of the Sahara issue.

On balance, these developments favor the Moroccan case which has also been bolstered by new support from Spain. The Moroccans, aiming to ease their financial burden while simultaneously displacing the referendum issue, put forth an autonomy plan on April 11, 2007. This would give the Western Sahara some of the powers and responsibility advocated by Baker's authority plan but under Moroccan sovereignty. King Mohammed VI incorporated this proposal as part of a far-reaching reorganization of the Kingdom into administrative "regions" rather than provinces. Thus, it treats the Sahara as a special case but still within the Moroccan state reserving to Rabat defense, foreign policy, and, most significantly, the King's "constitutional and religious prerogatives."

The United States and many others welcomed this plan and later that year urged the parties to resume negotiations. Yet another diplomat – Peter von Walsum – was recruited to oversee talks between Morocco and the Polisario. Having conceded autonomy, Rabat expected Polisario to concede independence. Thus far, however, nothing has happened.

## THE HAIDAR INCIDENT

There has been no change in Washington, either, as the Obama Administration has followed precisely the script of its predecessor on the Western Sahara. The United States continues to work with Morocco and other Maghreb states on common interests; advocates a quick settlement of the Sahara problem; and encourages negotiations over the autonomy plan.

Disappointed by Washington and the political momentum against them, the Polisario and Algeria sought another ally, this time the human rights NGOs. On November 13, 2009, one Aminatou Haidar, attempted to enter the El Aioun Airport as a resident of "Western Sahara," ensuring her a swift deportation by the Moroccan authorities to Spain's Canary Islands. She

promptly commenced a hunger strike at the Canary airport that lasted thirty-two days.

Haidar had a long record of protest activity (supported by Algeria, among others) and was already familiar with both Moroccan jails and the human rights celebrity circuit. Her fast was soon rewarded by demands from both NGOs and government officials in Europe and the United States that she be admitted to her native territory. Sympathizers held up her plight as symbolic of the Western Saharan population as a whole, supposedly denied its rights for so many years by Morocco.

A slight woman, Haidar's health declined precipitously, posing an increasingly difficult problem for her Spanish hosts. Madrid offered her asylum; she refused. Fearing her death in Spanish custody, Prime Minister Zapatero then ordered her returned to Morocco but the attempt to return her to El Aioun on December 4 was bungled, as Rabat had not agreed. In the end, however, the Moroccans chose not to make her either a martyr or a source of friction with Spain and on December 18, 2009, allowed her return on humanitarian grounds.

This was a clear case of "protest theater," intended to throw governments off stride on ostensible human rights issues. There are too many NGOs ready to approve such tactics and too many government officials that lack the courage to denounce them. For every sympathizer with Ms. Haidar, for example, there seemed little curiosity about the Tindouf camps, the "Free Sahrawis," whose movements are strictly controlled by the Algerians. No census has been permitted to justify demands for more assistance, although the numbers are believed to be already greatly inflated (See: "Stonewalling on Refugee Rights: Algeria and the Sahrawi," U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2009). The international human rights cause has thus become a cover for the surviving claims of the no longer fashionable national liberation ideology.

## CONCLUSION

The Haidar interlude did not change the basic political and economic trends that should lead to an end of the Sahara problem sooner rather than later. The European Union and the United States now have a strong common cause for ending this impediment to essential economic and political change throughout the Maghreb. So do the North African states.

The parameters of a solution have not changed. Morocco will not yield the territory nor can it be in U.S. interests to facilitate the creation of a failed state at the expense of its Moroccan ally. Morocco's next move may be a unilateral imposition of autonomy, although so long as negotiations are afoot with the United States and the E.U. support, Rabat is unlikely to act. As for the Algerians, they have a wasting asset in the Polisario but seem still unable to free themselves of causes past. Perhaps if they, rather than the U.N. and the donors, had to pay the Tindouf upkeep, their views might change. Not yet a big enough disturbance to be a crisis but still a serious impediment to the Maghreb's future, the Western Saharan awaits a joint U.S.-E.U. push for a timely resolution.

### Of Related Interest

Struggle in the Sandbox: Western Sahara and the "International Community," by Michael Radu, FPRI Enotes, Sept. 2007  
<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200709.radu.sandboxwesternsahara.html>

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