

Western Sahara Between Autonomy and Intifada

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In late February 2007, Western Saharan nationalists celebrated the thirty-first anniversary of their government, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic. The official ceremonies did not take place in Laayoune, the declared capital of Western Sahara, but in the small outpost of Tifariti near the Algerian border. This is because most of Western Sahara is under the administration and military occupation of Morocco, which claims the desert land as its own. The Western Saharan independence movement, led by the POLISARIO Front and the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, exists largely in exile, as does nearly half the native population. Roughly 100,000 Sahrawis have lived in refugee camps in the southwest corner of Algeria, near Tindouf, since POLISARIO proclaimed an independent republic in 1976. A generation has come of age in the camps, knowing nothing but refugee life and cut off from contact with their homeland. The other half of the population, those Sahrawis living under Moroccan occupation, have become a minority in their own country, pushed to the margins by three decades of "Moroccanization."

Despite these realities, or perhaps owing to them, Western Saharan nationalism remains a powerful idea for many Sahrawis. Likewise, POLISARIO's leadership role in the movement remains unchallenged. Unlike so many African and Middle Eastern liberation movements, POLISARIO has never disintegrated into factions and never resorted to brute force to maintain cohesion. Only in recent years have signs of internal division surfaced, thanks largely to the Internet. Yet endogenous criticism is more about the tactics and leadership style of POLISARIO's elite rather than POLISARIO itself.

The great success of POLISARIO's founding fathers is that they fostered a political movement that is now self-sustaining and, more importantly, self-motivating. But that is part of the problem. Having reared younger Sahrawis on the slogan "All the homeland or martyrdom," the POLISARIO elite is now hostage to its own rhetoric. It has become a practical and logical impossibility for POLISARIO's leadership to compromise the fundamental goal of independence. To do so would mean that they are no longer POLISARIO; and if they were no longer POLISARIO, then their constituents — Western Saharan nationalists — would have no further use for them.

COLD LOGIC OF GEOPOLITICS

Yet compromising that fundamental goal is precisely the demand the UN Security Council will press

upon POLISARIO, sooner or later. Officially, the UN supports the right to self-determination for Western Sahara, a prerogative the international body first backed in 1965, when the desert land was a Spanish colonial possession. Since 1991, the UN has maintained a mission in Western Sahara for the nominal purpose of organizing a referendum on independence. As a territory recognized by the UN as non-self-governing (and the last colony in Africa), Western Sahara has a right to independence grounded in international legality. Yet Morocco has made clear that it will not put its claim of “sovereignty” to the ultimate test of a vote on self-determination. Morocco is willing only to consider a negotiated final status agreement involving some measure of autonomy for Western Sahara. Self-determination is off the table.

On October 31, 2006, the Security Council passed Resolution 1720, “reaffirming its commitment to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.” In other words, and despite the nod to “self-determination,” nothing will be forced upon Morocco. The Security Council, here guided by Morocco’s key allies France and the United States, wants a “mutually acceptable” agreement between POLISARIO and Morocco that is negotiated and implemented voluntarily. Out of one side of its mouth, the Security Council calls for a vote on independence; out of the other side, it tells POLISARIO it will not compel such a poll. By clear implication, the Security Council’s conditions for peace in Western Sahara demand that self-determination be sacrificed.

It was faith in this logic — and subtle encouragement from Washington and Paris — that drove Morocco to promote autonomy for its “Saharan provinces” as an alternative to the referendum. From late 2005 to late 2006, Morocco’s King Mohammed VI mediated a domestic dialogue on the autonomy concept. The defunct Royal Advisory Council on Saharan Affairs was brought back to life so that the palace could point to some semblance of consultation with Sahrawis. In February, Morocco verbally briefed officials from France, the US, Spain and Great Britain on its autonomy plan. A written proposal, almost two years in the making, will be presented to the Security Council in April. If there is any haste in Morocco’s actions, it is not because Western Sahara’s political future remains undecided. It is because Mohammed VI is hoping that the Security Council will bless autonomy before his greatest benefactors, Presidents George W. Bush and Jacques Chirac, abdicate. Indeed, his patrons’ encouragement is no longer so subtle. Chirac has recently called the Moroccan plan “constructive,” while Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns has dubbed it “promising.”

