

# STANDOFF IN THE SAHARA

by J. W. Fernandez

The Western Sahara is an unlikely place for a war. A former Spanish colony, this area—about the size of Colorado—is classic desert country, almost totally barren as far as the eye can see. In the afternoon the winds sweep in and sand seeps through a cotton turban and into the throat, making every word a chore. At this time, life in the settlements slows down and people seek shelter from the heat and the sand until well past four o'clock.

But a war there is, and it is one in which the United States is playing a pivotal role. The war pits Morocco against the Polisario Front—acronym for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro—the guerrilla group that recently entered its second decade of fighting in the Western Sahara. Other players are involved: Algeria and, until recently, Libya on behalf of the insurgents, and France and Saudi Arabia on the side of Morocco. It has already had repercussions in the rest of Africa: At the 1982 and 1983 summits of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), quorums were reached only after Morocco's threat to lead a walkout over the admission of the guerrillas' Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic were defused by the Polisario's "voluntary" agreement to stay away. Since then the OAU has put forth proposals for a referendum, which received United Nations endorsement but have failed to put an end to the conflict. This year, prospects of another stalemate over the Western Sahara were partly responsible for the indefinite postponement of the annual OAU summit.

In the shadow of public concern over Central America, United States involvement in the Western Sahara has risen dramatically under the Reagan administration. To the Polisario, who have often seen their efforts stymied by developments beyond their control, the American entry provides a new source of frustration. At the Polisario's tenth anniversary celebration, held a year ago in southwestern Algeria, Washington was identified as the power behind Morocco's unwillingness to embrace a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Much to the chagrin of the Polisario, it now appears that any referendum initiatives by the OAU will require American backing for their implementation.

In his opening speech at the anniversary festivities, Polisario Secretary-General Mohammed Abdelaziz missed few

opportunities to condemn the United States. To his right and left sat the Algerian finance and interior ministers, as much to allay rumors of ebbing Algerian support for the Polisario as to recognize the nation that bankrolls most of the guerrilla effort. "Our people today are the object of American aggression," began Mr. Abdelaziz, "and the weapons and sophisticated military technology of the United States of America are now directed at the territory of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, in the hands of American experts who supervise and direct the genocidal warfare against the Saharawi people."

To the Polisario leader the future could not have seemed very promising, for there were rumors that Algeria and Libya were growing weary of the struggle. Indeed, soon thereafter, a lukewarm Moroccan-Libyan rapprochement deprived the guerrillas of their second largest backer. Nor had recent military developments augured well. Late in 1981, Morocco had completed a protective wall around the "useful triangle" in the north—an area comprised of the Bou Craa mine, the capital city of El Aaiun, and the interior village of Smara—and since then the Polisario's military exploits had been unable to match earlier feats. In addition, although fifty-eight countries had recognized the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, its admission to the OAU had proven a largely pyrrhic victory. To make matters worse, the Reagan administration was seeking to double military aid for Rabat for 1984.

## THE ROAD TO RABAT

Anti-American wrath at the anniversary celebration was not confined to high-ranking Polisario officials. Others had harsh words for King Hassan, who, they felt, was substituting for the shah as America's gendarme in the Arab world. Their conception of U.S. involvement was illustrated by the sort of speculation they engaged in with regard to the mysterious death in an automobile crash of General Ahmed Dlini, the architect of Rabat's military strategy in the territory. According to one version, General Dlini had advocated negotiations with the Polisario and thus Washington, wishing to continue the war at all costs, had engineered his fatal crash. In another version, offered by a school teacher, the United States and King Hassan had arranged for the general's death when it became clear that he favored French over American advisors. Such theories would have been inconceivable only a few years before, when observers were calling the Polisario one of the few nonaligned guerrilla movements in Africa.

---

*J. W. Fernandez is a New York attorney who recently visited the Polisario camps in southwestern Algeria.*

Forty years ago the slightest American concern for the Western Sahara would have raised many an eyebrow. First colonized in 1884 by the Spanish, the territory was largely ignored by the West until after World War II. The discovery in 1947 of high-grade phosphate deposits at Bou Craa, however, sparked Madrid's interest and that of neighboring states. Soon after Morocco and Mauritania gained their independence, they began calling for the "return" of what was then known as the Spanish Sahara; and by the mid-1960s no United Nations session was complete without a resolution urging Spain to grant the native population the right of self-determination.

The knowledge that vast phosphate reserves lay beneath the sand also sparked the notion of a self-sufficient Saharan nation. Nomadic traders who had once traversed the desert now settled in El Aaiun, Smara, and other villages around the Bou Craa mine. Soon various independence movements made an appearance. In 1973 the Polisario Front entered the fray.

Nearly five years after their death, Moroccan soldiers lie unburied in Mahkbes, their bodies—loose bones now—shifting slightly in the western winds. A few were originally interred, only to be uncovered by the swirling sands. Others were simply left where they had fallen. The Moroccans, the Polisario say, do not even bury their own.

