

## Algeria and the Western Sahara Dispute

By Jacob Mundy

Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter

Since the outbreak of hostilities between Morocco and the Western Saharan nationalists of the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro* (Polisario) in late 1975, Algeria has been one of the most important actors in that conflict. While Algeria maintains no territorial claim on Western Sahara, it has consistently supported Polisario's drive for self-determination diplomatically, militarily, financially and morally. With only slight aberrations in its Western Sahara policy, Algeria's position in the Western Sahara conflict, as Polisario's most important backer, will likely hold the same general shape it has for over thirty years. There is no doubt, then, that understanding Algeria's role in the Western Sahara conflict is necessary for a complete historical appreciation of this neglected international issue and is also key to unlocking the peace process, which has stagnated over the last ten years.

The dispute over Western Sahara has become a defining feature of North Africa's international politics and regional relations. Its significance cannot be underestimated. The lack of conclusion has translated into three decades of icy relations between Rabat and Algiers, the almost total failure of efforts to construct a Maghrib trading bloc and Morocco's continued boycott of the African Union. Beyond the undetermined fate of some 200,000 native Western Saharans, the conflict has indirectly affected the lives of 85 million Maghribis by undermining regional cooperation. It has also retarded regional security cooperation against trans-national terrorist groups and brought into question the Security Council's ability to resolve even the most marginal of international conflicts. From this point of view, the Western Sahara conflict no longer seems deserving of the derision and indifference it has received. Yet Western Sahara's status as one of the world most "forgotten conflicts" is only enhanced by the layers of misperception and ignorance surrounding it.

The Algerian regime's stake in the Western Sahara conflict has been one of the most contested yet little understood aspects of this three decades old dispute between Morocco and Sahrawi nationalists. This confusion stems, in part, from the opacity of the Algeria regime, but also from numerous hypotheses that have been put forward to explain Algeria's motivations. At one end of the spectrum, some have suggested that Algeria's policy is entirely cynical, aimed at either destabilizing Morocco or justifying the military's largess. At the other end, some have alleged that Algeria's policy is overwhelmingly idealistic, rooted in the same norms of self-determination and *uti possidetis* that guided Algeria's decolonization from France. As neither pole can sufficiently account for the evolution — or lack thereof — of Algeria's Western Sahara policy, both should be considered equally. The goal of this paper is to do just that: demonstrate the ways in which both idealist and realist rationales are co-constitutive of Algeria's Western Sahara policy. Then I will offer a brief historical sketch to ground these motivations in

Moroccan-Algerian post-colonial relations. As a conclusion, I will attempt to tease out some of the lessons this analysis may, or may not, hold for the Western Sahara peace process.

To provide some general background to the conflict, a few words are warranted. At the most basic level, the Western Sahara conflict is based upon two competing territorial claims. On the one hand, Morocco claims Western Sahara as a part of its sovereign territory, which had been unjustly severed by Franco-Spanish colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. On the other hand, Western Saharan nationalists, led by Polisario, claim the right to independence through self-determination, which has been the dominant UN framework of the issue since the 1960s. Indeed, a landmark opinion of the International Court of Justice in 1975 upheld Western Sahara's right to a referendum on self-determination. The Hague's opinion, however, had the effect of prompting a Moroccan invasion before Spain could organize a vote. Madrid capitulated to Morocco, an act that prompted Algeria to throw its weight behind Polisario. At the regional level, the Western Sahara dispute then became one side of an interlocking conflict between Morocco and Algeria, which had origins in a brief border war in 1963. The Western Sahara conflict also resonated at the international level. Set during the height of the Cold War, the Western Sahara conflict saw Western powers back Morocco and the African Union and Non-Aligned Movement rally to Polisario — where Soviet influence was more indirect. The Morocco-Polisario war, which briefly saw Mauritania's participation (1975-79), only came to an end in 1991, when a UN ceasefire took hold. The arrival of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) did little to resolve the issue. For roughly ten years, Morocco and Polisario argued over the criteria for voter eligibility in a proposed UN referendum on independence. Since 2001, negotiations have boiled down to whether or not there should even be a referendum on independence, as Morocco's new King, Mohammed VI (crowned in 1999), has rejected his father's support for such an option. Meanwhile the Security Council seems willing to tolerate an endless peace process, with recent talks producing nothing more than tepid statements from the UN Secretariat.