Though POLISARIO is feeling international pressure to compromise, it is feeling more internal pressure to fight back — literally. The same cold logic that gives Morocco comfort generates frustration among Western Saharan nationalists. The refugees, in particular, are keenly aware that their cause is boxed into a corner.

Tensions have already boiled over in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, where there were unprecedented demonstrations in May 2005. Unlike previous manifestations of Sahrawi discontent, these protests openly called for independence, rather than more rights or more jobs. Since then, the rallies have degenerated into daily minor confrontations between Sahrawi youths and Moroccan security forces. The trajectory of the unrest, known to Sahrawis as the May intifada, is not apparent, in part because of a near blackout of international coverage imposed by Morocco. But Sahrawis are being pushed to contemplate more drastic measures. For the time being, the youths are heeding the calls for non-violence coming from the older activists. Should Moroccan repression escalate, however, POLISARIO could be unable — or unwilling — to stop elements of its military stationed along the 1991 armistice line from attempting to draw Moroccan troops’ fire.

POLISARIO is caught between two antagonistic pressures, autonomy and intifada. How the movement navigates these pressures in the coming months will determine the future of Western Sahara.

FROM WAR TO “PEACE”

POLISARIO, the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro, was born in May 1973 when a ragtag group of Sahrawis attacked a small colonial fort in what was then called Spanish Sahara. POLISARIO grew directly out of an earlier movement for Western Saharan independence, the Harakat Tahrir, which was founded in the late 1960s but crushed by Spain in 1970. The Harakat Tahrir benefited enormously from the experiences of a short-lived Moroccan-Algerian-Mauritanian-Saharan insurgency of 1957-1958, jointly smashed by France and Spain. That uprising came only 23 years after Spain declared its possession pacified. From the founding of its colony in 1884 to then, 1934, Spain had faced sporadic resistance.

In its war against Spain (1973-1975), POLISARIO's greatest victory was the support it won from the population. A 1975 UN visiting mission reported that no other movement, including those backed by Spain and Morocco, was as visibly popular as POLISARIO. The Western Saharan independence movement received another huge boost on October 16, 1976, when the International Court of Justice rejected Moroccan and Mauritanian claims to Spanish Sahara. The Hague called for a referendum on self-determination.

That act of self-determination has yet to take place, but on February 27, 1976 in remote Bir Lahlou, POLISARIO announced the birth of their republic. At the same time, Spanish colonial officials were in the process of transferring territorial control to Morocco and Mauritania, following a secret deal reached on November 14, 1975. The Moroccan-Mauritanian invasion of 1975 convinced many Sahrawis to flee the territory; they eventually found their way to Algeria, where they remain to this day. Though Mauritania eventually dropped its claim, Morocco and POLISARIO fought for 15 years. Their war pitted Morocco's Western-supplied, Saudi-funded military against POLISARIO's indigenous knowledge of the terrain and light Algerian and Libyan weaponry. Stalemated by the mid-1980s, the war finally came to an end in 1991 when the UN brokered a ceasefire. Morocco agreed to the cessation because it trusted France and the US to look out for Moroccan interests in the Security Council. POLISARIO abided by the secretary-general's call for peace because they had been promised the long-denied referendum on independence.

A RETROGRADE PEACE PROCESS

If it seems that the peace process in Western Sahara has moved at a glacial pace, that is because it has actually moved backwards. From 1981 to 1999, negotiations were premised on a pledge by the late King Hassan II that Morocco would allow and respect a referendum on independence. By the terms of the UN Settlement Plan that underpinned the ceasefire, the UN mission in Western Sahara (MINURSO) tried in vain from 1991 to 1999 to stage such a plebiscite. The referendum seemed to acquire a new lease on life in 1997 when then newly appointed Secretary-General Kofi Annan designated former Secretary of State James Baker as his personal envoy to Western Sahara.

But the referendum, and Morocco's support for it, essentially died with King Hassan in 1999. One of King Mohammed VI's first major acts was to dismiss Interior Minister Driss Basri, the long-time supervisor of forcible suppression of opposition to the palace. This bold gesture, aimed at domestic and international audiences, was intended to signal a break with Morocco's dark past. Yet it also removed the major proponent of a Western Sahara referendum in the ancien régime. Part of Basri's job under Hassan, besides torturing and “disappearing” dissidents, was to fix elections. If he could get over 90 percent of Moroccans to approve a constitution, he could surely induce 120,000 Sahrawis to choose integration into Morocco. By mid-1999, however, it was clear that Basri's tactic — peopling the voter rolls with Moroccans posing as Sahrawis — had failed.

