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No. 5985

THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
North Texas State University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas

May, 1983

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Radhi, Samir Jassam, The Western Sahara Conflict.  
Master of Arts (Political Science), May, 1983, 130 pp.,  
2 illustrations, bibliography, 61 titles.

The purpose of investigating the conflict over the Western Sahara is to trace and analyze its impact upon the political stability of the northwest region of the African continent.

Chapter I provides background information on the Western Sahara. Chapter II discusses the international political developments affecting the Western Sahara. Chapter III discusses the positions of Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria, and Mauritania; Chapter IV analyzes those of Spain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Chapter V describes the role of the OAU in dealing with the conflict.

The internal economic development of the involved parties has been disrupted because they were obliged to appropriate funds to purchase arms for the exigencies of the war. Ending the conflict depends upon improving relations between Morocco and Algeria.

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INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW  
OF THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT

In the past the Western Sahara, formerly called the Spanish Sahara, in northwest Africa was a land in which few people were interested. Spain assumed colonial power in the territory in 1884 and maintained its authority there until 1976. The land has long been inhabited by nomadic tribes who travel throughout the area without regard for any political frontiers in their search for water and pasturage for their herds. During the 1960s, however, extremely large phosphate deposits were discovered in the northern section of the Western Sahara, and the Sahara coast has become a very rich area for commercial fishing. Oil is also expected to be discovered in the region off the Sahara coast. Thus, as a result of these burgeoning natural resources and other politico-economic factors, this once-neglected territory has become an area of great concern to its neighbors, to Spain and other interested nations, to the United Nations, and to the Organization of African Unity.

In 1975, Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain signed an agreement, later designated as the Madrid Accord, to terminate the Spanish colonial presence in the Sahara.

Under the terms of this agreement the Sahara was divided between Morocco and Mauritania with the consent and approval of Spain. Algeria and the Polisario--a Saharawi national movement based in Algeria--however, opposed the Accord and declared it invalid on the grounds that Spain had no right to give away land that it did not own.

For the Moroccans, the colonization of the Western Sahara ended in 1975 with the signing of the Madrid Accord, but Algeria regarded the division of the territory between Morocco and Mauritania as a new--and illegal--form of colonization succeeding upon the old. Algeria thus demanded the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the area and the granting of independence to the Western Sahara. The conflict between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara has been the most critical threat to the stability of the whole region. A major factor in this political unrest has been the Algerian sponsorship and military support of the Polisario, which is regarded by many nations--primarily African states--as the sole representative of the Saharawi people. The Polisario (officially the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia Al-Hamra and Rio de Oro) is a national Saharawi movement created by Algeria in 1973. Its goal is to establish an independent Saharawi state in the Western Sahara.

The Polisario opposed the joint Moroccan-Mauritanian control mandated for the Sahara after the withdrawal of

the Spanish from the territory, as stated in the terms of the Madrid Accord, and in 1976 it initiated a long series of military operations against Moroccan garrisons and cities from bases located inside Algeria. In retaliation for these attacks Morocco threatened to use the right of "hot pursuit" to chase the Polisario guerillas to their bases. The Algerians, however, would view such a move as an act of aggression and an intrusion upon their territorial integrity, and, as a consequence, the possibility of full-scale hostilities between Morocco and Algeria was a major concern. The outbreak of a war between Morocco and Algeria would force the north African nations to take sides against each other. The superpowers would also be forced to support one or the other of the combatants, and an international crisis might result that could threaten world peace and stability.

Since the formation of the United Nations after World War II the decolonization of territories controlled by foreign powers has been one of the major problems affecting its work and preventing it from devoting its attention to more important issues and concerns facing the international community. The UN first dealt with the Western Sahara problem in 1965, after the issuance of Resolution 1514 on the decolonization of colonized countries and peoples in 1960. In that year, the UN asked Spain to



negotiate with Morocco and Mauritania as a first step toward ending its colonial presence in the Western Sahara. Ten years later, in 1975, the UN approved the Madrid Accord between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania. Despite this approval of the terms of the Accord, however, the UN has issued a resolution almost every year since 1975 demanding that a referendum be conducted under its auspices to determine the future of the Sahara and its inhabitants. This contradiction in the UN resolutions regarding the Western Sahara has complicated the conflict because each concerned party defends its position in the dispute based upon the legitimacy given to it by the international community.

The Western Sahara conflict is undoubtedly one of the most critical problems to have confronted the Organization of African Unity (OAU). For the first time in the history of the organization the integrity of two of its vital principles--respecting the frontiers inherited from past colonizers and advocating self-determination--was endangered. The Western Sahara conflict threatened the future of the OAU because of the polarity of the countries involved in it. The majority of the African nations supported the Algerian claim, but they did not comprise the majority vote at the OAU summit meeting of African heads of state held in an attempt to reach a diplomatic solution to the dispute.

At the beginning of 1982, the OAU Council of Ministers accepted the Polisario as the fifty-first member of the organization. Since that time the OAU has been paralyzed by the opposition of Morocco and its supporters to the admission of the Polisario. If the Western Sahara gained independence with the help of the OAU, or by any other means, its success would prompt many other liberation and separatist movements to demand their independence as well; the African continent holds many examples, such as the Eritrean liberation movement, the separatists in southern Sudan and in Zaïre, and many others.

The purpose of this thesis is to trace and analyze the Western Sahara conflict and its impact upon the political stability of the northwest region of the African continent. The war in the Western Sahara is one of attrition that has inflicted great losses in terms of both sums of money and human casualties upon the parties involved. It has also prevented the nations from concentrating their efforts upon internal economic developments because they must appropriate most of the money they need to buy arms for the exigencies of the war.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first provides background information on the Western Sahara, including facts about its geography, population, economy, and history. The second chapter examines the role of the

United Nations and the International Court of Justice in dealing with the conflict and describes the Madrid Accord between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania. The third chapter discusses and outlines the positions of the concerned parties in the region. The positions and allegations of each party are presented in this chapter--the claim of Morocco; those of its opponents, the Polisario and Algeria; and finally that of Mauritania. The fourth chapter analyzes the positions of the other interested parties outside the immediate region.<sup>1</sup> The first of these to be discussed is Spain because it was the colonizer of the Western Sahara and parts of Morocco and has an important economic and strategic interest in the area. France, the colonizer of Algeria, part of Morocco, Mauritania, and other African countries, also favors an end to the conflict. The Soviet Union and the United States, too, have important economic and political concerns in the region, and Chapter IV discusses the impact of any prolongation of the Western Sahara conflict upon these superpowers.

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper "concerned parties" refers to Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and the Polisario, the entities in the region that are directly involved in military operations or have no political, diplomatic, and economic relations at the present time. "Interested parties" refers to Spain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States, which have important economic and strategic interests in the Western Sahara and are attempting to end the conflict in order to preserve those interests.

The fifth chapter describes both the role of the OAU in dealing with the conflict and the impact of the dispute upon the future of that organization. Finally, the conclusion speculates upon the possibilities for a resolution of the Western Sahara conflict in the foreseeable future.

The Western Sahara conflict is a relatively new phenomenon and has not yet attracted the attention of many scholars, perhaps because it does not appear to present a critical threat to world peace and security or to the interests of the superpowers in the region. Therefore, no definitive work has been written about the Western Sahara problem; most of the discussions now available have appeared in articles in African and a few American professional journals. Most of the facts presented in this thesis, therefore, have been drawn from official documents issued by the various involved parties, newspapers, and other periodicals. The materials gathered from these primary sources have been supplemented by my own observations gathered during meetings with Moroccan, Algerian, and Polisario officials during my visit to Morocco and Algeria during the summer of 1982.

## CHAPTER I

### THE WESTERN SAHARA: GEOGRAPHICAL, ECONOMIC, AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### Geography

The territory of the Western Sahara, located in the northwest area of the African continent, forms part of the great desert extending from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Sudan in the east and from the Atlas Mountains in the north to the Senegal River in the south. It comprises approximately 150,000 square miles in an area which extends from the internationally recognized southern border of Morocco (established in 1956) along the Atlantic coast for over 500 miles to the Mauritanian border at Cape Blanc.<sup>1</sup> The territory is bounded by Morocco on the north, Mauritania on the south and east, Algeria on the east, and the Atlantic ocean on the west (see Figure 1). Cities in this part of the Sahara include Al-Aioun, the capital of the northern reaches of the Sahara; Dakhla, the capital of the southern region of the Sahara; Boucraa, the site of a major phosphate production complex; and some smaller population centers such as Samara and Boujdor.

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<sup>1</sup>Suresh C. Saxena, The Liberation War in Western Sahara (New Delhi, Vidya Publishers, 1981), p. 1.

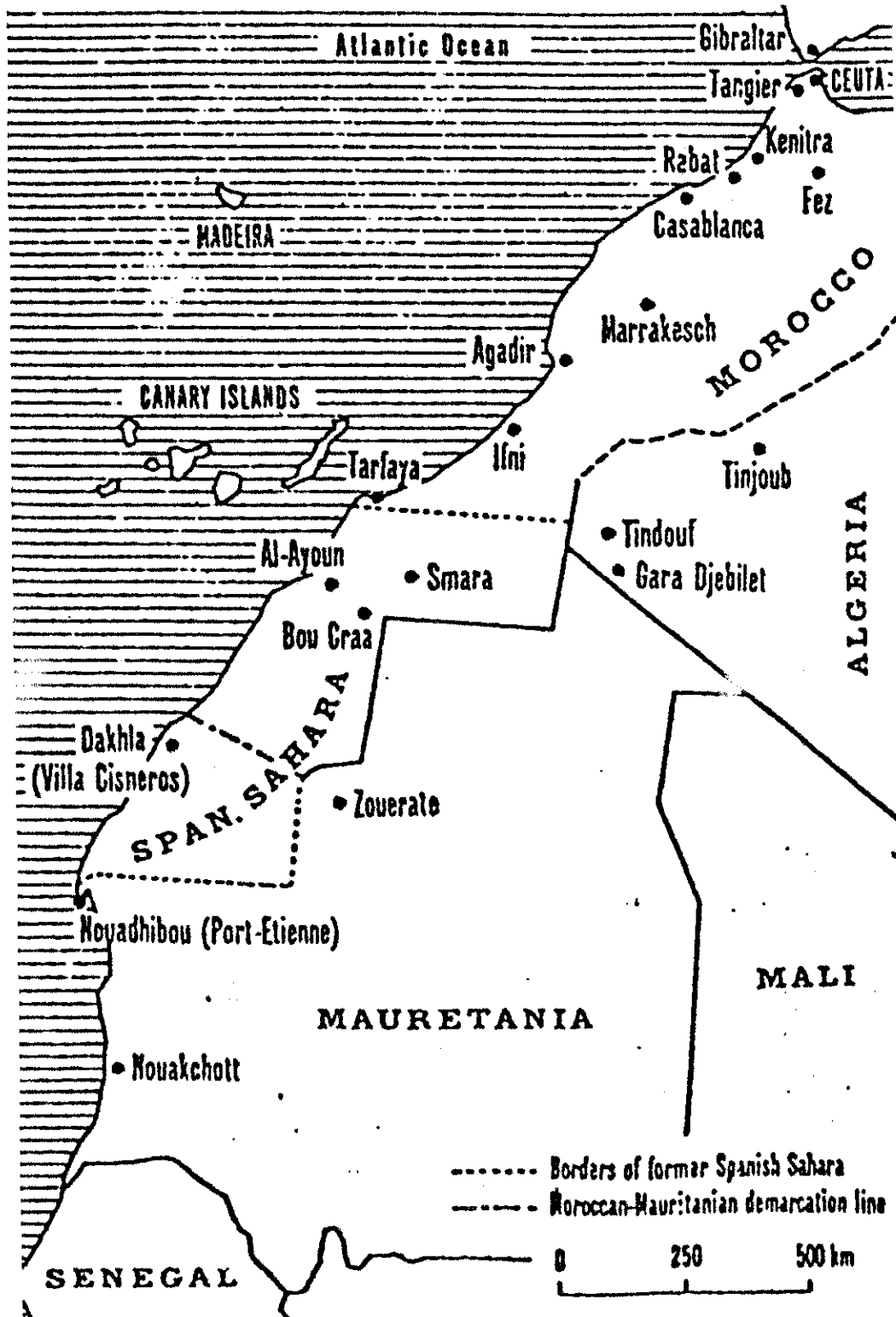


Fig. 1--The Western Sahara and its environs in north-west Africa.\*

\*Source: James E. Dougherty, "The Polisario Insurgency: War and Minuet in North-West Africa," *Conflict*, II, No. 2 (1980), 98.

Water resources in the Western Sahara are scarce, and the region has no permanent rivers. A large lake near Dakhla, however, was discovered underground by the Spanish in the early 1960s. The rainy season in the Sahara is very short, and the area's average annual rainfall is less than two inches.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of this scanty rainfall and the absence of permanent rivers, Saharan agriculture is restricted to small oases. Fresh water to sustain life is acquired by digging wells. The climate of the Sahara is of the desert type, marked by widespread sandstorms and extreme ranges of daily temperatures.

The Western Sahara is sparsely populated. According to a Spanish census, only about 95,019 persons lived in the territory in 1974; about 75,000 of this number were of Saharawi origin and the remainder were Spanish troops and European settlers.<sup>3</sup> The precise number of Saharawis inhabiting the area is unknown; the Polisario contested the Spanish figure of 75,000 and claimed that more than 100,000 Saharawis living outside the Western Sahara, mostly in the Algerian village of Tindouf just across the Moroccan border, had fled there after the Moroccans moved

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<sup>2</sup>"Spanish Sahara," The Middle East and North Africa, 20th edition (London, Europa Publications Ltd., 1973), p. 567.

<sup>3</sup>Saxena, p. 3.

into the disputed territory.<sup>4</sup> The native population of the Western Sahara consists of Moorish and Bedouin people who speak the Hassania dialect of Arabic. About 40 different tribes live in the Sahara. Of these, the largest-- and therefore the tribe dominating the region--is the Reguibat, whose main factions are the Delim and the Izarguen.<sup>5</sup> These nomadic tribes travel without regard to political boundaries.

#### Economy

The land of the Western Sahara is arid and unproductive and its population is too small to generate a wealthy economy. Most of the nomadic inhabitants engage in animal breeding activities, and camels and uncured animal skins are the sole important exports of the region. Fishing is the primary activity of Saharawis living in coastal towns, and fish processing was the major industry in the Western Sahara until the mid-1960s, when phosphate was discovered. Other Saharawis were engaged in various crafts, and a U.S.-financed desalinization plant produced

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<sup>4</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Report of a Study Mission to Morocco, the Western Sahara, Mauritania, Algeria, Liberia, Spain, and France, 96th Congress, First Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, August, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>David Lynn Price, The Western Sahara, The Washington Papers, No. 63 (Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 12.



flavored mineral water for local consumption.<sup>6</sup> In 1961, restrictions on foreign investment in the Western Sahara were modified and the area experienced a brief period of prosperity. As a consequence, nine American and three Spanish companies took up concessions for oil exploration,<sup>7</sup> but, by 1963, the dreams of these companies vanished when no oil in commercial quantities could be found in the area. Nine of the companies withdrew from the region, leaving only Gulf Oil, Texaco of Spain, and the state-controlled INI to conduct further explorations.<sup>8</sup>

A search for other mineral resources also began in the 1960s. The only minerals found in commercial quantities were iron ore and phosphate, both located near the Moroccan border. The Western Sahara phosphate deposits are said to be among the richest known in the world, and Boucraa, a town in the northern part of the Sahara just a few miles from the Moroccan frontier, is believed to have the fourth largest phosphate deposits on earth.<sup>9</sup> Varying amounts of other minerals have also been detected in the area, such as cobalt and uranium.

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<sup>6</sup>"Spanish Sahara," p. 568.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 569.

<sup>9</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Regional Stability in Northern Africa, 96th Congress, Second Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, April, 1980), p. 4.

After the discovery of the phosphate deposits at Boucraa, Spain began to undertake the development of the area. In 1965, the Spanish government inaugurated the construction of a small settlement for workers and a railway to link the mining complex with the port and its loading and export facilities outside the Sahara. As a consequence of the Spanish efforts to develop the territory, small businesses in the coastal Sahara cities experienced modest prosperity. Elements of urban community, including an urban elite, started to appear in these developing centers, provoking the population to express stronger resentment of the intensified Spanish presence in "their" land.