### **Understanding Algerian Support for Western Saharan Nationalism**

Some observers of the Western Sahara conflict have held that Algeria had fewer stakes in the conflict and so its policy would be more mutable than that of Morocco. History has proven this view flawed. Perhaps there is no clearer example than the undue enthusiasm that greeted the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 1999. With the death of King Hassan II in Morocco only a few months later and a series of initially positive gestures between the new King and the new President, a new era in Moroccan-Algerian relations were thought to be at hand. Bouteflika had been born in Morocco and it was suspected that he, as Foreign Minister in 1975, had favored a border agreement with Hassan II over support for Polisario. The policy effects of this misplaced optimism were soon felt. At the earliest opportunity (February 2000), the Security Council, under pressure from France and the United States, effectively abandoned the long awaited referendum on independence being organized by the UN Mission in Western Sahara. In effect, the Security Council scrapped the only agreement ever signed between Polisario and Morocco — the 1997 Houston Accords, negotiated by the UN secretary-general Personal Envoy James Baker. Throwing nine years of work out the window, the Council opened the door for an alternative approach that precluded independence, falsely assuming that Algeria was favorable to

power sharing. To say that this assumption has proven counter productive would be an understatement. In late 1999, the international community was merely months from finally holding a referendum on independence for Western Sahara. Ten years later, the international community is finding it difficult to bring Morocco and Polisario together to talk about simple “confidence building measures.”

Instead of reconciliation, Moroccan-Algerian relations under Bouteflika and Mohamed VI have remained strained. An important aspect of this is Algeria’s international rehabilitation under Bouteflika after nearly a decade of pariah status. Algeria’s vicious intra-national armed conflict of the 1990s, which fed off and compounded an already dire economic crisis, had severely weakened the government. However, rising hydrocarbon prices in the late 1990s helped re-inflate the Algerian state and made it possible to consolidate its victory over armed Islamist groups. The re-centralization of political power in the executive (see Werenfels 2007) has been punctuated by the retirement of several key figures in the military following Bouteflika’s re-election in 2004. Stronger civilian control over the state has not translated into less support for Polisario. Contrary to predictions made in 1999, Algeria has become more, not less, strident in its support for Western Saharan nationalism. Bouteflika has shown little interest in normalizing relations with Morocco. As Algeria positions itself as the regional powerhouse in North Africa, Polisario remains central to that strategy.

A full appreciation of Algeria’s impact on the Western Sahara conflict, however, is difficult to obtain without positing an impossible counter-factual: how would the conflict have evolved *without* Algeria’s influence? Some Moroccans have insisted that the conflict would not exist without Algeria’s participation. Such claims are simply not justified. Algeria did not create Western Saharan nationalism generally nor Polisario specifically. Following its initial occupation of parts of region in 1885, Spain faced periodic resistance from the local population, most notably in 1934 and 1957-58. The first Western Saharan movement to articulate an explicit demand for independence appeared in 1969 and Polisario several years later in 1973; neither of these were anything less than an endogenous expression of the desire to end Spanish rule. Algeria’s hand in Polisario’s development did not begin to take shape until after the Moroccan invasion of Spanish Sahara in October-November 1975. From that point onward, Algeria has had a profound influence upon the Western Sahara conflict but not one that we should consider overly determinant. It is not impossible to imagine that, with or without Algerian support, some or all of the native peoples of Western Sahara might desire independence. There have been other independence movements with even less direct support that have managed to achieve their ultimate goals (e.g., East Timor and Eritrea). Just as one could argue that the conflict exists because of Algeria’s participation, one could also argue that Western Saharan nationalism has not succeeded because it has become too dependent upon Algeria. Instead of calling for speculation, the best way to gauge Algeria’s affect on the conflict is to examine several episodes where its influence was clearly brought to bear (see below).

Likewise, the question of *why* Algeria is involved is as contentious as *how* Algeria is involved. Motives derived completely from either ideology or material interests cannot sufficiently explain the complete pattern of Algerian behavior in the conflict, yet both are impossible to ignore. Algeria’s support for national self-determination in Western Sahara is much more than rhetoric. Indeed, self-determination is an important aspect of the normative framework through which

Algerian nationalism constitutes itself and through which the Algerian government has tended to articulate its foreign policy. The ideal of self-determination indisputably played a key discursive role in Algeria's struggle for independence and so there is a sense in which Algerian leaders seen in Polisario clear parallels with their struggle for independence. Support for Western Saharan resistance is thus not only consistent with Algeria's national values, but also its history.

Moreover, at the time of the Moroccan-Mauritanian take-over of Western Sahara in 1975, Algeria's revolutionary heritage, anti-imperialist credentials, and advocacy of moderate socialism had earned it a particularly strong reputation in the Third World. In the early to mid-1970s, Algeria's international standing had reached its zenith in post-Nasser Africa, the Middle East and the Non-Aligned Movement. This credibility was partially rooted in Algeria's effort to champion a third way in the Cold War, neither pro-Western nor pro-Soviet. Non-alignment, the "centerpiece" of Algeria's foreign policy, was described by John Entelis (1986: 201) as

... a vigilant anti-colonialism that finds unswerving Algerian support for movements of national liberation; the organization of the struggle against imperialism, which assumes a simultaneous struggle for the creation of a new global economic order involving the solidarity of all "exploited" states; and determined action in favor of maintaining world peace.