Around the time Basri got the axe, the Security Council was learning a hard lesson in East Timor. While MINURSO was compiling its voter list in Western Sahara, a referendum on self-determination in East Timor quickly turned into a bloodbath. Having rejected Indonesia's offer of autonomy and implicitly called for independence, the East Timorese were once again subjected to the violent intimidation of the Indonesian army. Under intense international pressure to act, the Security Council used force to protect East Timor. In Western Sahara, the UN was careening toward a similar scenario.

It was no surprise, then, that Annan's first report on Western Sahara in February 2000 listed several arguments against continuing with the 1991 Settlement Plan. One complaint was that a date for a referendum could not "be set with certainty," because the parties had yet to agree on who should be allowed to vote. More importantly, though, the secretary-general admitted that "even assuming that a referendum were held...if the result were not to be recognized and accepted by one party, it is worth noting that no enforcement mechanism is envisioned by the settlement plan, nor is one likely to be proposed, calling for the use of military means to effect enforcement." In other words, Morocco might lose the referendum, yet refuse to quit the territory, and the Security Council was manifestly unprepared to intervene.

In late 2000, Morocco said it was willing to consider a limited devolution of governance to local leaders in its "Saharan provinces." Starting his new initiative, in 2001 Baker proposed four years of significant autonomy for Western Sahara, followed by an ambiguous final status referendum. Morocco was reportedly happy with the proposal, for the word "independence" was conspicuously absent from the text and thousands of Moroccans settled in Western Sahara while Basri was in charge would be allowed to vote in the plebiscite. For the same reasons, POLISARIO's rejection was swift and firm.

In order for Baker's diplomacy to produce results, the Security Council had to delineate his task. So, in Resolution 1429 of July 2002, they stated their resolve "to secure a just, lasting and mutually acceptable solution which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara." In very clear language, the Security Council called for a referendum including the option of independence. It was under this mandate that Baker presented his "Peace Plan for the Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara" in early 2003.

THE ULTIMATE COMPROMISE

Throughout the peace process, POLISARIO has made several tactical compromises with an eye toward its overall strategic objective of independence through self-determination. POLISARIO's tactical concessions normally had two aims: first, to embarrass Morocco and second, to curry favor with the Security Council.

After long denying that it could make a specific concession, POLISARIO would suddenly accept the "unacceptable," usually much to Morocco's chagrin and the Security Council's delight. The key examples here are POLISARIO's staunch refusal, from 1988 to 1993, to accept any prospective referendum voters not listed in a 1974 Spanish census (reversed in 1994); POLISARIO's refusal to allow voters from specific tribal groups not predominant in Western Sahara (reversed under the Baker-brokered Houston accords of 1997); and POLISARIO's refusal to allow a small group of prospective voters whose registration was facilitated by Morocco (reversed in 1999). In all of these cases, the POLISARIO U-turn caught the palace off guard, making Morocco appear to be the obstructionist party in the voter identification process. From 2000 to 2002, POLISARIO persisted with its gambit of offering dramatic concessions in order to revive the 1991 Settlement Plan. Baker,

however, was no longer playing that game.

The new game, Baker's 2003 plan, was a radical departure from what POLISARIO had previously considered. The plan followed the same four-year autonomy formula as the 2001 proposal, except that the final status referendum explicitly included the option of independence. Likewise, the referendum would include Moroccan settlers, giving Morocco a slight numerical edge in the vote. Though critics decried the plan as a blatant giveaway to Morocco, its proponents at the UN argued that POLISARIO would have four years of autonomous government to convince the Moroccan settlers to join them in voting for independence.

This time around, POLISARIO accepted the proposal and Morocco rejected it. Though Baker had achieved a breakthrough of sorts, King Mohammed VI was hardly in a position to concede to any referendum on independence — even under the generous conditions of the 2003 plan. Morocco was grappling with the effects of the May 2003 suicide bombing in Casablanca. Its self-image — an island of peace in a sea of terrorism — had been shattered in a single night. Elections were postponed, the major Islamist party was forced to curtail its activities and Moroccan security forces conducted a major crackdown on Muslim activists, detaining several thousand.