### History

Until 1434, the land presently known as the Western Sahara was an empty desert inhabited by a few wandering tribes. In that year, a small number of Portuguese troops landed on the southern coast of the Sahara, and, after penetrating the interior, the Portuguese built trading posts at Wadan not far from Atar in 1487.<sup>10</sup> During this period, Spain also made several attempts to enter the coastal area but enjoyed little success until 1884, when it occupied the southern part of the Sahara, then called Rio de Oro,

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<sup>10</sup>"Spanish Sahara," p. 567.

and declared in the same year a protectorate over the coastal zone from Cape Bojador to Cape Blanco in the south.<sup>11</sup> In June of 1900, Spain signed an agreement with France, the colonizing power in Algeria and parts of Morocco and Mauritania, to establish the border between Rio de Oro and the present frontier of Mauritania. In 1912, Spain unilaterally designated the area of Ifni and Tarfaya as its protectorate in the southern part of Morocco.<sup>12</sup>

The land under Spanish control was not consolidated, and the interior of the Sahara was not penetrated by Spain until the 1930s. In 1934, Spain began to reorganize the region beyond the southern zone of its Moroccan protectorate, calling it the Spanish Sahara. The area north of Rio de Oro and south of Ifni and Tarfaya became known as Saguia Al-Hamra, and its capital was established at Al-Aioun. Thus, Rio de Oro and Saguia Al-Hamra were designated as the Spanish Sahara. From 1934 until 1958, these two areas were consolidated by Spain in one centralized administration with Tarfaya and Ifni under the military governor at Sidi Ifni, the capital of Ifni.<sup>13</sup> This fact was later used as one rationale to justify Morocco's contention that the Western Sahara should be placed under its sovereignty.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 568.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

In 1956, Morocco gained its independence and laid claim to all Spanish possessions in northwest Africa and to the French colony of Mauritania. In 1957, the Moroccan government sent some of its Liberation Army units to fight the French and Spanish troops located in Tarfaya, Saguia Al-Hamra, Rio de Oro, and the northern part of Mauritania in order to free those territories from foreign "occupation." The Moroccan Liberation Army received support from the Saharan tribes, especially the Reguibat, which was, as noted earlier in this chapter, the dominant tribe in the Western Sahara.<sup>14</sup> Major battles took place between the Moroccans, backed by the Saharawis, and the Spanish. The Moroccan army defeated the Spanish troops and pushed them back to their coastal garrisons after major skirmishes in Dakhla, Al-Aioun, and Tarfaya. As a result of these military losses, Spain signed an agreement with France in January of 1958 in order to inaugurate a joint Franco-Spanish campaign against the Moroccan Liberation Army. According to this agreement, Spain would launch its military operations from Tarfaya and Al-Aioun, France would move out from the northern part of Mauritania, and both armies would meet in the southern

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<sup>14</sup>Thomas A. Marks, "Spanish Sahara: Background to Conflict," African Affairs, LXXV (January, 1976), 6.

part of the Sahara after driving the Moroccans back to Morocco and clearing the Rio de Oro area of all Moroccan troops. In the northeast region of the Sahara, the French undertook military operations from Fort Triquet and Tindouf and pushed the Moroccans out of the northern Sahara.<sup>15</sup> By March of 1958, the joint Franco-Spanish campaign had succeeded in driving the Moroccan Liberation Army back within its own borders and reestablishing full control over the Spanish Sahara.

Among the factors prompting Spain and France to sign their 1958 military agreement were the following:

1. Rising rebellions in the occupied territories would increase the monetary cost of controlling them and increase the number of human casualties incurred by the colonizing powers and would later affect the policy of the occupying governments toward their colonies. Therefore, ending the rebellions quickly and strongly would enhance the position of the colonizers both inside and outside the occupied territories.

2. The size of the area made it very difficult for Spanish troops to fight the rebels throughout the Sahara unaided.

3. A military defeat of the Spanish troops by the Moroccan Liberation Army would probably lead to the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

loss of Spanish control over the Sahara, and, as a result, France would also suffer from renewed local struggles against its troops in Algeria, Mauritania, and elsewhere. Consequently, France aided Spain because to do so served its own purposes as well.

The Saharawis carried on a continuing political struggle against the Spanish colonial presence in their land throughout the years of its duration, but during the last two decades this struggle has been manipulated by the adjoining countries: Morocco, Mauritania, and especially Algeria. These three nations have utilized the feelings and hopes of the Saharawi people primarily to serve their own interests. They have created and dissolved various Saharawi political movements that opposed and agitated against the Spanish colonial presence in the Western Sahara and neighboring countries. When Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria and their leaders were enjoying good relations they dissolved the Saharawi movements that they had helped to create; when they entered into disagreements or conflicts, these powers sponsored their own Saharawi movements to serve as proxies in their disputes with their adversaries.

The Saharawis employed a variety of methods in their struggle against Spain. They used peaceful means such as demonstrations in the Saharan cities of Al-Aioun,

Dakhla, and Samara, and they organized numerous movements to carry on military operations against Spanish troops in the Sahara. The first such Saharawi "movement" was formed in 1966, with the backing of Mauritania. The goal of the movement, called the Front for the Liberation of the Sahara (FLS), was to free the Western Sahara from Spanish domination. The FLS was opposed to the Moroccan desire that the Sahara should be unified with Morocco, and the movement was sponsored by Mauritania because of that nation's distrust of Morocco and its claim to parts of Mauritanian territory. It is claimed that, in 1967, the leader of the FLS entered into a secret agreement with the Moroccan government whereby he moved the base of the FLS and shifted his loyalty from Mauritania to Morocco.<sup>16</sup> Within two years after this "deal," however, the FLS was dissolved; when Morocco recognized Mauritania's sovereignty in 1969, the motivating force behind the movement--Mauritanian-Moroccan distrust--disappeared.

Two years later, two new Saharawi movements were formed. The first, called the Organization for the Liberation of Saguia Al-Hamra and Wadi el-Dahb, was organized in Algeria by two unidentified Saharawis. This movement was short-lived because Morocco and Algeria enjoyed good relations at the beginning of the 1970s.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Price, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

The second organization, the Mouvement de Résistance des Hommes Bleus (MOREHOB), was formed in Morocco by a Saharawi member of the Reguibat tribe named Edourd Moha. Its significance lay in its receiving recognition from the OAU. The stated goal of MOREHOB was to achieve independence for the Tuareg tribe, which was dispersed throughout the African desert,<sup>18</sup> but this goal was not acceptable to the Moroccans. In response to the Moroccan opposition to MOREHOB, Moha moved his headquarters from Morocco to Algeria in 1973. In 1975, however, he returned to Morocco and declared his allegiance to the king and dissolved MOREHOB.

In 1973, yet another liberation movement was created in Mauritania (although it was sponsored by Algeria), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia Al-Hamra and Rio de Oro--the PoLiSaRio.<sup>19</sup> Its founder, Mustafa Alwaly, was later killed in a Polisario raid on the capital of Mauritania in 1976. The Polisario opposed both the Spanish colonization of the Sahara and the Moroccan claim on the region. The goal of this movement was to achieve independence for the Western Sahara.<sup>20</sup> Its military operations against Morocco from bases in Algeria and under the supervision of Algerian military personnel

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.



have continued to the present time. By 1982, the Polisario had come to be considered as the sole representative of the Saharawi people by many countries and international organizations. Yet, although the Polisario has built a national consciousness for a Saharawi state since 1976 among the Saharawis who live in and around Tindouf in Algeria, the future political and physical existence of the movement still depends on the relations among the countries surrounding the Western Sahara, especially those between Morocco and Algeria.

## CHAPTER II

### INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING THE WESTERN SAHARA

The Western Sahara conflict has had a substantial impact not only upon the parties directly concerned in it--Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria, and Mauritania--but upon other countries throughout the world and upon the international community of nations. This chapter discusses the Western Sahara issue in the latter of these two contexts, focusing specifically upon the roles played by the United Nations and the International Court of Justice and the influence of the Madrid Accord and its aftermath in the history of the dispute during the past two decades.

#### The Role of the United Nations

In 1965, for the first time the Moroccan government officially asked the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to place the Western Sahara case on its agenda for discussion and call on Spain to decolonize the region. In 1960, the UNGA had formulated detailed procedures for the decolonization of any territory in the world which was still under the domination of a foreign power in its Resolution 1514. This resolution incorporated certain basic principles for

decolonization and stated, "All people have the right to self-determination through the free exercise of which they alone determine their political status."<sup>1</sup> Since 1965, the UNGA has treated the Western Sahara problem in accordance with Resolution 1514 and has passed a resolution supported by all of its members almost every year insisting on the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination.

In 1965, the UNGA adopted a resolution recommended by the Decolonization Committee urging the

Spanish government as the administrative body, to take immediately all necessary measures for the liberation of the territory of Ifni and Spanish Sahara from colonial domination and to this end to enter into negotiations on the problems relating to sovereignty presented by those two territories.<sup>2</sup>

This resolution was ambiguous because it did not specify which countries were to enter into negotiations with Spain to end the problem. Was Spain to negotiate with Morocco, with Mauritania, or with both countries? In 1966, the UNGA removed the ambiguity surrounding its 1965 resolution regarding the Western Sahara by adopting another resolution in which the questions of Ifni and the Western Sahara were separately treated. With regard to the Western Sahara the UNGA

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<sup>1</sup>Suresh C. Saxena, The Liberation War in Western Sahara (New Delhi, Vidya Publishers, 1981), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

invited Spain to determine at the earliest possible date in conformity with the aspirations of the indigenous people of the Spanish Sahara and in consultation with the governments of Mauritania and Morocco and any other interested party the procedures for holding a referendum under United Nations auspices with a view to enabling the indigenous population of the territory to exercise freely its right to self-determination and to this end: (1) To create a favorable climate for the referendum to be conducted on an entirely free, democratic, and impartial basis. (2) To provide all the necessary facilities to a United Nations mission so that it may be able to participate actively in the organization and holding of the referendum.<sup>3</sup>

Spain rejected all UNGA resolutions on the Western Sahara, taking the position that its African colonies were the provinces of metropolitan Spain and therefore not subject to self-determination.<sup>4</sup> In response to the 1966 UN resolution regarding the Western Sahara, however, Spain formed a Saharawi general assembly consisting of both elected and appointed members, the latter selected by Spanish officials.<sup>5</sup> This assembly was led by tribal chiefs and some conservative members who supported the status quo.<sup>6</sup> Its purpose was to work as a local government

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas M. Franck, "The Stealing of the Sahara," The American Journal of International Law, LXX (October, 1976), 701.

<sup>5</sup>David Lynn Price, The Western Sahara, The Washington Papers, No. 63 (Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

to represent the Saharawi people while continuing to support Spanish control of the Sahara.

From 1965 until July of 1975, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania were united in their opposition to the Spanish colonial presence in the Western Sahara. Algeria accepted the proposal that the Sahara should be divided between Morocco and Mauritania because it wished to resolve its dispute with Morocco concerning the city of Tindouf.<sup>7</sup> In 1972, Morocco signed a border agreement with Algeria acknowledging Algerian sovereignty over Tindouf and formulating a plan for joint exploitation of the iron ore in that area.<sup>8</sup> In response to this agreement Spain enlarged the local assembly (Yama'a) and promised to hold a referendum for self-determination in the Sahara in 1974.

Between 1972 and 1974, another development complicated the progress of events in the region: Morocco became concerned that Spain would give the Sahara its independence and that the new entity would come, even if indirectly, under Algerian rule. Algeria, in turn, feared that Morocco would demand that Tindouf be placed under its sovereignty because the Moroccan parliament had not yet ratified their 1972 agreement as the result of the king's

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<sup>7</sup>Brian Weinstein, "The Western Sahara," Current History, LXXVIII (March, 1980), 113.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

suspension of the parliament from 1973 to 1977. As a consequence of these suspicions, the leaders of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania met in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, in 1973 and publicly reaffirmed their collective support for the principle of self-determination and the holding of a referendum to determine the future of the Western Sahara.<sup>9</sup> Each of the three leaders hoped that the result of the referendum would ultimately be in his favor.

In 1969, the UNGA condemned all Spanish efforts to delay the requested consultation of Spain with the other concerned parties and schedule a referendum intended to accelerate the decolonization of the Western Sahara. During the years 1967 to 1974, the UNGA reiterated its 1966 resolution, especially the paragraphs relating to the organization of a UN-supervised referendum and the sending of a UN fact-finding mission to the area.<sup>10</sup> In December of 1974, the UNGA adopted Resolution 3292, which contained three important mandates: "(1) The postponement of the referendum. (2) The dispatch of a UN visiting mission to the Sahara. (3) The request to the ICJ for an advisory opinion."<sup>11</sup>

The UN fact-finding mission traveled to the Western Sahara in May of 1975; while the UNGA and the concerned

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Saxena, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup>Franck, p. 707.

parties awaited the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion about the history of the territory, the UN mission was on its way to the Western Sahara. The mission, appointed by the chairman of the special committee, consisted of representatives from Cuba, Iran, and Ivory Coast under the leadership of the UN permanent representative from Ivory Coast. The mission was charged with responsibility for "securing firsthand information on political, economic, social, cultural, and educational conditions, as well as the wishes and aspirations of the people."<sup>12</sup>

The mission began its work by visiting Madrid and ended it in Mauritania. The members of the mission also traveled to Morocco, the Western Sahara, and Algeria. In all of the sites visited, the mission representatives met with political leaders and other government officials. They also held discussions with the leaders of the political movements in the Sahara and with refugees and exiles in the neighboring countries. The mission's report stated that none of the concerned parties interfered with its freedom of movement in the area.<sup>13</sup> The unanimous report concluded:

The mission visited virtually all the main population centers and sought to ascertain the views of the overwhelming majority of their inhabitants. At every place visited, the mission was met by

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

mass political demonstrations and had numerous private meetings with representatives of every section of the Saharan community. From all of these, it became evident to the mission that there was an overwhelming consensus among Saharans within the territory in favor of independence and opposing integration with any neighboring country.<sup>14</sup>

It was said that Spanish officials in the Sahara knew about these demonstrations in Al-Aioun, Dakhla, and elsewhere before they took place and may have encouraged such actions by not seeking to forestall them. The rationale for this position was Spain's desire to grant independence to the Sahara under the leadership of a pro-Spanish Saharawi general assembly so as to protect its interest in the area.

Independence was found to be the overriding objective of all Saharawi political movements in the Sahara. The Partido de la Union Nacional Saharani (PUNS), the only legally recognized, Spanish-sanctioned movement in the territory and the one of which most members of the Yama'a council were said to be members, sought independence for the Western Sahara, and the Polisario, which, according to the mission's report, seemed to enjoy most of the support of the Saharawi people, also sought independence, agitated for it by means of demonstrations, and opposed any integration of the Western Sahara with neighboring countries.<sup>15</sup> The mission was satisfied that within the

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 707-708.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 708.



Western Sahara area "the population, or at least almost all those persons encountered by the mission, was categorically for independence and against the territorial claims of Morocco and Mauritania."<sup>16</sup>

Outside the Western Sahara, opinions of the Saharawis who lived in the neighboring countries were mixed, reflecting the respective policies of Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. The mission concluded with the recommendation that "the General Assembly should take steps to enable those population groups to decide their own future in complete freedom and in an atmosphere of peace and security."<sup>17</sup>

The International Court of Justice  
Advisory Opinion

In 1974, Spain decided to withdraw its troops from the Western Sahara and conduct a referendum to determine the future of the territory and its inhabitants. This decision was made in response to the 1965 UN resolution demanding that Spain end its colonial presence in the Western Sahara. Morocco's strong response to the Spanish decision was articulated by its delegate to the United Nations, who insisted on the implementation of Resolution 1514 of 1960 and offered to prove before the International Court of Justice that "the Sahara was an integral part of the kingdom of Morocco at the time of the colonization

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<sup>16</sup>Saxena, pp. 37-38.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

between 1880 and 1912."<sup>18</sup> This reaction reflected the Moroccan fear that the result of the referendum would be unfavorable to Morocco either because of Spanish manipulation of the Saharawi Yama'a or because the Polisario would convince the Saharawis to vote for independence under its leadership.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of this evaluation of the Western Sahara situation, Morocco persuaded Mauritania to join it in requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice to confirm their claims on the Sahara through the United Nations.

In December of 1974, the UNGA passed Resolution 3292 pertaining to the Western Sahara, asking Spain not to conduct the proposed referendum and petitioning the International Court of Justice for an advisory opinion about the history of the territory. Two questions were addressed to the court for clarification: "(1) Was the Western Sahara a land without an owner, 'terra nullius,' at the time of Spanish colonization? (2) If the answer to the first question is negative, what were the judicial ties between the Western Sahara, Morocco, and Mauritania?"<sup>20</sup>

The leaders of all the concerned parties agreed that this petition should be submitted to the International Court

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<sup>18</sup>Ahmed Osman, "The Western Sahara: Myths and Realities," press release (Washington, Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, May, 1980), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Weinstein, p. 113.

<sup>20</sup>Osman, p. 7.

of Justice because each of them hoped that the advisory opinion would support his claim and at the same time eliminate those of all other parties. Spain hoped that the opinion would state that the Sahara was free of any claims of sovereignty made by neighboring countries, thus clearing the way for its own determination of the future of the territory. Morocco hoped that the opinion would confirm its claim on the Sahara, thereby eliminating Mauritania from the territory and obliging Spain to return the land to Morocco without holding a referendum. Mauritania, on the other hand, hoped that the opinion would be in its favor, eliminating Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara and preventing the staging of a referendum of self-determination in the region. The overlapping mutual goals of Morocco and Mauritania were the avoidance of a referendum and the elimination of each other's claims to the territory.

In October of 1975, the International Court of Justice rendered its advisory opinion. Its answer to the first question was as follows:

The information furnished to the court shows 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. It also shows that, in colonizing Western Sahara, Spain did not proceed on the basis that it was establishing its sovereignty over terra nullius. Spain proclaimed that the king was taking the Rio de Oro under his protection on the basis of

agreements which had been entered into with the chiefs of the local tribes.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the answer to the first question was that the Western Sahara was not a land without an owner since it was inhabited by organized tribes and protected by the Moroccan sultans.