Boumedienne's embrace of Polisario in November 1975 fits with these core Algerian values and continues to resonate long since the end of the Cold War. It is also worth noting extent to which Morocco's invasion of Western Sahara was an affront to these sensibilities in terms of Western imperialism — the fact that Spain and the United States collaborated with Morocco to redraw the map of Africa right under Algeria's nose. This was not only a major slight to Algeria's interests and values but to those of Non-Alignment as well. Tempting as it might be to dismiss this argument from ideology as a factor in Algeria's Western Sahara policy, given the changes the geopolitical environment has undergone since 1975, there is good reason to think that it matters still. Though Algeria suffered inept executive leadership in the 1980s under Chadli Bendjedid and incoherent leadership in the 1990s, the Presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika has shown that the Boumedienne model is, for better and worse, alive and well. Where Third Worldism was considered all but dead after the end of the Cold War (e.g., Malley 1996), recent political developments in Central and South America suggest otherwise.

Norms, however, do not sufficiently account Algeria's actions in Western Sahara. Given the history of tense relations between post-colonial Morocco and Algeria, it is difficult to believe that Algeria's interest in Western Sahara is based on national self-image alone. And it is important to note that unbridled support for Western Saharan nationalism *followed* the Moroccan invasion. Nor has support for Western Saharan nationalism consistent been across the Algerian regime, as some leading Algerian figures, including Mohamed Boudiaf, a founding member of the FLN, supported Morocco's claim (ICG 2007: 12). From a strategic point of view, the most concerning aspect of the Moroccan seizure of Western Sahara was not the denial of self-determination but an aggressive, adversarial expansion along Algeria's vulnerable southwestern flank. In many ways, it is difficult not to see Western Sahara as a pawn in the struggle for hegemony at the western end of the Maghrib (see Zoubir 1997). As the region emerged from colonialism in the 1950s and 1960, the balance of power was not clear. Algeria had distinct

advantages in terms of size, the kind and diversity of its resources, and the intensity of its colonization (e.g., infrastructure and education). While Morocco has had a similar population base and some natural resources, it lacked the vast hydrocarbon reserves that have become the financial backbone of the Algerian state and its development. Hassan's attempt to consolidate the post-colonial Moroccan state through the annexation of Western Sahara has threatened to tip the regional balance of power, which had favored Algeria up to November 1975. The Algerian government, which has been dominated by the military since independence, and thus heavily influenced by military needs and thinking, has seen in Polisario a legitimate vehicle to keep Morocco in check and, possibly, reverse Hassan II's gains. Indeed, it goes without saying that a friendly state in Western Sahara under Polisario leadership would further Algerian interests and definitively tip the balance of power towards Algeria.

One particular claim about Algeria's strategic motivation has repeatedly surfaced over the course of the Western Sahara conflict. Algeria supports Western Saharan independence because a simpatico or proxy state in Western Sahara would grant Algeria easy access to the Atlantic for natural resource exportation. A 2001 draft autonomy proposal from then UN negotiator James Baker, where Western Sahara would have autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, came with the option that there should be a special corridor to connect Tindouf to the Atlantic through Western Sahara. This side offer, however, had no effect; Algeria and Polisario strongly rejected the proposal. Indeed, a 2002 Algerian counter proposal suggested dividing Western Sahara (Theofilopoulou 2006: 10), likely along the lines of the 1976 Moroccan-Mauritanian division where the southern third would go to Polisario. Such an arrangement would only place Atlantic access (e.g., the port of Dakhla) further out of reach, suggesting that Atlantic access has little to nothing to do with Algeria's motivations. According to geographic surveys, the most feasible route from Tindouf to the Atlantic is not through Western Sahara but through southern Morocco to the port of Tarfaya (Damis 1983: 35). Algeria already exports gas to Europe using a pipeline that runs through northern Morocco to Spain, strongly suggesting that, when necessary, "both sides are quite capable of separating economic and political interests" (Zoubir 1997: 50). The profitability of Atlantic access via Western Sahara not only has to be reconciled with the rough terrain, but also steep costs of constructing a port in Western Sahara that can handle oil, gas or minerals, whereas Algeria already has such processing facilities on the Mediterranean. How the situation will be affected by the Medgaz pipeline, which directly connects Algeria to Spain, or the proposed trans-Saharan gas pipeline, are unclear. The former raises the possibility of Algeria cutting off gas to Morocco; the latter would give Algerian hydrocarbons easier access to Nigerian facilities, the Atlantic and thus the American seaboard.

It thus seems that a confluence strategic and ideational factors are behind Algeria's role in the Western Sahara conflict. Given the durability of the Algerian regime, which has successfully weathered a daunting economic and political crisis lasting from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s, the probability of any change in Algiers' Western Sahara policy is low. Algeria's presidents, from Boumedienne to Bouteflika, have remained, more or less, faithful to Polisario's cause. The cost of which, to Algeria, has never been estimated, though it is widely assumed that Algeria foots most of the bill for Polisario's international diplomatic efforts and has generously contributed to the humanitarian needs of the refugees near Tindouf. Measured in dollars, Algeria's commitment to Western Saharan independence likely figures in the hundreds of millions.

