

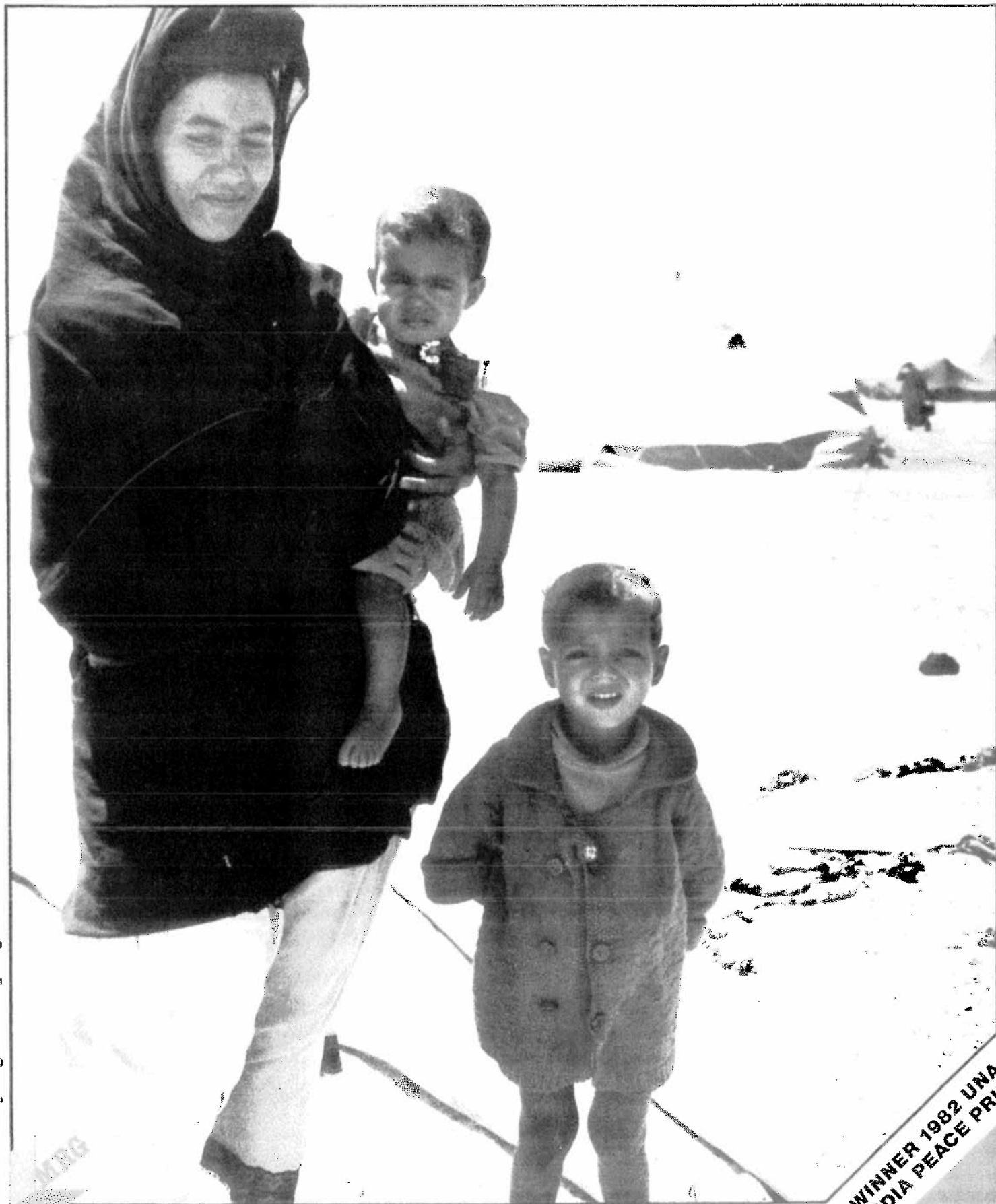
The Western Sahara

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The Minority Rights Group

Report No. 40



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is an international research and information unit registered in Britain as an educational charity under the Charities Act of 1960. Its principal aims are —

- To secure justice for minority or majority groups suffering discrimination, by investigating their situation and publicising the facts as widely as possible, to educate and alert public opinion throughout the world.
- To help prevent, through publicity about violations of human rights, such problems from developing into dangerous and destructive conflicts which, when polarised, are very difficult to resolve; and
- To foster, by its research findings, international understanding of the factors which create prejudiced treatment and group tensions, thus helping to promote the growth of a world conscience regarding human rights.

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242259

Western Saharans

By Tony Hodges

Tony Hodges has studied the Western Saharan problem for many years, and has written two books on the disputed territory, the *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey, 1982) and *Western Sahara: the Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill, Westport, Connecticut, and Croom Helm, London, 1984). His research, which has included several visits to both Polisario- and Moroccan-held parts of Western Sahara, as well as to Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, was conducted under a grant from the Ford Foundation in 1978-82. Educated at Balliol College, Oxford, and the University of California, San Diego, Tony Hodges was an analyst of African affairs at International Reporting Information Systems, Washington DC, in 1982-83, and is now Africa editor at Economist Publications Ltd., London. He is the author of the Minority Rights Group report, *Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Africa*, published in 1976 and updated in 1984, and co-author, with Colin Legum, of *After Angola: the War over Southern Africa* (Rex Collings, London, 1976).

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The Western Saharans

By Tony Hodges



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THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from any fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if a man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore,

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims

THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11. (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14. (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15. (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16. (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17. (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21. (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23. (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interest.

Article 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25. (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26. (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27. (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

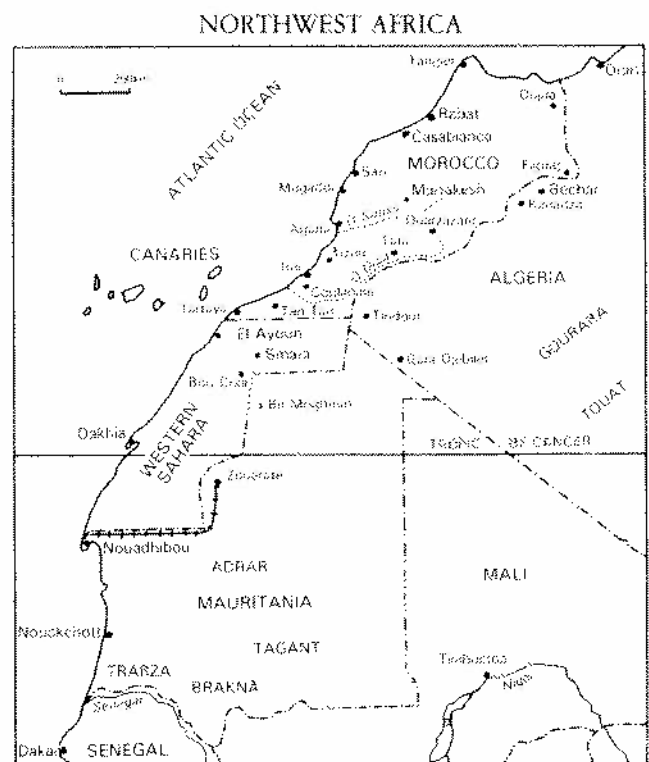
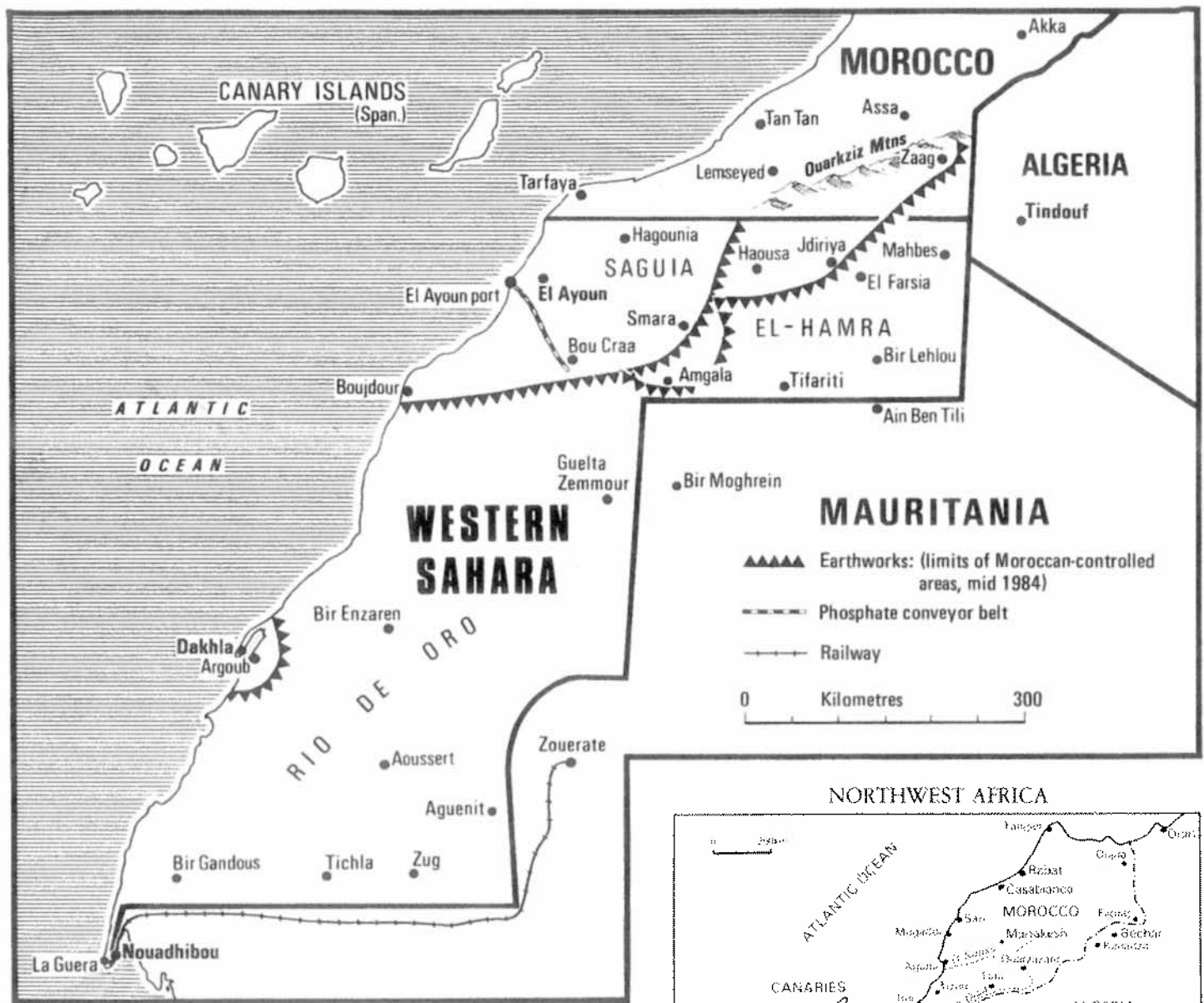
Article 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29. (1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.



THE WESTERN SAHARANS

by Tony Hodges

Since 1975, a bitter and so far intractable war has been fought for control of what might seem to be one of the least hospitable territories on earth – the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara, on the Atlantic coast of the great Sahara desert. There has only been sporadic coverage in the Western press of what has happened in this bleak, but phosphate-rich, patch of desert, which covers 102,700 square miles, an area slightly larger than Great Britain. Yet the conflict raging there, beyond the gaze of the daily news media, raises issues of great import, to Africa and the world at large.

The war itself is a dispute over sovereignty – between indigenous Western Saharans, or 'Saharawis', and their powerful neighbour to the north, Morocco. However, the war has ramifications far beyond Western Sahara's borders. In North-west Africa, it has strained relations between Morocco and its regional rival, Algeria, while compounding Morocco's grave economic difficulties and so undermining the stability of King Hassan II's pro-Western monarchy. It is not exaggerated to speculate that the war might ultimately bring revolution to Morocco, as the wars in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau did to fascist Portugal in 1974.

As an inter-African conflict, the Western Saharan war has become a major challenge for the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

Indeed, in 1982, the Saharan conflict produced such acrimony within the OAU that the continental organization almost collapsed in disarray.

At issue also is a principle which has been at the very heart of the contemporary philosophy of decolonization – the right of self-determination. For this war was spawned by the unjust and undemocratic manner of the territory's 'decolonization'. In effect, Western Sahara was simply ceded by Spain, without reference to

the wishes of its inhabitants, to its northern and southern neighbours, Morocco and Mauritania, which had longstanding territorial claims to the area. Western Sahara was then partitioned, from 1976 to 1979, when Mauritania tired of the conflict and renounced its territorial claims, prompting Morocco to annex the erstwhile Mauritanian sector too.

The local population was never genuinely consulted about its future, despite the fact that the United Nations General Assembly had been urging Spain since 1966 to hold a referendum. If the Saharawis had been given the right to decide their fate, there can be little doubt that independence would have been their choice – and by a large majority, for a United Nations mission of inquiry which toured the country in May 1975 reported ‘an overwhelming consensus among Saharans within the territory in favour of independence and opposing integration with any neighbouring country’.¹ The UN mission was also struck by the widespread support for the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro, the pro-independence movement commonly known by its acronym, *Polisario*, which had been founded two years earlier.

The will to live free has since sustained the Saharawis through their long and difficult war of resistance against Moroccan occupation. The Moroccan army has never succeeded in establishing a firm hold over more than a small part of the territory, mainly in the north-west.

This report delves back into history to find the complex origins of this war. It then traces the chain of events by which Spain bowed to Moroccan pressure in 1974-6, and the repercussions of the war since then – for the Saharawis themselves, for Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, for the OAU and the United Nations, and for the world powers. First, however, it would be well to take a closer look at the contested territory and its inhabitants.

To anyone visiting the Sahara for the first time, the landscape can seem as hostile as the ocean would to a shipwrecked sailor. It is eerily silent, apparently lifeless in its vastness. In much of Western Sahara, there appears to be nothing but rocks and stones, stretching interminably over monotonous plains, punctuated by occasional escarpments and the valleys of dried-up river beds. There are no oases of any consequence, although the sturdy *acacia radiata* appears to thrive in some regions, most notably in the valley of the country's only important river, the Saguia el-Hamra. This flows seasonally from east to west, below and above ground, to the Atlantic, from streams starting in the highest range, the Zemmour massif, which rises to 2700 feet, in the centre-east of the country, on the border with Mauritania.

There are precipitous cliffs along most of the 660-mile coastline, which has few natural harbours, hazardous sandbanks and shallow coastal waters. Flanking the coast is a narrow belt of sand dunes. However, the rest of the territory defies the popular image of the desert as a succession of undulating dunes. Instead, most of Western Sahara consists of stony plains, which rise from the coast to a maximum height of about 1300 feet. Apart from the Zemmour massif, there is only one other mountainous area, Adrar Soutouf, in the extreme south-east, where the highest peaks are about 1700 feet.