In its response to the second question, the court's opinion on Mauritania's claim was as follows:

The information before the court discloses that, at the time of the Spanish colonization, there existed many ties of a racial, linguistic, religious, cultural, and economic nature between various tribes and emirates whose peoples dwelt in the Sahara region which today is comprised within the territory of Western Sahara and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.<sup>22</sup>

Insofar as the question of Mauritanian sovereignty over the Sahara was concerned, the court stated, "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."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the court did not find any evidence of past Mauritanian sovereignty over the Sahara, but it did find some tribal

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<sup>21</sup>International Court of Justice, The International Court of Justice Reports: The Advisory Opinion about the Western Sahara (The Hague, United Nations, 1975), ¶129, pp. 56-57.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., ¶149, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., ¶150, p. 64.

and land-based legal ties between the territory and Mauritania.

The court's opinion of the Moroccan claim was as follows:

The inferences to be drawn from the information before the court concerning internal acts of Moroccan sovereignty and from that concerning international acts are, therefore, in accord in not providing indications of the existence, at the relevant period, of any legal tie of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and the Moroccan state. At the same time, they are in accord in providing indications of a legal tie of allegiance between the sultan and some, though only some, of the tribes of the territory and in providing indications of some display of the sultan's authority or influence with respect to those tribes.<sup>24</sup>

The final statement of the advisory opinion concluded:

The court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of Resolution 1514 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.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the court recognized the legal ties between the Sahara and Morocco and Mauritania but declared them insufficient for current claims of territorial sovereignty. Self-determination, not history, was the only acceptable basis to determine the future of the Western Sahara, the court declared.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., ¶129, pp. 55-56.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Report of a Study Mission to Morocco, the Western Sahara, Mauritania, Algeria, Liberia, Spain, and France, 96th Congress, First Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, August, 1979), p. 4.

The self-determination referendum in the Western Sahara did not take place, however, and probably will not be held in the foreseeable future. The failure of the UN to carry out this referendum can be attributed to the complexity of the case, due in part to the involvement of so many parties in it, each protecting its own interests. Those conflicting interests are rooted in the differing orientations of the nations and groups concerned. If only two parties were involved in the Sahara conflict, finding a resolution to it would be easier, especially if those parties had similar political systems.<sup>27</sup> In the case of the Western Sahara, unlike other situations such as that involving Belize, Morocco and Algeria were not regionally weak countries and Spain did not have the strength to continue to provide military protection for the territory after the withdrawal of its troops. Furthermore, Spain also did not wish to become involved in military conflict with Morocco because it was still occupying two sites within Morocco's borders, Ceuta and Mellelia. Moreover, both Spain and Morocco were strategically important to the west.

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<sup>27</sup>For example, the case of Belize in Central America was solved easily despite the reluctance of Guatemala, which had made territorial claims upon the region, to consent to the independence of this former British colony. Guatemala was too weak to resist combined British and American pressure in favor of independence for Belize and could not take over the territory because Britain had granted it military protection.

The Madrid Accord: The Prelude, the Agreement, and the Aftermath

Although the International Court of Justice advisory opinion did not favor a verdict of either Moroccan or Mauritanian sovereignty over the Western Sahara, both nations, especially Morocco, interpreted the opinion as reinforcing their claims. Less than a month after the opinion was presented to the UN, King Hassan II of Morocco announced that he would send 350,000 unarmed Moroccans to liberate the occupied Western Sahara by peaceful means. Spain and Algeria reacted strongly to this unprecedented action and declared that it was a threat to international peace and security.<sup>28</sup> The Security Council decided to send the UN Secretary General to Morocco to meet with the king in order to reach an agreement to stop the march, but the talks were not successful.<sup>29</sup> Spain responded to the failure of the negotiation between Hassan and the UN Secretary General by announcing that "it would defend Saharan territory with military force if necessary."<sup>30</sup> The Security Council responded to this new development with a more specific resolution calling upon "all the parties concerned and interested to avoid any unilateral or other action which might further escalate the tension in the area."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Franck, p. 713.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 714.

<sup>30</sup> Saxena, p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Neither the Security Council resolutions nor Spain's threat of military force, however, persuaded the king to cancel the peaceful march to the Sahara. So, on November 6, 1975, 350,000 unarmed Moroccans, each carrying the Holy Koran and a green flag, began their "Green March" to the Western Sahara in order to liberate it from Spain. New developments occurred during the first three days of the march; the king ordered the marchers to stop and return to their departure point on November 9, 1975. During these three days Spain ordered its troops to withdraw to the interior of the Sahara and to avoid any confrontation with the Moroccans. King Hassan halted the march as a result of Spain's agreement to undertake negotiations with Morocco and Mauritania as a first step toward ending its colonial presence in the Western Sahara. Then, on November 14, Spain signed the Madrid Accord and turned over control of the Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania.

At the beginning of 1975, Algeria entered into closer economic relations with Spain in order to induce Spain to grant independence to the Sahara under the leadership of the Polisario. King Hassan of Morocco feared that Saharawi independence under the Polisario would enable Algeria to take over direct control of the Sahara if Spain became too dependent upon Algeria to supply its need for petroleum resources. In support of this view, one



Polisario official declared that secret arrangements had been made between Spain and Algeria and between Algeria and Polisario by which Polisario guerillas would enter the Western Sahara after the withdrawal of all Spanish troops to fill any military or political vacuum in the territory.<sup>32</sup> This "deal" was supported by some military commanders in the Sahara and others within the Franco government, but members of the Franco family and some of their friends supported the return of the Western Sahara to Morocco. As a result, it appears that a conflict developed between members of the Franco family and some Spanish generals, but the pro-Moroccan position of the former prevailed. Spain could also be assured of gaining a share of the Boucraa phosphate deposits in the Sahara if it gave control of the territory to Morocco. If the Sahara gained independence under Polisario leadership, however, Algeria might succeed in persuading the Polisario to nationalize the phosphate industry, thereby possibly depriving Spain of any share in it.

On November 8, 1975, Antonio Martinez, a Spanish minister attached to the prime minister's office, visited Morocco, and on the following day King Hassan ordered the Green Marchers to return to their departure point. Also on November 8, the Moroccan prime minister and his foreign

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<sup>32</sup>Price, p. 17.

minister flew to Madrid. At the end of their visit, the Moroccan-Spanish negotiations were complete.<sup>33</sup> The Madrid Accord, signed on November 14, 1975, marked the end of the Spanish colonial presence in the Western Sahara, with Moroccan and Mauritanian administration replacing Spanish control over the territory. The representatives of Spain's, Morocco's, and Mauritania's governments reached an agreement based upon the following principles:

1. Spain reaffirms its decision, repeated countless times at the United Nations, to decolonize the territory of the Western Sahara by putting an end to the responsibility and power which it holds as the administrative authority.
2. In view of this decision, and in conformity with the negotiation between the interested parties recommended by the UN, Spain will proceed immediately to set up an interim government in the territory with the participation of Morocco and Mauritania and the collaboration of the Yama'a. The responsibilities and powers referred to in the previous paragraph will be transferred to these governments.
3. The views of the Sahara population, as expressed through the Yama'a, will be respected.
4. The three countries will inform the Secretary General of the UN of the measures taken under the heading of the present document as a result of negotiations which took place in conformity with Article 33 of the UN Charter.
5. The three countries party to the agreement declare that they reached the preceding conclusions in the best spirit of understanding, brotherhood, and respect for the principles of the UN Charter and as their contribution to the preservation of peace and international security.
6. This document will be operative on the day of publication in the official state bulletin of the law relating to the decolonization of the Sahara which authorizes the Spanish government

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<sup>33</sup>Franck, p. 716.

to carry out the undertakings contained in this document.<sup>34</sup>

The Accord included many secret provisions arranged between Morocco and Spain. One of these was that Spain would receive 35 per cent of the Sahara phosphate, and another was that Spain's previous fishing rights off the Sahara would be maintained and extended to the Moroccan coast as well.<sup>35</sup> With the signing of the Accord, the self-determination solution for the Western Sahara dispute was abandoned, and the right to determine the future of the Sahara was transferred to the Yama'a as the representative of the Saharawi people.

On February 26, 1976, at the request of the Moroccan government, the Yama'a met in Samara in the Western Sahara to approve the Madrid Accord. The Moroccans stated that the Yama'a accepted the Accord by a two-thirds majority.<sup>36</sup> Opponents later claimed, however, that this Yama'a meeting was not legitimate because the majority of its members had in fact rejected the Accord and fled the territory to join the Polisario in Algeria.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Regional Stability in Northern Africa, 96th Congress, Second Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, April, 1980), p. 24.

<sup>35</sup>Franck, p. 715.

<sup>36</sup>Osman, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup>Franck, p. 715.

## CHAPTER III

### THE POSITIONS OF THE CONCERNED PARTIES

#### Morocco

Since 1956, when Morocco became an independent nation, the Moroccans have viewed their position on the Western Sahara as constituting an effort to reunify the Moroccan homeland that was seized in bits and pieces by Spain and France in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The Moroccan government based its claim to sovereignty over the Western Sahara on historical, administrative, socio-economic, and cultural factors. The Moroccans considered the history of the Western Sahara to be a continuation of Moroccan history because the Moroccan sultans formerly appointed all the cadis and religious leaders in the Sahara by administrative acts.<sup>2</sup> The claim for cultural affinity rested on the assumption that, in ancient times, the people of the Western Sahara adopted the same system of writing as that used in Morocco. The struggle of the Saharawi people with the

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<sup>1</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Regional Stability in Northern Africa, 96th Congress, Second Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, April, 1980), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Suresh C. Saxena, The Liberation War in Western Sahara (New Delhi, Vidya Publishers, 1981), p. 15.

Moroccans against Spanish colonization of parts of Morocco and the Western Sahara also united them in a common cause. The Western Sahara has always witnessed intense political activity and armed uprisings, especially since Morocco gained its independence, whose ultimate purpose was to seek reunification with the motherland.<sup>3</sup>

When Spain withdrew its forces from the Western Sahara in February of 1976, as specified in the provisions of the Madrid Accord, the Moroccan and the Mauritanian governments appointed administrative staffs to replace Spanish officials in the region and to control the area with full sovereignty over each of its two divisions. Moroccan and Mauritanian control was challenged, however, by the Polisario, which demanded full independence for the Western Sahara. From the very beginning of the conflict, the Moroccan government continued to accuse the Algerian government of creating and fully supporting the Polisario. The Moroccan leaders believed that the Algerians were using the Polisario as a proxy for their ambitions in the region. Morocco asserted that its basic dispute over the Western Sahara was with Algeria alone, which was providing protection for the Polisario and giving the movement the support it needed to continue its military operations

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<sup>3</sup>Ahmed Osman, "The Western Sahara: Myths and Realities," press release (Washington, Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, May, 1980), p. 9.

against Morocco. Morocco also accused Algeria and Libya of bringing in Saharawi tribesmen of Mali, Algeria, and Libya and forcing them to live in Tindouf while alleging that these imported Saharawis were former residents of the Western Sahara who had fled to Tindouf because of the war and their rejection of Moroccan control over the Sahara. The Moroccans charged Algeria with instigating the Polisario for the following reasons.

1. Algeria's fear that the Moroccans would renew their claims on the Tindouf area. This region, the site of rich iron ore deposits, was under Moroccan sovereignty until France annexed it to Algeria in an attempt to maintain control over Tindouf when Morocco gained independence in 1956.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, however, France began to lose its colonial power in Algeria as well, and, in 1961, King Hassan II of Morocco signed a border agreement with Farahat Abbas, the president of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic. In that agreement, Morocco granted Algeria full support in its revolutionary struggle against France, and, in return for this aid, the Algerian leaders agreed to return Tindouf and its environs to Moroccan sovereignty. When Algeria attained independence in 1962, Ahmed Ben Bella, the first president of

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<sup>4</sup>David Lynn Price, The Western Sahara, The Washington Papers, No. 63 (Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 12.

Algeria, refused to honor the 1961 agreement between Abbas and Hassan;<sup>5</sup> in retaliation, King Hassan sent his troops across the Algerian border to take Tindouf by force. In November of 1963, a mediation committee of the OAU headed by Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia visited the two countries. The committee asked Morocco to withdraw its troops from Algeria and settle the conflict by peaceful means.<sup>6</sup>

The commander of the defeated Algerian army at that time was Colonel Hourri Boumédienne, who, two years later, ousted President Ben Bella in a military coup and succeeded him as president of Algeria, an office that he held until his death in 1978.<sup>7</sup> In 1969, President Boumédienne met with King Hassan during the Islamic conference in Rabat, Morocco, and the two leaders agreed to begin negotiations to settle the Tindouf problem. In return for concessions by Morocco on this question Algeria would have to support Morocco in its claim of sovereignty over the Western Sahara. In 1972, Hassan and Boumédienne met in Algeria to sign the Telmesan Agreement.<sup>8</sup> The leaders also agreed to establish a joint exploitation company to mine iron ore in Garra-Jabiulat near Tindouf. The Algerian government ratified the Telmesan Agreement, but, as of 1982, the Moroccan government had not yet done so. Accordingly,

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<sup>5</sup>Osman, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Price, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup>Osman, p. 12.

the Algerians continued to be concerned that Morocco would renew its claim to Tindouf, especially since the Moroccans averred that they had evidence to support their position in the dispute.

2. Greed motivated Algeria's support of the Polisario and the independence of the Sahara. The Moroccans believed that the Algerians wanted to obtain control of the Sahara's rich mineral resources. By creating a weak puppet state in the region that would be dependent upon Algeria and the eastern bloc countries, the Algerians could easily exploit those resources for their own benefit.

3. The Moroccans, moreover, claimed that, by creating a weak state in the Western Sahara, the Algerians would accomplish their dreams of gaining access to the Atlantic ports of the Sahara, thus facilitating the export of natural resources, especially iron ore from Tindouf, to West Africa and the American continents. It would be economically beneficial for Algeria to export natural resources through the Sahara rather than from its own Mediterranean ports because Tindouf is located only 200 miles from the Saharan Atlantic ports, as opposed to 1,000 miles from the Algerian ports on the Mediterranean Sea.

4. The Algerians had shifted their position from supporting the UN self-determination resolution of 1966 to supporting Morocco's claim on the Western Sahara after



the two countries negotiated their agreement in 1972. The Moroccans claimed that, because they had not signed that agreement, Algeria brought the Polisario within its borders and granted it support and a temporary homeland in order to take indirect revenge upon Morocco.

Since 1976, Morocco has spent more than \$200 million per year to develop the Western Sahara, and it may have achieved some success in its policy of trying to win the hearts of the people of the Sahara through these development efforts.<sup>9</sup> The Moroccan government has built roads, hospitals, schools, and many other facilities in the Western Sahara and has created numerous jobs in these projects and in the phosphate mines. The inhabitants of the Sahara were also being given free housing, medical treatment, and advice on agricultural techniques in conjunction with governmental attempts to settle them in small villages or towns. The availability of jobs in the Western Sahara has prompted thousands of Moroccans to move to the territory in order to work and live. One Moroccan official, Abdel Latif Ghissassi, Minister of Commerce, has declared, "For years we will be spending far more in the Sahara than we will be earning from it."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ray Vicker, "Desert Struggle: Stakes Are Substantial as Guerillas Step Up War against Morocco," Wall Street Journal, November 23, 1979, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Ray Vicker, "The Mini-War in the Sahara," Wall Street Journal, July 26, 1979, p. 12.

King Hassan has received the full support of the Moroccan people and political parties, including the country's leftist groups, on the issue of the "Moroccan Sahara."<sup>11</sup> Any shift or weakening in his policy would cause serious difficulty for the king because the Moroccan people have made substantial sacrifices in their already low standard of living for the cause of keeping the Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. The protracted war with the Polisario has placed a heavy strain upon the Moroccan economy; the cost of the war and a major military re - equipment program caused the security spending of the Ministries of National Defense and the Interior to increase from 15 per cent of Morocco's total budget in 1975 to 27 per cent in 1978.<sup>12</sup>

This sharp expansion in military spending came at a time when Morocco was experiencing other economic problems as well. In the summer of 1978, the king announced the curtailment of the country's five-year development program in order to preclude any further large-scale borrowing, which would have raised Morocco's indebtedness to a dangerously high level.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the king announced a three-year interim plan which in general did not project the

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<sup>11</sup>"Western Sahara: Fighting Escalates as Repercussions Grow," Africa Research Bulletin, XVI (February, 1979), 5144.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 5145.

building of major new development projects, instead stressing the completion of projects begun under the curtailed five-year plan. As a result, unemployment in Morocco rose to an alarming level, the standard of living of the majority of the people declined, and inflation spiraled.

In June of 1981, the most powerful group opposing the king's policies in the Western Sahara, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (SUPF), called for a general strike to protest government increases in the prices of basic commodities and called upon the king to use the right of "hot pursuit" to chase the Polisario guerillas back to Algeria, even if this action sparked a war between the two nations. One factor causing the SUPF-sponsored strike, which resulted in bloody riots in Casablanca and many other cities, was the deteriorating economic status of the Moroccan people, especially common workers and those with lower incomes. Another reason for the strike was the king's acceptance of the OAU resolution, based on the recommendation of its "Wisemen Committee" (to be discussed in detail later in this paper), to hold a referendum on the Sahara. The opposition leaders who headed the riots viewed that decision as evidence of weakness on the king's part.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Jouber Talha, "New Indicators to End the Dispute between Morocco and Algeria," Asharq Al-Awsat [The Middle East], October 26, 1981, p. 3.