Though Baker wanted a strong endorsement of his plan from the Security Council, he got far less. To many observers, it was strange that the Bush administration did so little to back Baker in Western Sahara. But in the post-September 11 era, Washington has several considerations that supersede any residual Wilsonian dedication to self-determination. US-Moroccan bilateral ties were greatly strengthened by Morocco's enlistment in the global war on terror. Indeed, in June 2004, the same month when Baker left the Western Sahara portfolio behind, the US awarded Morocco "major non-NATO ally status" and a free trade agreement. Human Rights Watch and Moroccan activists have identified Morocco as one host of the CIA "black sites" where "high-value targets" in the war on terror are held incommunicado. Moroccan diplomats now boast that relations with Washington have never been better. Assessing the place of Western Sahara in US-Moroccan relations, one cynical European Union official told Middle East Report, "You don't criticize the country that tortures for you, do you?"

For POLISARIO, accepting the Baker plan was the last compromise within its overall strategy of independence through self-determination. The concessions were indeed significant: Moroccans would have dominated the final status vote and POLISARIO would have had to return to Laayoune under the flag of Morocco. It is difficult to imagine, from POLISARIO's point of view, another tactical concession that would be "acceptable" to Morocco and still "provide for self-determination," as per the Security Council's tortuous phrasing. If Morocco is opposed to self-determination "in principle," then there is no use in POLISARIO pretending that negotiations would be fruitful.

After years of making tactical concessions, Western Saharan nationalism has learned a bitter lesson in asymmetric power politics: It does not matter how many compromises the weaker party strikes if the stronger party always asks for more. The Sahrawi refugees feel this to be the truth, as do Sahrawi nationalists inside Western Sahara.

WHITHER THE UPRISING?

Routine Moroccan quashing of a small demonstration in Laayoune provided the spark that ignited the Sahrawi intifada in May 2005. Yet the underlying causes of the non-violent independence movement come from 30 years of living as a divided population, suffering violent repression and being ignored by the international community and, on top of all that, socio-economic marginalization — the "Moroccanization" of Western Sahara. The demonstrations of May 2005 came as a shock not

only to most observers of the conflict, but to many Sahrawi nationalists as well. (Morocco tightly controls the news coming out of its “Saharan provinces”; since October 2006, two Scandinavian journalists seeking to cover the demonstrations have been deported and a third was detained by police for “working without permission.”) The latent energy unleashed soon diffused into the Sahrawi population, radicalizing a new generation. The red, green, white and black colors of POLISARIO, once rarely seen in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, have become the symbol of Sahrawi resistance, whether spray-painted onto school walls — in the shape of the POLISARIO flag — or braided into the hair of young girls.

Though not lacking in militancy, the intifada has not gathered sufficient momentum to impel a major rethinking of policy either in the Moroccan palace or at the Security Council. Coercion, of course, plays a large role. A debilitating number of key Sahrawi activists, young and old, languish in Moroccan jails, occasionally teetering on the edge of death after prolonged hunger strikes. But Moroccan security men keep the Western Sahara story out of the global media by refraining from massive displays of force and confining themselves to more intimate and targeted acts of violence. These extrajudicial policing measures are aimed squarely at known activists, as well as their friends and family. The website of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Violations of Human Rights Committed by the Moroccan State is replete with documented examples of police brutality and “confessions” obtained under severe duress. Another spark could set Western Saharan towns ablaze.

The Security Council and the UN Secretariat have justified keeping MINURSO in Western Sahara on the grounds that it “remains indispensable for the maintenance of the ceasefire,” even though Morocco rejects the very nature of the mission. (It is, after all, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.) The problem with this approach — peacekeeping without peacemaking — is that it aids and abets a status quo founded on a political war of attrition. If the status quo is allowed to ferment, the UN could be facing yet another armed African conflict that no one wants to deal with. Sahrawis in the camps and the streets of Laayoune often use the proverb “caught between the fire and the sea” to describe the desperate hopelessness of their situation. In many ways, they are right. Their two options — submit or fight back — seem equally bleak. For many, however, fighting fire with fire will seem the more honorable of the two choices.

P.S.

* From the website of MERIP.

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