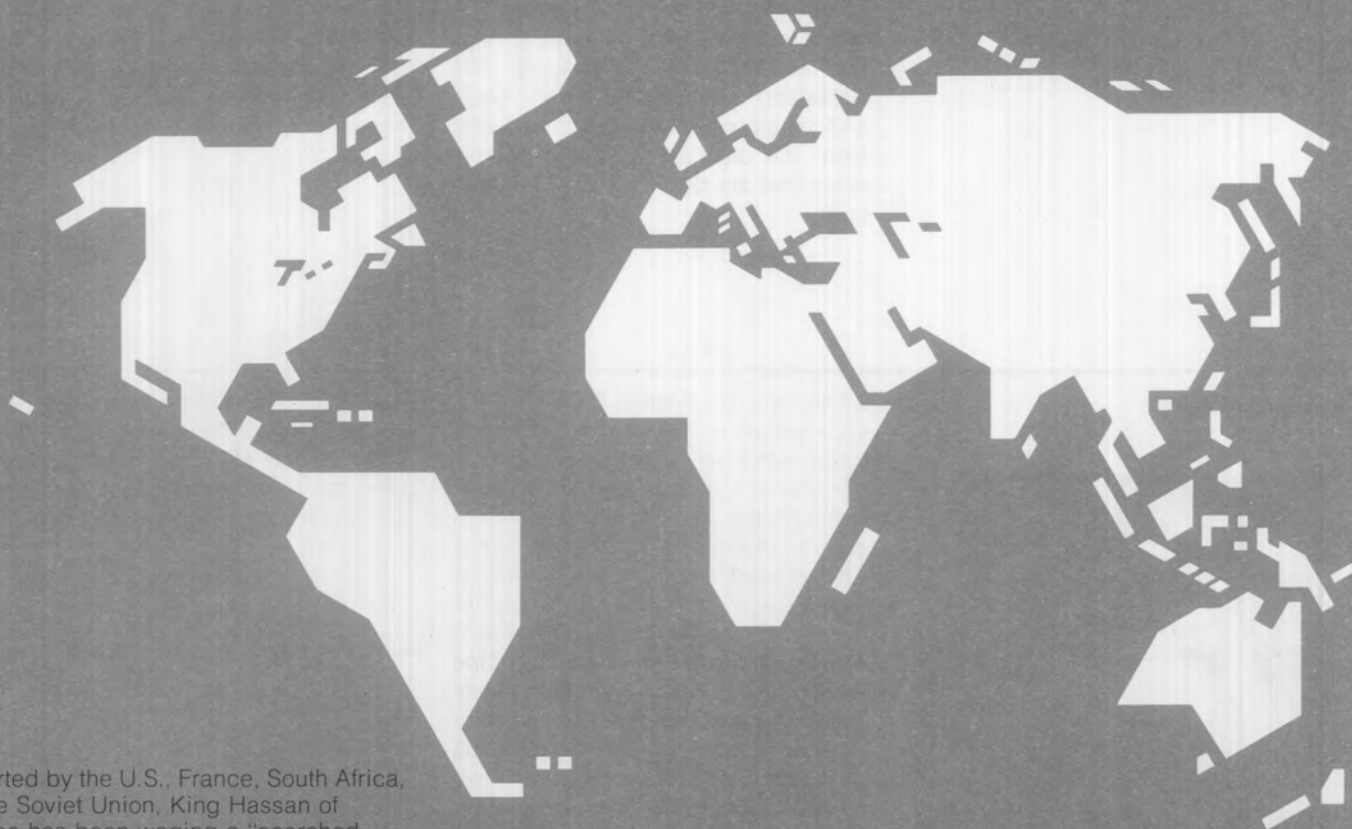


THE STRUGGLE FOR THE WESTERN SAHARA  
Part II: Contemporary Politics

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



Supported by the U.S., France, South Africa, and the Soviet Union, King Hassan of Morocco has been waging a "scorched earth" war against the Polisario Front, representing the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic.

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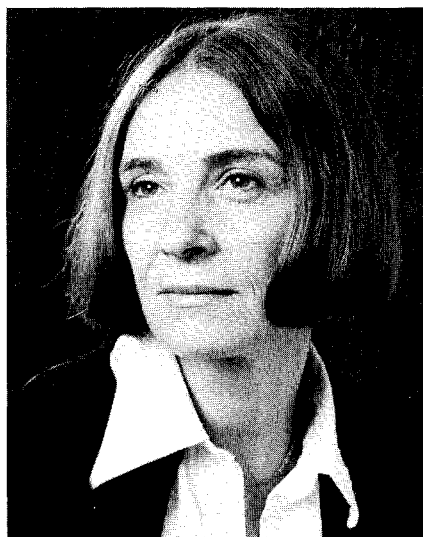
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While other African states were gaining their independence after World War II, Spain resisted pressures to decolonize the Western Sahara. Generalissimo Franco was gradually forced to recognize that the best Spain could do would be to grant political independence under a local regime that would protect Spanish economic interests. What should have remained a procedural negotiation between Spain and the Sahrāwī, however, escalated into a conflict that threatens peace throughout the region. The dispute has created rifts especially among the members of the Organization of African Unity. Moreover, U.S. and European strategic and economic interests, expressed through policies that encourage Moroccan ambitions in the area, have raised the specter of Super Power involvement.