King Hassan was caught in a serious dilemma, for his country was experiencing increasing external isolation as a result of the failure and unpopularity of its foreign policy. On the other hand, he could not respond to the political pressures within the government and opposition parties such as the SUPF to use "hot pursuit" to chase the Polisario guerillas back to Algeria because he could not risk his throne by throwing Morocco into a full-scale war that it could not sustain. The king also suspected that his political opponents were trying to force him into an impasse in order to overthrow him.

Morocco's inferiority to Algeria in arms also deterred the king from escalating his country's conflict with the Polisario. Although the armies of the two nations were numerically equal with about 100,000 men each, the Algerians had more than 600 tanks, mostly Russian-made, compared to approximately 260 French and South African machines for the Moroccans. An even greater disparity existed between the two country's air forces. The Algerians had more than 160 war planes, mostly Russian MIGs, whereas the Moroccans had only 60 F-5s and a few Mirage fighters.<sup>15</sup> The Moroccans had one strategic advantage in that their military

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<sup>15</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, 96th Congress, First Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, July, 1979), p. 36.

bases were located just a few miles from Algeria's major communication lines and mining complexes. Nevertheless, the king would not risk his future by provoking a war with Algeria unless he was forced to defend his country's territorial integrity against an Algerian invasion.

In June of 1981, at the annual summit of the OAU in Nairobi, Kenya, King Hassan accepted the "Wisemen Committee's" resolution to hold a referendum on the Western Sahara, but, on his return to Morocco, he called the proposed referendum merely as a confirmative election concerning Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. The king was prompted to take this major tactical step for the following reasons.

1. The king agreed to hold a referendum in order to release his country from the isolation into which it had fallen because of the failure of Moroccan diplomacy regarding the Sahara conflict.

2. He agreed to hold a referendum in order to forestall the admission of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic to the OAU.

3. He agreed to hold a referendum because of friendly pressure from close political allies such as President Sékou-Touré of Guinea, President Bourguiba of Tunisia, King Khalid of Saudi Arabia, and President Mitterand of France in order to bring about a just solution to the Sahara conflict.

4. Finally, he agreed to hold a referendum to win the approval of other nations and groups outside Morocco--and, in fact, his decision was welcomed by a number of other African countries, including Algeria, as a positive step toward solving the Western Sahara problem--and, after returning home, qualified his statement on the referendum to an approval of a vote to confirm Moroccan sovereignty in the Sahara.

The Moroccans could not win their war with the Polisario because they were not fighting a conventional army within a known and limited battlefield; rather, they were fighting guerillas in an empty expanse of mountains and sand with which they were unfamiliar but which was well known to their opponents. The Moroccan army was located inside the major population centers and around the phosphate mines in the Western Sahara. The forces were protected by a defensive wall extending from Agadir in the southern region of Morocco to Laayon in the Sahara. The Moroccans placed highly sensitive surveillance equipment on top of the wall, which could detect the movement of Polisario guerillas at a distance as great as 50 kilometers.<sup>16</sup> The mobility of the Polisario guerillas in the northern Sahara was curtailed due to the effectiveness

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<sup>16</sup>"Western Sahara: Setback for Settlement," Africa Research Bulletin, XVIII (October, 1981), 6228.

of these Moroccan defenses, and, as a consequence, the Polisario began to attack Moroccan troops in the southern area of the Sahara near the Mauritanian border (see Figure 2). After Morocco's eastern border with Algeria was sealed off by its defensive wall, Algeria became convinced that attempts to destabilize Morocco's government through Polisario attacks on the mining sites and Moroccan bases in the Western Sahara would no longer be as effective as they had been in the past.

As a means of ending the long Sahara conflict King Hassan sought to play upon Algeria's need for an expeditious export route by offering that nation a free port on the Atlantic coast. He also offered the Algerians a share in the wealth of the Sahara with the Mauriticians and the Saharawis.<sup>17</sup> Morocco and Algeria then entered into secret negotiations at the start of 1980, and relations between the countries are now slowly improving.

#### The Polisario

The Polisario--the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia Al-Hamra and Rio de Oro--is viewed by many countries today (primarily African and socialist nations) as the sole representative of the Saharawi people. The origin of the Polisario movement can be traced to the

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 6229.

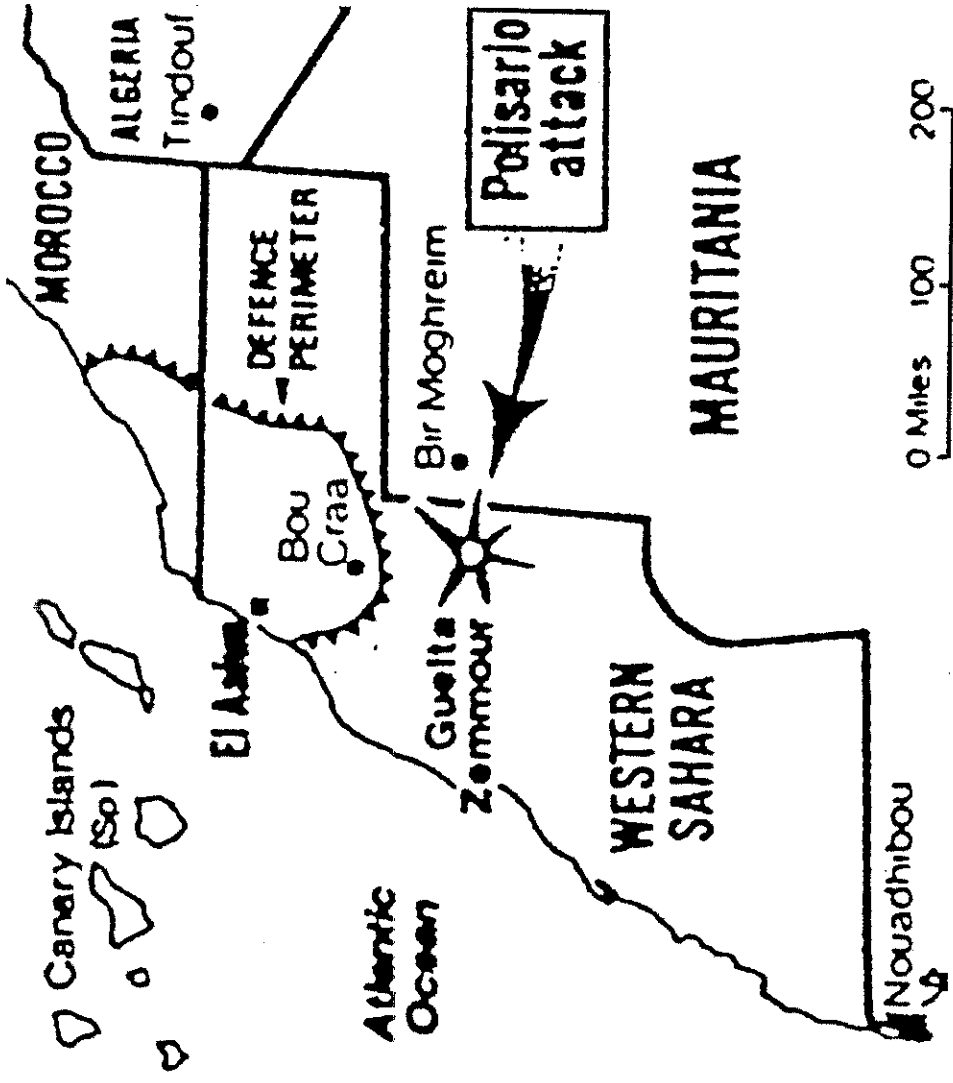


Fig. 2--Pattern of Polisarlio attacks on Morocco, 1981.\*  
\*Source: "Western Sahara: Setback for Settlement," Africa Research Bulletin, XVIII (October, 1981), 6228.



initiative of a group of students at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. In 1968, these students formed a nationalist movement, the Front for the Liberation of the Sahara, that organized many nationalist demonstrations in the capital of the Sahara, Laayon, and other Saharan cities to demand independence and an end to the Spanish presence in the territory. Several of the Front's leaders and sympathizers were later arrested by the Spanish army and, as a result, the movement's remaining leaders fled to neighboring countries, notably Mauritania.

In 1973, these leaders, with Algerian and Mauritanian assistance, formed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia Al-Hamra and Rio de Oro, or Polisario.<sup>18</sup> The main goal of this movement has been the liberation of the entire territory of the Western Sahara, consisting of the two provinces of Saguia Al-Hamra in the north and Rio de Oro in the south. In its third congress in 1976, the Polisario stated the basic principles of the people it represents as follows: "The specific characteristics of the Saharawi people are that they are Arab, African, and Muslim; they belong to the third world; they are opposed to imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, p. 134,

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

From 1973 until 1975, the Polisario had a successful record of attacks against Spanish garrisons and other outposts in the Western Sahara, and it enjoyed good relations with Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania.<sup>20</sup> But, in June of 1975, the Polisario learned of the pending negotiations between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania to partition the Western Sahara. Algeria also knew about this arrangement and tried to prevent it by placing economic pressure upon Spain, but these efforts were not successful. Because the Algerians were not consulted or invited to participate in the Spain-Morocco-Mauritania negotiations, they invited the leaders of the Polisario to come to Algeria and granted them Tindouf and its environs to be their temporary base in order to destabilize Morocco and Mauritania through guerilla military operations.

The Polisario's structure incorporated a provisional national council, but its effective power actually lay in a seven-man executive committee drawn from a twenty-one-member political bureau.<sup>21</sup> Saharawis from the Western Sahara constituted a minority in this political bureau; Saharawis from Algeria, Mali, Morocco, and Mauritania controlled all the upper echelons of the organization. Most of the Polisario's leaders were born either in Morocco or Mauritania. The first leader of the movement, Mustafa

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<sup>20</sup>Price, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

El-Ouali, who was killed in a Polisario raid on Noakchott in 1976, was born in Tan Tan in Morocco. Mohammed Lemine Ould Ahmed, the Premier of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, was born in Tan Tan as well. Hakim Brahim, foreign minister of the SADR, was born in Mauritania, and Brahim Ghali Ould Mustapha, SADR defense minister, was born in Samara in the Western Sahara. Mohammed Ould Zio, president of the Saharawi national council and later minister of justice in the SADR government, was born in Mauritania, as were many other leaders of the Polisario.<sup>22</sup>

Beginning with only a few hundred operatives, the Polisario has grown to a reported size of 8,000 to 10,000 guerillas.<sup>23</sup> Military training of the guerillas has been carried out by Algerian officers in Tindouf at the refugee and training camps of Hafid Boud-Jemma and Hassi Rebinet.<sup>24</sup> In mid-1978, many guerillas who escaped from these Polisario camps at Tindouf described, in separate interviews, how they were controlled by the Algerians. According to David Lynn Price, "There were sixteen camps, each with 800 people, making a total of 12,800 in all."<sup>25</sup> The majority of the Saharawis who lived in them were nomads

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<sup>22</sup>Osman, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup>James E. Dougherty, "The Polisario Insurgency: War and Minuet in North-West Africa," Conflict, II, No. 2 (1980), 104.

<sup>24</sup>Price, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

and refugees from the Sahel drought. Most of the guerillas who defected in 1978 estimated the strength of the Polisario at that time to be about 5,000 operatives. The largest single group at Tindouf was from the Algerian faction of the Reguibat tribe,<sup>26</sup> and the remainder was composed of members of several other tribes. This seems to support the Moroccan claim that the Algerians have diluted the Western Sahara component of the Polisario by recruiting Saharawis from Algeria, Libya, Mali, and Niger and the allegation that these were Saharawis who refused to accept Moroccan control over the Western Sahara.<sup>27</sup>

The Polisario has employed Soviet-made weapons supplied by Algeria and Libya in its military operations, including light automatic rifles, heavy machine guns, mines, explosives, and SAM missiles.<sup>28</sup> Since 1980, the Polisario has also used heavy weapons such as Soviet-made T54 and T55 tanks in its battles with the Moroccan army, especially in Guelta Zemmour. Defectors have stated that Cuban, Vietnamese, and East German instructors were present in the Polisario training camps, but no western reporters have yet corroborated these reports of foreign advisors. In its daily operations, the Polisario used land rovers as its primary means of transport. Many of these vehicles were supplied to the Polisario by Algeria;

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Osman, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup>Price, p. 29.

others were obtained by the Polisario from the Spanish army during its withdrawal from the Western Sahara, and still others were captured in attacks on Moroccan garrisons in the territory.

Since its inception the Polisario has utilized hit-and-run guerilla warfare tactics in its military operations against the Moroccan army in the Western Sahara. Colonel Mohammed Bannani, the commander-in-chief of Morocco's forces in the Sahara described these tactics as follows:

They [Polisario guerillas] come together into larger groups to mount attacks. The Polisario fighters come, four or five men in a land rover. They usually start their attacks at sunset, in order to retreat under cover of darkness, dispersing in several directions to avoid interception.<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning of 1976, the Polisario initiated a campaign of capturing villages and settlements. But, with its small number of guerillas, the Polisario could not maintain these operations because of the presence of thousands of Moroccan and Mauritanian troops in the Western Sahara. Therefore, the Polisario then adopted the strategy of hit-and-run attacks in order to avoid heavy casualties at the hands of the Moroccans. Since Mauritania was politically, economically, and militarily weaker than Morocco, the Polisario leaders decided to

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

concentrate their attacks on Mauritania in order to further undermine its stability and drive its forces out of the southern part of the Western Sahara.<sup>30</sup>

From 1976 until mid-1978, the Polisario concentrated the majority of its attacks upon Mauritania rather than Morocco. The intent of the Polisario leaders was to destroy the fragile economy of Mauritania by attacking its main source of revenue, the Zouerate iron mine and the Zouerate-Nouadhibou rail link.<sup>31</sup> These attacks were remarkably successful in achieving the Polisario's objective of destabilizing Mauritania. Consequently, in August of 1979, Mauritania signed a peace agreement with the Polisario in Algeria, relinquishing its territorial claim in the Western Sahara in favor of the Polisario.<sup>32</sup> As a result of the Mauritanian withdrawal from its portion of the Sahara, the Polisario gained the opportunity to put larger forces of thousands of men into the field against the Moroccans alone and began to launch attacks on Morocco from bases located inside both Algeria and Mauritania.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Dougherty, p. 110.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>"Mauritania: Pact with Polisario," Africa Research Bulletin, XVI (August, 1979), 5379.

<sup>33</sup>Vicker, "Desert Struggle," p. 2.

The Polisario has been dependent upon Algeria to supply most of its financial and military needs, although it has also received weapons and monetary aid from Libya. Colonel Muammar Qaddafi has increased his military support to the Polisario since 1977, as a consequent of King Hassan's support of President Anwar El-Sadat's visit to Israel and his moderate policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, the Polisario has received financial support from various western European political parties, such as Germany's Social and Christian Democrats, France's socialist and communist parties, and others.

Despite the assistance that Qaddafi has given to the Polisario, Libya's influence upon the movement has remained insignificant because of geopolitical factors and the unstable relations between that nation and Algeria. On the other hand, the Polisario could not reject any of Algeria's wishes or proposals relating to its policies because, if it did so, it would cease to exist. No Polisario official has dared to oppose the stance of the Algerians toward the Western Sahara conflict; when the SADR's minister of the interior criticized the Algerian government, he was arrested by the Algerians and his fate remains unknown.<sup>34</sup> In addition to these facts, the

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<sup>34</sup>Price, p. 35.

testimony of Saharawis who escaped from the Polisario camps near Tindouf has also supported the contention that the Algerians exerted almost total control over the Polisario.

In a further step to legitimize the Polisario as the sole representative of the Saharawi people, on February 26, 1976, Algeria sponsored the declaration of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) government in exile. According to Mustafa El-Ouali, who was the chairman of the Polisario at that time, the ceremony was held near Bir Lahlou, a so-called "liberated territory" viewed as the provisional capital of the Western Sahara, just across the Algerian border,<sup>35</sup> but, in fact, the event took place near Tindouf inside Algeria. Reporters and foreign newsmen who were attending the ceremony could not verify the location because it took place late at night. Five days later, Moroccan officials escorted reporters and foreign newsmen to Bir Lahlou during the day, and they found no sign that any Polisario or SADR celebration had taken place in the village.<sup>36</sup>

On March 5, 1976, the Polisario announced the formation of the SADR government in exile. The first country to recognize the SADR was Madagascar, the second was Burundi, and Algeria was the third.<sup>37</sup> Algeria did not

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Saxena, p. 80.



recognize the SADR government immediately after its proclamation so that other nations would not view the SADR as an exclusively Algerian creation and an instrument of President Boumédiène's foreign policy. Subsequently, some small Leninist-Marxist African countries such as Angola, Bénin, and Ethiopia and a few communist countries also recognized the SADR and its government in exile.