The harshness of the Saharan climate is legendary. Even on the coast, where the aridity of the desert is tempered by the moisture of Atlantic winds, annual rainfall rarely exceeds two inches. Temperatures soar to a blistering heat in the middle of the day (as high as 135°F inland in the summer) and then tumble in the course of the night, dropping to freezing point on winter nights inland. Besides these dramatic shifts in temperature and the extreme aridity, the Saharawi has to contend with the desert winds, which fill the air with fine particles of sand that, but for protective robes and turbans, clog hair, throat and eyes. However, despite the inauspicious climate and terrain, people have always lived in Western Sahara. Until about 20 years ago, before the development of phosphate mining and the economic and political changes of recent times, they were nomads – apart from a few Spaniards living on the coast. These tough Saharans survived by migrating over vast distances, searching out pastures and water for their herds of camels and goats.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Saharawis

The Saharawis are a sub-group, ethno-culturally speaking, of the *beidan*, or ‘Moors’, nomads of mixed Berber, Arab and black African descent who speak a dialect of Arabic known as Hassaniya and live in a swathe of desert from the Oued Draa in southern Morocco to the valleys of the Niger and the Senegal. Historically, they are the result of the fusion, through wars, subjugation, alliances and inter-marriage, of Sanhaja Berbers (who first migrated into this region in the first millennium BC and acquired the camel in about the first century AD), Bedouin Arabs known as the Beni Hassan (who began arriving at the end of the thirteenth century), and black African slaves. As Arabophone nomads, the Moors were distinct from the Berber Tuareg nomads to their east, as well as from the black African farmers to their south and the semi-nomadic or sedentary Berbers of the Souss and the Anti-Atlas to their immediate north. The tribes, or *qabael* (singular, *qabila*), in the region now known as Western Sahara were regarded, by themselves and their neighbours, as the *ahel es-sahel* (the people of the littoral), since they lived in the extreme western stretch of desert flanking the Atlantic.

The Saharawi economy was based on pastoral nomadism. The camel, which has a stomach capacity of up to 60 gallons and can travel some 40 miles a day without drinking for five days in the hottest weeks of the summer, was the key to survival, allowing the nomads to traverse huge distances to reach the scattered pastures and wells. The camel was a pack animal, a means and unit of exchange, the Saharawis' principal ‘export’ (along with salt), an instrument of war, the foundation of the nomads' diet (milk) and a source of hair (for the weaving of tents) and leather.

The nomad was like a living compass. In his constant struggle against nature, he knew that the slightest error of judgement could decimate his herds and perhaps result in starvation and death. Survival required a remarkable sense of direction and knowledge of terrain – skills which have contributed to the Saharawis' success as guerrillas in the twentieth century.

The cultivation of crops was marginal to the economy. There were almost no oases between the Oued Draa and the Adrar region of Mauritania, though small quantities of barley were sometimes cultivated in rain-collecting depressions. Furthermore, only small impoverished tribes along the coast engaged in fishing, by wading with large nets from the beach rather than using boats, although Western Sahara has a 660-mile coastline with rich fishing resources that have attracted the Canary Islanders for several centuries. The Saharawis did, however, engage in trade. They would exchange animals, wool, skin and salt for such ‘imports’ as cereals, tea, sugar, firearms, rugs and pots. They also participated, as guides, escorts or traders, in the long-distance caravan traffic across the Sahara.

Raiding between *qabael* was almost endemic, because of the Saharawis' great mobility, the availability of arms, the competition for livestock, pastures and wells, and the customary responsibility of agnates for murders, which could cause a vendetta-like spiral of violence.

Saharawi society was divided horizontally and vertically, into tribes and castes. At the top were free *qabael*, known either as *ahel mdafa* (people of the gun) or *shorfa* (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed) – though, for the latter also, freedom rested as much on military prowess as on noble descent. Beneath them, there were *qabael* of tributary status, the *znaga*, who were forced to pay tribute for ‘protection’ to powerful free tribes. At the bottom of the social scale were castes of craftsmen (*maalemin*) and bards (*iggawen*), who were attached to *qabael* of free or tributary status, and finally the slaves (*abid*) and freed-yet-dependent *haratin*.

The main *ahel mdafa* were the Oulad Delim (‘Sons of Delim’), the Izarguen and the Ait Lahsen. The principal groups of *shorfa* were the Reguibat (who today constitute a numerical majority of the Saharawi population), the Arosien and the Oulad Bou Sbaa. Together, the *ahel mdafa* and the *shorfa* constituted the overwhelming majority of Saharawis. The only large tribe of *znaga* were the Oulad Tidrarin. There were very few *maalemin*, *iggawen*, *haratin* and *abid*.

Each *qabila* was segmented into fractions. Politically, each tribe and fraction regulated its affairs through an assembly (*djemaa*) of the heads of its most distinguished families – men who, by virtue of their valour, age, wisdom, piety or wealth, enjoyed the greatest respect. The *djemaa* selected the group's *sheikh* (plural, *shioukh*), established its own body of law, the *urf*, to complement the basic Islamic judicial code, the *Sharia*, and appointed a *qadi* to administer justice. At tribal level, this assembly was often known as an Ait Arbain, or Council of 40. Presided over by a *moqadem*, it would usually be called into session in time of war or grave crisis, to organize the tribe's defence or a raid (*ghazzi*).

The limited and dispersed pastures required migration in relatively small groups, and so it was very rare for a whole tribe to gather together in one place. Under such conditions of dispersal, in an exceptionally arid and hostile environment, no single group could draw on sufficient power or resources to establish even a semblance of supratribal government. Further south, in southern and western Mauritania (Adrar, Trarza, Tagant and Brakna), where rainfall is higher and oases more frequent, weak embryonic supratribal states were set up from about the seventeenth century. However, their emirs had no authority over the *qaba* of the *ahel es-sahel*, which remained completely independent.

Likewise, the Saharawis were effectively beyond the control of the sultans of Morocco. Much of Morocco itself (the Atlas ranges and the Rif) was normally beyond the sultans' effective writ in pre-colonial times – and thus known as the 'lands of dissidence', the *bilad es-siba*. Intervention by Moroccan sultans in the distant, forbidding Sahara was limited and ephemeral. When there was such intervention, by atypically powerful rulers, like Ahmed el-Mansour (1578-1603) and Moulay Ismail (1672-1727), it was normally motivated by the desire to secure control of the trade routes across the desert to acquire gold and slaves. The usual means were to send raiding armies, strike up opportune alliances and secure control of strategic oases, market towns, salt-mines and wells. Temporary Moroccan administration was established at times in the Algerian oases and trading centres of Gourara, Touat and Tidikelt and, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, in Timbuktu. Such (very brief) administration was only possible at all because these regions had oases or towns with sedentary populations. In the expanse of desert encompassing what is now known as Western Sahara, however, there were no settlements. This was the domain of long-range camel-herding nomads, the 'sons of the clouds', who were constantly on the move, scattered over enormous, distant tracts of exceedingly inhospitable territory. To have attempted to have administered or taxed them, or to have halted their incessant inter-tribal raiding, would have been utterly utopian.

Spanish Colonization

The first European contact with Western Sahara came in the fifteenth century, at the start of the great age of maritime discovery pioneered by Portugal and Spain. Prince Henry the Navigator, the son of King João I of Portugal, sent out annual expeditions from the Algarve to the islands of the Atlantic and the African coast from the 1420s, and in 1434 one of his captains, Gil Eannes, became the first European to succeed in returning from a voyage south of Cape Bojador – beyond which, legend had it, lay the dreaded *Mare Tenebrosum*, the Sea of Darkness. By 1441, Portuguese seamen had reached as far as Cape Blanc. The first Portuguese slave-raid was staged on the Western Saharan coast that year, and thereafter raiding alternated with trading, for slaves and gold. One place where gold was acquired, the inlet at Dakhla, was named the Rio de Ouro by the Portuguese.

Portugal's main rival was Castile, which began conquering the Canary Islands, off the northern tip of the Saharan coast, in 1402. In 1405, Jean de Bethencourt, a Norman knight in the service of Castile, landed on the Saharan coast, to the north of Cape Bojador, and attacked a caravan of traders. In 1476, the Castilian master of the Canaries, Diego García de Herrera, sent an armed force to the Saharan coast to build a fortress, Santa Cruz de Mar Pequeña, which became a trade centre and a base for slave-raiding. Castile and Portugal agreed on spheres of influence along the coast under successive treaties, signed in Alcáçovas (September 1479), Toledo (May 1480), Tordesillas (June 1494), and Cintra (September 1509). However, in 1524, a Saharawi force sacked Santa Cruz de Mar Pequeña. The Spanish, whose imperial

interests shifted to the Americas, made no attempt to re-establish a settlement on the Western Saharan coast, though the Portuguese remained on the island of Arguin, just to the south of the modern Western Saharan-Mauritanian border, until its seizure by the Dutch in 1638.

Spain did not renew its interest in the African coast opposite the Canaries until the European scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. With the French then in possession of Arguin and a British trading company (Donald Mackenzie's North-West Africa Company) installed since 1879 at Tarfaya, directly opposite the Canaries, there were fears in Madrid that France, Britain or some other European power might secure control of this coast and so endanger Spain's hold over the Canaries. It would be prudent, some argued, to raise the Spanish flag to forestall such rivals. Moreover, the traumatic loss of the colonies in Latin America had left a sense of wounded pride which some Spanish nationalists hoped to dispel by pursuing new imperial glories in Africa. Their cause was propounded by such societies as the *Asociación Española para la Exploración de Africa* (founded in 1877 with the backing of King Alfonso XII), the *Sociedad de Geografía de Madrid* (founded in 1876) and, above all, the *Sociedad Española de Africanistas y Colonistas* (launched in 1883), which sent an explorer, Emilio Bonelli, to the Saharan coast in November 1884. The colonialist lobby was supported by business groups which, like Mackenzie, wanted to tap the supposed wealth of the Saharan caravan traffic or to exploit the rich fishing banks off the Saharan coast. In 1881, the *Sociedad de Pesquerías Canario-Africanas* established a pontoon in the Río de Oro bay, and in 1883 the *Compañía Comercial Hispano-Africana* was founded 'to develop Spain's commercial relations with Africa by establishing trading posts and creating a regular steamship service'.³

So, by 1884, the year the Congress of Berlin started laying down the ground-rules for the division of Africa, there was a formidable nexus of business interests and 'Africanist' propagandists who, with the ear of the royal family and several prominent politicians, could pressure the Madrid government to embark on a colonial venture on the Saharan coast. In December 1884, the Spanish government proclaimed a 'protectorate' over 'the territories of Río de Oro, Angra de Cintra and the Bay of the West'. A settlement named Villa Cisneros, was founded at Dakhla, on the Río de Oro bay, in 1885. On 10 July 1885, the whole coast between Capes Bojador and Blanc was placed under the administrative responsibility of the overseas ministry in Madrid and Bonelli was appointed royal commissioner. The Spanish Sahara's borders were delineated by four successive Franco-Spanish conventions, signed in 1886, 1900, 1904 and 1912. In all, Spain acquired 112,000 square miles of desolate desert, comprising two outright colonies – Río de Oro (71,000 square miles) and Saguia el-Hamra (31,650 square miles) – and a 9900 square mile 'protectorate' known as Spanish South Morocco between parallel 27° 40' and the Oued Draa, which was regarded as a southern adjunct of the Spanish protectorate zone set up in northern Morocco (with a capital at Tetuan) when Morocco was divided by France and Spain in 1912.

However, Spain was too weak to occupy its allotted zone of desert. For more than 30 years after its founding, Villa Cisneros was the only Spanish settlement in Western Sahara. In 1916, a second outpost was finally established at Tarfaya, allowing the Spanish flag to fly for the first time in 'Spanish South Morocco'. A third settlement was founded at La Guera, at the tip of Cape Blanc in 1920. However, no attempt was made to occupy points in the interior until as late as 1934.

In the meantime, the hinterland of these supposedly Spanish territories became a sanctuary for nomad forces resisting the French advance into the neighbouring regions of Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria. Sporadically, for 30 years, from 1904 to 1934, long-range raiding parties would set forth from 'Spanish' territory to attack the French and the tribes that had allied with them. Two of the most celebrated anti-colonial leaders, Sheikh Ma el-Ainin and his son, Ahmed el-Hiba, even attempted, in 1910 and 1912 respectively, to save Morocco from European colonization by deposing the weak, compromise-prone Alawite sultan, Moulay Hafid. They were defeated by French armies. While El-Hiba kept on fighting against the French from the Anti-Atlas until 1934, his brother, Mohammed Laghdaf, and other Saharawi resistance leaders, such as Mohammed el-Mamoun and El-Aissawi et-Tibari, continued raiding against the French in the desert.

However, in 1934, French forces from Morocco, Algeria and French West Africa finally 'pacified' the border regions of the north-western Sahara in a coordinated military campaign. Simultaneously, at France's behest, Spain at last occupied a few strategic points in the interior of its zone of desert, including the (abandoned) town of Smara, the region's only pre-colonial settlement, which had been built by Ma el-Ainin in 1898-1902.

Spanish Rule

Still, Spanish Sahara remained an almost forgotten colony, of zero economic value to the metropolis. From 1934 to 1946, it was governed, for purposes of administrative convenience, as an appendage of the Spanish protectorate in northern Morocco. Then, from 1946 to 1958, it formed part of *África Occidental Española* (AOE), with Ifni, a small enclave on Morocco's Atlantic coast. As late as 1952, there were still only 216 civilian employees, 24 telephone subscribers and 366 children in school in the whole of Spanish Sahara. Almost all the Saharawis remained nomads. It was not until the sudden awakening of interest in the territory's mineral resources, in the late 1950s, that their way of life would begin, suddenly and radically, to change.

In 1958, two years after Morocco's independence, AOE was dissolved. Spanish South Morocco was ceded, or retroceded, to the Rabat government, while the rest of Spain's Saharan territory was converted into a Spanish province, with its own capital at El-Ayoun, where a settlement had been founded in 1940. (A separate province was created in Ifni.) The *Provincia de Sahara* was administered by a governor-general, a military officer with the rank of general who was responsible in military matters to the Captain-General of the Canaries and in civilian affairs to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in Madrid, through its colonial office, the *Dirección General de Plazas y Provincias Africanas* – or, as it was known after Ifni's cession to Morocco in 1969, the *Dirección General de Promoción del Sahara*.

Under a 1962 decree, El-Ayoun and Villa Cisneros each had municipal status and so were administered by city councils (*ayuntamientos*), headed by mayors (*alcaldes*). Smara and La Guera were deemed 'minor local entities' and administered by local *juntas*. For the territory as a whole, there was a 14-member *Cabildo Provincial* (Provincial Council). From 1963, when the first elections to these bodies were held, three *procuradores* represented the province in the Spanish *Cortes* (Parliament). In 1967, their number was raised to six. However, the electoral process was no more democratic than it was in Spain itself under the Franco dictatorship. None of the councils, at local or provincial level, had any real power.

As for the nomads (the overwhelming majority of the population until the early 1970s), the Spanish authorities continued a policy akin to 'indirect rule', through the *qabael*'s traditional *djemaas* and *shioukh*. As sedentarization increased, however, the Spanish felt a need for new means of communication and consultation with the Saharawi population. So, in 1967, a territorial *Djema'a*, composed (initially) of 82 members, all Saharawis, was set up. They represented tribal, rather than geographical, constituencies and less than half were directly elected. The assembly had a purely consultative role, and a UN mission of inquiry which visited Western Sahara in May 1975 reported that it appeared to 'depend considerably for guidance on the Spanish authorities' and to be 'representative largely of the older and more conservative element of Saharan society'.¹

Like metropolitan Spain during the Francoist era, Western Sahara was administered by a ruthless police state. Manifestations of opposition to the colonial status quo were violently repressed. In effect, the territory was a military colony. It was administered by military officers, and after Morocco's independence it became the main home for the Spanish Foreign Legion. In some towns and settlements, Spanish troops outnumbered civilian residents.