Without a doubt, Algeria can influence Polisario more than any other country. Yet it would be a mistake to think that Algeria controls Polisario or holds veto power over it. While Polisario's international activities are heavily dependent upon Algerian support, together they conduct their relations as would any two states, albeit under the unusual and specific circumstances of the Western Sahara conflict. The only difference being the extent to which Polisario is key to Algeria's foreign policy and the extent to which Algeria can amplify Polisario's diplomatic muscle. An illustrative example, elucidating the nature of their relations, can be found in the crisis surrounding the 2000-1 Paris-Dakar rally. Though Western Sahara conflict had been under a steady cease-fire since 1991, Polisario mobilized its forces in response to a perceived Moroccan aggression. In preparation for the crossing of the rally from the Moroccan occupied Western Sahara to the Polisario controlled zone, Moroccan forces had entered a buffer zone to check for mines and, reportedly, fired warning shots towards Polisario positions. From Polisario's point of view, this constituted a clear violation of the ceasefire. As the UN mission in Western Sahara was unwilling to address this breach, Polisario's forces were quickly deployed to confront any further aggression. Tensions quickly rose and both sides prepared for hostilities. A spate of high-level diplomatic activity ensued, involving French and U.S. governments, as well as the African Union and Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Pressure was especially put on Algerian government to stop Polisario. The crisis came to an end when then Algerian Chief-of-Staff General Mohamed Lamari intervened directly with Polisario's leader, Mohammed Abdelaziz, in Tindouf. The contents of their discussion are unknown (i.e., did Lamari threaten or entice Polisario to back down). What this episode demonstrates is extent of Polisario's autonomy from Algeria, in that it took the highest level of Algerian intervention — short of President Bouteflika himself — to stop Polisario from returning to arms. Frequent claims that Polisario will only return to armed conflict if Algeria allows it must first be reconciled with this episode, as it suggests the possibility of an explosive situation precipitating armed action on the part of Polisario outside of Algeria's means to control it. While Algeria could certainly deny Polisario arms, funding, diplomatic support and refuge in Tindouf, guerrilla wars in Africa have been waged with far less support. Do not equate the ability or willingness of Western Saharan nationalists to return to arms with perceived Algerian support for such a development.

### **Historical Background to Moroccan-Algerian Tensions**

The colonization and emancipation of Morocco from joint French-Spanish “protection” (1912-1956/69) was relatively brief when compared to the intense French conquest and colonization of Algeria (1830-1962). For Morocco, the end of colonialism brought the restoration of the ‘Alawi monarchy under Mohammed V, and thus a return to a centuries old state building project. The Moroccan mythology of a return to traditional rule stood in sharp contrast with the dominant narratives of the Algerian nation's struggle for independence and the state it would create. Algeria's mythology prioritized egalitarianism, populism and socialism; Algeria had been born in the crucible of foreign conquest, the nation baptized in the blood of an armed revolution claiming one million martyrs from 1954 to 1962. It was almost as if the post-colonial Algerian state was being created in direct contrasts to Morocco. To what extent these oppositions — traditional/modern, hierarchical/egalitarian, oligarchic/democratic, capitalist/socialist — actually structure any real differences between Morocco and Algeria, or are mere hyperbole, is beyond

the scope of this study. What is important to note, however, is the fact that these *perceived* differences, set in the context of the Cold War, helped engender the post-colonial relations between Morocco and Algeria. Where Morocco became a key ally of the West in the Middle East and Africa, Algeria adopted policies that were seen as antagonistic to the interests of Washington and Paris. Though by no means a puppet of Moscow, Algeria's heavy reliance upon Soviet armaments often generated accusations of such.

The Cold War helped nurture the growing rift between independent Morocco and Algeria and so the outbreak of conflict in Western Sahara in 1975 only exacerbated the tensions. Those tensions had already boiled over in 1963 during a brief border war between Morocco and Algeria that became known internationally as *La guerre des sables* (War of the Sands). The basis of the grievance, from the Moroccan regime's point of view, was the generous amount of "Moroccan" territory Algeria had inherited from France upon independence. Shortly before obtaining its own independence in 1956, Moroccan political elites had embraced the idea of Greater Morocco, an irredentist claim upon all of Mauritania and Spanish Sahara, as well as large parts of western Algeria and northern Mali (not to mention the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla). Morocco's pre-colonial borders, it was asserted, extended far beyond the landmass Spain and France handed to the Monarchy in 1956. While there was a historical aspect to Greater Morocco, there was also a clear state-building dimension, as the fulfillment of Greater Morocco would enhance newly independent Morocco's otherwise nominal natural resource base. Though the claim on northern Mali was never seriously pursued, Hassan II created a Ministry of Mauritanian and Saharan affairs in 1965, only to be abandoned in 1969 when Morocco formally recognized Mauritania. Hassan also prioritized good relations with Spanish leader General Francisco Franco following a 1963 summit between the two leaders, which substantially muted Moroccan claims to Spanish Sahara for roughly a decade.