\* \* \* \* \*

The United Nations had never been impressed with Spain's 1958 declaration of the Western Sahara as a province, seeing the *djemaa* merely as a transparent effort by Spain to create a local government made up of persons owing their status to Spain. In 1964 a special UN committee called on Spain to grant independence to the Western Sahara; this was approved in a General Assembly resolution in 1965. In 1966 the General Assembly in Resolution 2229 (XXI) invited Spain to hold a referendum under UN auspices "in conformity with the aspirations of the indigenous people of the Spanish Sahara and in consultation with the governments of Mauritania and Morocco and any other interested party." The resolu-

tion also requested the Secretary General of the United States to "appoint immediately a special mission to be sent to the Spanish Sahara for the purpose of recommending practical steps for the full implementation of the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and in particular for determining the extent of United Nations participation in the preparation and supervision of the referendum."

Thereafter, similar resolutions were passed each year, but Spain took no action. In 1972, the United Nations in General Assembly Resolution 2983 (XXVII) deplored that the "administering power has not provided sufficiently clear information on the conditions and timetable it intends to apply in bringing about the complete decolonization of the territory."

According to legal theorist Thomas Franck, the Western Sahara case was "monumentally mishandled, creating a precedent with potential for mischief out of all proportion to the importance of the territory."<sup>1</sup> The UN's repeated calls for Spain to decolonize masked an "acceleration of efforts by all [these interested] parties to arrange their preferred outcome behind a facade of support for self-determination."

Other international bodies passed similar resolutions. As long ago as the early 1960s the Organization of African Unity (OAU) affirmed the rights of the Sahrāwī people to self-determination. In 1976, two days after the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic was proclaimed, the OAU Council of Ministers passed a resolution that: "Like any other people, the Sahrāwī people have the right to self-determination and independence. It

has effectively exercised this right in creating a sovereign and independent republic." By this time, the Polisario Front had been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Sahrāwī people, first by the OAU, then by the Nonaligned Movement and, in 1975, by the United Nations.

#### Colonial Boundaries or "Historic Ties"?

When the Organization of African Unity was formed in the early 1960s its members made the important decision, enshrined as a principle of the OAU Charter, that the colonial boundaries should be recognized as the basis for defining the new independent states, and that this might be abrogated only by the clear vote of the people concerned. Only Somalia and Morocco dissented.

African leaders recognized the artificiality of these divisions but they feared the chaos they believed would result from any attempt to redraw national boundaries, fears that have amply been borne out in the Biafran secession, which resulted in a long and bloody civil war in Nigeria, and elsewhere. Ironically, King Hassan's government upheld Nigeria's right to maintain its territorial integrity, for it was during the Nigerian civil war that Morocco began again to assert its "historic rights to sovereignty" over the Western Sahara.

The present-day Sahrāwī emerged as a distinct people in the Western Sahara generations ago (see Part I). Moreover, during the nineteenth century when Spain had difficulty subduing the indigenous people, appeals to Morocco for assistance were met with unambiguous denials of its authority over the people.

\*Accent marks for the term Sahrāwī must be applied to this typeface by hand; thus they are used only on page one.

Historian Sir Geoffrey Furlonge confirms this view:

*The Moroccan claim of "historical rights" over either the Spanish Sahara or Mauritania appears to be based solely on an expedition undertaken in the thirteenth century by the greatest of the Saadian Sultans, Ahmad al Mansur, who crossed "Shanqit" to discover, and if possible occupy, the sources of gold and salt which his country had long been obtaining from further south.... His successors, however, seem to have lost interest in the southern regions and evacuated them, since when Morocco has exercised no authority south of the northern limits of Spanish Sahara. In other words, the Moroccan claim is, at best, tenuous.<sup>2</sup>*

Instead, as Sir Geoffrey reminds us, had the people of Mauritania and the Western Sahara wished to counter Morocco's claims, "being of the same basic stock as the Almoravids [they] might therefore claim historic rights over Morocco on the grounds of their ancestors' hundred-year occupation of the country."

A consensus was finally achieved among Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania that the Sahrawi people had the right to self-determination—at least in opposing Spanish colonialism—and each supported the call for a referendum. There was considerable disagreement about the nature of this self-determination, however, and the probable results. Morocco apparently believed that the referendum would produce a favorable vote by the Sahrawi for integration with Morocco.

*All political groups in Morocco expected that self-determination to be expressed through tribal notables would result in a demand to be reunited with the "Motherland," and Hassan had instituted a carefully orchestrated campaign to ensure international support for Morocco's claims. Emissaries from all Moroccan political parties were sent to Middle Eastern and East European states to explain Morocco's case.... An agreement had already been made with Mauritania over the eventual division of the territory, Mauritania's support having been gained after Morocco's claim over Mauritania itself [hitherto*

*considered by the King as part of "greater Morocco"] had been abandoned during a meeting between King Hassan and President Ould Daddah. Algeria, at the time, was quite prepared for the Sahara to be reunited with Morocco, provided that she was satisfied that this mirrored the wishes of the Saharaoui population.<sup>3</sup>*

Algeria never laid claim to any part of the Western Sahara.