To placate the UN, Spain promised, from 1966 onwards, that it would eventually allow self-determination, through a referendum, when the territory and its people were 'ready' for it. In practice, however, such a vague promise allowed Spain to remain indefinitely in the territory, which seemed, in the 1960s, to be on the verge of a mineral bonanza.

Economic Resources

One resource, Western Sahara's rich fishing waters, had been exploited by Spaniards from the Canary Islands for more than four-and-a-half centuries. One of the best fishing zones in the world, the Western Saharan coast is estimated to be able to support a global annual catch of as much as 2 million tons. About 250,000 tons of fish are caught there annually by the Canary Islands' fishing fleet alone. However, Western Sahara itself has benefited little from this wealth. In the peak, pre-war year of 1974, 11,800 tons of fish were landed in Western Saharan ports – about 1% of the total estimated tonnage of fish caught off the territory's coast by vessels from the rest of the world.

In the early 1960s, meanwhile, the world's oil companies descended on Western Sahara, encouraged by the major oil discoveries in the Algerian Sahara. In 1960-1, 43 onshore blocks covering 37% of the territory's land-area, were awarded to 11 consortia grouping 20 oil companies. By 1964, 27 discoveries had been made, but none was deemed commercial. The exploration focus then shifted offshore. Though no oil was ever exploited, oil companies have retained interest in the region. In 1978, the Moroccan government awarded new offshore blocks to BP and Phillips Petroleum, though the wartime conditions forced the companies to abandon their permits in 1980. Since then, the oil search has shifted, for political reasons, across the border to the Tarfaya region of southern Morocco, where Shell was authorized to look for shale oil onshore in 1981, and Mobil was awarded offshore exploration rights in 1982 in a region earlier explored by Agip and Esso.

Since the 1950s, there has also been interest in Western Sahara's iron ore, which has been found in three regions – at Agracha, a few miles from the huge iron mines across the Mauritanian border at Zouerate; in the east of Saguia el-Hamra, not far from the Gara Djebilet iron deposits in south-western Algeria; and in the centre of the country. The iron deposits have not yet been exploited, however.

It is phosphate rock, of course, which has really put Western Sahara on the world mineral map. Phosphate deposits were first discovered in the late 1940s, but a systematic survey was not conducted until after the creation of the *Empresa Nacional Minera del Sahara* (ENMINSA) in 1962. ENMINSA estimated the territory's total deposits at 10 billion tons and found proven reserves of 1.7 billion tons of high-grade (75-80% bone phosphate of lime) ore at Bou-Craa. In 1969, Spain's *Instituto Nacional de Industria* (INI) founded a special company, *Fosfatos de Bu-Craa* (Fosbucraa for short), to exploit the deposits there. Exports began in 1972. By 1975, almost 25 billion pesetas had been invested, providing a production capacity of 3.7 million tons of ore a year, and annual output had risen to 2.6 million tons. Fosbucraa planned to raise capacity to 10 million tons a year by 1980, making Western Sahara the world's second largest phosphate exporter (after Morocco). With its phosphate revenues, which had already reached 4.7 billion pesetas by 1974, Western Sahara would be economically viable as an independent state. Indeed, it might, in view of its small population, enjoy a per capita income comparable to that in Western Europe or the Gulf oil states. However, the phosphate industry ground to a virtual standstill after the outbreak of war between Morocco and Polisario in 1975.

Social Changes

The economic changes of the 1960s and early 1970s brought about a rapid modernization of Saharawi society. The majority of Saharawis gave up their precarious nomadic way of life and settled in the towns, to take up wage-employment, set up shop as traders or send their children to school. The number of Saharawis living in the three main towns (El-Ayoun, Smara and Villa Cisneros) trebled between 1967 and 1974, reaching 40,660, or 55% of the Saharawis recorded in the 1974 census, which put the total population at 95,019, of whom 73,497 were Saharawis, 20,126 Europeans and 1396 from other African countries. Some nomads were probably 'missed out', however. Moreover, the census took no account of those Saharawis from the *qabael* which had traditionally roamed in the Western Saharan region, and who – for political or economic reasons – had settled in the neighbouring territories, rather than within the borders of Spanish Sahara. There

were at least 75,000 such *ahel es-sahel* in southern Morocco, northern Mauritania, and south-western Algeria by 1974.

Liberation Movements

It was Morocco's regaining of independence in 1956 and the calls to insurrection from the radical leaders of the Moroccan *Jaich at-Tahrir* (Army of Liberation), then in control of much of southern Morocco, after the withdrawal of the French, which first inspired the *ahel es-sahel* to rise in revolt – against the French in northern Mauritania and south-western Algeria as well as the Spanish in Western Sahara. Their tactics were modelled on the raids of the pre-'pacification' period that had ended barely two decades earlier. Attacks became frequent during 1957 and the weak Spanish forces had to be evacuated from the interior to a handful of strongpoints along the coast. Even Smara was abandoned. However, in February 1958, the insurgency was crushed by a joint Franco-Spanish campaign, Operation Ouragan (Hurricane), involving 14,000 troops and 130 aircraft. The remnants of the Saharawi guerrilla forces were disarmed and disbanded in southern Morocco by the regular Moroccan army, the *Forces Armées Royales* (FAR), which assumed control there from the 'irregulars' of the *Jaich at-Tahrir* the same year. It was only after the decimation of the guerrilla movement that Spain finally agreed, on 1 April 1958, to hand over Spanish South Morocco to the Rabat regime (Agreement of Cintra).

The following decade saw no serious attempts by the Saharawis to challenge Spanish rule. However, the profound changes within the Spanish colony and in the international arena during the 1960s did give rise to a modern, urban-based nationalist movement at the very end of the decade. This was the *Harakat Tahrir Saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab* (Liberation Organization of Saguia el-Hamra and Oued ed-Dahab), whose principal leader was Mohammed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri, a Reguibi who had studied in Morocco, Egypt and Syria. A small clandestine movement which advocated social reforms as well as decolonization, the *Harakat Tahrir* disintegrated after Foreign Legionnaires fired on anti-Spanish demonstrators in El-Ayoun on 17 June 1970. Hundreds of Saharawis were briefly detained. Bassiri was arrested and never reappeared. Most Saharawis believe that he was murdered by his captors.

The initiative for reorganizing the anti-colonial movement came from Saharawis living abroad, in Morocco and Mauritania. A nucleus of militant Saharawi students was formed in Rabat in 1971-2. Among them, notably, was a Reguibi, El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed, a student in the law faculty at Mohammed V University, who travelled incessantly between the main centres of the Saharawi diaspora, in Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, to lay the foundations for a new movement which would fight the Spanish, arms in hand. Fearing Moroccan repression, the embryo of the new movement was formed in Zouerate. Finally, on 10 May 1973, the *Polisario Front* was born – as the 'unique expression of the masses, opting for revolutionary violence and the armed struggle as the means by which the Saharawi Arab African people can recover their total liberty and foil the manoeuvres of Spanish colonialism'.⁴ The first guerrilla attack, against an outpost of the Spanish Tropas Nómadas at El-Khanga, in the eastern Saguia el-Hamra, followed ten days later. Over the next two years, the Front staged a succession of small hit-and-run attacks, with almost no external support apart from one small consignment of arms from Libya. The governments of Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria gave no material support to the guerrilla struggle, though Polisario bands could outwit the Spanish by slipping across the border into the vast unpoliceable desert regions of northern Mauritania.

It was at its second congress, held between 25-31 August 1974, that Polisario came out unambiguously in favour of full independence. A manifesto declared that 'the Saharawi people have no alternative but to struggle until wresting their independence, their wealth and their full sovereignty over their land'.⁵ The Front was converted from a small vanguard group into a mass movement in 1974-5 as a result of the vacillations of Spanish policy and the looming threat from Morocco at that time. The Front's popular support was dramatically revealed in May 1975, when thousands of pro-Polisario demonstrators took to the streets to greet a UN mission of inquiry as it toured the territory. The mission members reported:

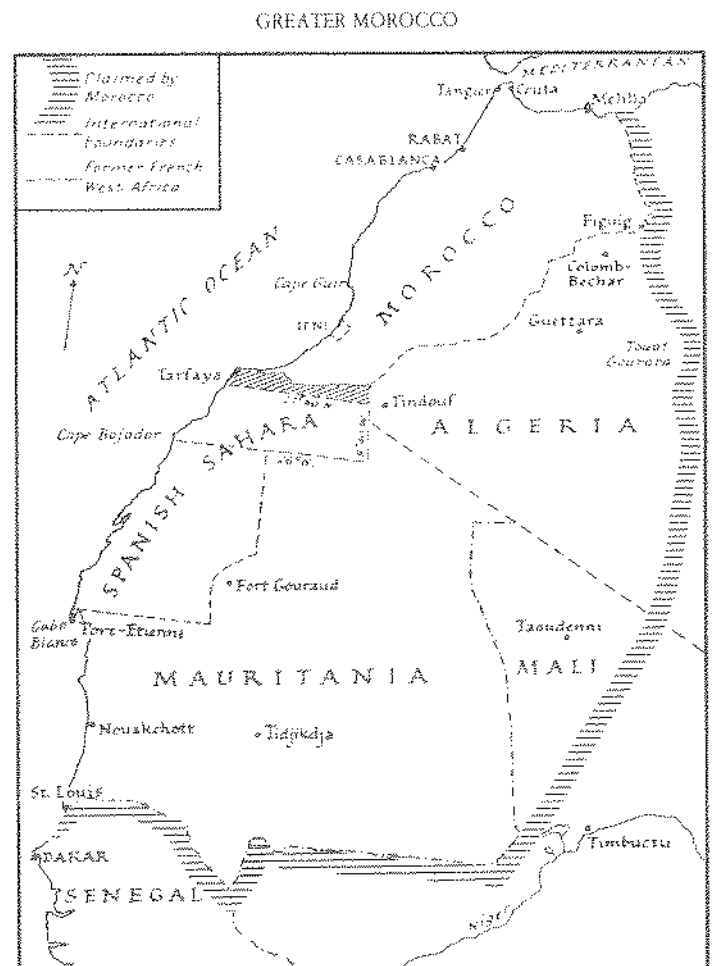
'At every place visited, the Mission was met by mass political demonstrations and had numerous private meetings with representatives of every

section of the Saharan community. From all these it became evident to the Mission that there was an overwhelming consensus among Saharans within the territory in favour of independence and opposing integration with any neighbouring country... The Mission believes, in the light of what it witnessed in the Territory, especially the mass demonstrations, of support for one movement the Frente POLISARIO... that its visit served as a catalyst to bring into the open political forces and pressures which had previously been largely submerged.'⁶

Territorial Claims

However, while an indigenous nationalist movement sunk deep roots within the Spanish colony, two neighbouring states also had designs on the territory. Both Morocco and Mauritania had longstanding territorial claims, and therein lay the germs of the conflict over Western Sahara's future that was to erupt in 1975.

Upon Morocco's accession to independence in 1956, Allal el-Fassi, the leader of the Moroccan Istiqlal (Independence) Party, claimed that only parts of the historic Alawite empire had been freed. 'So long as Tangier is not liberated from its international statute, so long as the Spanish deserts of the south, the Sahara from Tindouf and Atar and the Algerian-Moroccan borderlands are not liberated from their trusteeship, our independence will remain incomplete and our first duty will be to carry on action to liberate the country and to unify it'.⁷ The Istiqlal newspaper, *Al-alam*, published a map of Greater Morocco on 7 July 1956, laying claim to a vast portion of the Algerian Sahara, the whole of Western Sahara and Mauritania, and even a corner of north-western Mali.



SOURCE: THE GEOGRAPHER, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

King Mohammed V could not afford to allow the main nationalist party to outstrip the monarchy in nationalist fervour during the delicate post-independence period when the monarchy was still consolidating its power. He also saw an opportunity to turn Allal el-Fassi's theses, which glorified the conquests of the more powerful of Morocco's pre-colonial sultans, to royal advantage. The Greater Morocco cause was embraced by the Moroccan government in 1957 and publicly endorsed by Mohammed V himself during a speech in the southern oasis town of M'hamid on 25 February 1958. Consequently, Morocco refused to recognize

Mauritania when it achieved independence in 1960, and Morocco briefly went to war with Algeria in 1963 in pursuit of its claims to Tindouf and other parts of the Algerian Sahara.

Meanwhile, a Mauritanian claim to Western Sahara was first staked by Mokhtar Ould Daddah on 1 July 1957, when he was vice-president of Mauritania's government council:

'I cannot help evoking the innumerable ties which unite us: we bear the same names, we speak the same language, we conserve the same noble traditions, we honour the same religious leaders, graze our herds on the same pastures, give water to them at the same wells. In a word, we are referring to that same desert civilization of which we are so justly proud. So I invite our brothers of Spanish Sahara to dream of this great economic and spiritual Mauritania.'⁸

Above all, Ould Daddah (who became Mauritania's president upon independence in 1960) wanted to prevent Western Sahara falling into Moroccan hands – a grave security danger to Mauritania, in view of Morocco's claim to Mauritania, for it would have given Morocco 980 miles of common border with Mauritania, almost half of it within 30 miles of the strategic iron-ore railway from Zouerate to Nouadhibou upon which Mauritania was dependent (by the mid-1960s) for about 85% of its export earnings.

Ironically, in view of their territorial claims, neither Morocco nor Mauritania gave significant support to anti-Spanish movements in Western Sahara. The Mauritanian government benefited from the colonial status quo, since it kept Morocco at arm's length. For his part, King Hassan II, who ascended the Moroccan throne in 1961, had no intention of allowing a new anti-Spanish guerrilla movement to operate from Moroccan territory – having disbanded the remnants of the Army of Liberation in southern Morocco in 1958-9 when he was Crown Prince and chief-of-staff of the FAR. He valued cordial relationships with General Franco, whom he met for three summit meetings in Spain in 1963, 1965 and 1969. Indeed, he was frequently criticized by the ultra-nationalist opposition parties in Morocco (in particular the Istiqlalians) for down-playing the Moroccan claim to Western Sahara and collaborating with Spanish colonialism.

A group of Moroccan-based Saharawis did form a *Frente de Liberación del Sahara* (FLS), with the assistance of the Moroccan Ministry of Mauritanian and Saharan Affairs, in 1966. However, it was never active within Western Sahara and it faded away in 1969 when Hassan reached agreement with Spain on Ifni, dropped his claim to Mauritania and wound up the Ministry of Mauritanian and Saharan Affairs. Another Moroccan-based group, the *Mouvement de Résistance 'les Hommes Bleus'* (MOREHOB), which took its colourful name from the indigo-dyed Saharawi robe, the *draa*, was founded in 1972. However, its leader, Bashir Figuigui (alias Edouard Moha), switched base from Rabat to Algiers in March 1973. Deported from Algiers within a few months, he then settled in Europe, before returning to Morocco in 1975. Like the FLS, Figuigui's group was never active in Western Sahara.