Even without countenancing Morocco's territorial claim to significant parts of Algeria, the Saharan areas south of the Dra'a River were a particular bone of contention between the 'Alawi and FLN regimes. While the colonial border between Morocco and Algeria had been consistently maintained from the Mediterranean coast roughly to Figuig-Bechar region, demarcations of sovereignty and administration southward, to northeast corner of Spanish Sahara, were never clearly fixed until the 1950s. For some, the Dra'a constituted the "natural limits" (Reyner 1963: 317-8) of Morocco's south-east flank, yet the long-standing 'Alawi dynasty in Morocco had itself originated in the oases of Algeria's southwest. Previous Moroccan dynasties were attributed territorial ambitions extending from Spain to Timbuktu.

Nevertheless, French colonial maps were often incompatible; delineations of sovereignty were mistaken for administrative divisions and vice versa. This was exacerbated by competition between French colonial official in Morocco and Algeria, resulting in constant readjustments of the border following the first effort, the Franco-Moroccan Treaty of Lalla Marnia in 1845. Subsequently, there were the 1901 and 1902 Franco-Moroccan protocols that extended Morocco's border southward. Then Maurice Varnier, High Commissioner for Eastern Morocco, drew a new administrative line in 1912. Five conferences were held in the 1920s to resolve border issues in the Maghrib. Without clarifying the issue of sovereignty, the 1929 *Confins algéro-marocains*, established shared security and administration duties for the French colony of

Algeria and the French protectorate of Morocco under specified operational limits (*Limite opérationnelle*).

As Paris was preparing to restore full sovereignty to Morocco in early 1956, French officials sought to solidify the 1929 boundary. It was a rough compromise between the demands of French administrators in Rabat and Algiers and seemed to have a historical veneer; it basically followed a border proposed by Colonel Trinquet, who had occupied Tindouf in 1934. “Although the French Government rejected this proposal to enlarge Morocco,” wrote study noted, “*le projet Trinquet* became the basis of Moroccan territorial claims against Algeria” (Reyner 1963: 316-7; see also Trout 1969: 317-23). But because of continued anti-colonial guerrilla activity in rural Morocco and Spanish Sahara, not to mention the war in Algeria since 1954, the French army in Algeria assumed positions on Morocco’s side of the 1929 line. Independent Morocco reluctantly stayed behind the *Limite opérationnelle* as France fought the Algerians (see Joffé 1987).

French interests, however, went far beyond security. In the early 1950s, high-grade iron ore deposits and potential oil/gas reserves were discovered in western Algeria. French authorities made sure that the area from Bechar to Tindouf was more clearly incorporated into Algeria. Indeed, the plain or *hammadah* of Tindouf — Polisario’s base of operations and home to some 100,000 Western Saharan refugees since 1976 — has been central to the Morocco-Algerian territorial dispute. Tindouf initially fell under French control when Colonel Trinquet, coming from Morocco, arrived in 1934. The only sizeable oasis within hundreds of miles, Tindouf was seen as a necessary strategic point for monitoring the Rgaybat al-Sharq/al-Guwasim, the most populous and wide ranging Sahrawi confederation. It was the ambiguity of the 1929 *Confins* and the French occupation of Tindouf later provided Moroccan irredentism with several useful facts: Tindouf was administered from Agadir until 1952; Moroccan colonial soldiers manned posts around Tindouf until 1950; and colonial salaries were paid in Moroccan currency as late as 1960 (Damis 1983: 17). In a desperate attempt to undermine Moroccan support for the Algerian independence, French authorities signaled their willingness to cede the Bechar-Tindouf corridor to Rabat in exchange for Moroccan security cooperation against FLN rear bases in Morocco. Rabat even back Algeria’s territorial integrity against a cynical French proposal to cede northern Algeria to the FLN while retaining the sparsely populated, resource-rich Sahara (“French Siberia”). In exchange for Moroccan support, the FLN had suggested their willingness to negotiate their shared border with Morocco. However, as soon as Algeria achieved independence in July 1962, the Algerian regime refused to open negotiations.

By 1962, the idea of Greater Morocco had already suffered a huge setback with the independence of Mauritania in 1960, which Morocco attempted to block. Furthermore, the accidental death of King Mohammed V in early 1961 had suddenly elevated Hassan II to the throne. Facing internal and external challenges, Hassan’s military took part in an escalating cycle of border clashes, expulsions and small land grabs between Morocco and Algeria starting in the summer of 1962. Finally, in September 1963, a large Moroccan force surrounded Tindouf. The Algerian response was to seize areas around Figuig. Some observers felt that, had Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser not rushed aid to Algeria, the Moroccan conquest might have been successful, given the weakness of the fledgling Algerian republic. Through the Organization of African Unity, Ethiopia’s leader, Haile Selassie, negotiated a *status quo ante* agreement the following month. While Morocco was able to demonstrate greater military

capacity, the outcome was a huge diplomatic victory for the Algerians — a pattern that has repeated itself over and over in the Western Sahara conflict. Algeria's final position on the status of its borders with Morocco were made quite clear the following month, November 1963, by then Foreign Minister — now president — Abdelaziz Bouteflika: "Our borders are incontestable for we have paid for them with our blood" (Trout 1969: 426-8).