Polisario pronouncements in 1973 caused a dramatic change in Morocco's strategy. Instead of a referendum, Morocco proposed to the United Nations that the matter of sovereignty be referred instead to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. Mauritania supported this move and on December 13, 1974, the General Assembly passed a resolution to postpone the referendum it had previously recommended, and to organize a mission to visit the Western Sahara. Spain objected to the intervention of the International Court, but was powerless to resist. It therefore "welcomed" the mission, clearly expecting the report would affirm an arrangement for independence that would protect Spanish interests against the Moroccan threat of annexation.

Even while the members of the UN mission were packing their bags, a new arrangement was being made behind the scenes. When the secret agreement between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania was revealed in October 1974, it destroyed the common, though uneasy, front Algeria and Morocco had presented toward Spain. Algeria had not forgotten that Morocco had, in their 1963 war, "tried to capture the valuable iron ore deposits near Tindouf, close to the frontier between the two countries and would probably have succeeded in doing so had President Nasser of Egypt not sent the Algerians essential military aid in the nick of time."<sup>4</sup> If Morocco were allowed to expand into the Western Sahara, what would prevent a renewal of its claims to the Tindouf region?

#### **The UN Investigative Mission**

The United Nations team which was sent to the Western Sahara was made up of representatives from the Ivory Coast, Cuba, and Iran, and

was charged with gathering information on the political, economic, social, cultural, and educational conditions in the Spanish Sahara. Its most important responsibility, however, was to the wishes and aspirations of the people in relation to the ambitions of Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania.

The mission spent the months of May and June 1974 traveling throughout the Western Sahara. It also visited Sahrawi living as refugees in Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria.

The team came to two important conclusions. First, it found that the Sahrawi were in favor of independence and strongly opposed to the integration of their territory with that of *any* of their neighbors. Second, it concluded that the Polisario Front was the true representative of the political aspirations of the people of the Western Sahara.

Hitherto, the Polisario Front, despite its guerrilla activity since 1973, had been considered little more than a clandestine movement without a significant following. The strength of its support visible in popular demonstrations was as much a surprise to Spain as to the UN mission. As noted in Part I, in order to buy food and water, most of the people belonged to the official party (PUNS), which had organized public demonstrations to welcome the mission in all the towns and cities visited; on each occasion, however, the team was greeted by the Polisario flag rather than the PUNS party banner.<sup>5</sup>

Presentation of the UN mission's report was delayed for more than a year. In the meantime the International Court of Justice had ruled and Morocco, in defiance, began its attempt to occupy the territory with its military forces. When, on November 7, 1975, the mission formally recommended that steps be taken to enable the population to decide its own future in complete freedom and in an atmosphere of peace and security, the Western Sahara had already been invaded.

#### **The International Court of Justice Decision**

The International Court was asked to determine whether or not the Western Sahara had been a

"territory belonging to no one" (*terra nullius*) at the time of its colonization. It was also asked to determine what, if any, legal ties there were between the peoples of the Western Sahara and those of Mauritania and Morocco at the time of colonization.

The first problem was to determine the date of Spanish colonization. Although Spain maintained that there was evidence of its sovereignty from as early as the fifteenth century, the Court fixed on 1884 as the effective date when the region had first become a Spanish colony. The Court then found in favor of the claims of Spain and of the indigenous people—namely, that on evidence of the original treaties signed by Spain with the local chiefs, the region was not *terra nullius* at the time of colonization.

The question of "legal ties" between the Sahrawi people and those indigenous to Mauritania and Morocco prior to 1884 was more complicated. Morocco's claims were based on its assertion that the indigenous people had shown allegiance to the Sultan who had imposed taxes on them, and that the local rulers had derived their authority from the Sultan who had also appointed their local Islamic religious leaders. Common ethnic, cultural, and religious ties were also cited and the military cooperation which had existed between Moroccans and the Sahrawi at the time when French and Spanish troops were fighting to gain control over the area. The separation of the region of the Western Sahara from Morocco was, the latter asserted, a recent event brought on by Spanish and French imperialism.

Spain introduced evidence to contradict Morocco's version of the history of the Western Sahara. According to Spain, none of the nomadic groups within the Western Sahara had ever given allegiance to the Sultan; the only groups acknowledging his rule lived in southern Morocco. As to the religious authority at the time of colonization, this too, Spain maintained, had been completely independent of the Sultan. Spain also pointed to the lack of any evidence that "tribes" in the Western Sahara had ever paid taxes to the Sultan.