While maintaining generally cordial relations with Spain, both Morocco and Mauritania tailored their policies on Western Sahara at the UN, from 1966 onwards, to accommodate the UN's standard decolonization principles, in the hope, or expectation, that self-determination would lead to territorial integration. 'Instead of going purely and simply to claim the territory of the Sahara', Hassan himself remarked in July 1970, 'I went (to Spain) to request specifically that a popular consultation take place there, assured as I was that the first result would be the departure of the non-Africans and that then one would leave it up to the people of the Sahara to choose whether to live under the Moroccan aegis or their own aegis or any other aegis.'⁹

In 1969, besides, Hassan initiated a détente with Algeria and Mauritania, to the chagrin of the ultra-nationalists of the Istiqlal Party. On 15 January 1969, a 20-year treaty was signed at Ifrane, committing Algeria and Morocco to 'submit all the questions in abeyance between them to bilateral commissions'.¹⁰ On 27 May 1970, at a summit meeting in Tlemcen, Hassan and Boumedienne set up a joint commission to resolve their border dispute. Two years later, on 15 June 1972, Morocco recognized its *de facto* border with Algeria. The *rapprochement* with Algeria was accompanied by a belated recognition of Mauritania. Hassan broke the ice by inviting Ould Daddah to an Islamic summit conference in Rabat in September 1969 and then signed a treaty of friendship with Mauritania on 8 June 1970.

During this period of détente, the leaders of Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria held two tripartite summit meetings, in Nouadhibou on 14 September 1970, and in Agadir on 24 July 1973, at which they jointly endorsed the UN's calls for self-determination in Western Sahara. At Agadir, for example, they affirmed:

'... their unwavering attachment to the principle of self-determination and their concern to ensure that this principle was implemented in a framework which guaranteed that the will of the inhabitants of the Sahara was given free and genuine expression, in conformity with the United Nations decisions on this question.'¹¹

The Role of International Organizations, 1965-74

The United Nations General Assembly adopted its first resolution on Western Sahara and Ifni, by 100 votes to two (Spain and Portugal), with four abstentions, in December 1965. This requested 'the Government of Spain, as the administering power, to take all necessary measures for the liberation of the Territories of Ifni and Spanish Sahara from colonial domination and, to this end, to enter into negotiations on problems relating to sovereignty presented by these two territories'.¹² The implication was that Spain should hold talks with Morocco about Ifni and with both Morocco and Mauritania about Western Sahara. However, it had become standard practice for the UN to organize or monitor elections or plebiscites in colonies where, on the eve of the colonial power's withdrawal, there was doubt about their inhabitants' real desires. While the population of Ifni clearly wished to join Morocco, the desires of the Western Saharans were unclear, if only because Morocco and Mauritania had rival claims. Accordingly, the UN General Assembly adopted a second resolution, by 105 votes to two, with nine abstentions, in December 1966, which distinguished the decolonization procedures to be applied in Ifni and Western Sahara. While requesting Spain to negotiate with Morocco about the 'transfer of powers' in Ifni, the resolution proposed a referendum in Western Sahara. It requested Spain:

'... to determine at the earliest possible date, in conformity with the aspirations of the indigenous people of Spanish Sahara and in consultation with the Governments of Mauritania and Morocco and any other interested party, the procedures for the holding of 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.'¹³

This referendum proposal was repeated in all six subsequent resolutions adopted by the General Assembly between 1967 and 1973, and the resolutions adopted in 1972 and 1973 went still further by explicitly recognizing the Western Saharans' right to independence as well as self-determination.¹⁴

The Organization of African Unity began endorsing the UN resolutions on Western Sahara in 1969. Thus, even at a session held in Rabat in June 1972, the OAU's Council of Ministers requested African states to:

'... intensify their efforts *vis-à-vis* the Spanish Government to induce it to implement Resolution 2711 of the UN General Assembly and, in particular, its provisions relating to the holding, as soon as possible, of a referendum designed to enable the population of the Sahara under Spanish domination to freely exercise their right to self-determination, in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter, under the auspices and with the full guarantees of that international organization.'¹⁵

A similar position was taken by the OAU in 1973.¹⁶ Likewise, the UN resolutions were endorsed by the fourth non-aligned summit conference, held in Algiers in September 1973, and by the fifth Islamic summit, held in Kuala Lumpur in June 1974.¹⁷

THE TERRITORY'S CESSION

Spain's Plans for a Referendum

Western Sahara's future suddenly hung in the balance when the Spanish government at last deemed it wise under new circumstances (notably the April 1974 coup in Lisbon and the consequent decolonization of Portugal's African empire) to lay the groundwork for Spain's withdrawal from the territory. In July 1974, the Madrid government unveiled a statute of autonomy, known as the *estatuto político*, under which the Djemaa was to be converted into a legislative assembly and a partially-Saharawi Governing Council was to assume executive powers. This period of internal

self-government was intended to prepare the way for independence. On 20 August 1974, therefore, the Franco regime announced that a referendum would finally be held under UN auspices during the first half of 1975. Meanwhile, at the end of 1974, the Spanish authorities helped to set up a moderate Saharawi political party, the *Partido de la Unión Nacional Saharaui* (PUNS), under the leadership of Khaliuhenna Ould Rashid, a 27-year-old Reguibi and Spanish-educated engineer, to counter Polisario's influence and lead the territory to independence in close association with Spain.

Hassan's Saharan Jihad

In riposte to the unveiling of the *estatuto político*, Hassan warned on 8 July 1974, that 'we will not accept seeing a puppet state erected in any form in the southern part of our country' and appealed to his countrymen to make 1974 'a year of mobilization at home and abroad to recover our territories'.¹⁸ After soft-peddalling the Moroccan claim to Western Sahara for more than a decade, the king was now determined to thwart Franco's internal autonomy plan, which he rightly saw as a prelude to independence, and force Spain to negotiate the territory's cession to Morocco. By launching a patriotic crusade to recover the 'Moroccan Sahara', he aroused enormous enthusiasm among the Moroccan masses. Riding on a tide of patriotism, he successfully out-manoeuvred the Moroccan opposition parties (which tail-ended his Saharan campaign) and re-stabilized his regime, which had been rocked by crises – among them two abortive coup attempts – in the early 1970s.

On 20 August 1974, Hassan warned that, if the UN held a referendum on independence, 'it is evident that not only will Morocco reject it but it will be the first time that it disavows a decision emanating from the United Nations Organization'. The king added a threat: 'Morocco prefers to take a diplomatic, political and peaceful path, instead of resorting to no matter what other means; however, if Morocco ascertains that this path will not lead to the recovery of its territories, it will certainly not hesitate to find these other means.'¹⁹ 20,000 troops were massed in southern Morocco, near the Western Saharan border, under the command of Colonel Ahmed Dlimi, the director of Hassan's *aides-de-camp* and of the secret police, the DGED.

In order to block the rapidly approaching referendum, Hassan successfully persuaded the UN in December 1974 to urge Spain to postpone it while the Saharan dispute was examined by the International Court of Justice at The Hague. In the meantime, the king tackled the embarrassing problem of Mauritania's counter-claim by striking a secret deal with Ould Daddah at an Arab League summit in October 1974 by which Western Sahara would be partitioned.

To maximize its pressure on Spain, the Moroccan government began harassing Spanish fishing boats off the Moroccan coast, revived previously dormant claims to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on Morocco's Mediterranean coast, and in February 1975 set up a pro-Moroccan Saharawi guerrilla movement, the *Frente de Liberación y de la Unidad* (FLU), composed primarily of Saharawi soldiers from the FAR. It began cross-border attacks the following May.

Spain's Vacillations

Buffeted by contradictory pressures, Spanish policy vacillated, without clear direction. Under Moroccan pressure, Spain shelved and then abandoned the *estatuto político*. The referendum was postponed and ultimately never held. As the Spanish commitment to self-determination wilted and the Moroccan threat loomed, the PUNS was discredited. Its leader fled to Morocco in May 1975, when Polisario emerged as the dominant party during the visit of the UN mission of inquiry. As the PUNS disintegrated, the Spanish government briefly flirted with the idea of handing power to Polisario. The Front stopped its guerrilla attacks in June; and Spain and Polisario exchanged prisoners in August–October. On 9 September, the Spanish Foreign Minister, Pedro Cortina Mauri, secretly met El-Ouali to discuss the transfer of powers.

The publication of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on Western Sahara, on 16 October 1975, finally brought the crisis to a head.

The Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice

Departing, under Moroccan pressure, from its traditional policy on Western Sahara, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution in December 1974 requesting Spain to postpone its plans for a referendum until the ICJ had given an advisory opinion on the following questions:

- I. Was Western Sahara (Río de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (*terra nullius*)? If the answer to the first question is in the negative,
- II. What were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?²⁰

The relevance of such historical-legal questions to the contemporary problem of Western Sahara's decolonization was dubious, to say the least. The implication was that the territory's pre-colonial legal status, rather than the will of its inhabitants, should determine its future. After 27 sessions in The Hague in June–July 1975, at which the governments of Spain, Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria (but not Polisario) were represented, the ICJ decided unanimously that Western Sahara had not been *terra nullius* before Spanish colonization began in 1884. Western Sahara 'was inhabited by peoples which, if nomadic, were socially and politically organized in tribes and under chiefs competent to represent them'.²¹ With respect to Morocco's pre-colonial relations with these tribes, the court was of the opinion (by 14 votes to two) that:

'The inferences to be drawn from the information before the Court concerning internal acts of Moroccan sovereignty and from that concerning international acts are ... 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.'²²

By 15 votes to one, the judges found that:

'... 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.'²³

There were merely legal ties relating to such matters as migration routes, the use of wells, and the settlement of disputes. The Court concluded, therefore, that:

'... the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity. Thus the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) 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.'²⁴

The Green March

Within hours of the publication of the ICJ's advisory opinion, King Hassan announced that 350,000 Moroccan volunteers would march, *Quran* in hand, across the Western Saharan border to assert Morocco's territorial claim. Named after the holy colour of Islam, the Green March was a political masterstroke. It precipitated events before the UN had time to consider the ICJ's conclusions. It brought enormous pressure to bear on Spain, and in Morocco it captured the imagination of the king's subjects and gave a new fillip to his regained prestige.

In Western Sahara, the march was denounced by Polisario, the Djemaa and the remnants of the PUNS (which finally collapsed in November). The Spanish government protested to the UN Security Council. However, the challenge could not have come at a worse time for Madrid. On 17 October, General Franco, who was then 82, entered his long, final illness. His premier, Carlos Arias Navarro, and most of his ministers – as well as the heir to the Spanish throne, Juan Carlos de Borbón, who became acting head of state on 30 October – were determined to avoid a military confrontation with Morocco while they grappled with the delicate task of steering Spain towards a new post-Francoist order. Negotiations, therefore, started with Morocco on 21 October. The Green Marchers poured into Tarfaya to await the D-Day for their frontier crossing, while Spanish civilians were hastily evacuated from Western Sahara. Spanish troops were pulled back to a few strategic points on or near the coast, and the Spanish army made no

attempt to intercept Moroccan forces which began moving into remote parts of Saguia el-Hamra on 31 October. On 1 November, the president of the Djemaa, Khatri Ould Said Ould el-Joumani, judged it opportune to switch his allegiance from Spain to Morocco and so flew to Agadir.

Alarmed by Morocco's resurgent irredentism, the Algerian government had begun assisting Polisario at the beginning of 1975. As the Spanish-Moroccan talks continued in October-November (and were widened to include Mauritania), Algeria protested to Spain. The UN Secretary-General, Kurt Waldheim, proposed a temporary UN administration in Western Sahara. However, these *démarches* failed to stop Spain reaching an agreement with Morocco and Mauritania. When Hassan finally ordered his Green Marchers across the Western Saharan border on 6 November, he was commencing a scenario already arranged with the Spanish to save face on both sides. Spain had promised not to interfere with the marchers as long as they proceeded no further than a 'dissuasion line', about 8 miles from the border, to which Spanish troops had already pulled back. Just three days after the border crossing, Hassan ordered the marchers home because they had 'achieved what we ourselves and our friends expected' of the march.²⁵

The Madrid Accords

Negotiations resumed in Madrid on 12 November and culminated two days later in a tripartite agreement between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania. The accords were kept secret, apart from a brief 'declaration of principles'. This stated that Spain would 'proceed forthwith to institute a temporary administration in the Territory, in which Morocco and Mauritania will participate in collaboration with the Djemaa', that Spain would finally withdraw from Western Sahara by the end of February 1976 and that 'the views of the Saharan population, expressed through the Djemaa, would be respected'.²⁶ In effect, Spain agreed to hand Western Sahara over to Morocco and Mauritania. Both countries were allowed to send thousands of troops into the country, while Spain withdrew its troops. The Djemaa was not a properly representative body, and no mention was made of the referendum which Spain had previously planned. In return for ceding Western Sahara, the Spanish government won a new respite for Ceuta and Melilla, secured guarantees for Spanish fishing interests off the Moroccan and Saharan coasts and retained a 35% stake in Fosbucraa and compensation for the other 65%, which went to Morocco. Franco died six days after the accords, on 20 November 1975.

On 25 November, Hassan declared that the Western Saharan dossier was closed. However, he had made two vital miscalculations. He had underestimated the Saharawis' determination to resist annexation and Algeria's resolve to help them thwart it.

The Transitional Administration

The new tripartite government took office in El-Ayoun within a fortnight of the Madrid Accords. By mid-January 1976, the last Spanish troops had been evacuated to the Canaries, leaving the main towns in Moroccan or Mauritanian hands. A few Spanish administrative officials remained until the end of February. Many of the smaller settlements, however, were occupied by Polisario forces for several months before being seized by Moroccan or Mauritanian troops, sometimes after heavy fighting. Meanwhile, there began an exodus of refugees to south-western Algeria.

The members of the Djemaa proved far less pliant than the signatories of the Madrid Accords had anticipated. At an extraordinary session held under Polisario auspices at Guelta Zemmour, near the Mauritanian border, on 28 November, 67 of the Djemaa's 102 members proclaimed the assembly's dissolution and their 'unconditional support for the *Frente Polisario*, the sole and legitimate representative of the Saharan people', and set up a 41-member Provisional Saharawi National Council, modelled on the Ait Arbain of old Morocco and Mauritania did, however, finally persuade 57 members of the Djemaa to attend a rump session of the assembly in El-Ayoun on 26 February 1976, and vote unanimously to give 'full approval' to Western Sahara's 'reintegration with Morocco and Mauritania'.²⁷ Spain officially ended its 91-year period of colonial rule the same day.