The 1963 Sand War remains a sore spot in post-independent Moroccan-Algerian relations but the two governments were still able to "normalize" relations as early as 1964. Five years later, the two signed a treaty of solidarity and cooperation in Ifrane, Morocco, which led to the creation of a border commission. Given Morocco's overdue recognition of Mauritania in 1969, King Hassan, President Boumedienne of Algeria (who seized power in a 1965 coup) and President Ould Daddah of Mauritania were able to hold a trilateral summit in Nouadhibou in 1970 where they backed UN resolutions calling for Spanish Sahara's self-determination. A similar summit in 1973 in Agadir also produced a statement in support of Western Sahara's decolonization. By 1972, Morocco and Algeria had come to an agreement on a border treaty that endorsed the *Limite opérationnelle* but also proposed joint exploitation of natural resources around Tindouf. While Algeria ratified the convention, Morocco delayed. It is widely suspected that Hassan made these territorial concessions to Algeria and recognized Mauritania in order to win support for his claim on Western Sahara (see Joffé 1987).

The question of Western Sahara took a sudden turn in 1974 when Spain provided the territory with provisional autonomous status to be tested by a referendum including the option of independence. Springing into action, Morocco and Mauritania, both still claiming Spanish Sahara as their own *terra irredenta*, pushed the UN General Assembly for an opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on their claims of historical title. Algeria, initially, did not seem to distance itself from this apparent rejection of self-determination. Indeed, Algeria's apparently inconsistent position during this period remains subject to historical debate. At the October 1974 Arab League summit in Rabat, Boumedienne allegedly gave his blessing to a Moroccan-Mauritanian division of Spanish Sahara. Nor did Algeria initially seem enthusiastic about Polisario, founded in May 1973; Algerian officials were known to have even deported its leaders on occasion. In the early days, Libya was Polisario's main patron. At an April 1975 ministerial of the Arab League, Bouteflika rejected Morocco's position on Western Sahara; then, two months later, Bouteflika and his Moroccan counter-part, Ahmed Laraki, were reportedly shuttling back and forth between Rabat and Algiers to hammer out a border agreement. By July, Bouteflika reportedly believed he had won Moroccan ratification of the 1972 border, earning Boumedienne's support for a Moroccan-Mauritanian takeover (Parker 1987: 110-11). However, when The Hague began hearing arguments on the question of Western Sahara in the summer of 1975, Algeria made some of the most forceful arguments in favor of self-determination. Ominously, Algeria even claimed a right to intervene in defense of that principle.

Things came to a head in October 1975. Hours after the ICJ released its opinion, which supported the right of self-determination over the claims of Morocco and Mauritania, Hassan II announced plans to launch a 350,000 strong civilian invasion into Spanish Sahara — the Green March. With this development, the previous decade of Moroccan-Algerian détente was gone. Boumedienne attempted to block the Moroccan invasion, pressing Spain and even personally threatening Ould Daddah as the Green March was underway in early November. The

announcement of a trilateral agreement between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania on November 14, wherein Madrid would relinquish Western Sahara to Rabat and Nouakchott, sealed the deal. Though Algeria had become more friendly towards Polisario since mid 1974, it was likely this moment that crystallized Algeria's determination to back Western Saharan nationhood. Considering Algeria's ideology and strategic needs, some of the motives are clear enough. The idea that Western powers had conspired to help King Hassan redraw the map of North Africa, and done so without consulting Algeria, was a serious affront to an Boumedienne (see Mundy 2006). As a matter of moral consistency, face-saving and international credibility, Algeria could no longer retreat from self-determination. Yet the war in Western Sahara also provided Algeria with a golden opportunity to pursue its strategic interests indirectly. As one Algerian official claimed in early 1976, "We're going to bleed Hassan white" (quoted in Parker 1987: 113).

Indeed, the war in Western Sahara became a touchstone in Moroccan-Algerian relations. Only after the first decade of fighting, by which time Morocco has secured most of the territory with defensive barriers, did Moroccan-Algerian rapprochement begin to take place. All of the countries of the Maghrib faced similar socio-economic problems (rapidly growing populations, daunting unemployment, staggering foreign debt, increasing calls for political pluralism and the rise of political Islamism) and a changing international political environment (the 1986 collapse of hydrocarbon prices, demise of the Soviet Union and rise of Neo-liberalism). The international free-trade consensus, unchallenged at the end of the Cold War, seductively promised authoritarian regimes political stability (i.e., minimal reform) through economic liberalization.