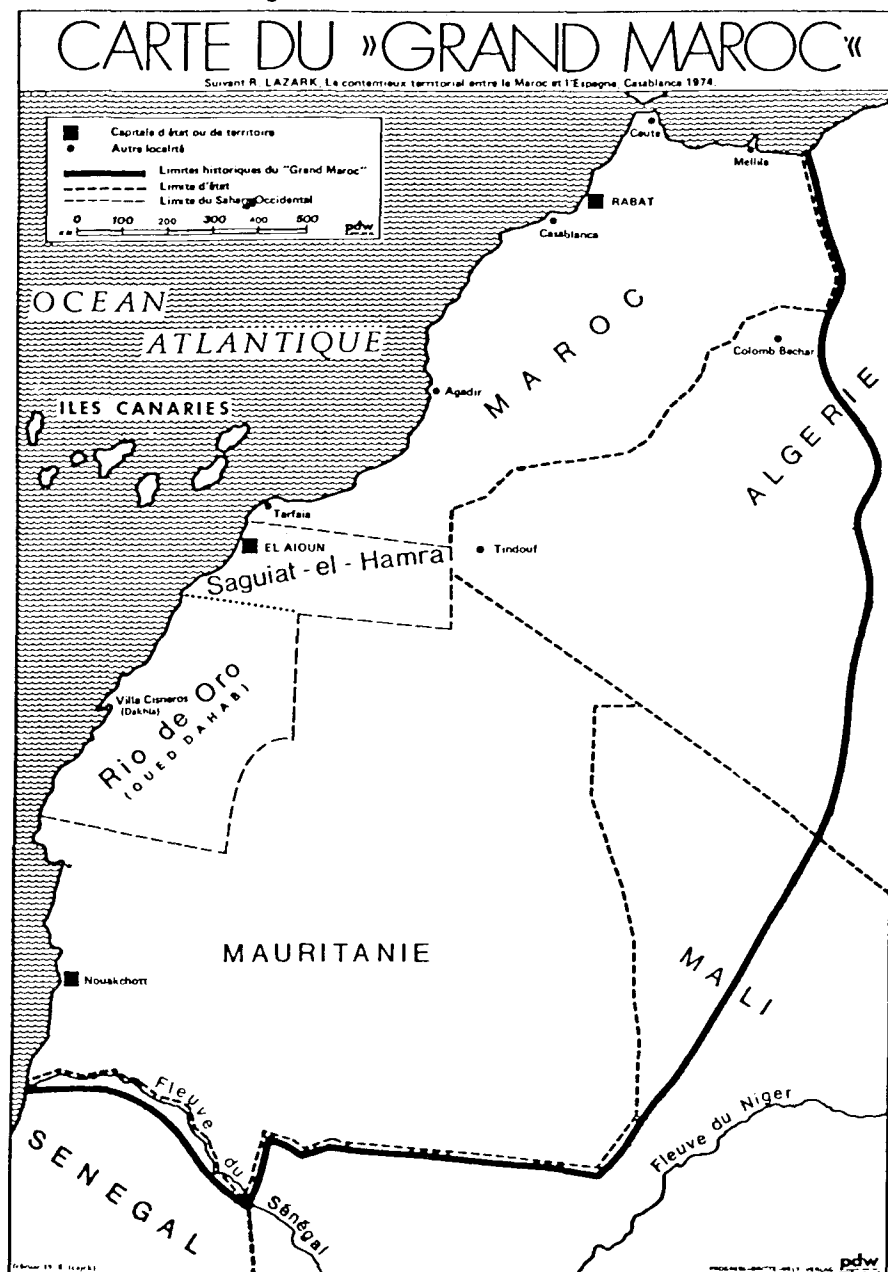
Mauritania's definition of the "entity" over which it claimed sovereignty at the time of colonization included the area from Senegal to Saquiat al-Hamra. Called Shinguitti, it was at the time in question, Mauritania maintained, in the hands of the Emir of Adrar. Mauritania also argued cultural and ethnic ties existed between its population and that of the Western Sahara.

Spain countered by noting the well-established fact that the emirate of Adrar was autonomous, distinct from the emirates in the south of

Shinguitti and separate from the independent nomadic groups in the north and the west. Moreover, said Spain, at the time of colonization, the emirate of Adrar was undergoing grave internal troubles and was, in fact, in a state of anarchy. Spain asserted that there was no proof of ties of allegiance between the "tribes" in the Western Sahara and those of Mauritania or of the emirate of Adrar.

Although Morocco temporarily dropped its concept of Greater Morocco, its territorial claims, as put

King Hassan's View of Greater Morocco



before the International Court of Justice, extended southward and included parts of the Western Sahara that overlapped with Mauritania's claims for its precolonial sovereignty. Since the two countries were collaborating behind the scenes to take over the Western Sahara, at the Court they agreed their sovereign territories met at the point of intersection of the northern area of Saguiet el-Hamra and the southern Rio de Oro, the regions established by Spain. Jointly they maintained that no geographical void, or "no man's land," separated the two parts of the Western Sahara. According to them, their separate claims were precisely defined by these regions which happily met at the administrative boundary created by Spain. The 16 judges of the International Court disagreed, saying that this was a crucial element in the complex situation. To speak of a "north" and a "south" with no overlapping or void between peoples could not, according to this learned body, reflect the true situation.

A further complicating factor noted by the Court was the existence of nomadic groups from the Western Sahara who ranged over an area including parts of present-day Algeria. However, the Algerian delegate to the Court denied any binding association, other than Islam, among the peoples of the Western Sahara and those of adjacent states, including Algeria.

On October 16, 1975, the International Court of Justice gave its ruling. On the question of whether the territory at the time of colonization was *terra nullius*, the ruling was unanimously negative. As to the existence of legal ties between the peoples of the Western Sahara and the Sultan of Morocco, 14 of the 16 judges ruled that some of the tribes did have such ties. Similarly, by a vote of fifteen to one, the Court ruled that such tribes also had ties with people living in the "Mauritanian entity" and that the ties included some rights to land. However, according to the Court, none of these ties constituted a state of territorial sovereignty between the Western Sahara and Morocco or Mauritania. Thus there were no legal ties that might affect the application of Resolution 1514 (XV) in the

Western Sahara and the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the people of the territory.