The UN's Reaction

The UN had been powerless to prevent the Madrid Accords. A month later, on 10 December 1975, the General Assembly confusingly adopted two rival resolutions on Western Sahara. The first, Resolution 3458A, which was adopted by 88 votes to none with 41 abstentions, repeated the traditional UN stance by requesting Spain, then heading the transitional administration, 'to take immediately all necessary measures, in consultation with all the parties concerned and interested, so that all Saharans originating in the territory may exercise their inalienable right to self-determination'.²⁸ The other (3458B), which 'took note' of the Madrid Accords, was backed by Morocco but only narrowly passed through the General Assembly by 56 votes to 42, with 34 abstentions. However, since both resolutions upheld the principle of self-determination and mandated the UN to play a role in its implementation, Waldheim dispatched Sweden's UN ambassador, Olof Rydbeck, to Western Sahara to examine how the UN could proceed. Touring the territory from 7-12 February 1976, Rydbeck was so struck by the scale of the Moroccan military presence, the repressive political atmosphere, the developing guerrilla war and the exodus of refugees that he advised Waldheim that a genuine consultation of Saharawi opinion had become impossible. Waldheim therefore rejected Moroccan and Mauritanian requests to send a UN observer to the 26 February meeting of the Djemaa, since the 'essential conditions' for the exercise of self-determination had 'not been fulfilled'.²⁹

The Partition and Refugee Flight

Western Sahara was formally partitioned by Morocco and Mauritania six weeks later, on 14 April 1976. Morocco got the lion's share of the division - two-thirds of the territory, including the phosphate deposits at Bou-Craa and the two main towns, El-Ayoun and Smara. Mauritania received a virtually resourceless slab of desert in the far south, though it did include the third main town, Villa Cisneros, which reverted to the Arabic name of Dakhla.

On 7 January 1976, the International Committee of the Red Cross announced that 40,000 Saharawis had fled their homes. Half had reached Algeria and the rest were hiding in remote parts of Western Sahara. The Saharawi neighbourhoods in the capital had started to look like ghost towns. In October 1976, the Algerian government informed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that 50,000 Western Saharans had taken refuge on its territory and were living in scattered camps in the Tindouf region. More refugees came from the Saharawi regions of southern Morocco and northern Mauritania, and by 1984 the Algerian government was claiming that there were 165,000 Saharawis living in the Tindouf region, in 22 refugee camps. Although this figure may have been somewhat exaggerated, there were probably at least 100,000 refugees in Algeria by this time.

After an initial period of great hardship (almost 1000 children died during a measles epidemic in 1976), conditions in the camps gradually improved. Supplied by the Algerian Red Crescent, the Algerian government and foreign agencies, but administered by Polisario itself, the camps are superbly organized. Each camp is governed by a 'people's council', which coordinates the work of specialized committees for food distribution, education, health, crafts and justice. Clinics, hospitals, schools, creches, craft workshops and vegetable gardens have been established, under an impressive self-help programme, despite the huge logistical and climatic obstacles faced in a desert region 1200 miles from Algiers.

POLISARIO'S WAR OF RESISTANCE

Polisario and the SADR

After the Madrid Accords, the majority of Saharawis rallied behind the Polisario Front to continue the fight for independence. The refugee camps in Algeria ended up composed almost entirely of women, children and old people, while an estimated 20,000 Saharawi men enrolled in the Front's Saharawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to fight a protracted war of resistance against

Morocco and Mauritania, with the support of Algeria, which provided rear bases, training, money, arms, food and fuel. Meanwhile, the birth of an independent Western Saharan state, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), was proclaimed by the Provisional Saharawi National Council on 27 February 1976, to fill the juridical vacuum left by the formal termination of Spanish rule the day before.

Polisario has consistently rejected any settlement of the Western Saharan problem which falls short of granting the territory full independence – within its pre-1975 borders. Its fifth congress, held on 12–16 October 1982, under the slogan 'The Whole Country or Martyrdom', vowed to 'defeat all manoeuvres and plots aimed at limiting our national independence over the whole of the territory of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic'.³⁰

Polisario has said little about the kind of policies it would pursue after gaining full independence. Concerned to maintain nationalist unity while pursuing its difficult war, it has restricted its broader programmatic pronouncements to such generalities as 'opposition to imperialism, colonialism and exploitation' and adherence to 'socialism'. Its socialism, it claims, is inspired by Islamic rather than Marxist precepts. The Front advocates 'the suppression of all forms of exploitation', the 'just distribution of national resources and the suppression of disparities between the countryside and the towns', Arabization of education and the provision of free medical care, free, universal, compulsory education, and adequate housing. Gravitating ambiguously between religious or cultural traditionalism and a reformist modernism, Polisario also advocates 'achieving women's political and social rights and encouraging their access to all fields, so that they may assume their responsibilities in national construction, in conformity with our national reality and religion'.³¹

El-Ouali was the Front's Secretary-General from its founding until his death in action in June 1976. At the third congress, held on 26–30 August 1976, another Reguibi, Mohammed Abdelaziz, was elected Secretary-General. He was re-elected at the fourth congress (25–28 September 1978) and the fifth congress (12–16 October 1982). The Secretary-General heads Polisario's supreme leadership body, the 7-member Executive Committee, which is elected by the Front's congress and oversees political, military and diplomatic strategy. A subordinate Political Bureau, with 25 members, coordinates the Front's political work.

Executive Committee of the Polisario Front

(Elected by the fifth congress, October 1982)

Mohammed Abdelaziz, Secretary-General
 Mohammed Lamine Ould Ahmed
 Mahfoud Ali Beiba
 Ibrahim Ghali Ould Mustapha
 Bashir Mustapha Sayed
 Ayoub Ould Lahbib
 Mohammed Lamine Ould Bouhali

The SADR's leading bodies tend to overlap, in function and composition, with those of Polisario itself. The SADR's constitution, which was adopted by the third congress, in August 1976, established, for example, that the state's supreme legislative and executive body, the Council for the Command of the Revolution (CCR), would be performed transitionally by the Front's Executive Committee 'until the holding of the first General People's Congress after the recovery of sovereignty'. The CCR, which 'lays down the general policy of the state', is headed by the Front's Secretary-General, who, under a constitutional amendment adopted at the fifth congress, is 'head of state of the SADR'.³² The Council of Ministers is subordinate to the CCR; and the SADR's 'parliament', the Saharawi National Council, has a purely consultative role.

The SADR's first Council of Ministers was appointed on 4 March 1976, a week after the new republic's founding. Its first premier was Mohammed Lamine Ould Ahmed, a member of a small 'sharifian' tribe, the Taoubalt, who had been born in the late 1940s and had studied with El-Ouali at Mohammed V University. He remained Prime Minister until October 1982, when he was succeeded by another Polisario veteran, Mahfoud Ali Beiba, a Saharawi of Izarguen ancestry, born in about 1953, who had been educated in Western Saharan schools.

Council of Ministers of the SADR (as of September 1984)

Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Culture	Mahfoud Ali Beiba
Ministers	
Defence	Ibrahim Ghali Ould Mustapha
Education	Mohammed Lamine Ould Ahmed
Interior	Abdel Kader Taleb Omar
Foreign Affairs	Ibrahim Hakim
Justice	M'hammed Ould Ziou
Secretaries of State	
Trade	El-Kenti Ould Jouda
Health	Nema Ould Joumani
Secretary-General of the Presidency	Mohammed Ould Sidati

Polisario's War with Mauritania

By joining Hassan in the occupation and division of Western Sahara, Mokhtar Ould Daddah plunged Mauritania into a war that proved unpopular among his people, militarily unwinnable and calamitous for his country's fragile economy. Polisario singled out Mauritania, the weaker of its two enemies, for the main focus of its attacks in 1976–8. The guerrillas' first objective was to knock Mauritania out of the war and so destroy the Moroccan-Mauritanian alliance.

Mauritania's small army, which was rapidly built up from about 3000 to 20,000 men, not only had to defend scattered settlements and outposts in the Mauritanian-annexed zone of Western Sahara, known then as Tiris el-Gharbia, but also had to resist Polisario guerrillas raiding deep into Mauritania itself, a virtually unpoliceable territory of 400,000 square miles. In its modern, motorized form, the *ghazzi* was to prove devastatingly effective. On two occasions (June 1976 and July 1977), Polisario *kataeb* (units) succeeded in reaching the outskirts of the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, and shelling the presidential palace. Even more alarming for Ould Daddah, however, were Polisario's attempts to bring the Zouerate iron-mining industry to a halt. On 1 May 1977, a guerrilla group stormed into Zouerate and kidnapped six French expatriates. Meanwhile, there were frequent attacks on the 657 km railway from the mines to the Atlantic port of Nouadhibou. Two more Frenchmen were seized in a raid on the railway on 25 October 1977.

Operation Lamantin

In a desperate attempt to bolster his defences, Ould Daddah turned to Morocco and France for help. On 13 May 1977, he signed a defence pact with Morocco under which 9000 Moroccan troops arrived in Mauritania and Tiris el-Gharbia over the following year. A Franco-Mauritanian military agreement had already been signed in September 1976 and widened in scope in January 1977 to allow French military personnel of all categories to be sent to Mauritania. After the seizure of French expatriates during 1977, French military involvement in the conflict escalated. In an operation codenamed 'Lamantin', Jaguars of the French air force bombed guerrillas in northern Mauritania in December 1977. The French prisoners were released on 23 December, but new French air-strikes followed in April 1978.

The Downfall of Mokhtar Ould Daddah

The Jaguars inflicted setbacks on the guerrillas. However, they did not stop Polisario's Mauritanian offensive. Sabotage attacks on the vital Zouerate-Nouadhibou railway continued, and the Mauritanian economy slid into an almost unmanageable crisis. To the costs of the war were added devastating droughts and a dramatic deterioration in the terms of trade due to spiralling oil prices and a slump in world demand for iron. The balance of payments lurched heavily into deficit, and by April 1978 the total public external debt had climbed to \$711 million, equivalent to over 170% of the country's GNP.

Furthermore, the war seemed fratricidal to many of Mauritania's Moors, while the country's black African minorities regarded the conflict as an inter-Arab affair that was completely foreign to their own concerns. As the economic crisis drifted almost beyond control in 1977–8, the country's technocratic elite, in business and government alike, recognized that peace was a precondition for

recovery. The army officers, meanwhile, were dismayed by their units' losses and humiliated by the ever-larger Moroccan troop presence.

During the night of 9–10 July 1978, the armed forces seized power in Nouakchott and set up a *Comité Militaire de Redressement National* (CMRN) to 'save the country from ruin and dismemberment'.³³ Two days later, Polisario announced a 'temporary halt in military operations in Mauritanian territory' as a 'gesture of goodwill' to the new regime.³⁴

The Algiers Agreement

The Mauritanian army's road to peace was not an easy one, however. Fearful of how Hassan might react to a bilateral agreement with Polisario, the military regime tried at first to bring both Morocco and Polisario into a global peace agreement – under which Mauritania would give up Tiris el-Gharbia to Polisario but Morocco would keep its share of Western Sahara. This 'mini-state' plan satisfied neither Morocco nor Polisario. Meanwhile, economic conditions in Mauritania remained precarious and factional strife within the CMRN led to its displacement by a new *Comité Militaire de Salut National* (CMSN) in April 1979. Irritated by the military regime's hesitation to abandon Tiris el-Gharbia unilaterally, Polisario lifted its ceasefire on 12 July 1979, and attacked the village of Tichla in Tiris el-Gharbia, capturing its Mauritanian prefect. This immediately halted the CMSN's prevarications. To Morocco's consternation, the CMSN signed a peace agreement in Algiers on 5 August. 'The Islamic Republic of Mauritania', it stated, 'solemnly declares that it does not have and will not have territorial or any other claims over Western Sahara' and 'decides to withdraw from the unjust war in Western Sahara'. In a secret addendum, the CMSN undertook to 'put an end to its presence in Western Sahara and to hand over directly to the Polisario Front the part of the Western Sahara that it controls within seven months from the date of signing of the present agreement'.³⁵

The Moroccan Annexation of Tiris el-Gharbia

The secret addendum to the Algiers Agreement could not be implemented. Though the Moroccan troops in Mauritania were gradually withdrawn, Moroccan forces seized control of Dakhla and on 14 August Tiris el-Gharbia was proclaimed a Moroccan province under the name of Oued ed-Dahab (Arabic for Rio de Oro). Mauritanian forces were evacuated immediately, except from the small settlement of La Guera, near Nouadhibou, on the Cape Blanc peninsula, which remains in Mauritanian hands to the present day. Relations between Morocco and Mauritania have been fraught ever since 1979. Morocco has frequently accused the CMSN of allowing Polisario forces to cross its territory, while the CMSN has accused Morocco of harbouring Mauritanian exiles and aiding an abortive coup in March 1980. In February 1984, Mauritania took the further step of recognizing the SADR.

Morocco's Saharan Quagmire

By April 1976, the FAR had established garrisons in most of the small outlying settlements of the Moroccan zone, as well as securing a firm hold over the towns. Three provinces were set up in the Moroccan sector in April 1976, with capitals at El-Ayoun, Smara and Boujdour, and a fourth was established in Oued ed-Dahab, with a capital at Dakhla, in August 1979.

However, the FAR could not hope to patrol the whole of the desert hinterland effectively. There, Polisario *kataeb* established a network of hide-outs, to supplement their rear bases in Algeria. Moroccan convoys were ambushed and hit-and-run raids were staged against Moroccan-held outposts and towns, including El-Ayoun on occasion. Mining at Bou-Craa ground to a halt early in 1976. The Moroccan troops, peasants from the Atlas and Rif ranges or urban conscripts for the most part, were not accustomed to the harsh Saharan climate, resented having to endure months or years in trenches in the desert, and did not know the terrain in the manner of their elusive enemy. Lacking the guerrillas' *panache*, they resorted to fighting a passive, defensive war, to hold fixed positions.

Morocco's military difficulties took a sharp turn for the worse after the July 1978 coup in Mauritania, which allowed the guerrillas to

focus undivided attention on the Moroccan forces. Polisario began raiding into southern Morocco, as it had earlier into Mauritania. Moreover, Algeria's support for the Saharawi nationalists did not falter after President Boumedienne's death in December 1978. Indeed, the guerrillas won some of their greatest victories during a campaign in 1979–80 named in his honour – the 'Houari Boumedienne Offensive'. For the first time in the course of the war, major Moroccan-held towns and bases were assaulted and their defences breached. On 28 January 1979, for example, a large guerrilla force fought its way into the centre of Tan-Tan, a provincial capital in southern Morocco with a garrison of several thousand troops and an air-base. On 11 August 1979, the Moroccan positions at Bir Enzaren, 150 miles east of Dakhla, were partially overrun. The most devastating setback for the FAR came on 24 August 1979, when a base at Lebourate, in southern Morocco, fell to the guerrillas. On 6 October 1979, several thousand guerrillas successfully broke through Smara's defence lines and evacuated 700 local residents to Algeria; and on 14 October Polisario seized Mahbes, a base in the extreme north-east of Saguia el-Hamra, killing a fifth of its defendants. Some Polisario raids were staged as far north as the Bani mountains and the south-easterly slopes of the Anti-Atlas, while other attacks were staged by guerrillas using pneumatic launches against fishing boats off the Western Saharan coast.

As the challenge from Polisario grew increasingly serious, the FAR began to abandon many of the smaller, more remote outposts they had occupied in 1975–6. A gradual process of retrenchment began, and the defences of the more important towns were heavily reinforced. Thousands of fresh troops were sent south to Western Sahara, and – on Hassan's own admission – there were 80,000 Moroccan troops there by January 1983.³⁶ Overall, the FAR trebled in size during the course of the war, reaching 200,000 men by 1983.³⁷ By 1984 US officials were estimating the number of Moroccan troops in the Sahara at 100,000.