Movement towards greater North African cooperation began at this time and built upon thawing relations between Algiers and Rabat. Such movement, however, was only possible because Western Sahara was not on the agenda. Morocco had broken off relations with Algeria in 1976, when it became the first state to recognize Polisario's government in exile, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Under President Chadli Bendjedid, Moroccan-Algerian summits took place in 1983 and 1987, the latter under Saudi Arabia's King Fahd. A year later, Morocco attended the Arab League summit in Algiers. The UN Security Council's adoption of the Western Sahara conflict in 1988 and a Morocco-Polisario summit in January 1989 helped pave the way for the creation of the *Union du Maghreb arabe* (UMA, Arab Maghrib Union). It includes Mauritania, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Libya. The charter called for the easing of visa restrictions, designed to help trade, tourism, families and migrant workers; tariff reductions or eliminations; expanded rail links; and the establishment of a single regional airline. While generally vague on some economic issues, the UMA sought reciprocity in industry and agriculture, while encouraging countries with surpluses of certain resources to trade with those lacking them. The UMA was a far cry from a robust political federation imagined by some (*à la* the European Union), but it was also envisioned as eventually becoming more than just a free trade area.

For a period, it seemed, Morocco and Algeria were able to keep Western Sahara on a different track from other diplomatic issues. The UMA held several summits until 1994, when Morocco and Algeria again broke off relations and closed their border. The Algiers-Rabat détente, in fact, had been a troubled one. A brief escalation of Morocco-Polisario fighting in the fall of 1989 led to further charges and counter-charges from both governments and allied media. Yet it was the issue of terrorism that undid the UMA. As the Islamist insurgency in Algeria grew more and

more violent, Algiers frequently charged Morocco with passive and active complicity in the rebellion. An August 1994 attack on a Hotel in Marrakech, which left two Spanish tourists dead, was followed by a new salvo of accusations, resulting in the closing of the border that has held to date. The UMA has survived but mostly at the technical level, prodded along by the European Union's Barcelona Process or Euro-Med dialog, which began in 1995.

Almost like clockwork, the Western Sahara conflict has managed to undermine the revival of the UMA every year, though the prospects for a summit seemed particularly good in early 2005. Morocco had dropped its visa requirement for Algerians and at the preceding Arab League summit in Algiers, Bouteflika and Mohammed VI had met privately. As a warm gesture, Mohammed decided to extend his stay in Algeria past the meetings. Yet the UMA summit, set for May 2005 in Tripoli, never materialized. A "private" letter, from President Bouteflika to Polisario's leader Mohammed Abdelaziz, on the occasion of Polisario's thirty-second anniversary celebrations, declared Algeria's unwavering support for Western Saharan independence at the upcoming UMA summit. Upon its publication by Polisario, Morocco predictably backed out. Where Western Sahara was once just the elephant in the room, it is now central to the UMA's continuing failure.

From 1975 to the present, the structures — and even some of the specific actors — of the regimes in Algeria and Morocco exhibit a high degree of continuity. Both have survived war, widespread domestic unrest, economic stagnation and political challenges from both the Left and Islamicism. Constant adversity and sporadic crises of legitimacy have only reinforced the hegemonic status of already dominant political groups in Morocco and Algeria. Outside these elite circles, the general opinions of the populations of Morocco and Algeria vis-à-vis the question of Western Sahara remain largely unknown yet assumed without warrant. Nor is the populace at large in any position to affect their government's Western Sahara policy, whether as a result of enforced consensus (Morocco) or apathetic indifference (Algeria). As with all major policy matters in Morocco and Algeria, Western Sahara is essentially a non-issue for domestic constituencies because there are no means for the population at large to have input. In Algeria, most citizens know that the key decisions affecting the conflict are made at the highest levels in the regime, far outside of their limited input into either the constrained democratic processes or informal networks of power. In Morocco, it is *assumed* that popular support remains high, yet there is likewise no means for the population to question, or voice real democratic support for, the annexation of Western Sahara. Just as the Moroccan regime quickly moved to silence a publication that had measured ninety percent support for King Mohammed VI, any attempt to measure popular attitudes on Western Sahara will likely meet a similar fate, if not violent pre-emption.

Yet for all the differences between Algeria and Morocco, there is one striking similarity. The political-economy that actualizes the rule of these two regimes is fairly straightforward. Following independence, the Moroccan and Algerian states bought political obedience by placing few demands on the population. The government provided a wide array of services to the general population, albeit on a limited basis (i.e., enough to keep dissent to manageable levels). Eschewing general taxation, state income was primarily generated through foreign trade. The implication is quite obvious:

As it is sometimes put, there is “no representation without taxation.” Rather than make themselves beholden to their people, the regimes use their externally generated income to buy acquiescence to their rule. Thus have the governments of North Africa provided generous consumer subsidies, education, health care, and other services to their people, becoming, in essence, preindustrial welfare states. (Anderson 1997: 130)

The durability of such *rentier* regimes is evidenced in their ability to accommodate the international demands for economic liberalization while making symbolic or piecemeal gestures towards political liberalization. Barring any unforeseen chain of events that might radically alter what has become an otherwise static regional politics, the broad historical trend suggests that this will be the case for some time to come. With regards to the Western Sahara conflict, the demonstrable continuity of these robust regimes bodes ill for any change in the attitudes of either.

### **Conclusion: Algeria and the Peace Process**

The essential dilemma that has kept the Western Sahara peace process at a near standstill for a decade is quite simple. Given that the positions of the parties, as well as Algeria, remain fundamentally the same, only the Security Council has the power to leverage peace. However, the consequences of “rocking the boat” are unknown. A politics of fear governs the peace process.