In August of 1979, as noted above, the Mauritanian government withdrew from the Western Sahara conflict and demanded an end to the "unjust war." Mauritania's signing of a peace treaty with the Polisario enhanced the legitimacy of the latter and its SADR government, and, as a result, other countries began to recognize the SADR government in exile. In August of 1979, Libya recognized the SADR government as the sole representative of the Saharawi people and began to campaign for its recognition in many poor and communist countries. By September of 1982, the number of nations which had recognized the SADR government reached 53. Although no major power has appeared in this group, it does include some influential non-African countries such as Mexico, Venezuela (the last country to recognize the SADR), Vietnam, Cuba, and North Korea.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

In 1976, Algeria presented the Polisario to the OAU ministerial council in Addis Ababa as a nationalist liberation movement.<sup>39</sup> After that time, 26 African countries recognized the SADR government, but the SADR representatives attended only a few of the OAU meetings on the ministerial level because of Morocco's opposition to its participation in any OAU activities. In February of 1982, the SADR government was admitted to the OAU as the fifty-first member of the African organization by a simple majority vote of 26 nations,<sup>40</sup> but it still has not attended any OAU meetings because of the continued Moroccan rejection of its admission to the organization and the withdrawal of other countries supporting Morocco's position from any OAU meetings attended by SADR government representatives. On the European front, the SADR government entered into cordial relations with a number of socialist and conservative western political parties; delegates from Italy and West Germany's Social and Christian Democratic parties and other western European parties have attended the annual celebration of the SADR anniversary in Algeria every year.

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<sup>39</sup>"Morocco-Mauritania: Break with Algeria," Africa Research Bulletin, XIII (March, 1967), 3952.

<sup>40</sup>"The Secretary General of the OAU Admitted the SADR to the OAU," Asharq Al-Awsat [The Middle East], February 29, 1982, p. 1.

The Polisario's concentrated military campaigns against Mauritania during the period from 1976 to 1979 eventually caused that nation to relinquish its part of the Western Sahara and make peace with the Polisario. Because it focused its strikes primarily upon Mauritania during these years, the Polisario's guerilla raids on the Moroccan army in the Western Sahara were not successful. Therefore, after Mauritania's capitulation, from 1979 until the end of 1981, the Polisario conducted heavy attacks on the Moroccan army and the mining industries in the Western Sahara. In 1982, however, these attacks began to lose some of their effectiveness, partly as a result of Morocco's new strategy of massing its troops within main population centers protected by highly sensitive surveillance equipment placed atop sand walls; this equipment could detect Polisario activity--and any other movement in the desert--at a distance as great as 50 kilometers.<sup>41</sup>

Another reason for the decreased efficacy of the Polisario's military operations against Morocco might be the fear, based on increasing internal political opposition to the Algerian government, that Algeria will eventually abandon the movement and thus force it into dealings with Morocco. The Polisario's apprehensions in this regard were corroborated by evidence that Algeria and Morocco had been

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<sup>41</sup>"Western Sahara: Setback for Settlement," p. 6228.

engaged in ongoing secret negotiations since the beginning of 1981 in an attempt to bring an end to the Western Sahara conflict. Pursuant to these negotiations, Algeria allegedly reduced its military and financial support to the Polisario and restricted the movement of the Polisario within its borders. It has also been reliably reported that Algeria has diverted some of its arms shipments to the Polisario.<sup>42</sup>

In the spring of 1980, the Polisario agreed to the OAU "Wisemen Committee's" proposal--rejected by Morocco--of holding a referendum to determine the future of the Western Sahara. But in the summer of 1981, King Hassan reconsidered and accepted the proposal in a tactical move to stop the admission of the Polisario to the OAU and to relieve the condition of international isolation into which Morocco had fallen because of its unsuccessful diplomacy in the Western Sahara conflict. The Polisario was surprised by this unexpected reversal of Morocco's position on the referendum and, as a consequence, announced that the vote must be carried out according to its own conditions. These conditions were as follows:

- (1) direct negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario,
- (2) total withdrawal of all Moroccan troops from the Western Sahara to pre-1975 borders, (3) withdrawal of

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 6229.

the Moroccan administration from the Western Sahara, (4) the return of the Saharawis alleged to be in Tindouf to the Western Sahara in order to participate in the referendum, and (5) establishment of a provisional international administration by the UN and the OAU in coordination with the SADR government.<sup>43</sup>

On one hand, it could be surmised that the Polisario for all practical purposes actually rejected the OAU resolution and that a referendum would never take place in the Western Sahara because none of these conditions could be fulfilled, especially since Morocco did not recognize the existence of the Polisario. On the other hand, Algeria, the main backer of the Polisario, welcomed Morocco's acceptance of the referendum, considering it to be a constructive step toward achieving comprehensive peace in the region.<sup>44</sup> Algeria's approval of the Moroccan position on the question of the referendum was opposed to the Polisario's stated conditions, and this was the first known instance in which such a contradiction occurred between the policies of Algeria and the Polisario

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<sup>43</sup>"Conclusive Referendum Raises Hope for Peace," Africa Research Bulletin, XVIII (July, 1981), 6118.

<sup>44</sup>"Western Sahara Referendum," Africa Research Bulletin, XVIII (June, 1981), 6068.

on the future of the Western Sahara. Two possible interpretations could be assigned to this break between the Polisario and Algeria. First, it might be an indication of Algeria's future abandonment of the Polisario, in response to which the Polisario was trying to prove to the Algerians that it had become strong enough to resist any further pressure. One piece of evidence supporting this view was that, in October of 1981, the Polisario staged a major attack on a Moroccan village in the Western Sahara, using tanks and SAM missiles. This attack was launched not from Algeria but from Mauritania, where the Polisario had established a number of bases since 1979.<sup>45</sup> The second view of the Algeria-Polisario split on the issue of the Western Sahara referendum is that the scenario was pre-arranged in order to foster the impression that the Polisario was an independent movement rather than merely a mouthpiece and puppet of Algeria.

Since 1976, the Polisario sought to build a nationalist political awareness on behalf of the SADR, especially among Saharawi refugees living in camps in and around Tindouf.<sup>46</sup> But, despite that fact, the future of the Polisario and the Western Sahara conflict remains primarily in the hands of Moroccan and Algerian leaders.

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<sup>45</sup>"Western Sahara: Setback for Settlement," p. 6228.

<sup>46</sup>Dougherty, p. 100.

## Algeria

Algeria's position on the Western Sahara is based on its historical sympathy for national liberation movements throughout the world and in Africa in particular and upon its general commitment to the principle of self-determination.<sup>47</sup> Algeria supported the UN's 1966 resolution concerning self-determination for the Western Sahara until 1972, when, after signing the Telmesan Agreement with Morocco, it shifted its position to one endorsing the Moroccan claim. In the seventh Arab summit at Rabat, Morocco in 1974, Algeria's President Boumédiène told the Arab leaders that, if Mauritania and Morocco were to "adopt a formula for an accord between their countries to undertake the liberation [of the Sahara] and delimit what will be the Moroccan zone and the Mauritanian zone, I will be one of the first to approve."<sup>48</sup>

In 1975, the Algerian government again shifted its position from supporting Morocco's claim to supporting the self-determination solution to the Western Sahara question. One reason for this change was that President Boumédiène felt deceived after the signing of the Madrid Accord between Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain, without any

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<sup>47</sup>U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, p. 59.

<sup>48</sup>Price, p. 23.

consultation with Algeria. As a consequence, Boumédiène fostered the organization of the Polisario and granted it a temporary homeland in Tindouf in order to destabilize and obtain revenge upon the parties to the Madrid Accord, especially Morocco and Mauritania. He also arranged the announcement of the SADR government in exile in Algeria and was one of the first leaders to recognize it as the sole representative of the Saharawi people. Three motives lay behind Boumédiène's action of granting the Polisario a temporary homeland in Algeria. The first was political. During the "Sand War" in 1963 between Morocco and Algeria, Boumédiène was the commander of the defeated Algerian forces. In 1965, he became the president of Algeria after a successful military coup, and, from that time until his death in late 1978, he repeatedly attempted to obtain revenge for that defeat on Morocco and on King Hassan in particular. Under Algerian sponsorship, the reorganization of the Polisario and its employment of guerilla warfare tactics could destroy Hassan's rule in Morocco or at least weaken Morocco's strength in the region and allow Algeria to assume the preeminent position in northwest Africa. Professor William Zartman of New York University stated to the Congressional Subcommittee on African Affairs,



Algeria's discussion of this issue is frequently in terms of the balance in the area, and they see the Moroccan annexation of part of the Sahara with its phosphate . . . as a threat to Algeria's predominance in the region and the basis of a dangerously strong Moroccan government.<sup>49</sup>

Boumédiénne's second reason for withdrawing his support from Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara was economic. An independent Saharawi state in the Sahara would be completely dependent upon Algeria, and Algeria would gain control over the Boucraa phosphate in the territory because the Saharawi government would not have enough technicians and skilled workers to exploit the land's mineral resources. Algeria would also save millions of dollars that it was currently spending to transport iron ore and other resources from Tindouf to the Algerian ports on the Mediterranean in the north. By creating an independent state in the Western Sahara, the Algerians would accomplish their dream of gaining access to the Atlantic ports of Laayon and Dakhla for future transport of iron ore from Tindouf.<sup>50</sup>

The third and weakest motive for Boumédiénne's second shift in position on the Western Sahara question was ideological. As revolutionaries, the Algerian leaders were opposed to the conservative monarchy in Morocco and worked

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<sup>49</sup>U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, p. 32.

<sup>50</sup>Price, p. 23.

to destabilize it in order to bring about its downfall. Furthermore, as revolutionaries the Algerians committed themselves to aid all the liberation movements in the world and in Africa in particular. Since the Polisario was formed as a liberation movement, the Algerians were obliged to assist it in achieving its goals.

At the conclusion of a major battle between Moroccan and Algerian forces at Amgala in the Western Sahara, about 180 miles from the Algerian frontier, on January 16, 1976, the Moroccans defeated the Algerians and won control over the Western Sahara.<sup>51</sup> The Algerians claimed that their troops were on a mercy mission "taking supplies to the Saharan refugees."<sup>52</sup> After the cessation of the fighting, however, Moroccan officials took foreign newsmen and reporters to the scene and exhibited large quantities of captured weapons from the Algerians such as land mines made in China, mortars, SAM 7 missiles, and various types of Soviet munitions.<sup>53</sup> The Algerians believed that, by sending their army to the Western Sahara, they could capture part of the territory and declare the creation of an independent state under the leadership of the Polisario, but the defeat of the Algerian army at the hands of the

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<sup>51</sup>"Spanish Sahara: Spain Pulls Out," Africa Research Bulletin, XIII (February, 1976), 3942.

<sup>52</sup>Price, p. 32.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

Moroccans at Amgala forced them to reorganize the Polisario and grant it a base of operations inside Algeria from which it could conduct its hit-and-run attacks against the Moroccan troops in the Western Sahara.

Since 1976, Algeria's domestic circumstances have become increasingly unstable because of rising political opposition, poor economic conditions, and the country's continuing dispute with Morocco over the Western Sahara. In March of 1976, the opposition leaders in Algeria published a manifesto entitled "New Appeal to the Algerian People," blaming Algeria's unhealthy economy on the government's socialist approach in the administration of the country's affairs.<sup>54</sup> The opposition also accused President Boumédiène of creating a foreign adventure in the Western Sahara to distract attention from deteriorating economic conditions at home. Algeria's state factories were operating at only 30 to 60 per cent of capacity, and funds allocated for development were being wasted.<sup>55</sup> The socialist enterprise of the cooperative villages failed, and agricultural output was not sufficient to supply domestic consumption. Algeria formerly purchased many agricultural products from Morocco to offset this internal

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>55</sup>Vicker, "Mini-War," p. 12.

shortage, but in 1976 that source of foodstuffs was cut off when Morocco stopped all exports to Algeria.

After the death of President Boumédiène in 1978, the Moroccan government stated that a meeting had been planned in Brussels between him and King Hassan to discuss a resolution to the Western Sahara conflict.<sup>56</sup> The Algerian government denied this claim and refused to permit the official representatives of the Moroccan government to attend Boumédiène's funeral.<sup>57</sup> In 1979, Algeria's Liberation Front Party elected Shadely Bengadid as the nation's new president. He was a moderate and western-oriented leader who improved Algeria's relations with the United States, France, Italy, and other western countries. He also confronted many internal problems such as the Berber riots against Algeria's Arabization efforts and the long neglect of their provinces by Boumédiène.<sup>58</sup>

In the past few years Algeria's support of the Polisario has been significantly reduced from its 1975-1978 level. At the end of 1978, Algeria began to consider a political solution to the Western Sahara conflict and suggested direct negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario, viewing this as the only means of ending the dispute.

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<sup>56</sup>"Western Sahara: Fighting Escalates as Repercussions Grow," p. 5142.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Price, p. 57.

Algeria's decreased interest in the Polisario began four months before President Boumédiène's death. In October of 1978, King Hassan of Morocco sent a letter to Boumédiène protesting an Algerian ambush of Moroccan troops within the Western Sahara. Instead of ignoring the letter, which was the manner in which all of the king's previous protests had been treated, Boumédiène responded to it, denying the involvement of any Algerian troops in the ambush and declaring that there were no contentious issues between Algeria and Morocco.<sup>59</sup> Another indicator of Algeria's lowered interest in the Polisario movement occurred on the occasion of the Polisario's fifth anniversary celebration; Algeria sent only a low-level official to represent it at the event.<sup>60</sup> Algerian resentment of the Polisario's refusal to consent to any resolution of the Western Sahara conflict has increased, and at the present time the Algerian government is convinced that no Algerian would go to war with Morocco on behalf of the Polisario.

The present leadership in Algeria is completely different from that of the Boumédiène regime. It is facing strong internal political opposition, and recently government officials have discovered that their ally Libya is supporting those opposition forces, especially the "Ben

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Bella Group," with money and weapons.<sup>61</sup> Algerian leaders are attempting to rebuild the nation's economy after the failure of Boumédiène's socialist policies, and they need stability in the surrounding region in order to concentrate their efforts upon overcoming the opposition and bringing about economic recovery. The best way for Algeria to achieve these goals is to negotiate with Morocco, and Morocco is now more than ever willing to participate in such negotiations, ratify the 1972 border agreement, and grant Algeria access to the Atlantic. After the Moroccans agreed to the holding of a referendum on the Western Sahara question, Algeria entered into secret negotiations with Morocco to seek an end to the costly Western Sahara dispute.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, if relations between Algeria and Morocco continue to improve, a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict could be reached in the foreseeable future.

#### Mauritania

Mauritania's position on the Western Sahara originally derived from President Mokhtar Ould Daddah's vision of a greater Mauritanian reunification of similar people in a

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<sup>61</sup>"Some African Countries Concerned about Holding the OAU Summit in Tripoli, Libya," Asharq Al-Awsat [The Middle East], October 31, 1982, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup>"Western Sahara: Setback for Settlement," p. 6228.

geographically compact state.<sup>63</sup> Mauritania is a poor, backward country whose total population is only 1.5 million in a land area of more than 400,000 square miles. Until 1960, when Mauritania gained its independence, it had no previous history as a nation-state. It was inhabited by tribes from Arabic, Berber, and African origins. From 1960 until 1969, Morocco viewed Mauritania as part of the old Moroccan Empire, but during the Islamic conference at Rabat in the latter year it recognized Mauritania as an independent political entity.

In 1975, Mauritania joined Morocco in signing the Madrid Accord with Spain, in which Mauritania annexed the southern part of the Western Sahara. From 1976 until 1978, the Polisario concentrated its attacks on Mauritania because it was politically, economically, and militarily weaker than Morocco;<sup>64</sup> the guerillas operated easily within Mauritania's borders and its sector of the Western Sahara, Tiris El-Gharbia. Between 1976 and 1978, the Polisario destroyed more than 150 freight-carrying iron ore vehicles from the Zouerate mines over the length of 650 kilometers on the rail link with the port at Nouadhibou, as well as carrying out intensive attacks on the Zouerate mines

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<sup>63</sup>U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, p. 135.

<sup>64</sup>Dougherty, p. 101.

themselves,<sup>65</sup> thus cutting off Mauritania's principal source of revenue. As a result of these heavy Polisario attacks and the general weakness of the Mauritanian army, President Ould Daddah signed a military assistance agreement with Morocco in May of 1977,<sup>66</sup> in which Morocco committed itself to send between 7,000 and 10,000 Moroccan troops to Mauritania in order to protect the mining industry at Zouerate.

Nevertheless, the expense of Mauritania's war with the Polisario was escalating, the country's economic condition was deteriorating due to a long drought, and the operation of the mining industry had been halted because of the Polisario's attacks. All of these factors helped to undermine the position of President Ould Daddah. Therefore, on July 10, 1978, a group of moderate military officers led by Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Ould Salek seized power in Mauritania in a bloodless military coup.<sup>67</sup> Later, as head of the "Military Committee of National Correction," Colonel Ould Salek, who later became the president of Mauritania, revealed the reasons for the coup. The first and most important impetus was the skyrocketing war costs, which had almost bankrupted the nation; by the end of 1977, Mauritania's external debt had reached \$467 million, and, by April of 1978, the Daddah government found it difficult

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Osman, p. 13.