The 'Wall'

One strategic objective was to drive the guerrillas out of southern Morocco, beyond the Ouarkiz range, which could act as a defensive barrier. A first attempt, codenamed Operation Iman (The Faith), in March 1980, was a dismal failure. A force, 7000 strong, was routed. However, an even larger Moroccan force did finally gain control of this region the following May. Then, in August 1980, Moroccan troops secured a strategic pass through the Zini mountains, to the south-west of the Ouarkiz, near the Western Saharan border. From there, they started to build a continuous defence line southwards to Smara, 60 miles away, and then, *via* Bou-Craa, in a south-westerly arc to the Atlantic, in order to seal off the whole north-western corner of the Western Sahara, the region – known as the 'useful triangle' – with the territory's two main towns (El-Ayoun and Smara) and the Bou-Craa phosphates. By March 1981, this 'wall' had reached Smara. By mid-May 1981, it had been extended to Bou-Craa, and by May 1982 it had reached the Atlantic, to the south of Boujdour. About 250 miles long, this continuous defence perimeter consisted of sandbanks, about 2 to 3 yards high, minefields and barbed wire, intermittent artillery placements and observation posts, underground quarters for its defendants, and electronic ground sensors and radar equipment to detect guerrilla vehicles.

All told, this 'Great Wall of the Sahara' sealed off about 17,000 square miles, roughly one sixth of the territory's total land area. Beyond this zone, the FAR controlled only one other heavily fortified enclave, a few hundred square miles in area, around Dakhla and Argoub, on the Rio de Oro bay. The rest of the territory had been abandoned. The last two Moroccan-held posts beyond these enclaves, Guelta Zemmour and Bir Enzaren, had been evacuated in November 1981, after a devastating Polisario attack on Guelta Zemmour the previous October, during which its 2600 strong Moroccan garrison had suffered severe losses and the Moroccan airforce had lost five aircraft – to ramp-launched SAM missiles, according to the distraught Moroccan government, which turned to the United States for increased military aid.

The building of the 'wall' stalemated the war, and this was reflected in a prolonged stand-off, which lasted from January 1982 to July 1983. The wall proved a formidable obstacle for the guerrillas. With Moroccan garrisons no longer isolated in small far-flung outposts, the FAR were much less vulnerable to the lightning

guerrilla raids at which Polisario had excelled in earlier stages of the war. In addition, the FAR had been reinforced with French Mirage F-1 jets, Puma and Gazelle helicopters and armoured vehicles, along with US supplied Northrop F-5 combat aircraft, OV-10 Bronco counter-insurgency planes, Chrysler M-60 tanks, Maverick missiles, Bell helicopters, anti-personnel cluster bombs, and radar and electronic detection equipment.

The FAR therefore seemed to be in a much stronger position than at any time since the start of the war in 1975. They controlled the strategic 'useful triangle', with its phosphates and population centres, and Polisario staged only minor harassment raids against the wall. It seemed unprepared to launch the kind of conventional attack, with thousands of troops and sophisticated, heavy weaponry, that would be required to breach it. In July 1982, phosphate mining resumed at Bou-Craa, although heavy investment was still needed to rehabilitate damaged installations and so exports remained far below the level achieved before the start of the war. In 1983, exports totalled 677,672 tons, about one quarter of the 2.6 million tons exported in 1975.

Phosphate exports³⁸

	tons
1975	2,638,000
1976	277,000
1977	25,000
1978	441,000
1979	139,000
1980	n/a
1981	n/a
1982	677,000
1983	678,000

However, Morocco was no nearer 'victory' than it had ever been. Five sixths of the territory had been abandoned to the guerrillas, who continued to stage small raids against the wall, while building up their fighting strength and digesting new, more advanced weapons systems in preparation for larger attacks on the FAR's defensive earthworks. Polisario finally ended the lull by launching a sustained, month-long offensive against the Moroccan defences at Lemseyed, in the Ouarkiz mountains, in July-August 1983. Then, in September 1983, Polisario struck further south, on a 50 km front, against Moroccan positions on the wall near Smara, employing 80 tanks, armoured troop carriers, 'Stalin Organ' multiple rocket launchers, mortars and 122 mm artillery, according to Moroccan sources.³⁹

These attacks prompted King Hassan to embark on another bout of wall-building. His aim was to thrust Polisario onto the defensive and avert the danger of new large guerrilla attacks on the existing wall, to extend the wall south to the Mauritanian border, thereby cutting Western Sahara in two and obliging Polisario to make a detour through Mauritania to reach the Río de Oro, and to build a new outer wall, nearer the Algerian border, providing a first line of defence beyond the older inner wall. Between December 1983 and May 1984, two new walls were built by an estimated 30,000 Moroccan troops. The first, which amounted to a south-easterly extension to the original wall, ran 50 miles due east from Bou-Craa to Amgala, a water-point near the Mauritanian border, and then swung north to rejoin the old wall a little to the north of Smara. The second was a much more ambitious defence line, starting from Zaag in the south-east of Morocco and extending in a south-westerly line via Jdiriya and Haousa (hitherto the SADR's nominal 'capital') to the Moroccan earthworks near Smara. From Zaag to the Atlantic, near Boujdour, there was now a continuous defence line more than 400 miles long.

The huge Moroccan forces mobilized to build these new earthworks were too powerful for Polisario to halt. However, the successful completion of the new Moroccan defence positions was a setback for the guerrillas, rather than a fundamental shift of fortunes. The FAR still control less than a quarter of Western Sahara's land area. King Hassan remains obliged to keep 100,000 troops in the desert, at enormous cost, to man his network of defence lines. Rather than ending the war, the extension of these walls nearer to the Mauritanian and Algerian borders has simply pushed the 'front line' deeper into the desert, while spreading the Moroccan forces more thinly and lengthening their supply lines.

Worse still, the war could spread into Mauritania. There is nothing to stop Polisario skirting the new Moroccan defence lines by moving through the vast, unpoliceable desert wastes of northern Mauritania. That, in turn, could prompt Moroccan reprisal raids (which King Hassan has already threatened), drawing impoverished and unstable Mauritania back into the crisis from which it tried to escape in 1978-9. There is a real risk, moreover, that a Moroccan attempt to extend the earthworks right up to the Algerian frontier near Tindouf (the next logical step in King Hassan's wall-building strategy) would spark off direct clashes between Moroccan and Algerian forces, with potentially disastrous consequences for the peace of the Maghreb.

The reality is that neither side can win an outright military victory -- as long as the United States and France continue to equip the FAR while Algeria goes on sustaining Polisario. The Saharan conflict is a classic example of a war of attrition. The guerrillas do not have to break through the Moroccan defence lines and seize El-Ayoun to achieve their objectives. They simply have to remain a permanent threat, forcing King Hassan to keep a huge number of troops and a vast arsenal of weaponry in the Sahara, at a cost, in financial terms, that Morocco can ill afford. Polisario's strategy hinges, in fact, on the belief that Morocco will be unable to sustain this war indefinitely and that, if King Hassan does not end it, he will eventually lose his throne.

The Cost of the War to Morocco

King Hassan's real problem is that the Saharan war is compounding a grave economic crisis, caused by multiple factors, among them slack demand for Morocco's vital phosphate exports, a huge increase in the country's oil import bill, grave agricultural failings, and EEC protectionism. By 1980, the US Embassy in Rabat was reporting claims by 'knowledgeable government financial experts' that 'Morocco's defense-related expenditure actually diverts no less than 40% of the consolidated national budget'.⁴⁰ Morocco's exports (\$2.4 billion in 1983) barely cover half the cost of its imports (\$4.2 billion in 1983), and the country is now one of the most indebted in the Third World, with a disbursed public external debt of \$11 billion, the equivalent of about three quarters of its GNP, by the end of 1983, compared with only \$1.7 billion in 1975. By 1983, over one third of earnings from exports of goods and services were being recycled out of the country to service the foreign debt.

To satisfy the IMF, the World Bank and other creditors, the Moroccan government has been forced to adopt harsh austerity measures, in the hope of bringing its prolonged balance of payments crisis under control. However, these measures have worsened the lot of Morocco's poor. 56% of Moroccans live below what the World Bank regards as an absolute poverty line, and in the cities, where almost half of the 22 million population now lives, at least 2 million Moroccans are living in swollen slums and shanty-towns. Unemployment and underemployment are rife, and, since 1981, the government has repeatedly raised the prices of basic foods and other essential consumer products in an attempt to reduce the budgetary burden of its subsidy fund, the *Caisse de Compensation*. Discontent exploded into bloody rioting in Casablanca, the country's largest city, in June 1981, when the government raised the prices of subsidized foods, and about 600 people are estimated to have been killed when the army was brought in to restore order. There was a similar spate of rioting in January 1984, this time in Marrakesh and several northern Moroccan cities, and once again troops had to be deployed, resulting in an estimated 100 deaths.

Spontaneous and leaderless, such outbursts by the urban poor could not, in and of themselves, bring about King Hassan's downfall. Nor could any of Morocco's political parties, which have very narrow clienteles and proved unwilling or unable to take advantage of the discontent revealed by the 1981 and 1984 riots. However, the degradation of economic and social conditions, amidst glaring social inequalities, has encouraged the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and other radical creeds, and generalized discontent, especially in the urban areas. Most important of all, it could eventually spur the armed forces to move against the king. Given the FAR's past history of failed coup attempts (in 1971 and 1972), it is not surprising that rumours of another plot spread through the country following the death of General Ahmed Dlimi, the FAR's most senior officer and the commander of the forces in the Sahara, in mysterious circumstances in January 1983. It was

widely assumed that the general had been assassinated by the king, or at royal command, after the discovery of a coup plot, or simply to remove a powerful potential rival.

Thus, one of the ironies of the Saharan war has been that, by forcing him to pour scarce resources into the war effort, it has piled up trouble for the king in Morocco itself. Yet, despite the economic difficulties and political tension at home, King Hassan remains fearful of withdrawing from Western Sahara. Although the Saharan euphoria of Green March days has long since dissipated and popular reaction to a retreat might not be as highly charged as that to domestic price increases, it would bring accusations of national betrayal from the ultra-nationalist parties – notably the Istiqlal Party and the *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* (USFP). Above all, however, the king fears that, to abandon the 'Moroccan Sahara', after years of gruelling war, would amount to admitting a failure of such proportions that his credibility as a ruler would be shattered. He has staked too much on his Saharan crusade to be able to withdraw without a drastic loss of face. Worse still, a withdrawal might tempt the army, bitter after its desert trauma, to seek revenge on the Palace. Thus, despite (ambiguously) dropping his erstwhile opposition to a referendum in 1981, to appease the OAU, Hassan has not been prepared to allow a genuinely democratic plebiscite that, in all probability, would lead to independence. 'We are prepared to pursue the war for centuries if that is necessary, because the Sahara is Moroccan and can only be Moroccan', he declared on 6 November 1982.⁴¹ More recently, on 7 July 1983, he made a mockery of the very purpose of a referendum, by declaring that, whatever its outcome, he would never give up Western Sahara 'on a golden platter to a rabble of mercenaries'.⁴²

Algeria and 'Maghrebi Unity'

Only an Algerian decision to abandon the Polisario guerrillas would allow King Hassan to get the better of them. The king has battled on in the Sahara in the hope that the Algerian government will eventually tire of the regional tension and force Polisario to accept a settlement on terms that he could portray as a victory to his subjects. However, such a deal with Algeria has remained an elusive goal, despite a summit meeting between the king and President Chadli Bendjedid (the first such Algerian-Moroccan summit since the start of the war) on 26 February 1983, in the Algerian border village of Akid Lotfi. Though frontier restrictions were subsequently lifted, and air and rail links restored, the summit did not lead to the restoration of diplomatic relations, which have been broken since 1976, and failed to break the impasse over Western Sahara. Furthermore, Morocco has found itself excluded, because of the Saharan dispute, from the Algerian-led moves towards greater Maghrebi unity, which were launched with much fanfare by the signing of a 20-year treaty of fraternity and concord by Algeria and Tunisia in March 1983 – a treaty to which Mauritania became a third party the following December.

The stumbling block to Algerian-Moroccan detente has remained the Sahara. Contrary to press speculation at the time, the holding of the Akid Lotfi summit did not imply a softening of Algerian support for the Saharawi nationalists. Rather, it revealed a change in Algerian tactics towards Morocco, and an imaginative new Algerian initiative to extricate King Hassan from the war. Chadli hoped that the prospect of joining Algeria in a more collaborative 'Greater Maghreb' would be an enticing carrot for the king economically and provide him with the kind of idealistic cause, rooted in traditions going back to the days of common struggle against France, that could arouse sufficient popular enthusiasm to submerge the traumas of withdrawal from the Sahara.

Chadli insisted, however, that Morocco come to terms with Polisario. 'I was very clear about Algeria's position concerning the question of Western Sahara', Chadli confided the following June about the Akid Lotfi summit. 'I explained to the Moroccan king that I was not mandated to speak in the name of the Saharawis and that I would not arrogate to myself the right to speak in their name or assume their tutelage'. What Algeria was prepared to do, Chadli said, was 'to contribute to a reconciliation of the viewpoints of the two parties in conflict in Western Sahara', in the same way that Algeria had helped to bring Polisario and Mauritania together in 1979.⁴³ An immediate upshot of the Akid Lotfi summit was a secret encounter in Algiers in April 1983 between three of King Hassan's closest confidants (Ahmed Reda Guedira, one of his

counsellors, Driss Basri, the minister of the interior, and M'Hammed Boucetta, the foreign minister) and three top leaders of Polisario. But the Moroccan envoys' offer of Saharawi autonomy within the framework of overall Moroccan sovereignty was rejected out of hand by Polisario, which insisted on Western Sahara's full independence.

Thereafter, to Chadli's annoyance, King Hassan categorically refused to enter into negotiations with Polisario. Algeria therefore maintained its logistical support for Polisario and gave its approval to the Front's big attacks on Lemseyed in July–August 1983 and the Smara section of the 'wall' the following September.

On 10 April 1984, the Political Bureau of Algeria's ruling Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) published a detailed statement on Algerian foreign policy which was unambiguous on the Sahara. It reiterated 'Algeria's unqualified support for the struggle being waged by the people of Western Sahara under the leadership of the Polisario Front, their sole legitimate representative, for the effective exercise of their right to self-determination'. It called for 'the implementation in full' of the resolution on Western Sahara adopted by the June 1983 summit conference of the OAU (see below), and it reaffirmed Algeria's disposition to 'bring together the brother peoples of Morocco and Western Sahara and so encourage a negotiated solution'.⁴⁴

There are probably at least four reasons why the Chadli government has not departed from these basic policy positions. It would regard an outright Moroccan victory in Western Sahara as a dangerous precedent, in view of the past and not entirely extinguished Moroccan designs on parts of the Algerian Sahara. Abandonment of Polisario's cause would be visibly at odds with fundamental principles of the FLN's ideology. It would do great damage to Algeria's international credibility, after years of successful lobbying on the Saharawi nationalists' behalf, notably in the UN and the OAU, and the recognition of the SADR by 58 Third World states (by mid-1984). Finally, the Algerian government, like Polisario, believes that, however many walls he builds, Hassan will ultimately be unable to sustain the war financially or will lose his throne. From that perspective, maintaining a relatively low-cost war of attrition makes sense.