The fighting at Mahkbes came three years after a beleaguered Spain had agreed to leave its former colony in the hands of Morocco and Mauritania. Initially, it had seemed that both countries would soon follow Madrid out of the Western Sahara. At first using weapons and Land-Rovers captured from Morocco, and later Soviet-made tanks and SAM-6 missiles, the guerrillas had managed to harass the enemy in the larger towns and control many of the outlying villages. By August of 1979, Mauritania was ready to hand the Rio de Oro province to the guerrillas. The ensuing pact proved of little value to the Polisario, however, when Morocco quickly moved its troops into this southern region and deprived the insurgents of their hoped-for enclave.

Even as the Polisario were exulting over their military victories, the character of the war was being altered. In the northern Saguiat el Hamra province, a strategic wall was close to completion. On the other side of the Atlantic, the new Reagan administration was determining to make King Hassan II a symbol of America's renewed willingness to stand behind friends in need.

For King Hassan II the advent of Ronald Reagan could not have been more welcome. President Carter had irked Rabat during the early years of his term by restricting arms sales to what was deemed necessary to the security of pre-1975 Morocco, conditioning further military aid on Rabat's willingness to negotiate with the Polisario. Faced with American oscillation, Rabat turned elsewhere. President Giscard d'Estaing proved a willing supplier, but French aid paled beside Saudi Arabia's contribution, which in 1982 totaled \$2.8 million a day. Violating Arab League and OAU covenants, Morocco also purchased armored vehicles from South Africa.

Although Carter administration policy tilted in Morocco's favor after a series of Polisario military exploits and the fall of the shah, it was upon the arrival of Ronald

Reagan that Washington abandoned all but the veneer of neutrality. Early in the Reagan term, Caspar Weinberger and Alexander Haig traveled to Rabat for meetings with King Hassan. The result was the establishment of a Joint Military Commission and Morocco's agreement to allow its air transit facilities to be used by the U.S. Rapid Deployment Forces. In return, Morocco received an American commitment to supply 108 additional M-60 tanks, pilot and commando training against SAM-6s, side-looking airborne radar for reconnaissance, and cluster bombs. Military aid, set at \$30 million during the last year of Carter's term, jumped to a total of \$101 million in fiscal year 1983 and is approximately \$70 million in fiscal '84. Contacts with the Polisario were cut off, but American military personnel continue to visit Moroccan installations in the Western Sahara. Officially, however, Washington takes no stand on the territory's sovereignty and supports OAU and U.N. calls for negotiations.

U.S. aid also contributed to the construction of the three hundred-mile protective wall around the most valuable and populous portion of the territory. The wall—a structure of sandbags, trenches, embankments, and barbed wire—was the brainchild of the late General Dlini, who realized that his army would be hard pressed to control the entire Western Sahara and that most of what gave importance to this region was concentrated within the "useful triangle." The wall is further enforced by radars built by the Westinghouse Corporation with United States financing, intended to detect infiltrators. More recently, Rabat announced that it had completed an extension of the wall running from southern Morocco to the Mauritanian border.

The completion of the walls has made clear that both sides face a protracted military struggle. Despite Polisario claims of incessant shellings, late in 1982 Rabat felt confident enough to resume operations at the Bou Craa mine, closed in 1975 when repeated attacks by the Polisario had made it impossible to transport the ore to port. Today, in the wake of sporadic heavy fighting near the wall, even Polisario supporters admit that the war is stalled. Prior to construction of the wall the Polisario seldom mounted a serious frontal attack against any of the major cities in the Western Sahara; and this new impediment aside, it is unlikely that a few thousand guerrillas would ever conduct a conventional offensive against the eighty thousand-strong Moroccan forces stationed within the "useful triangle." Rabat, on the other hand, cannot hope for victory while its enemy roams about unmolested in a major portion of the territory. Nor can a Moroccan military collapse be totally discounted: Morale among the troops behind the wall is said to be low, and there have been accounts of alcohol and drug abuse in the Western press.

#### THE WAITING GAME

When the Reagan administration sought \$100 million in military aid for Morocco for 1984, congressional opposition was swift in building. In addition to recommending that military allocations be limited to \$50 million, the House Subcommittee on African Affairs advocated proscribing the entry of U.S. military advisors in the Western Sahara except in limited circumstances and requiring that the administration inform Congress of all new military training, sales, and aid deliveries to Morocco. It also called on the U.S. to resume diplomatic contacts with both sides

and to foster peaceful negotiations. These recommendations, the Subcommittee noted, mirrored "its concern, heightened by recent events and a new Committee staff report, that an overreliance on the military component in U.S.-Moroccan relations could damage U.S. interests in Morocco and the region as a whole." The "new Committee staff report" referred to was a House Foreign Affairs staff study which decried Washington's emphasis on military aid to Morocco on the grounds that it created "the misleading impression that the United States might favor a Moroccan military victory over the Polisario, an impression at odds with the stated goals of U.S. policy and with long-held convictions by military experts that such a victory is not attainable." The staff study concluded that U.S. aid to Rabat had strengthened what it perceived as King Hassan's "basic reluctance to embrace an internationally administered referendum of self-determination." Congress eventually succeeded in cutting back the administration's 1984 military aid request to \$67 million, a figure similar to the one being sought by the president for the new fiscal year.