<sup>67</sup>Price, p. 45.



even to pay its army wages and civil service salaries.<sup>68</sup> Another reason which motivated the military takeover was fear of the Moroccan army's presence on Mauritanian soil, based on Morocco's previous claim on Mauritania as part of the Moroccan Empire.

In response to the military coup in Mauritania, which was viewed by Algeria and the Polisario as a positive step toward resolving the conflict in the Western Sahara, the Polisario immediately declared a cease-fire with Mauritania in order to give the new leaders a chance to open negotiations and withdraw from Tiris El-Gharbia.<sup>69</sup> After learning of the wish of the new Mauritanian regime to make peace with the Polisario, Moroccan leaders warned that they would accept no settlement that posed a threat to their territorial integrity. King Hassan carefully supported Mauritania's desire for peace, but he declared that he would not tolerate along his borders a regime whose ideology differed from that of Morocco and Mauritania.<sup>70</sup>

The new leaders of Mauritania faced a dilemma. On one hand, they could not make peace with the Polisario because this would lead to a change in their national frontier and would violate the 1977 defense agreement with Morocco.

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, p. 136.

<sup>70</sup>Price, p. 46.

On the other hand, they could not afford to reject a ceasefire and continue the costly war with the Polisario guerillas.<sup>71</sup> As a result of these strong conflicting pressures, Mauritania's military leaders suggested an international settlement of the conflict among the concerned parties--Algeria, Morocco, and the Polisario. The Salek regime appeared to be more independent than its predecessor in dealing with Moroccan coercion. In September of 1979, the Mauritanian minister of foreign affairs said, "The Polisario is a reality which we recognize," although to appease Morocco, which regarded the Polisario guerillas as Algerian mercenaries, he stated, ". . . perhaps not as exclusive representative, but we know that it exists and that it has a role to play in the process of peace."<sup>72</sup>

The military government in Mauritania continued its ambiguous policy toward the Western Sahara. At the suggestion of Libya's Colonel Qaddafi, who had granted Mauritania financial aid to alleviate its economic difficulties and reduce its dependence on Morocco, Mauritanian leaders entered into secret negotiations with the Polisario in Paris and Mali in September and October of 1978.<sup>73</sup> Yet, in

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>"Western Sahara: Fighting Escalates as Repercussions Grow," p. 5142.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

December of 1978, Mauritania joined Morocco in the United Nations to vote against the resolution reaffirming the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination and independence. Then, only a month later, in a contradictory move exemplifying the confusion of the Mauritanian government at that time, President Ould Salek announced that a referendum could be held in Tiris El-Gharbia if the Polisario agreed to it and if a global solution to the Sahara crisis could not be found. In an interview with Le Monde, Ould Salek said regarding this proposed referendum, "We are ready to submit ourselves to the results of such a consultation. We do not reject the hypothesis of leaving [Tiris El-Gharbia] if the referendum results demand it."<sup>74</sup>

The Polisario rejected the proposal of holding a referendum in only one section of the Western Sahara because its goal was to gain independence for both parts of the territory. The Polisario also feared that a referendum held under Mauritanian auspices would have an outcome unfavorable to its cause because of Mauritanian pressure on the inhabitants of Tiris El-Gharbia to vote to remain under Mauritanian sovereignty.<sup>75</sup> Morocco reacted to the Mauritanian call for a referendum by withdrawing some of its troops from Mauritania, notably those stationed near mining complexes, and relocating them in its section of

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 5143.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

the Western Sahara. Morocco assumed that, after the withdrawal of these troops from Mauritania, the Polisario would be encouraged to renew its heavy attacks there, and, as a result, Mauritania would again be forced to call on Morocco for help and would terminate its peace negotiations with the Polisario. In fact, however, this did not occur, and Mauritania continued its talks with the Polisario with the help and encouragement of Qaddafi. Moroccan-Mauritanian relations then began to deteriorate, and on August 5, 1979, Mauritania signed a peace agreement with the Polisario in Algeria.<sup>76</sup> In this treaty, later known as the Algiers Agreement, Mauritania made the following affirmations.

1. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania does not and would not have any territorial or other claims in the Western Sahara.
2. Decided to withdraw permanently from the unjust war of the Western Sahara following the understanding arrived at with the representatives of the Saharawi nation and the Polisario front.<sup>77</sup>

The details of the Algiers Agreement were not disclosed until March 17, 1980, when Algeria published some of its provisions.<sup>78</sup> Under the terms of the agreement, Mauritania was required to relinquish its share of the Sahara to the Polisario, but a period of six months was

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<sup>76</sup>"Mauritania: Pact with Polisario," p. 5381.

<sup>77</sup>Osman, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

allowed for the withdrawal of all Mauritanian forces from the area. Morocco regarded this agreement as invalid and reacted very quickly to it by ordering its troops stationed inside Mauritania to seize the region immediately and prevent the Polisario from moving into it to establish its state.

As a result of these concessions to the Polisario, Mauritania received substantial financial support from Libya and its mining industry resumed operations without disruption from Polisario guerillas. The political consequences of the Algiers Agreement have been beneficial for the Polisario; its legitimacy on the international front was enhanced, and it was recognized by many countries, especially other African nations.

After signing the Algiers Agreement the Polisario moved some of its bases from Algeria and Mauritania and began to conduct heavy raids on Moroccan military positions in the deep Sahara. As a result, for the past two years Morocco has leveled its accusations regarding Polisario attacks in the Sahara at Mauritania rather than Algeria. Morocco is also seeking to provide means by which Algeria can modify its position on the Western Sahara without diplomatic "loss of face" in an effort to end that nation's support of the Polisario.<sup>79</sup> This reduced

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<sup>79</sup>"Mauritania: Attempted Coup Crushed," Africa Research Bulletin, XVIII (March, 1981), 5995.

Algerian support has made Libya the major arms supplier for the Polisario guerillas. In October of 1982, during the Polisario's annual congress held in Tindouf, Algeria did not prevent the hard-liners, backed by Libya, from taking over the leadership of the movement in a military coup and ousting the soft-liners, who supported a negotiated settlement of the conflict in the Western Sahara.<sup>80</sup> This event could be regarded as proof of secret collaboration between Algeria and Morocco to drive the Polisario to Mauritania. If this is accomplished, the basis for a solution to the Western Sahara conflict could be found in the not-too-distant future.

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<sup>80</sup>"Some African Countries Concerned," p. 3.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE POSITIONS OF THE INTERESTED PARTIES

#### Spain

In 1974, the illness of Generalissimo Franco and the political upheaval and disorder in Portugal resulting from the Angolan war and the Portuguese presence in Africa prompted Spain to agree to withdraw its troops from the Western Sahara and hold a referendum in the area.<sup>1</sup> The question was whether Spain wished to grant independence to the Sahara or divide it between Morocco and Mauritania. Because of Moroccan pressure on the Spanish government, Spain entered into negotiations with Morocco and Mauritania in mid-1975 concerning the future of the Western Sahara. On November 14, 1975, as stated earlier in this paper, Spain signed the Madrid Accord with Morocco and Mauritania to divide the territory between the latter two nations. Spain ceded the Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania not because it could not protect the territory from Moroccan military action but because of pressure from members of the Franco family and some of their friends, who

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<sup>1</sup>James E. Dougherty, "The Polisario Insurgency: War and Minuet in North-West Africa," Conflict, II, No. 2 (1980), 95.

argued that giving the Western Sahara to Morocco would protect Spain's interests and would persuade Morocco to postpone its inevitable demand for the return of the Spanish enclaves, Ceuta and Mellelia, in the northern region of Morocco.<sup>2</sup> Spanish military officers in the Western Sahara, however, supported the idea of granting independence to the area under the leadership of the Polisario because they viewed Morocco as their natural enemy.<sup>3</sup>

Following the signing of the Madrid Accord between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania, Spain promised to withdraw all of its troops from the Western Sahara and end its colonial presence there by February 28, 1976,<sup>4</sup> but the Spanish withdrawal from the Western Sahara did not end the conflict over the future of the region. The Polisario and its principal backer, Algeria, rejected the Madrid Accord and the division of the territory between Morocco and Mauritania and launched attacks on Moroccan and Mauritanian troops in the Sahara from bases within Algeria. From 1976 until 1978, Polisario guerillas attacked the Spanish fishing fleet off the coast of the Western Sahara, killing and abducting many Spanish fishermen.<sup>5</sup> Spain

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>4</sup>"Spanish Sahara: Spain Pulls Out," Africa Research Bulletin, XIII (February, 1976), 3942.

<sup>5</sup>David Lynn Price, The Western Sahara, The Washington Papers, No. 63 (Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 58.



asked Algeria to stop these attacks and demanded the return of all the abducted fishermen, but Algerian leaders replied that the Polisario was an independent movement that was not subject to their authority or control.<sup>6</sup> Spain, of course, was not satisfied by Algeria's claim and deployed two frigates to protect its fishing fleet in the area.

In 1976, the Algerian government contacted the leaders of the Canary Islands Liberation Movement (MPAIAC), led by Antonio Cubillo.<sup>7</sup> The Algerians granted Cubillo a radio station to broadcast anti-Spanish programs to the people of the Canary Islands, provided financial support, and promised to represent MPAIAC to the OAU as a liberation movement in order to secure formal recognition for it from other African countries.<sup>8</sup> These actions were part of Algeria's strategy to place pressure on Spain to force it to denounce the Madrid Accord and recognize the Polisario as the sole representative of the Saharawi people.

During 1977 and 1978, the opposition of the Spanish public and the nation's socialist and communist parties to the Madrid Accord increased. The former secretary general of the Sahara, Colonel Luis Rodriguez de Viguri, accused some friends of the Franco family of being responsible for Spain's "incomprehensible" decision to withdraw from the Western Sahara without holding a referendum to allow the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Dougherty, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

inhabitants their right to self-determination.<sup>9</sup> The Spanish Socialist Party claimed that Morocco and Mauritania were to be allowed to take over only the territory's administration, not its sovereignty, and called on the Spanish government to renounce the Madrid Accord or to insist on a referendum in the Western Sahara.<sup>10</sup>

By mid-1978, Algeria's strategy of placing pressure upon Spain, augmented by a change in the Spanish political system from dictatorship to democracy with the death of Franco, appeared to be working. The Central Democratic Union (CDU), the ruling party in Spain, recognized the Polisario as the sole representative of the Saharawi people, and the Polisario released the Spanish fishermen who were being held as prisoners around Tindouf in Algeria. Then, in September of 1978, the CDU sent a representative to attend the Polisario's fourth congress in Tindouf.<sup>11</sup> In order not to embarrass the CDU representative, Algeria and the Polisario did not invite the leaders of MPAIAC, who were calling for the independence of the Canary Islands, in response to the CDU's recognition of the Polisario.

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<sup>9</sup>"Western Sahara," Africa Report, XXIII (May-June, 1978), 35.

<sup>10</sup>Joe Gandleman, "West Sahara Turmoil Spills into Spanish Politics," The Christian Science Monitor, February 15, 1978, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup>"Morocco-Mauritania: Polisario Congress," Africa Research Bulletin, XV (October, 1978), 5016.

The Moroccan government strongly protested the CDU's action, although Morocco's leaders did not ask that Spain withdraw from Ceuta and Mellelia.<sup>12</sup> Political parties in Morocco accused the CDU of submitting to Algerian blackmail to obtain the release of the imprisoned Spanish fishermen. Noting that no Moroccan political party had ever recognized the anti-Spanish MPAIAC or Basque movements, they saw no justification for the CDU's recognition of Morocco's enemies.<sup>13</sup> The Spanish government informed the Moroccan leaders that the attendance of the CDU representative, Xavier Ruporez, at the Polisario congress was necessary to secure the release of eight imprisoned Spanish fishermen.<sup>14</sup> The Spanish statement that the actions of the CDU did not represent Spanish government policy did little to appease the angry Moroccan press, although at the formal level the Moroccan government accepted the official Spanish explanation. As of the end of 1982, the Spanish government had not yet recognized the Polisario because it did not wish to provoke the Moroccans to demand a change in the status of the Spanish enclaves at Ceuta and Mellelia.

The main reason that compelled the CDU ruling party to recognize the Polisario was not the return of the eight fishermen abducted by the Polisario guerillas but, rather,

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 5017.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 5016.

the OAU's threat to recognize the Canary Islands Liberation Movement at the request of the Algerian government in the summer of 1978.<sup>15</sup> The CDU party leaders were aware of the strategic importance of the Canary Islands in the Cape route; the CDU congress in 1978 reaffirmed its support for Spain's membership in NATO, and the Canary Islands would constitute an important bargaining card for Spain's entry into that organization.<sup>16</sup> The Islands were also very important to France because French military aircraft used them en route to Senegal. In addition, in 1975, Spain built a major military airport at Tenerife, and the United States Navy maintained a submarine base at Punte de Tero;<sup>17</sup> it was suggested in the Spanish press that the Canaries might someday become a Spanish-American base for Trident submarines, and the key U.S. installation at Kinetra, Morocco, which monitored Soviet naval activities in the Mediterranean and the South Atlantic, was also linked to the Canary network. Thus, the CDU's decision to recognize the Polisario in order to persuade Algeria to terminate its support of MPAIAC was directly linked to the importance of the Canary Islands to Spain's military and diplomatic welfare.

By establishing cordial relations with Morocco, Spain has secured the status of Ceuta and Mellelia as Spanish

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<sup>15</sup>Dougherty, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

provinces, at least until it resolves the problem of Gibraltar with Great Britain. Spain continues to be concerned with the future of the Western Sahara because of its various interests in the region. Spain cannot exert strong leverage on Morocco and Algeria because of its weak standing on the issue of the Moroccan enclaves and its dependence on Algerian oil and natural gas, but, nonetheless, it is encouraging negotiations between Morocco and Algeria to settle the Western Sahara conflict.

#### France

As the most important colonial power in Africa, France maintains a substantial economic and political interest in northwest Africa. At the beginning of the Western Sahara conflict, France adopted a policy supportive of Morocco and Mauritania against Algeria. On February 2, 1976, in an interview with Le Monde, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing stated that he was opposed to the "multiplication of micro-states," adding that "the Western Sahara had too small a population to support the apparatus of a modern state."<sup>18</sup>

Although in the past France was Morocco's and Mauritania's major economic partner, the United States was the

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<sup>18</sup>"Western Sahara: French Prisoners Released," Africa Research Bulletin, XIV (December, 1977), 4691.

largest supplier of arms to Morocco. Between 1976 and 1978, however, France took over that role as well because of the United States' refusal to sell weapons to Morocco so that they would not be deployed in the Western Sahara conflict; the French government sold Morocco 50 Mirage F-1 jet fighters, 24 Fouga fighters, 40 Puma helicopters, \$200 million worth of Crotale anti-aircraft missiles, and other weapons to replace the United States as Morocco's primary arms supplier.<sup>19</sup> France's support of Morocco and Mauritania in the Western Sahara war during the period between 1976 and 1978 was, to a large extent, a reflection of its deteriorating political and economic relations with Algeria. The French had lost most of its share of Algeria's oil and mineral resources and construction contracts to American and Japanese firms at the beginning of the 1970s,<sup>20</sup> and, as a radical revolutionary regime, the Algerian government opposed the French presence in Africa, especially in Chad.

From the beginning of the Western Sahara conflict, the Polisario, encouraged by Algeria, attempted to coerce France to recognize it by killing and abducting French workers in the mining complexes in Mauritania and the Western Sahara. Yet, unlike Spain, France did not succumb

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<sup>19</sup>Dougherty, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

to this pressure; on the contrary, it retaliated through military action. When France granted independence to Mauritania in 1962, it also gave the nation military protection.<sup>21</sup> In 1977, the Polisario intensified its raids on the mining complex at Zouerate in Mauritania and abducted eight French nationals.<sup>22</sup> Instead of giving in to the Polisario, France, after consulting with the governments of Morocco and Mauritania, which had requested French assistance, as well as that of Senegal, decided to intervene directly in the war and expelled eight Polisario members from France. France then reinforced its base in Senegal and sent troops to Mauritania. In December of 1977, France ordered its pilots to carry on air strikes against the Polisario, using twin-engined Jaguars against the guerilla columns in northern Mauritania.<sup>23</sup>

On December 23, 1977, the Polisario freed the eight kidnapped French nationals from its camps in Algeria.<sup>24</sup> The Polisario gained no concessions in return for this release and in fact claimed that, on December 14 and 15, French war planes had attacked its guerilla columns and intervened in a battle between the Polisario and the Mauritanian army on Mauritanian territory. France denied the Polisario's allegation but issued vague and contradictory

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<sup>21</sup>"Western Sahara: French Prisoners Released," p. 4688.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.      <sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 4688.      <sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 4691.

statements that neither confirmed nor denied its activity in the Western Sahara conflict.<sup>25</sup> Not until the eight abducted French nationals had been safely returned did the French foreign ministry acknowledge that "French planes stationed in Senegal had been involved in two recent engagements with Polisario guerillas in Mauritania."<sup>26</sup>

The main objectives of the French intervention in the Western Sahara war were to support the Mauritanian government, to foster its own interests in the region, and to protect its nationals who were working in the Western Sahara mines. France sought to block the Polisario's strategy of vanquishing Mauritania, gaining control of its section of the Sahara, and isolating Morocco. The French also wished to strengthen the position of King Hassan of Morocco, who was an important supporter of western policies in Africa and who served the interests of western countries in general and those of France in particular, and, at the same time, to force Algeria to reduce its support of the Polisario and other radical movements in Africa.<sup>27</sup>

The French failed to achieve any of these objectives, however, because of strong Algerian retaliation to its military involvement in Mauritania; the Algerian government accused France of "duplicity, neo-colonialism, and

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 4689.    <sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 4688.    <sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 4691.



imperialism"<sup>28</sup> and increased its support of the Polisario. Algeria's internal conditions in late 1977 and early 1978 were unstable as the result of labor strikes, increasing unemployment, and rising inflation. Therefore, the Algerian government exaggerated its account of the French military action against the Polisario in order to shift the Algerian people's attention from their troubled domestic situation to external events. The Algerian government also established economic sanctions against France, stopping all exports and restricting imports, in order to reduce the country's dependence on French goods.<sup>29</sup>

During 1978, the French position on the Western Sahara underwent a significant change. One of the reasons for this change was Algerian Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika's visit to Paris in July of 1978. Another reason was the military coup in Mauritania, which had a significant impact on all of the parties in the conflict.<sup>30</sup> The third reason was France's desire to benefit economically from the United States' decision to halve its projected purchases of Algerian liquefied natural gas and crude oil by regaining Algeria as a major trading partner. This goal was achieved for France when, in January of 1979, Algeria signed a massive billion-dollar

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<sup>28</sup>Price, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

contract with a Franco-Italian consortium for the construction of a third natural gas liquefaction plant complex at Arzeu.<sup>31</sup>

With the election of a socialist government in 1981, France changed its policies toward the African nations and adopted a more neutral role in the Western Sahara conflict. France is now pursuing improved relations with Morocco and Algeria and is assuming the role of mediator between the two countries because of the personal friendship of President Mitterand with King Hassan of Morocco and President Bengadid of Algeria. With the cooperation of the Moroccan and Algerian leaders, France is seeking a solution that will be acceptable to both parties in order to end the costly war in the Western Sahara.