Libya's Shifting Alliances

By contrast to Algeria, Libya has pursued an inconsistent and at times ambiguous policy on Western Sahara. Colonel Qadhafi was the first Arab leader to provide material aid to Polisario when it was fighting against Spain, and the colonel's antipathy for King Hassan assured the Front of continuing support for several years after the Madrid Accords. However, Qadhafi's Arab unionist ideology was not conducive to supporting the idea of Western Saharan independence, and this was doubtless why Libya delayed four years, until April 1980, before officially recognizing the SADR. Then, in June–July 1983, Qadhafi engineered an astonishing rapprochement with King Hassan, at Polisario's apparent expense, to dissuade the king from sending Moroccan troops to Chad to support the embattled regime of Hissène Habré against Libyan-backed rebels.

A year later, this new Libyan-Moroccan alignment was taken a step further when King Hassan and Colonel Qadhafi met in Oujda, Morocco, on 13 August 1984, and signed a 'treaty of union'. This was, above all, an anti-Algerian axis, motivated by a mutual hostility to the Chadli regime, which, besides refusing to come to terms with Morocco over Western Sahara, had infuriated Colonel Qadhafi by vetoing Libyan accession to the March 1983 'treaty of fraternity and concord' until Libya renounced its longstanding claims to a strip of Algerian Sahara territory near their common border.

The implications of this realignment for the Saharan conflict should not be exaggerated, however. Libya has never been more than a second-tier actor in the war. Its arms supplies to Polisario had always been transported via Algeria, with Algerian approval, and the Algerian government could easily make up for any cutback in Libyan arms deliveries. In any case, the Libyan-Moroccan honeymoon looked too unnatural to last for long. Its motives on both sides were strictly conjunctural, based on short-term considerations in a fast changing and highly complex diplomatic game in which either of these machiavellian players could switch abruptly to alternative, divergent tactical moves. Each of Qadhafi's

previous "unions" (with Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Chad) came to nought, and the union with Morocco is likely to suffer the same fate.

Morocco's Diplomatic Isolation

Morocco's territorial annexationism has been dimly viewed by much of the Third World, and in particular by Africans. By mid-1984, the SADR had been recognized by 58 foreign states – all of them from the Third World and 29 African, but representing a rather broad ideological spectrum.

Countries Recognizing the SADR

(with dates of recognition)

Africa

(29 countries)

Algeria (1976)	Madagascar (1976)
Angola (1976)	Mali (1980)
Benin (1976)	Mauritania (1984)
Botswana (1980)	Mauritius (1982)
Burkina (ex Upper Volta) (1984)	Mozambique (1976)
Burundi (1976)	Rwanda (1976)
Cape Verde (1979)	São Tomé and Príncipe (1978)
Chad (1980)	Seychelles (1977)
Congo (1978)	Sierra Leone (1980)
Ethiopia (1979)	Swaziland (1980)
Ghana (1979)	Tanzania (1978)
Guinea-Bissau (1976)	Togo (1976)
Lesotho (1979)	Uganda (1979)
Libya (1980)	Zambia (1979)
	Zimbabwe (1980)

Asia

(8 countries)

Afghanistan (1979)	North Korea (1976)
Iran (1980)	South Yemen (1978)
Kampuchea (1979)	Syria (1980)
Laos (1979)	Vietnam (1979)

Latin America and Caribbean

(15 countries)

Bolivia (1982)	Mexico (1979)
Costa Rica (1980)	Nicaragua (1979)
Cuba (1980)	Panama (1979)
Dominica (1979)	Peru (1984)
Ecuador (1983)	St Lucia (1979)
Grenada (1979)	Surinam (1982)
Guyana (1979)	Venezuela (1982)
Jamaica (1979)	

Oceania

(6 countries)

Kiribati (1981)	Solomon Islands (1981)
Nauru (1981)	Tuvalu (1981)
Papua New Guinea (1981)	Vanuatu (1980)

The OAU

The annexation of Western Sahara transgressed two of the OAU's most hallowed principles – the right of colonial peoples to self-determination and the sanctity of the albeit artificial frontiers inherited from the European powers. However, some African governments have withheld support for Polisario, for fear of displeasing Western allies, weakening King Hassan or allowing an inter-African dispute to divide the OAU. At its summit meetings in Mauritius in 1976 and in Libreville in 1977, therefore, the OAU

shelved taking a substantive position on Western Sahara by referring the problem to an extraordinary summit – which was never held. By the time of the July 1978 coup in Nouakchott, however, the conflict could no longer be ignored. An *ad hoc* committee of five African heads of state, known thereafter as the 'Wise Men', was set up at the July 1978 summit in Khartoum with a brief to consider 'all the data on the question of Western Sahara, among which, the exercise of the right of the people of this territory to self-determination'.⁴⁵ A year later, in July 1979, the OAU summit in Monrovia endorsed the Wise Men's proposals – the most important of which were an 'immediate ceasefire' and 'the exercise by the people of Western Sahara of their right to self-determination through a general, free referendum enabling them to choose one of the two following options: a) total independence, b) maintenance of the status quo'.⁴⁶

Morocco's repute slipped still further when Hassan annexed Tiris el-Gharbia in August 1979 and then refused to attend a meeting of the OAU *ad hoc* committee in Monrovia the following December. The committee regretted Morocco's boycott, congratulated Mauritania for making peace with Polisario, called on Morocco to 'withdraw all its troops from Western Sahara', repeated the ceasefire and referendum proposals, and suggested the dispatch of an OAU peace-keeping force to Western Sahara.⁴⁷ Morocco's isolation was even more marked at the following OAU summit, held in Freetown in July 1980. Morocco was appalled to find a narrow majority of the OAU's members (26 out of 50) recognizing the SADR and favouring its admission as a member-state. Morocco was only able to avert such a diplomatic disaster by threatening to walk out of the OAU and, as a carrot, offering to end its boycott of the *ad hoc* committee. At the committee's next meeting, in Freetown in September 1980, the Moroccan premier, Maati Bouabid, reiterated Morocco's opposition to the referendum proposal. However, such inflexibility further eroded Morocco's diplomatic standing in Africa. So, upon the advice of his Western allies, Hassan promised the next OAU summit, held in Nairobi in June 1981, that Morocco would accept a 'controlled referendum whose modalities should give justice simultaneously to the objectives of the *ad hoc* committee, that is to say the Committee of Wise Men, and to Morocco's conviction regarding the legitimacy of its rights'.⁴⁸ The king was applauded for his magnanimity and the SADR was once again excluded from the OAU.

Polisario and Algeria, however, doubted the king's sincerity. His pledge on Moroccan TV, on 24 June, two days before his speech in Nairobi, that 'we will not renounce a single grain of this Moroccan Sahara for which so many of us have sacrificed their blood and which has cost us so much money', suggested that he was merely playing for time, to keep the SADR out of the OAU, and would not allow a genuine referendum, for fear that most Saharawis would vote for independence.⁴⁹

The Nairobi summit appointed an Implementation Committee (composed of the presidents of Kenya, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Tanzania) to 'take, with the participation of the United Nations, all necessary measures to guarantee the exercise of a general and regular referendum of self-determination by the people of Western Sahara'.⁵⁰ Despite holding two sessions, both in Nairobi, on 24–26 August 1981 and 8–9 February 1982, this committee proved unable to make any real progress towards organizing a referendum or even arranging a preliminary ceasefire, if only because Morocco flatly refused to recognize Polisario as its adversary. Fearing to lose Morocco's cooperation, the committee decided at its second session (Nairobi III) 'not to name the warring parties, although we know who the parties are'.⁵¹ If it could not name them, the committee could not, of course, get them to negotiate, even indirectly, and so it could do no more than make the timeless observation that 'a total ceasefire will take effect after consultations with all the concerned parties'.⁵²

With the Implementation Committee in a diplomatic *cul-de-sac*, Algeria and other pro-Polisario African states then judged it opportune to force the pace on the issue of the SADR's membership of the OAU. The SADR finally took its seat at a session of the OAU's Council of Ministers, as the organization's 51st member-state, in Addis Ababa on 22–28 February 1983. To the dismay of Polisario and its African allies, however, 18 states joined Morocco in a protest walk-out. Unable thereafter to achieve the obligatory two-thirds quorum (34 states) for its conferences, the OAU was thrown into disarray. The crisis was exacerbated by

controversy over plans to hold the OAU's 1982 summit in Libya, which by custom would have given Colonel Qadhafi the organization's annual chairmanship. Scheduled for 5-8 August, the summit collapsed in quorate. Despite a voluntary offer by the SADR to stay away (without, however, renouncing its OAU membership), a second attempt to convene the summit in Tripoli on 15-21 November 1982 failed too, due to a new row over the representation of strife-torn Chad. It was not until 8-12 June 1983, after a change in venue to Addis Ababa and another 'voluntary and temporary' decision by the SADR not to take its seat, that the OAU was finally able to hold its summit. Polisario was rewarded for this gesture by the passage of a resolution, adopted by consensus, which, for the first time, named Morocco and Polisario as the parties in conflict in Western Sahara and urged them to 'undertake direct negotiations' with a view to reaching an agreement on a ceasefire that would create conditions for 'a peaceful and fair referendum for self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, a referendum without any administrative or military constraints, under the auspices of the OAU and the United Nations'. The Implementation Committee was urged to meet 'as soon as possible', with Morocco and Polisario, so that the referendum could be held by December 1983.⁵³

Both Polisario and Morocco were accordingly invited to attend talks with the Implementation Committee in Addis Ababa on 21 September 1983. Morocco and Polisario sent high-level delegations, led respectively by Crown Prince Sidi Mohammed and Polisario's Secretary-General, Mohammed Abdelaziz. However, the talks never got off the ground. When President Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, the OAU chairman, invited the Moroccan and Polisario delegations to join the Implementation Committee at the same table, Polisario accepted but Morocco refused. The committee meeting was adjourned *sine die* on 23 September. The OAU peace plan thereupon collapsed. The December deadline passed by without any progress even towards a ceasefire, let alone the referendum. One upshot of this setback, however, was that several of the once pro-Moroccan OAU 'boycotters' of 1982 began to lose patience with King Hassan. By mid-1984, the king had few African friends.

The UN and the Non-Aligned Movement

In 1976-7, Morocco successfully exploited the OAU's plans for an extraordinary summit as a pretext to dissuade the UN General Assembly and the Non-Aligned Movement (at its Colombo summit in August 1976) from taking positions on Western Sahara.⁵⁴ After the coup in Mauritania, however, Morocco could no longer prevent these bodies from taking a stand. In December 1978, the UN General Assembly adopted two resolutions - one, backed by Morocco and adopted by 66 votes to 30, with 40 abstentions, which (like the 1976 and 1977 resolutions) appealed to states not to impede the peacemaking efforts of the OAU, and another, adopted by a much larger majority (90 votes to 10, with 30 abstentions), reaffirming 'the inalienable right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination and independence' and 'the responsibility of the United Nations with regard to the decolonization of Western Sahara'.⁵⁵ Morocco's diplomatic standing eroded further after the Algiers Agreement and the Moroccan annexation of Tiris el-Gharbia. The sixth Non-Aligned summit, held in Havana in September 1979, 'deplored the extension of Morocco's armed occupation to the southern part of Western Sahara previously administered by Mauritania' and expressed hope that the creation of the OAU's *ad hoc* committee would 'assure, with the briefest possible delay, the exercise by the people of Western Sahara of their right to self-determination and independence'.⁵⁶

From 1979 to 1982, Morocco found itself forced to vote against all the resolutions on Western Sahara adopted by the UN General Assembly. In November 1979, the General Assembly voted by 85 votes to six, with 41 abstentions, to affirm 'the inalienable right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination and independence' and 'the legitimacy of their struggle to secure that right', to hail the Algiers Agreement and deplore 'the continued occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco and the extension of that occupation to the territory recently evacuated by Mauritania', to urge 'Morocco to join in the peace process and to terminate the occupation of the territory of Western Sahara', and, recognizing Polisario as 'the representative of the people of Western Sahara', to recommend its participation 'in any search for a just, lasting and definitive political solution of the question of Western Sahara'.⁵⁷

An almost identical resolution was adopted in the General Assembly in November 1980, by 88 votes to eight, with 43 abstentions.⁵⁸

After King Hassan's referendum pledge at the June 1981 OAU summit, the General Assembly resolutions, adopted in November 1981 (by 76 votes to nine, with 57 abstentions) and in November 1982 (by 78 votes to 15, with 50 abstentions), focused on the need for peace talks between Polisario and Morocco, a proposal which Hassan continued to reject.⁵⁹ A new development was that the United States, under President Ronald Reagan, cast negative votes, alone among the Western powers. The 1982 resolution, which was broadly similar to that adopted in 1981, reaffirmed 'the inalienable right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination and independence' and declared that 'only negotiations between Morocco and the *Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Rio de Oro* could create the objective conditions for the restoration of peace in north-west Africa and would guarantee the fair conduct of a general, free and orderly referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara'.⁶⁰ The following year, this viewpoint was adopted by the OAU too, in the Addis Ababa resolution of June 1983. The latter was then incorporated into a resolution adopted by consensus (including even Morocco) in the UN General Assembly on 7 December 1983, although Morocco had already rendered it ineffective by refusing to participate in talks with Polisario under the auspices of the OAU's Implementation Committee.

THE WORLD POWERS

It is the Western Saharan war's regional ramifications, rather than the territory's minerals or any other consideration, which have drawn the attention of policymakers in Washington, Moscow, Paris and Madrid. The destabilization of Morocco's Alawite monarchy, a long-standing ally of the West, is arousing concern in Western capitals as the war drags on, while both France and Spain are anxious to be rid of a conflict that complicates their important relations with both Morocco and Algeria.

President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing came to regret his military intervention against Polisario in Mauritania in 1977-8, which failed to save Mokhtar Ould Daddah's war effort but brought Franco-Algerian relations to a nadir - to the great cost of French industry, which lost valuable Algerian contracts to its competitors. During the last three years of his presidency (1978-81), therefore, Giscard set great store on repairing relations with Algeria, and from 1979 acknowledged the Western Saharans' right to self-determination. Nonetheless, France remained Morocco's principal arms supplier: delivery of 50 Mirage F-1 aircraft and 25 Alpha-Jets began in 1980. This ambiguous policy was continued by President François Mitterrand after his election victory in 1981. While Mitterrand strove, with considerable success, to boost trade with Algeria, he was as careful as Giscard not to jeopardise relations with Morocco, which has the largest French expatriate community in the world (numbering 55,000) and (though of lesser importance than Algeria) remains an important trade market for France. So, despite the French Socialist Party's long-standing relations with Polisario, the Mitterrand government has not halted French arms deliveries to Morocco.

The Spanish government has also tried to preserve cordial relations with both Morocco and Algeria. Algeria is Spain's largest export market in Africa, but Spain, too, has strong incentives not to displease Hassan. The Moroccan and Saharan coasts are of enormous importance to the Spanish fishing industry, and Spain still holds two enclaves on Morocco's Mediterranean coast, the *presidios* of Ceuta and Melilla. So, the successive governments of Carlos Arias Navarro, Adolfo Suárez, and Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo tried to exploit the ambiguities of the Madrid accords to placate Algeria while retaining the friendship of Morocco. Though it had handed over Western Sahara's administration to Morocco and Mauritania, the Spanish government insisted that it had not ceded sovereignty - which, it declared, was vested in the Saharawi people. While exporting arms to Morocco and Mauritania (until 1977), it recognized - in principle - the Saharawis' right to self-determination.