It is assumed that pressing Morocco to allow and respect a referendum on independence will require a great deal of pressure, as Rabat is certainly not bluffing on this issue. However, Morocco is a key ally of France and the United States; it would be quite strange for Washington to propose sanctions against a major non-NATO ally such as Morocco. Yet it is feared that even lower levels of pressure (e.g., moral censure) could have a destabilizing effect upon Morocco. Given the centrality of Western Sahara to the legitimacy of the ‘Alawi monarchy, Western policy makers have long feared that putting pressure on Morocco could weaken the Moroccan state. With Islamists being the most organized informal opposition force in Morocco, such fears are only enhanced. And even if the Moroccan palace could find the will to change its position, it is not clear that it could deliver the rest of the regime, especially the entrenched financial and military interests in the occupied Western Sahara.

On the other side, it is feared that putting too much pressure on Western Saharan nationalists to accept Moroccan sovereignty will alienate Polisario and Algeria from the peace process. Where Morocco’s trump card has been unquestioned support from the United States and, ultimately, France, the ace up Polisario’s sleeve is certainly the option of returning to armed conflict if the peace process goes sour. A new war in Western Sahara would likely have a destabilizing effect upon Morocco and the Sahara-Sahel region, and so makes the option of putting pressure on Polisario as undesirable as the option of putting pressure on Morocco. And even if Polisario could be pressed into cutting a deal with Morocco, it is not clear whether or not it could deliver to the refugees near Tindouf, who, year after year, call for return to armed struggle. These are the basic reasons why the UN Security Council ritually renews MINURSO’s mandate with little debate, calling on the parties to find the willpower themselves to resolve the issue. But in the

near and long term, a solution to the Western Sahara conflict is unlikely to come from the parties, barring any significant crises like the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis that led to Indonesia's about-face on East Timor. Western Sahara is likely a multi-generational conflict.

For Algeria, this must all seem quite amusing. Algeria suffers the least but enjoys the most benefit from the continued standoff between Morocco and Polisario. This is not ask *cui bono?* and then assert that Algeria has a vested interest in continued stalemate. Rather, it is to point out the obvious: the international community has utterly failed to articulate a coherent alternative to the status quo that speaks to the parties' self-interest. The Security Council now calls for a political solution yet refuses to suggest what a solution might look like and why it would be in the interests of Morocco, Polisario and Algeria to consider it. These three will remain ensconced in their positions so long as no other body marshals the political imagination to show them otherwise. Simply calling for a negotiated settlement that respects self-determination is an empty request unless it is backed by a coherent vision that sutures to the parties' self-interest together. Since 2004, the Security Council and the UN Secretariat have refused to engage in such practices, instead leaving it to the parties to develop their own solutions. While Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal was the right step, it was in the wrong direction — away from the more robust power sharing and referendum proposals put on the table by James Baker in 2003. Indeed, Algeria then played an immensely constructive role in the peace process, when it convinced Polisario to accept the second Baker Plan against their perceived self-interest. So long as Algeria is treated as the powerful nation state that it is, but not one with a real dog in the fight, and not simply Polisario's gatekeeper, Algeria can play a vital role in the search for peace.

## **Bibliography**

Anderson, Lisa. 1997. Prospects for Liberalism in North Africa: Identities and Interests in Preindustrial Welfare States. In *Islam, Democracy and the State in North Africa*, John Entelis ed., 127-140. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Damis, John. 1983. *Conflict in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Dispute*. Stanford: Hoover Institution.

Entelis, John P. 1986. *Algeria: The Revolution Institutionalized*. Boulder: Westview.

International Crisis Group. 2007. *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*. Middle East/North Africa Report 66 (June 11). Brussels: ICG.

Joffé, George. 1987. Frontiers in North Africa. In *Boundaries and State Territory in the Middle East and North Africa*, Gerald H. Blake and Richard N. Schofield eds. Wisbech: Middle East and North African Studies: [http://arabworld.nitle.org/texts.php?module\\_id=4&reading\\_id=119](http://arabworld.nitle.org/texts.php?module_id=4&reading_id=119), last retrieved September 2006.

Parker, Richard B. 1987. *North Africa: Regional Tensions and Strategic Concerns*. New York: Praeger.

Reyner, Anthony. 1963. Morocco's International Boundaries: A Factual Background. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 1: 313-329.

Theofilopoulou, Anna. 2006. *The United Nations and Western Sahara: A Never-ending affair*. United States Institute for Peace, Special Report 166. Washington: USIP.

Trout, Frank E. 1969. *Morocco's Saharan Frontiers*. Geneva: Droz.

Werenfels, I. 2007. *Managing Instability in Algeria: Elites and Political Change since 1995*. London and New York: Routledge.

Zoubir, Yahia H. 1997. In Search of Hegemony: The Western Sahara in Algerian-Moroccan Relations. *Journal of Algerian Studies* 2: 43-61.