#### The Soviet Union

Although the Soviet Union is considered by some Third World Countries to be the primary supporter of numerous national liberation movements throughout the world, it has not become involved in the Western Sahara conflict because of its significant economic interest in Morocco. The Soviet Union has sought to acquire a share of Morocco's phosphate resources because of the small quantity and

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<sup>31</sup>"Western Sahara: Fighting Escalates as Repercussions Grow," Africa Research Bulletin, XVI (January, 1979), 5144.

poor location of its own phosphate deposits in the Kola peninsula and the Kara Tau area of southern Kazakhstan.<sup>32</sup> After 1975, the Soviet Union was the second largest supplier of oil to Morocco after Iraq and the major purchaser of Morocco's phosphate. In 1974, the Soviet Union concluded a five-billion-dollar agreement with Morocco for the supply of five million tons of Moroccan phosphate,<sup>33</sup> and in the spring of 1978 the Soviet Union signed a twenty-year cooperation agreement with Morocco for the exploitation of phosphate deposits at Maskala; the latter negotiation was characterized by King Hassan as "the contract of the century."<sup>34</sup> The cooperation agreement, which included a Soviet investment of two billion dollars in a phosphate mine at Maskala in the southern area of Morocco, is said to be the largest ever signed by the Soviet Union with any African country.<sup>35</sup> According to the terms of the agreement, the Russians were required to build and equip the phosphate mines at Maskala and to build a railway linking the mines to a new port at Al-Souira.<sup>36</sup> By Moroccan stipulation, the agreement was to be reviewed every five years; the Moroccans added this condition to

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<sup>32</sup>Price, p. 64.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Suresh C. Saxena, The Liberation War in Western Sahara (New Delhi, Vidya Publishers, 1981), p. 93.

<sup>36</sup>Price, p. 65.

the contract to deter the possibility of increased future support of the Polisario by the Soviets.

The Soviet Union supported Algeria economically and militarily during the 1960s because the Algerian leaders were guiding their nation according to socialist principles and because they were in sympathy with various other national liberation movements in Africa. Since the beginning of the 1970s, however, notably following the 1973 conference of non-aligned nations, Algeria opened its doors to western firms--with which the Russians could not compete--because of the backwardness of Soviet technology and because of the failure of socialist governmental practices and policies in Algeria, especially in the agricultural sector. Despite this shift in Algeria's stance toward the west, the Soviet Union has continued to maintain a military and ideological commitment to the nation in order to balance its economic agreements with Morocco. During the 1960s, the Soviet Union was the major supplier of arms to Algeria, approximately 1,700 Russian advisors were working in the Algerian air force, and hundreds of others were employed in the country's other military forces.<sup>37</sup>

During Boumédiène's presidency, Algerian officials at high levels lobbied in the Soviet Union to secure Russian

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

recognition of the Polisario, but the Soviets refused to acquiesce to this Algerian persuasion. It appeared that the Soviets' urgent need for Moroccan phosphate was more important than recognizing the Polisario as a nationalist movement, for such a recognition by the Russians would have jeopardized their economic position in Morocco. The Russian refusal to recognize the Polisario was not surprising because in the past the Soviet Union had sacrificed other communist parties and guerilla movements in favor of its own interests.

The Soviet Union maintained a circumspect position in its interactions with the two key parties to the Western Sahara conflict. It supported the 1966 UN resolution advocating self-determination for the Saharawi people but did not recognize the Polisario as the sole representative of the Saharawis. Similarly, the Soviets did not acknowledge Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara but did recognize the Moroccan administration in the territory. The cautious policy of the Soviets is illustrated in a joint communiqué issued after President Boumédiène's visit to Russia in 1978, in which both Algeria and the Soviet Union spoke in "support for the earliest possible peaceful settlement of the Western Sahara problems through the exercise of the principle of self-determination by

the people of the territory in accordance with the UN resolution."<sup>38</sup>

#### The United States

The United States has long had political and strategic interests in Morocco, its ally in northwest Africa, dating back as far as December 20, 1777, when Morocco was the first country to grant de facto recognition to the new republic of the United States.<sup>39</sup> Morocco has been important to the west in general and to the United States in particular in Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean for several reasons. First, Morocco's location on both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic places it in a controlling position of the southern side of the Straits of Gibraltar, which is vital to U.S. interests. Second, King Hassan has taken a moderate position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and he was the first Arab leader to publicly express approval of President Sadat's trip to Israel. The king has also opposed Soviet and Cuban intervention in Africa and has consistently supported moderate political forces on the continent. Third, Morocco continues to permit port visits by U.S. naval vessels and to allow U.S. military aircraft to use Moroccan

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ray Vicker, "The Mini-War in the Sahara," Wall Street Journal, July 26, 1976, p. 12.

air bases en route to their destinations in the Middle East and other countries.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the United States is one of the largest importers of Moroccan phosphate and is Morocco's major arms supplier at the present time.<sup>41</sup>

The relationship of Algeria and the United States has been steadily improving since their resumption of diplomatic relations in 1974. Economic ties between the two nations are of great importance, and the U.S. is Algeria's largest trading partner; Algeria supplies the United States with about 9 per cent of its crude oil imports, and American firms have won contracts totaling approximately six billion dollars for engineering and construction services in Algeria since 1975.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the United States negotiated an extensive contract for liquefied natural gas with Algeria in 1975, but in 1978 the U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission became concerned about America's heavy dependence upon a single source with close military and political ties with the Soviet Union. Consequently, the Commission refused to approve the full contract and recommended that other

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<sup>40</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, 96th Congress, First Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, July, 1979), p. 37.

<sup>41</sup>Vicker, "The Mini-War," p. 12.

<sup>42</sup>U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, pp. 86-87.

sources of supply be sought in Mexico, Nigeria, Iran, and elsewhere. As a result of the Commission's cut in the contract, the United States is importing only about 25 per cent of its liquefied natural gas from Algeria,<sup>43</sup> but the U.S. will probably remain Algeria's foremost trading partner throughout the 1980s.

In the Western Sahara conflict the United States has found itself in a dilemma not of its own making, and the dispute between Morocco and Algeria has made it difficult for the U.S. to pursue its interests in the region. The U.S. has recognized the Moroccan administrative control over the Sahara, but not Moroccan sovereignty.<sup>44</sup> In 1960, the United States and Morocco signed a military agreement that limited arms sales to Morocco to defensive weapons and confined Morocco's use of U.S. weapons to the area within its internationally recognized borders. These restrictions stemmed from the United States' concern that Morocco would offer those weapons to other Arab countries for use against Israel.<sup>45</sup> In 1977, the Moroccans found themselves in desperate need for advanced weapons to resist the Polisario's heavy attacks on cities and military garrisons in the Western Sahara, and they asked for the

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<sup>43</sup>Dougherty, p. 104.

<sup>44</sup>Price, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup>Keith Richburg, "U.S. May Lift Curb on Arms for Morocco," Washington Post, July 25, 1979, p. 6.



sale of 24 Cobra helicopter gunships and 24 OV-10 reconnaissance planes, both of which had been successfully employed in combat against guerilla forces in Vietnam.<sup>46</sup>

The United States refused Morocco's request for a number of reasons. First, as stated above, the U.S. had not recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara and therefore asked Morocco to make a written pledge that, in accordance with the 1960 military agreement, weapons purchased from the U.S. would not be used in the Sahara war. Morocco rejected this condition, however, because it needed the weapons specifically for use against the Polisario in the Western Sahara.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the United States did not want to be seen as openly supporting Morocco in an altercation against another Arab country because this would adversely affect its position in the Arab world and in Algeria in particular.<sup>48</sup>

In February of 1979, the United States agreed to sell Morocco six heavy-lift Chinook helicopters despite the two nations' earlier disagreement regarding the use of American-supplied arms in Morocco.<sup>49</sup> In October of 1979,

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<sup>46</sup>"Morocco-U.S.: Limited Helicopter Sales," Africa Research Bulletin, XVI (February, 1979), 5176.

<sup>47</sup>Richburg, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup>Price, p. 67.

<sup>49</sup>"Morocco-U.S.: Limited Helicopter Sales," p. 5176.

some American officials such as former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, defense secretary Harold Brown, and others were said to favor the sale of the OV-10s and the Cobra helicopters as well. The supporters of the U.S. arms sale to Morocco argued that it was foolish to reduce U.S. support and commitment to a country whose location had been considered for decades to be essential to U.S. strategic interest in northwest African in return for economic benefits in Algeria.<sup>50</sup>

In 1979, the United States lifted all limitations on weapons sales to Morocco, largely because of increasing criticism from its allies, especially Saudi Arabia, for abandoning the Shah of Iran. The United States initiated unrestricted sales of weapons to Morocco to reassure its allies in the Arab world that events in Iran did not imply any weakening in its commitment to them.<sup>51</sup> The Saudis' promise to finance all of Morocco's military contracts with the United States was a further incentive for the American arms sales, as was the succession of extensive Polisario attacks inside internationally recognized Moroccan territory.

In 1981, with the advent of President Ronald Reagan's administration, relations between the United States and its friends, including Morocco, were greatly improved. The

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<sup>50</sup>Dougherty, p. 115.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

United States has lifted all the imposed restrictions on selling arms to Morocco. U.S. officials such as former secretary of state General Alexander Haig and secretary of defense Casper Weinberger traveled to Morocco in 1981 on more than one occasion, and King Hassan and other high-ranking Moroccan officials visited the United States several times as well. In an interview with the New York Times before his last visit to the United States in May of 1982, King Hassan stated,

If tomorrow it proves necessary to conclude a treaty with the United States to defend Morocco against hegemony amid aggressions against its sovereignty and territorial integrity, it is not just the king but also the twenty million Moroccans who would be ready to sign a treaty with whomever they desired.<sup>52</sup>

On May 28, 1982, the United States and Morocco signed a military agreement whereby American forces could be granted transit rights and the use of facilities in a number of Moroccan bases "in case of emergency and during periodic training."<sup>53</sup> It was also said that Morocco granted the United States the right to build more military bases on Moroccan soil but the Moroccan Minister of State in charge of foreign affairs denied that such a right was granted to the U.S. and added that "the agreement

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<sup>52</sup>Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, "Morocco--News Summary: Agreement on Military Cooperation" (Washington, Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, April-May, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

consists neither of the installation of military bases in Morocco nor of the stationing of U.S. forces in Morocco."<sup>54</sup>

The United States has publicly announced its position on the Western Sahara conflict to be neutral and has encouraged negotiations between Morocco and Algeria. With the lifting of all restrictions on arms sales to Morocco and the signing of the U.S.-Moroccan military cooperation agreement, however, the United States appears to be supporting the Moroccan claim and implying recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY IN THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT

The Western Sahara conflict has been the subject of continuous disputes among African nations both within and outside the OAU since 1976. One stated reason for these disputes was that Algeria and some other African countries viewed the Moroccan annexation of the Western Sahara as a violation of the principle underlying Article 3 of the OAU charter, namely, the right of self-determination. Morocco, on the other hand, maintained a different position on Article 3, stemming partly from the fact that the enclaves of Ceuta and Mellelia within its borders and a few islands off its Mediterranean coast were still occupied by Spain; if Morocco agreed to follow the self-determination principle embodied in Article 3 of the OAU charter, it might be decomposed into more than one mini-state. Aware of this reality, the OAU helped Morocco to "buy time" in finding a solution to the Western Sahara issue, yet the organization did not reject Algeria's repeated demands to discuss the matter.

In 1976, Algeria submitted the case of the Western Sahara to the OAU and asked for the recognition of the

Polisario as the sole representative of the Saharawi people during the meeting of the ministerial council in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> Morocco and Mauritania opposed Algeria's request and threatened to withdraw from the OAU if the Polisario was given liberation front status. The number of OAU members initially supporting the Polisario's recognition was 21, but the Moroccan and Mauritanian threat reduced that total to 17; the final vote included nine countries opposed to recognition and 21 abstentions.

One factor that forced various nations to change their votes was that they did not want to be torn publicly between Algeria and Morocco, each of which was a major member of the OAU. Another reason was that the nations wished to preserve their own integrity and that of their organization.<sup>2</sup> All of the members of the OAU were very sensitive to the possibility of any change in the frontiers of any individual nation on the continent because African international borders were originally devised by colonial powers without regard for physical or human geography.<sup>3</sup> Thus, change in the current status of Africa's

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<sup>1</sup>"Spanish Sahara," Africa Research Bulletin, XIII (February, 1976), 3918.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria, "Memorandum on the Western Sahara Affair" ([n.d.]), ¶62, p. 35.

frontiers would affect the territorial unity of all African countries.

During the discussion of the Polisario's recognition at the OAU council meeting, Algeria declared the formation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) government in exile. This declaration saved the meeting from failure because it transformed the Polisario from a liberation movement into a formal state and placed the responsibility for granting or denying OAU membership to that state upon a summit gathering of African leaders.<sup>4</sup>

In 1977, the OAU discussed the admission of the SADR government to the organization but Morocco and Mauritania and their supporters threatened to withdraw from the meeting, and the African heads of state decided instead to submit the case to a special summit. Morocco and Mauritania agreed to accept the resolution reached by this summit but only on the condition that all of the heads of the participating states should be present. As a result, the special summit did not take place because not all of these heads of state were willing to attend.

In the 1978 OAU summit the problem of the Western Sahara was referred to a "Wisemen Committee," comprising members from Sudan, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Guinea. During the period between 1978 and 1980, this

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<sup>4</sup>"Spanish Sahara," p. 3918.

committee visited the concerned parties and held meetings with their officials, and, in 1980, it presented a plan to the OAU summit calling for self-determination for the Saharawi people through a referendum under the supervision of the OAU and the United Nations.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980 OAU council of foreign ministers meeting, the admission of the SADR again arose for discussion. Morocco, fearing that the SADR, backed by Algeria and Libya, had now generated enough votes to gain entry to the organization, contended that the admission of the SADR would require a decision by a two-thirds majority on the interpretation of the OAU charter since the SADR could not be regarded as an independent sovereign state. This argument was not tenable, however, because Article 28 of the OAU charter clearly stated that "a new applicant for membership could be admitted by a simple majority of member states."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Morocco again threatened to leave the organization's meeting, along with its supporters, if the SADR was admitted to the OAU. The Moroccan threat influenced the attitudes of the states favoring the SADR's admission, prompting them to recommend to the OAU summit that the problem of the Western Sahara be referred to the

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<sup>5</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Policy and the Conflict in the Western Sahara, 96th Congress, First Session (Washington, Government Printing Office, July, 1979), p. 136.

<sup>6</sup>Suresh C. Saxena, The Liberation War in Western Sahara (New Delhi, Vidya Publisher, 1981), p. 97.



"Wisemen Committee" to find an acceptable solution.<sup>7</sup> As in 1976, the primary reason for this recommendation was that the African states did not want to endanger the unity of the OAU. Another reason was that the SADR's admission to the OAU would eliminate any possibility of a negotiated settlement to the problem, and a third reason was that the OAU was unable to exert pressure upon Morocco because most of its members were reluctant to become involved in the conflict.<sup>8</sup>

King Hassan of Morocco was pleased with the outcome of the 1980 council meeting because, for the time being, his strategy of preventing the admission of the SADR to the OAU had been successful, but his satisfaction was short-lived; later in 1980, at the seventeenth OAU summit in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the "Wisemen Committee" presented a plan to solve the problem that did not favor Morocco's interests in the Western Sahara. The "Wisemen Committee's" recommendation called for a cease-fire and a referendum in the Western Sahara as the appropriate solution to the problem. The OAU summit adopted the committee's plan, which included the following points:

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>James E. Dougherty, "The Polisario Insurgency: War and Minuet in North-West Africa," Conflict, II, No. 2 (1980), 108.