To the Madrid government's irritation, however, the Western Saharan problem would not go away. At home, the left-wing

opposition parties (notably the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* and the *Partido Comunista de España*) campaigned actively for the annulment of the Madrid accords. Polisario tried to force Spain to renounce the accords by staging numerous attacks on Spanish fishing boats off the Saharan coast in 1977–80, and Algeria applied additional pressure in 1977–8 by campaigning vocally for the independence of the Canary Islands. In order to secure the release of eight captured Spanish fishermen, the ruling *Unión del Centro Democrático* (UCD) finally recognized Polisario in October 1978 as 'the sole legitimate representative of the struggling Saharan people'.⁶¹ On 1 May 1979, the Spanish Prime Minister, Adolfo Suárez, met Polisario's Secretary-General, Mohammed Abdelaziz, in Algiers. However, the ambiguity in Spanish policy remained. The UCD's recognition of Polisario was not endorsed by the UCD government, which could not afford to alienate King Hassan. Indeed, such pragmatism continued, despite the PSOE's strong sympathy for Polisario, after the PSOE's election victory in October 1982.

The USSR has displayed equal prudence. It enjoys generally close relations with Algeria and it has publicly supported the Western Saharans' right to self-determination. Polisario, moreover, primarily uses arms of Soviet bloc manufacture, apart from the weapons it captures on the field of battle. However, these Soviet-origin arms have been supplied to the guerrillas by Algeria or Libya, rather than by the USSR or other Eastern European states, none of which have recognized the SADR. The main reason for such circumspection is that the USSR values its growing economic relationship with Morocco. In particular, it has secured long-term access to Moroccan phosphate – of great importance since the USSR will be a net phosphate importer by the 1990s – by signing a 'contract of the century' in 1978 under which the USSR is financing \$2 billion investment in the development of Morocco's huge Meskala phosphate deposits and will trade oil, chemicals, timber and ore-carriers for phosphate and phosphoric acid over 30 years.

By contrast, broad strategic considerations impelled the Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations in Washington to align more or less overtly with Morocco despite Algeria's much greater importance to US business interests. The value of the Hassan regime to the US has been manifold. After the closure of the Strategic Air Command's Moroccan bases in 1963, the US Navy retained communications facilities in Morocco until 1978. Then, in May 1982, Morocco signed an agreement giving the US Rapid Deployment Force transit facilities at Moroccan air-bases. Morocco's geographic location, *en route* to the Middle East and astride the entrance to the Mediterranean, is of obvious strategic relevance, and the Hassan regime has always allowed US warships to call at its ports. Furthermore, Hassan has assisted the US by moderating Arab militancy on the Palestinian question – and, in 1977–8, he backed the initial Egyptian-Israeli contacts that culminated in the Camp David accords. Last but not least, Hassan has acted as a regional *gendarme* in Africa – by rushing Moroccan troops to Zaire in 1977 and 1978 to help crush the Shaba insurgencies.

Fears of jeopardizing US-Algerian relations, associating the US with a particularly blatant form of territorial annexationism, and risking the Western Saharan conflict's internationalization did prompt Carter to ban the sale of some US aircraft to Morocco briefly in 1978–9. However, when the fall of the Shah of Iran and Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua in 1979 drove the Carter Administration to tone down its 'human rights' rhetoric and reinforce security assistance to valued US allies in the Third World, these arms sale restrictions were dropped. In January 1980, the Pentagon announced plans to sell Morocco \$232.5 million worth of Northrop F-5E jets, OV-10 'Bronco' counter-insurgency aircraft and Hughes helicopter gunships. Reagan inherited and strengthened this pro-Moroccan policy. 'Morocco is important to broad American interests and occupies a pivotal strategic area', a State Department official told Congress in March 1981. 'We intend to maintain and reinforce our historically close relationship with reliability and consistency as our watchwords'.⁶²

After the Moroccan *débâcle* at Guelta Zemmour, in October

1981, US military assistance was intensified. US military instructors arrived in Morocco to train elite troops in offensive counter-guerrilla operations and to teach anti-missile tactics to Moroccan pilots. The Reagan Administration set up a joint military commission with Morocco in 1982.⁶³

US Arms Sales and Military Aid to Morocco

(in million \$, for fiscal years)

	Total 1975-84*	1982	1983	Estim'd 1984	Projected 1985
Foreign Military Sales (FMS)					
Agreements	880.0	14.0	67.7	80.0	100.0
Credits	352.2	30.0	75.0	26.8	10.0
Military Aid					
(MAP) Grants	55.0	–	25.0	30.0	40.0
Military Training Aid (IMET)	10.5	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.7
Licensed Commercial Arms Exports	83.6	5.0	5.0†	5.5	5.5

* Actual for 1975–83, estimates for 1984.

† Estimate.

CONCLUSION

The evidence leaves little doubt that the great majority of Saharawis want independence. The mass demonstrations for independence which left such an impression on the UN mission of inquiry which toured the territory in 1975 revealed the emergence of a deeply rooted nationalist movement. Few observers at the time would have expected anything but independence to have resulted from the referendum, had it been held. Since then, the traumas of the refugee exodus, which has left all Saharawi families divided, without contact for almost a decade, and the rigours and bitterness of the resistance war have reinforced this nationalism, forging it into a burning passion.

The only just way to resolve this conflict, once and for all, is to hold the referendum which the UN has been urging since 1966. Since 1981, Morocco has said it will accept the principle of a referendum. However, it has still not been held – because of Morocco's refusal to sit down to talks with Polisario about a preliminary ceasefire and the procedures to be followed for the referendum. Grave doubts remain about the sincerity of Morocco's acceptance of the referendum, and it is therefore not surprising that Polisario insists on being a party to the ceasefire and referendum arrangements, to ensure that the referendum is held under genuinely fair and democratic conditions.

The Western powers – in particular the US and France – must share the blame, with King Hassan, for the fate that has befallen the Saharawis – and, in a very real sense, the Moroccans too, for they have suffered the economic blows of this war of attrition and, in some cases, bereavement, for a cause that can bring them nothing of value. The US and France claim to be neutral in the conflict, and they officially support the OAU's calls for a referendum. Neither state officially recognizes Morocco's claims to sovereignty in the territory. Yet, since the start of the war, the US and France have provided massive military aid to the Moroccan armed forces. In the case of the US, the military assistance furnished to Morocco between fiscal years 1975 and 1984 comprised no less than \$880 million in Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements, \$352 million in military sales credits and \$55 million in outright grants to finance military sales, as well as \$84 million in licensed commercial arms exports and \$10.5 million in the provision of military training.

These countries' military aid for Morocco makes them accomplices in a colonial war. By contrast, a joint Franco-American decision to halt the flow of arms to Morocco would leave King Hassan with little option but to accept the OAU's calls for talks with Polisario and finally proceed with the long postponed referendum.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Report of the United Nations Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara, 1975, in *General Assembly Official Records*, Thirtieth Session, Supplement 23, Vol III, UN Document A/10023/Rev. I, p 59.
- ² Tomás García Figueras, *Santa Cruz de Mar Pequeña, Ifni, Sahara. La acción de España en la costa occidental de África*, Madrid: Ediciones Fe, 1941, p 126.
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- ⁵ 'Manifeste politique', in *Le peuple saharoui en lutte*, Polisario Front, 1975, p 50.
- ⁶ Report of the United Nations Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara, *op. cit.*, p 59.
- ⁷ Speech of 27 March 1956, cited in Bertrand Fessard de Foucault, 'La question du Sahara espagnol (I)' in *Revue Française d'Etudes Politiques Africaines* 10 (119) 1975, p 78. *Tangier was transferred to Moroccan administration in October 1956.*
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- ¹⁰ Traité de fraternité, de bon voisinage et de coopération conclu entre la République algérienne démocratique et populaire et le Royaume du Maroc, in *Journal Officiel de la République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire* 8 (11) 1969, pp 82-4.
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- ¹² Resolution 2072, 16 December 1965, in *General Assembly Official Records*, Twentieth Session, Supplement 14, UN Document A/6014, pp 59-60.
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- ¹⁴ Resolution 2354, 19 December 1967, in *General Assembly Official Records*, Twenty-second Session, Supplement 16, UN Document A/6716, pp 53-4; Resolution 2428, 16 December 1968, *General Assembly Official Records*, Twenty-third Session, Supplement 18, UN Document A/7218, pp 63-4; Resolution 2591, 16 December 1969, *General Assembly Official Records*, Twenty-fourth Session, Supplement 30, UN Document A/7630, pp 73-4; Resolution 2711, 14 December 1970, *General Assembly Official Records*, Twenty-fifth Session, Supplement 28, UN Document A/8028, pp 100-1; Resolution 2983, 14 December 1972, *General Assembly Official Records*, Twenty-seventh Session, Supplement 30, UN Document A/8730, pp 84-5; and Resolution 3162, 14 December 1973, *General Assembly Official Records*, Twenty-eighth Session, Supplement 30, UN Document A/9030, pp 110-1.
- ¹⁵ Resolution 272, on the So-Called Spanish Sahara, OAU Council of Ministers, Nineteenth Ordinary Session, Rabat, 5-19 June 1972.
- ¹⁶ Resolution 301, on the Sahara under Spanish Domination, OAU Council of Ministers, Twenty-first Ordinary Session, Addis Ababa, 17-24 May 1973.
- ¹⁷ The Algiers non-aligned summit reaffirmed the non-aligned movement's 'unshakeable attachment to the principle of self-determination and its concern to see it applied under conditions that would ensure to the inhabitants of the Sahara under Spanish domination the free and authentic expression of their will, in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions regarding their territory'. The fifth Islamic summit urged Western Sahara's neighbours 'to pursue their consultations, to unite and to intensify their efforts to obtain the application of Resolution number 3162 of the 28th General Assembly of the United Nations, notably regarding the arrangements for the organization as soon as possible of a referendum so as to allow the indigenous populations to express themselves in full freedom, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, under the auspices and guarantee of the international organization'.
- ¹⁸ *Discours de S M Hassan II, 3 mars 1974-3 mars 1975*, Rabat: Ministère d'Etat chargé de l'information, 1975, pp 61, 63.
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- ³² For the full text of the SADR's constitution, see Tony Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1982, pp 307-9.
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- ³⁷ *Le Monde*, 28 January 1983.
- ³⁸ Author's interview with Larbi el-Omari, Director, Fosbucraa, El-Ayoun, 20 June 1978; *Mining Annual Review*, 1980: information provided by Ministry of Energy and Mines, Rabat.
- ³⁹ *Le Monde*, 3 November 1983.
- ⁴⁰ Cited in *Arms Sales and the Conflict in the Western Sahara: an Assessment of US Policy*. Hearing before the Subcommittees on International Security and Scientific Affairs and on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session, 25 March 1981. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1981, p 43.
- ⁴¹ *AFP*, Rabat, 7 November 1982.
- ⁴² *International Herald Tribune* (Paris) 12 July 1983.
- ⁴³ *El Moudjahid* (Algiers) 12 June 1983.
- ⁴⁴ *Révolution Africaine* (Algiers), 20-26 April 1984.
- ⁴⁵ UN Document A/33/337, 31 October 1978.
- ⁴⁶ *Jeune Afrique* (Paris) No. 970, 8 August 1979, p 52.
- ⁴⁷ *Le Monde* (Paris) 17 December 1979.
- ⁴⁸ *Le Monde* (Paris) 28-29 June 1981.
- ⁴⁹ *Le Monde* (Paris) 26 June 1981.
- ⁵⁰ *Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens*, 3 July 1981.

- ⁵¹ President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya, 9 February 1982, cited in *Financial Times* (London) 11 February 1982.
- ⁵² *El Moudjahid* (Algiers) 11 February 1982.
- ⁵³ See Appendix for the text of the resolution.
- ⁵⁴ Resolution 31/45, 1 December 1976, and 32/22, 28 November 1977.
- ⁵⁵ Resolution 33/31B and 33/31A, 13 December 1978.
- ⁵⁶ 6ème conférence des pays non-alignés, Resolution sur le Sahara occidental, in *La République Arabe Saharaouie Démocratique*.
- ⁵⁷ Resolution 34/37, 21 November 1979.
- ⁵⁸ Resolution 35/19, 11 November 1980.
- ⁵⁹ Resolution 36/46, 24 November 1981, and Resolution 37/28, 23 November 1982.
- ⁶⁰ Resolution 37/28, 24 November 1982. The states voting against this resolution were Morocco, Chad, Chile, El Salvador, Gabon, The Gambia, Guatemala, Guinea, Honduras, Liberia, Senegal, Solomon Islands, the United States, Upper Volta and Zaire.
- ⁶¹ Madrid Radio, 14 October 1978.
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APPENDIX

Resolution on Western Sahara adopted at the 19th Summit of the Organization of African Unity, Addis Ababa, 6-12 June 1983.

'The Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity, meeting in its nineteenth ordinary session in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 6 to 12 June 1983,

Having examined the report of the Implementation Committee of Heads of State on Western Sahara,

Recalling the solemn commitment made by His Majesty King Hassan II during the 18th Summit to accept the holding of a referendum in the Western Sahara to enable the people of that territory to exercise their right to self-determination,

Recalling with appreciation His Majesty King Hassan's acceptance of the recommendation of the Sixth Session of the *Ad Hoc* Committee of Heads of State on Western Sahara contained in document AHG/103 (XVIII) B, annex I, as well as his pledge to co-operate with the *Ad Hoc* Committee in the search for a just, peaceful and lasting solution,

Reaffirming its previous resolutions and decisions on the question of Western Sahara, and in particular AHG/Res. 103 (XVIII) of 27 June 1981,

1. Takes note of the reports of the Implementation Committee of Heads of State on Western Sahara;

2. Urges the parties to the conflict, the Kingdom of Morocco and the POLISARIO Front, to undertake direct negotiations with a view to bringing about a cease-fire to create the necessary conditions for a peaceful and fair referendum for self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, a referendum without any administrative or military constraints, under the auspices of the OAU and the United Nations, and calls on the Implementation Committee to ensure the observance of the cease-fire;

3. Directs the Implementation Committee to meet as soon as possible, and in collaboration with the parties to the conflict, to continue to work out the modalities and all other details relevant to the implementation of the cease-fire and the conduct of the referendum in December 1983;

4. Requests the United Nations in conjunction with the OAU to provide a Peace-Keeping Force to be stationed in Western Sahara

to ensure peace and security during the organization and conduct of the Referendum;

5. Mandates the Implementation Committee with the participation of the United Nations to take all necessary measures to ensure the proper implementation of the resolution;

6. Requests the Implementation Committee to report to the 20th Assembly of Heads of State and Government on the result of the Referendum with a view to enabling the 20th Summit to reach a final decision on all aspects of the question of the Western Sahara;

7. Decides to remain seized with the question of Western Sahara;

8. Requests the Implementation Committee in the discharge of its mandate to take account of the proceedings of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Ordinary Sessions on the question of Western Sahara and to this end invites the OAU Secretary-General to make available the full records of the said proceedings to the Committee;

9. Welcomes the constructive attitude of the Saharawi leaders in making it possible for the 19th Summit to meet by withdrawing from it voluntarily and temporarily.'

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