#### The Green March

After the Court's decision had been announced, Morocco came to what Thomas Franck has described as a "remarkable conclusion...worthy of the perverse Red Queen in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, that the opinion of the Court can only mean one thing: that the so-called Western Sahara was part of the Moroccan territory over which the sovereignty was exercised by the Kings of Morocco and that the population of this territory considered themselves and were considered to be Moroccans.... Today Moroccan demands have been recognized by the legal advisory organ of the United Nations."<sup>6</sup>

On November 4, less than three weeks after the Court's decision had been announced, and despite efforts by Costa Rica, Sweden, and Spain to enforce a Security Council prohibition, 350,000 unarmed civilians carrying *Korans* marched into the Western Sahara to demonstrate their historic territorial rights to the area.

*Projected abroad as a nonviolent "green" or "peace" march, its internal title, massirat fath, was more in keeping with the holy war nationalism by which Hassan brought the Moroccan people behind him in October 1975. To the outside world, the march was presented as a brave crusade to free the Sahrawis from one of the last imperialists, Spain. This was easily enough contrived, given the media's lack of knowledge about "Spanish" Sahara and the unsavory reputation of the Franco regime. The dust of Hassan's 350,000 marching subjects on the coast diverted attention from the entry of the Forces Armées Royales (FAR) across the inland end of the frontier with Western Sahara.*<sup>7</sup>

Within the Security Council there were further consultations, and France and the United States were successful in dissuading those members who were clamoring for a Security Council order to halt the march. On the night of November 5, just as the marchers were crossing the border, an emergency meeting was held and the next day a

watered-down resolution was published "deploring" Morocco's action and asking that it withdraw from the territory and resume negotiations.

Hassan had hoped to impress the world community as well as his own people with a false military victory, pretending that his 350,000 civilians routed the Spanish colonizers and reclaimed their lost territory by marching, unarmed, into the guns of the Spanish military. The truth of the matter was that a secret agreement with Madrid had produced an abrupt order to the Spanish forces in the area to hand over the territory to the advancing Moroccan troops. (Franco was on his deathbed at the time, and the order led to considerable dissension within the Spanish Army.) The real obstacle, however, was the Polisario. Two top Spanish officers, speaking before the Cortes in March 1978, confirmed the UN Mission's conclusions: Polisario represented the Sahrawis in their wish for "total" independence. War began.

#### The Tripartite Agreement

King Hassan's secret arrangements with Spain went further than the military farce in the desert. On November 8 the Spanish minister attached to the Prime Minister's office visited Morocco and on the following day the Green Marchers were ordered to return to Morocco. On November 14, 1975, in a joint communique issued from Madrid, the general terms of the agreement, but not the full text, were announced.<sup>8</sup>

Two-thirds of the territory (above a line from just north of Dakhla to the Zouerate curve) was to be given to Morocco. Mauritania got the short end of the stick: its share was the southern third plus an unknown share of the phosphate resources. The Spanish civilian population in the Western Sahara, shocked by what was happening to them and well aware of what had happened to the civilians in Spanish Guinea, were offered inducements by Madrid to leave the territory.

A timetable for the withdrawal of the Spanish military forces had been agreed upon earlier and a three-power transitional administration was set up, to end February 26, 1976. (In reality, Spain withdrew immediately as Morocco occupied the territory under the guise of the



Green March and control was transferred without delay to Mauritania and Morocco.) The possibility of establishing Spanish military bases at a later date was also included in the negotiations.

Morocco agreed on a "period of tolerance" for the Spanish *presidios*, Ceuta and Melilla, situated on Moroccan territory, and agreed it might help Spain to put pressure on the British *presidio* by withdrawing its labor force from Gibraltar. The agreement gave Spain a 35 percent share in the Bu Craa phosphate mine (see Part I) with a right to take a similar proportion of the output at the current price. Spanish fishing rights in the area were limited to 800 vessels in the annexed waters and 200 vessels in Mauritanian waters. A further boost to the Moroccan fishing industry was agreed on at the time and announced in 1977. This included a \$44 million loan from Spain to buy boats, set up a processing industry, improve its port facilities, and open a training school.<sup>9</sup>

The tripartite agreement recognized the indigenous population only by including a provision that the wishes of the Sahrawi, as represented by the *djemaa*, would be respected. The *djemaa* itself was called upon to ratify the agreement. (While Morocco had previously denounced this assembly as incapable of speaking in the name of the population of the Western Sahara, it now found it convenient to claim that the agreement had been ratified by two-thirds majority of this body. King Hassan had offered the members of the assembly financial inducement for their support and the President, Sheikh Said ould Khatri, is said to have been paid an enormous sum [to which the Spanish also contributed] to insure his backing.)

Evidence indicates that the fateful meeting of the *djemaa* was attended by only one-quarter of its members. Moreover, the Polisario claimed that two-thirds of those present had already proclaimed its dissolution, and had shifted their allegiance to the Polisario.<sup>10</sup>

Reaction within the UN was confused, as reflected in the two Resolutions that followed. The first, 3548 (XXX) A, requested Spain to organize a referendum under UN

auspices to allow for the free expression of the peoples of the Western Sahara. The second, 3458 (XXX) B, took note of the tripartite agreement and requested "the parties to the Madrid agreement on November 14, 1975 to insure respect for the freely expressed aspirations of the Saharan populations." Thus, while the General Assembly appeared to hold Spain responsible for arranging a plebiscite, it also implicitly recognized the tripartite agreement. Since the territory had already been divided between Morocco and Mauritania, "expecting those countries to conduct a free consultation after having occupied their respective sectors," according to Franck, "was like inviting the cat to consult the canaries."