At a time when reduced levels of Saudi Arabian aid should have strengthened Washington's leverage in leading Rabat to the bargaining table, American support for King Hassan II has hardened his determination to continue the war. Morocco's public position on the Western Sahara has traditionally left little room for negotiations. In the past Rabat refused even to negotiate prisoner exchanges with the Polisario for fear that such actions might imply recognition of the insurgents it dismissed as Algerian and Libyan mercenaries. Morocco also insisted that its army remain in the Western Sahara during a referendum. And under Morocco's interpretation of past OAU proposals, voters would not be asked to choose between independence and integration with Morocco but asked merely to confirm or renounce their "allegiance" to the Moroccan Crown.

Given the nomadic nature of much of the Western Saharan population, perhaps the greatest obstacle to implementing a referendum proposal is agreement on the number of eligible voters. While Morocco wishes to limit suffrage to the 74,000 Saharans who were counted in a 1974 Spanish census, the Polisario dispute this figure and insist on including the refugees living at their camps in southwestern Algeria. To Rabat, however, these are mostly non-Saharans, who have fled recent droughts in Mali, Chad, and Mauritania. Publicly, the guerrillas refer to a million Saharawis, although the Algerians have at times spoken of 400,000 inhabitants. Many outside observers believe that 250,000 is a more accurate figure. The matter is further complicated by the influx of nearly 100,000 Moroccans from the north, who have been attracted by Rabat's massive development program.

Morocco's treatment of past OAU proposals for a referendum suggests that Rabat is biding its time in the hope that Algerian backing for the Polisario will eventually cease, and Polisario officials appear content to play a similar waiting game. Polisario officials contend that if King Hassan remains committed to a conflict that presently drains government coffers of \$1.5 million a day, Rabat will eventually bleed its way to the negotiating table. They point to Morocco's recent rescheduling of a portion of its foreign debt and to a ballooning military budget that absorbs 40 per cent of government spending in a nation where only

one out of three adult males is able to find employment. According to the Polisario, chronic rumblings within the Moroccan Army confirm the soundness of their strategy. Reflecting such confidence, the insurgents have occasionally gone so far as to insist that Morocco must recognize their Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic prior to a referendum.

In view of their differences, the mere ratification of an OAU referendum proposal by Rabat and the Polisario in June of '83 was an achievement. It also offered evidence of the organization's desire to remove a deeply divisive issue from its agenda. The price of agreement, however, was ambiguity. With the notable exception of its call for negotiations between "the parties to the conflict, the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front," the OAU proposal did not address the issues that had thwarted previous peace initiatives. Evidently hoping that direct negotiations between the parties would lead to a compromise on the details of a referendum, the OAU proposal remained silent on such roadblocks as the size of the electorate, the wording of the question, and the role of the Moroccan Army during the balloting. Although three months after ratifying the OAU proposal King Hassan once again rejected direct talks with the Polisario, in December the U.N. General Assembly adopted the OAU proposal in its entirety. The overwhelming nature of the vote, despite intensive lobbying by Rabat, indicated Morocco's isolation on the issue.

Pressure on Rabat to adopt a more conciliatory posture may soon follow from other African nations concerned with the looming threat of another deadlock at the already delayed OAU summit later this year. Additional factors may also favor a peace initiative. Although Algerian leaders periodically reaffirm their support for the Polisario, the conflict remains the major obstacle to the Moroccan-Algerian rapprochement initiated last year by Algerian President Chadli Benjedid, eager to concentrate on the pressing internal problems of his suddenly cash-short nation.

Opportunities for compromise do exist. For example, Morocco is known to be willing to negotiate on the wording of the referendum proposal and Algeria reportedly would tolerate a reduced number of Moroccan troops in the Western Sahara while the balloting was taking place. Were Morocco to adopt a flexible posture on other issues, observers believe, Algeria might prevail on the Polisario to accept a reduced Moroccan military presence in the territory alongside an international peacekeeping force.

Despite recent statements in support of a referendum by Secretary of State Shultz and Vice President Bush, it seems unlikely that the Reagan administration will follow the policies of its predecessor and condition military aid on Rabat's willingness to enter into negotiations with the Polisario. U.S. initiatives would, in any event, be tempered by the knowledge that King Hassan, having galvanized Moroccan public opinion behind his quest for the Sahara, can ill afford to appear willing to negotiate away Morocco's historic claims, much less at Washington's behest. On the other hand, without some pressure from the United States, Rabat is unlikely to take steps to implement any referendum proposal in the near future. Whether the Polisario lay down their arms in exchange for votes may well rest with the very nation they hold responsible for the escalation of the war in the Western Sahara. (WV)