1. A decision to organize a "just and general referendum" in accordance with the decision of the 1979 OAU summit in Monrovia.
2. A call to all the parties to observe the cease-fire, effective from December, 1980.
3. During the period of the cease-fire, armed forces must be restricted to their bases or barracks.
4. A United Nations peace-keeping force is to be responsible for ensuring respect for the cease-fire.
5. The OAU, with the assistance of the UN, will proceed to the organization of the referendum.
6. The Secretary General of the UN would be entrusted with the responsibility to communicate the ad hoc committee's decision to the concerned parties.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the African countries commended the "Wisemen Committee's" plan and viewed it as the best solution to the Western Sahara Conflict. King Hassan, however, who had refused all of the previous resolutions calling for self-determination for the people of the Sahara and claimed that the Saharawi people chose to be under the sovereignty of the Moroccan motherland and to express their loyalty to him through their territorial assembly, rejected the new OAU plan as well. Morocco's foreign minister stated, "Morocco would neither agree for a cease-fire nor for a referendum"<sup>10</sup> because the Moroccans, rather than being aggressors, were defending their own territory; thus, the idea of a cease-fire was irrelevant. After rejecting the OAU's "Wisemen Committee" plan, Morocco became more isolated as the number of African countries recognizing the

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<sup>9</sup>Saxena, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

SADR increased. King Hassan was concerned that his next attempt to prevent the SADR's admission to the OAU would not be successful because the majority of the African nations were losing patience with Morocco's continued rejections of all peaceful solutions to the Western Sahara dispute. Confronted by these uncertainties, Hassan decided to inject himself into the picture by leading his country's delegation to the 1981 OAU summit at Nairobi, Kenya.

In June of 1981, King Hassan and his delegation attended the Nairobi OAU summit with the intention of permanently preventing the admission of the SADR to the organization. Before the conference Hassan and Colonel Qaddafi reached an agreement whereby Libya would not support the admission of the SADR if the question was raised during the summit and Hassan would not object to the selection of Tripoli as the site for the next OAU summit.<sup>11</sup> During a closed session of the OAU meeting, King Hassan proposed that the problem of the Western Sahara should be solved through a referendum under the auspices of the OAU and the UN. He also stated, "We have decided to envisage a procedure of controlled referendum, of which the procedures would simultaneously respect the objectives of the latest

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<sup>11</sup>"Western Sahara Referendum," Africa Research Bulletin, XVIII (June, 1981), 6068.

recommendations of the ad hoc committee--the Committee of Wisemen--and the conviction which Morocco has of its legitimate rights."<sup>12</sup> The king's declaration at the OAU summit was warmly received by all the member states, including Algeria and Libya, and Morocco was assured that the SADR's admission to the OAU would not be discussed until the referendum took place.

After the king's announcement, the summit selected an action committee to ensure the implementation of the "Wisemen Committee's" recommendations. This body was composed of the five "Wisemen Committee" members, Sierra Leone, and Kenya. The committee was required by the summit to meet before the end of August, 1981, in order "to draw up the modalities and all other details concerning a cease-fire as well as the organization and the holding of a referendum with the cooperation of the warring factions."<sup>13</sup>

At the end of August, 1981, the implementation committee members met with the concerned parties in the Western Sahara conflict in Nairobi. The committee had faced many difficulties in communicating with Morocco and its neighbors because of the former's refusal to talk directly with the Polisario. At the end of the meeting, which lasted for approximately twelve hours, however, the committee and the concerned parties agreed on numerous proposals

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

concerning the cease-fire and the referendum, although they were not announced in detail. One of these proposals required Morocco and the Polisario to restrict their armed forces to their own bases. Another proposal concerned sending a peace-keeping force, formed by the OAU and the UN, to establish an interim administration in the Western Sahara and hold the referendum to establish whether the Saharawi people wanted integration with Morocco or independence.<sup>14</sup> The committee also, after a long and difficult discussion, adopted the 1974 Spanish census figures for the population of the Sahara as the basis for the referendum, which would allow only about 75,000 persons to participate in the proposed voting, rather than the Polisario's figures, which estimated the total number of Saharawis living inside and outside the Western Sahara region at more than one million. The committee did take into consideration, however, the annual increase in the population growth rate of the Saharawis.<sup>15</sup>

The committee decided that the Moroccan administration would continue to be responsible for supervising regular affairs in the Western Sahara while the interim

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<sup>14</sup>"Western Sahara: OAU Peace Plan," Africa Research Bulletin, XVIII (August, 1981), 6131.

<sup>15</sup>Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, "Recent Developments within the Organization of African Unity Concerning the Sahara Question," press release (Washington, Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, 1982), p. 4.

administration would be responsible only for the preparation and organization of the referendum. With regard to the cease-fire question, the committee charged its president with "initiating contacts with all the states in the region in order to set the date for the cease-fire, which will be respected by all, before March, 1982."<sup>16</sup> These proposals were viewed as a diplomatic victory by the Moroccans, and, according to King Hassan, "the text as a whole shows that the resolution, in letter and in spirit, respects our sovereignty, preserves our dignity, and is directed towards the triumph of justice and the elimination of injustice."<sup>17</sup>

The Polisario was surprised and disappointed by the OAU's implementation committee proposal and its support of Morocco's interests. In retaliation, on October 13, 1981, it staged a massive attack on the Moroccan garrison at Guelta Zemmour in the Western Sahara, near the Mauritanian border, for the first time using Russian-made tanks and ground-to-air missiles. This attack was a clear violation of the OAU resolution for a cease-fire and an indicator of the Polisario's rejection of the OAU's conditions of holding the referendum. The Polisario's action delayed all of the OAU's preparations for the Western Sahara referendum and enhanced the Moroccan position in

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

the OAU as the nation that was supporting a peaceful solution to the problem. Subsequently, as a justification for its attack on the Moroccans, the Polisario accused Spain of giving Morocco 20,000 cards from the 1974 Spanish census for distribution to Moroccans living in the Western Sahara, which would qualify them to vote in the referendum.

The 1981 OAU summit resolution concerning the Western Sahara indicated that "any attempt to place the Western Sahara problem in a framework other than that of the OAU implementation committee would be considered an obstacle to peace."<sup>18</sup> But, on February 28, 1982, the Council of Ministers of the OAU, while meeting in an ordinary session in Ethiopia, invited the SADR representative to attend and treated him as a full member of the organization. The secretary general of the OAU ministerial council, who had extended this invitation, justified his action by pointing out that the OAU charter required only a simple majority vote for the admission of a new member state and stating that, since the SADR had generated 26 votes for its admission, it was automatically a full member of the organization.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>"The Secretary General of the OAU Admitted the SADR to the OAU," Asharq Al-Awsat [The Middle East], February 29, 1982, p. 1.

Morocco's reaction to the illegal admission of the SADR, which violated the OAU 1981 resolution, was swift and bold. In a letter to the acting president of the OAU, Daniel Arap Moi, King Hassan declared that the admission of the SADR to the OAU by the organization's secretary general "could inflict a mortal wound on the credibility of the African assembly." In response Moi expressed his complete disapproval of the irresponsible action taken by the secretary general, adding, "This act is in complete contradiction to the previous decisions of the African heads of state on the Sahara question. The admission of new members is the exclusive responsibility of the African heads of state and should be discussed only at a high-level summit."<sup>20</sup>

Aware of the division among the African countries and the probability of a breakup of the OAU, Morocco requested an urgent extraordinary summit to discuss the illegal admission of the SADR, preserve the strength of the OAU, and restore its legitimacy and credibility.<sup>21</sup> The acting president of the OAU rejected the Moroccan request, instead referring the issue to a special committee of heads of state for discussion and resolution. The committee met

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<sup>20</sup>Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, "Recent Developments," p. 5.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 6.



in Kenya and decided to postpone the search for a solution to the problem of the admission of the SADR to the next ordinary summit of the OAU, which was to meet in Tripoli in August of 1982, because only two presidents of the eight who comprised the special committee attended its meeting.<sup>22</sup> Immediately after the "illegal" admission of the SADR to the OAU, the organization was unable to hold a meeting because of the lack of a quorum resulting from the Moroccan withdrawal, followed by that of its supporters, from any OAU gatherings attended by SADR representatives, despite the OAU's appeal that all of its institutions should continue to function normally.

In August of 1982, only 31 countries participated in the OAU's nineteenth summit in Tripoli because of the SADR's attendance at the meeting, and the annual meeting of the African heads of state did not take place because two-thirds of the member states--the number required in the OAU charter--were not present. A key reason for the inability of the summit to attain a quorum was the Moroccan refusal to attend, which was supported by 19 other African states. In addition, several nations failed to attend the OAU summit in Tripoli because of their objection to Colonel Qaddafi's chairmanship of the OAU for that

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

year.<sup>23</sup> The summit was eventually postponed until November of 1982 because of the insistence of Qaddafi upon the SADR's participation in the meeting.

The acting president of the OAU and some other African leaders were afraid that this crisis would bring about the dissolution of the OAU as a symbol of African unity. These leaders agreed to assemble a committee of six countries to contact King Hassan and the other heads of state who had boycotted the summit and seek a solution to the OAU's dilemma. During its visit to Morocco, the committee asked King Hassan to give guarantees that Morocco would attend the OAU summit in November and allow the organization to proceed with the proposed referendum in the Western Sahara before the twentieth OAU summit at Konakry, Guinea in 1983.<sup>24</sup> If the Moroccans refused to give these guarantees, the OAU summit would again meet in Tripoli with the participation of the SADR as a full member. King Hassan reasserted his acceptance and support of the 1981 OAU proposal for a referendum in the Western Sahara and its attendant resolutions concerning the Western Sahara conflict. Morocco assured the committee that it would indeed participate in

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<sup>23</sup>Colin Legum, "African Unity's Toughest Test: Deciding who Rules W. Sahara," The Christian Science Monitor, November 10, 1982, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>"An Attempt to Get the OAU Out of Its Present Crisis," Al-Yaum [Today], October 23, 1982, p. 5.

the postponed summit if the SADR did not attend, and the committee then asked Libya and Algeria to persuade the SADR's leaders to absent themselves from the OAU summit in order to preserve the unity of the organization. The SADR accepted the request of its supporters and the committee and decided not to attend the OAU summit scheduled for November 23, 1982. By reaching this compromise with the cooperation of the concerned parties in the Western Sahara conflict, the committee was successful in saving the OAU from probable disintegration, at least until the holding of the proposed referendum in the Western Sahara. This compromise may also be viewed as a victory for Moroccan diplomacy and for the "moderate" forces in the OAU that were calling for a restoration of the organization's legitimacy.

Yet, the future of the OAU remains at stake for the time being because of the increasing ideological and political cleavages among the African countries composing its membership. The OAU has faced other crises in the past, but the present difficulties threaten the organization's future because, for the first time, half of its members have opposed the other half on a political issue. Many political observers believe that the OAU's 1983 summit at Konakry will not take place because the "progressives" will withhold their participation in order to

destroy the meeting with the support and encouragement of Colonel Qaddafi, who was greatly disappointed because he did not have the privilege of chairing the OAU for a year as a result of the boycott of "moderate" forces within the organization in 1982.<sup>25</sup> If Moroccan-Algerian relations are eased during 1983, however, the probability that the integrity of the OAU will be preserved and its next summit will take place will be increased because Qaddafi alone cannot generate a sufficient number of African countries to support a boycott of the meeting, even with the offer of financial assistance.

Although France rejected a call from several African countries during the 1982 annual meeting of Francophone nations to intervene in maintaining the stability of the OAU, it has been engaged in quiet mediation efforts between Morocco and Algeria in order to end the conflict in the Western Sahara.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, by the time of the next scheduled OAU summit, the organization may have restored some of its credibility among the African countries that desire the reestablishment of the OAU as the symbol of African unity. During the next year it is hoped

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<sup>25</sup>Alan Cowell, "Africa at Crossroads: Is OAU Dying?" The New York Times, November 27, 1982, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup>"France Will Not Mediate in the Present OAU Crisis," Okaz, October 13, 1983, p. 7.

that the African countries will endeavor to reach a compromise between the so-called "moderate" and "progressive" factions in order to save the OAU from any catastrophe. After all, as Isebill V. Gruhn, professor of politics at the University of California-Santa Cruz, has stated, "The very charter of the OAU was a compromise between different blocs and factions among independent African governments."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, with the help of the respected leaders of Egypt, Guinea, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and Algeria and Morocco--if relations between these last two nations improve--the OAU will emerge from its crisis and maintain its integrity regardless of the varying political orientations of its member states, if they place African unity above all other considerations.

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<sup>27</sup>Isebill V. Gruhn, "Why the Organization of African Unity Survives," The Christian Science Monitor, November 4, 1982, p. 23.

CONCLUSION: SPECULATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR THE FUTURE

As this paper has demonstrated, the Western Sahara conflict is a power struggle between Morocco and Algeria to gain control of the territory in question rather than a struggle in support of a national movement to win independence for the region. The war in the Western Sahara is unwinnable because of the differing capabilities of the nations concerned. The three parties involved in the conflict are now in a better position to resolve their dispute than at any time in the past seven years, with the help of the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia to persuade the leaders of Morocco and Algeria to sit at the negotiating table to improve their relations. It is unlikely that a just solution to the conflict can be reached unless relations between Morocco and Algeria improve.

Present economic and political conditions in Morocco, Algeria, and the Polisario are conducive to negotiations. Morocco's economy is weakening and the war is draining all of its development funds. The Moroccan people are blaming rising rates of unemployment and inflation upon the Sahara war, and they are no longer as interested in the future of

the territory as they were three years ago. These unfavorable domestic conditions may prompt King Hassan to adopt a more flexible position regarding the future of the territory. The Algerian government is facing increasing criticism from political groups both inside and outside Algeria that have accused the nation's leaders of creating a foreign adventure in order to distract the attention of the people from Algeria's deteriorating economic conditions. Therefore, the Algerian government, too, is more likely now than in previous years to undertake a compromise with Morocco to end the Western Sahara conflict so that it can concentrate its efforts upon improving domestic conditions and reducing the magnitude of its political opposition. The Polisario has suffered a great deal of disappointment since launching its unsuccessful military attack on Morocco in October of 1981. The failure of that action has left only one path open to the Polisario, a negotiated settlement that will be dependent on the current strategic and political objectives and preferences of its protector, Algeria.

Establishing a Saharawi state in the Western Sahara is not feasible at the present time because of King Hassan's determination not to allow such a state to be established on his country's southern border. The formation of a Saharawi state would act as another destabilizing

element in the region. On the domestic front, the people of a Saharawi state could not provide the officials required to administer its government or the necessary personnel to offer daily services. A Saharawi state would not be able to defend its territorial integrity against outside aggression because of the vast size of the land and its sparse population. Regionally, the state would be dependent economically and militarily on surrounding nations, primarily Algeria, because its inhabitants would not possess sufficient skill and expertise to operate the phosphate mines or utilize the area's other natural resources. Externally, the Saharawi state would join the world's increasing number of mini-states, subject to manipulation by other countries in international organizations such as the UNGA and regional bodies such as the OAU that depend on majority votes for the adoption of their resolutions.

Two positive developments in the Western Sahara dispute may eventually help to bring the conflict to an end. The first of these was King Hassan's acceptance of the 1980 OAU "Wisemen Committee" Saharawi self-determination resolution at the 1981 OAU summit in Nairobi. The second was the intensive mediation efforts conducted by President Mitterrand of France and King Fahad of Saudi Arabia to improve relations between Morocco and Algeria. The details



of these negotiations have not been made public, but, after the last visit of King Fahad to Algeria in November of 1982, a joint communiqué was issued stating that both leaders had agreed to seek a just solution to the Western Sahara conflict based upon the right of the Saharawi people to determine their future through a referendum. In response to this communiqué, Morocco announced that the proposed referendum would take place within the next few months.

This discussion has made clear that the Western Sahara war can have no "winner"; wisdom, negotiation, and compromise must prevail. I feel that the proposed referendum will take place and that Algeria will not reject the result. The Moroccans, however, in a goodwill gesture to improve their relations with Algeria, should ratify the 1972 Telmesan Agreement, which would in turn guarantee territorial security for Algeria. I believe that the Polisario will be constrained to accept the outcome of the referendum because it is powerless to do otherwise without Algeria's protection and support. The Algerian government should stop its propagandistic publications and radio broadcasts against Morocco in order to prepare the people to accept the result of the referendum. All other points such as granting Algeria access to Saharan and Moroccan ports on the Atlantic, establishing joint

companies to exploit the natural resources in the Western Sahara, and dividing the benefits to be gained from them, returning members of the Polisario to their homes in the Western Sahara, and granting the Saharawi people a degree of autonomy in their homeland will be secondary details that can be decided after relations between Morocco and Algeria are normalized.

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