Twenty-nine of the forty African states voted in favor of the first resolution, eleven abstained. Only 12 African nations voted in favor of the second, 21 opposed, and 8 abstained. The vote of the United States is significant: it abstained from voting in the first resolution and voted in favor of the second which failed to censure the illegal occupation. In 1976 the UN postponed further consideration of the conflict in the Western Sahara while welcoming OAU attempts to solve the problem.

#### Internationalization of the Conflict

Since 1973, the Polisario Front had been carrying out guerrilla raids against the Spanish, whose control was already limited to towns and phosphate installations. The guerrillas were armed mainly with weapons captured from the Spanish Army, although a certain amount of aid had been obtained from Libya.<sup>11</sup>

When Moroccan troops replaced Spanish, under the cover of the Green March, they became the principal target of Polisario attacks.

During the first confrontations, the Polisario was heavily outnumbered by the U.S.- and French-equipped Moroccan Army with its jet fighters, airlifted troops, and artillery. Mauritania joined in the war in December 1975, after its own military capacity had been strengthened by arms received from France. From the beginning of the war, however, Mauritania was forced to rely heavily on Moroccan support be-

cause of the inability and unwillingness of its own army to engage the Polisario.

Dismissed as a "minor policing operation" by King Hassan and Ould Daddah (Mauritania's head of state), the early days of the war brought terrible sufferings to the civilians as military operations were directed against them rather than the elusive Polisario guerrilla forces. Morocco remembered the lessons of history: the only way any foreign power had gained control over the Western Sahara was by applying a scorched earth policy. The besieged towns were encircled with barbed wire and armed police, but some 100,000 women and children escaped without food or water into the inhospitable desert, the first of tens of thousands of refugees.

Ill-equipped to cope with the disaster, the Polisario was forced to turn its attention to the protection of the civilian population. Temporary refugee camps were set up in the interior, but none was safe from attack. By early 1976, a number of international groups were referring to the war as one of genocide, as napalm bombs were dropped from French Jaguars against civilians who had fled to camps at Tifariti and Bir Lahlou. Other camps were subjected to rocket bombardment and heavy machine-gun fire. Civilians were fleeing from all corners of the country. Many who escaped the gunfire died of thirst, hunger, or cold or fell victim to landmines and poisoned wells. Others were simply lost in the desert. Describing the situation the Polisario faced, one veteran of the period said: "We had to look for civilians. We found them behind rocks, hiding under trees, without protection. A combatant would gladly have given a woman or a child or an old man his coat, but he had no coat of his own to give."<sup>12</sup>

In February 1976 the International Federation of Human Rights, only one of many such groups to visit the scene, reported that:

*The invasion has been accomplished by innumerable exactions on persons of all ages and conditions...the soldiers of the two occupying countries have butchered (égorgé) hundreds and perhaps thousands of Sahrawis, including children and old people who refused*



*Combatants around a fire in the Polisario-occupied zone.*

*to publicly acknowledge the King of Morocco...some have seen their children killed in front of them by way of intimidation...women described to us how they have been tortured...and how soldiers had cut off young men's fingers to make them unable to fight...80 percent of the inhabitants of El Aioun have left...defenseless refugee camps have been bombed.*<sup>13</sup>

Algeria's attitude toward Morocco had altered after details of the tripartite agreement had been leaked in 1974, but it was the scale of the atrocities against civilians that prompted Algeria to action. The government offered the Polisario refuge inside Algerian borders and allowed it also to establish camps for Sahrawi civilians.

After initial defeats by the Moroccan and Mauritanian Armies, but with new Algerian cooperation, the Polisario changed strategy, establishing its main headquarters near Tindouf. Although the Moroccans had occupied all settlements and outposts, the Polisario was able, through lightning strikes by a highly mobile force using all-terrain vehicles armed with machine guns, recoil-less rifles, rocket launchers, and anti-aircraft guns, to successfully attack economically vital targets.

From the outset, these attacks affected wider international interests as well. The multinational-owned

phosphate mine at Bu Craa, connected to the port near El Aaiun by the 96-kilometer conveyor belt, was an obvious and fairly easy target. It had been under siege in 1975, but the belt had been spared when it appeared that Spain was genuinely backing a referendum. Now, with the war in full swing, it was destroyed; the mine was finally closed in June 1977.

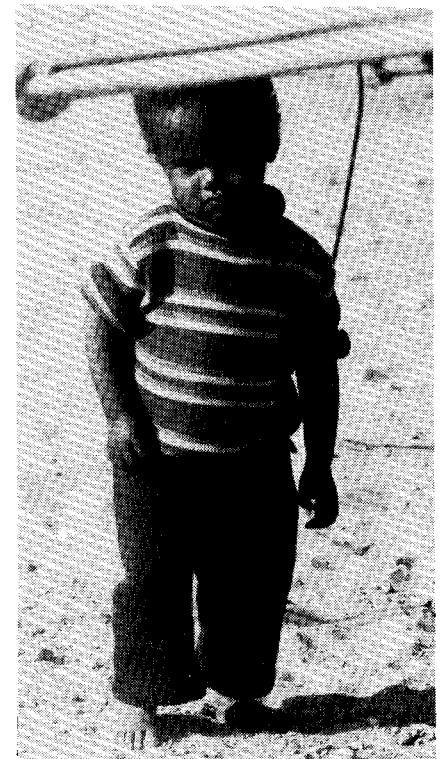
The Polisario then concentrated on its weaker southern enemy, Mauritania, where many people supported the Sahrawi cause. In June 1976 a raid against Nouakchott demonstrated the Polisario's ability to operate as far as 2,000 kilometers from its bases. (The U.S. Embassy in Nouakchott was also hit by shells.) More successes followed. In May 1977, Zouerate, the site of the French-controlled iron ore mine, came under attack: two French technicians were killed and six others taken captive. The railway line connecting the iron ore mine with the coast was also cut by repeated attacks. Attacks on Spanish fishing vessels led to withdrawal of the fleet in December 1977.

The result of success was to widen the war. Whereas France had publicly asserted its neutrality during the first two years, while

supplying arms to Morocco and Mauritania, attacks on Zouerate threatened Mauritania's tottering economy and reduced France's iron ore supply. The taking of French hostages was the last straw: France withdrew French technicians (who had been unofficially servicing military equipment) from Zouerate and openly entered the war.

By November 1977 France had made a complete aerial survey of the desert and paratroopers were moved into Senegal and Mauritania. On December 2 the French made an air attack on a Polisario outpost inside Mauritania. Although their excuse for entering the war—the French hostages—was removed when the Polisario released them, France continued both the air attacks and the build-up of forces in Senegal and Mauritania. Civilian vacancies at the Zouerate mines were filled by military personnel and the war was directed by French officers. The French Navy patrolled the waters of the Mauritanian zone of the Western Sahara.

Ivory Coast was also drawn into the conflict. In a visit to Abidjan,



*A Sahrawi boy watches visitors at the Tindouf refugee camp.*



President Giscard d'Estaing secured President Houphouët-Boigny's support for Morocco and his approval of French intervention against the Polisario.<sup>14</sup> Giscard d'Estaing was now able to state openly that France would continue to support Mauritania indefinitely, and President Ould Daddah announced that he did not "know if French military presence [in Mauritania] should be counted in months or years."<sup>15</sup>

Very early in the conflict the myth had been created that the war in the Western Sahara had been initiated by Algeria and that the Polisario were actually Algerian mercenaries. According to this version, the refugees in the camps near Tindouf were simply Tuareg nomads who had fled the Sahelian drought, many of whom had been forced into the Algerian army. In 1977, Morocco, blaming Algeria for the heightening tension in the Western Sahara and claiming that the Polisario was Algeria's invention, cabled the UN Security Council, demanding that Algerian activities be restrained since the people of the Sahara had already been given the opportunity to express freely their desire to join their motherland under the Madrid agreement.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, public evidence of Algeria's direct participation on only two occasions. Once, when its army was assisting the Polisario in evacuating refugees from the Western Sahara into the relative safety of the camps inside Algeria, "an army unit supplying Polisario was surprised at Amgala and badly damaged by the Moroccans, Boumedienne's forces retaliating soon after by routing a detachment of Hassan's troops at the same post." Morocco then tried to intimidate Algeria by threatening a full war between the two countries.<sup>7</sup>

### Mauritania's Defeat

The presence of more than 10,000 Moroccan troops in Mauritania increased suspicion there about Rabat's long-term intentions. Clashes between the two armies produced many deaths on both sides. Early in 1978, Ould Daddah visited Kaddafi in Libya, creating more tensions in his relationship with King Hassan, as it was known that arms and support had been coming to the Polisario from Libya through Algeria.

Ould Daddah had never had an easy time ruling Mauritania after it gained its independence in 1960. His one-party state was fiercely criticized by those who saw their independence as merely symbolic since the French continued effectively to control the economy. Daddah was forced eventually to make concessions which strained his relationship with France. In 1973 he withdrew from the franc zone and nationalized the iron ore mine that produced 80 percent of Mauritania's export earnings.

Morocco's expansionist threats against Mauritania were another source of anxiety, Morocco having originally refused even to recognize that country's independence, maintaining that the territory belonged to "greater Morocco." These fears had been partly removed by Morocco's recognition, in 1969, of Mauritanian sovereignty, but Daddah had hoped that his cooperation in the Madrid agreement would put the final touches to the Moroccan-Mauritanian détente.

In 1969, the Sahelian drought had begun, bringing catastrophic economic difficulties for the nomads and peasant farmers. Many migrated to urban centers in search of food and employment and, as a result, Nouakchott and other towns grew by 300 percent almost overnight. The fall in iron ore prices had decreased export earnings, and the closure of the mines, together with the costs of the war, were a final straw for the beleaguered economy.

By July 1978 Mauritania's external debt had reached \$750 million. Not only was Daddah's war with the Polisario an economic drain, it was politically and militarily unwinnable. As a result of internal pressures, the army took control on July 10, 1978, and Daddah fled to Paris.<sup>18</sup> Two days after this coup, the Polisario announced a cease-fire with Mauritania.

Morocco's immediate reaction to Mauritania's withdrawal was to claim the whole of the Western Sahara. Troops were moved into Dakhla (the population of which had shrunk to 5,000, most of its 15,000 citizens having fled), and in March 1980, in a bizarre attempt to demonstrate his power, King Hassan personally visited the town to

declare it the capital of a new Moroccan province. *New York Times* journalist James Markham describes the scene:

*Early this March, amid great military secrecy, 2,000 catered meals from the five-star Mamounia Hotel in Marrakesh, Morocco, were airlifted to the sun-scorched Sahara and laid out under brown tents. A dozen thoroughbred horses and an antique French carriage—to bear Morocco's King Hassan II in the unlikely event of rain in the desert—were also quietly flown in on C-130H transports to Dakhla, an obscure town on a spit of land by the sea. The King of Morocco then packed his top aides, prime minister, cabinet members and key military men into two Boeing 727s, which made the two-hour flight from Marrakesh to tiny Dakhla.... The monarch's French pilots deftly landed his 747 jumbo jet on the short airstrip, where a military honor guard snapped to attention as the 50-year-old Commander of the Faithful emerged in a natty yellow suit and sunglasses. As the King's security is a matter of obsessive concern, none of the soldiers in Dakhla had ammunition clips in the M-16 assault rifles. Hassan pinned green medals on a number of officers, and brass plaques were unveiled naming Dakhla streets after him and his dead father, Mohammed V. Later, enveloped in traditional white robes and shielded from the bright sun by a purple parasol held aloft by a trudging retainer, Hassan rode an imported stallion through Dakhla, which has a population of possibly 5,000, and gestured to several hundred dutifully cheering men and tattooed, ululating women.<sup>19</sup>*

King Hassan has not forgotten Mauritania's "betrayal," and continues to threaten its stability. On March 16, 1981, a small group of pro-Moroccan Mauritanian officers living in exile in Senegal moved into Mauritania in an attempt to seize power. The assault was timed to coincide with a meeting of the ruling Military Committee of National Salvation, but this had been canceled and MCNS head Heydalla was away in the north at the time, inspecting defensive positions against other possible Moroccan attacks. At least a dozen people were killed before the coup attempt

was thwarted. At least three of those who survived were executed.

The coup attempt sharpened regional alignments. Mauritania broke off diplomatic relations with Morocco and is unlikely to remain neutral in Hassan's war in the Western Sahara. Although Mauritania has received military support from Algeria since the attempted coup, its need for such aid has increased in the face of Moroccan threats to pursue Polisario guerrillas into its territory.

Morocco, always concerned about her relations with France, had consulted with Giscard d'Estaing before arranging this abortive coup. It is unlikely that Morocco will be able to count on such support from France in the future: the pronouncements of the new socialist government under Mitterrand suggest some changes in foreign policy in Africa.

#### Other African Involvement

When the OAU met in Freetown in July 1980, it was confronted with several urgent problems. Its earlier failure to resolve these issues had, for most observers, emphasized its impotence to assume responsible leadership in world affairs. There was the continuing conflict in Chad, the recent invasion of Angola by South Africa, and the question of recognition of the Doe regime in Liberia which had been responsible for the assassination of President Tolbert, then OAU chairman. Still, the single issue posing the most immediate threat to OAU unity, if not its very survival, was the application for membership from the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), represented by the Polisario Front. (In 1979 the UN had passed another resolution welcoming the peace agreement between Mauritania and the Polisario Front, deploring Morocco's occupation of the territory from which Mauritania had withdrawn, and urging Morocco to join in the peace process. On the diplomatic front, the next step was OAU membership.)

In his speech to the OAU summit, President Machel of Mozambique did not mince words in his condemnation of Morocco.

*...colonialism has no color. Colonialism has no race. Colonialism has no people. A parasite is a parasite*

*and feeds on blood. Colonialism is a crime against humanity. Colonialism is a crime against life. Colonialism is a cancer which feeds on blood and human life. It is human beings that are being slaughtered in Western Sahara. We know what war means. War feeds on the blood of children, men, women, the elderly. And we have a member of our organization who practices genocide...if we cannot tolerate colonialism practiced by countries from outside the African continent, neither can we accept that an African country becomes a colonialist...there can be no unity between us and colonialism. Our duty is to welcome the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic into our organization and give it here the place that belongs to it by right. We appeal once more to Morocco, which is heir to glorious anticolonial traditions, to act in conformity with the UN and OAU charters and to recognize the independence of the Saharan people....*<sup>20</sup>

The rules for membership in the OAU require an application to be supported by the recognition of a simple majority of members. By July 1980 the SADR had been recognized by 26 (of 50) African states and by 19 other countries. Voting at the OAU meeting *should* have been a mere formality, but Morocco's threat to withdraw was sufficient to cause a retreat. The OAU "put in abeyance" the question of the SADR's admission; in the meantime, an ad hoc committee was to meet in Freetown within three months to "try to reconcile the parties and seek a lasting solution."<sup>21</sup>

In September 1980 a "mini" OAU summit was held in Freetown,

chaired by President Siaka Stevens, whose country was among those that had recognized the SADR. The plan drawn up there called for a cease-fire, and a fair and general referendum organized by the OAU with assistance from the UN.

Morocco rejected the recommended cease-fire and the referendum and opposed further United Nations involvement; its experiences with the other OAU member states, particularly in July, suggested that if the dispute were confined to the OAU, it would be able to muster greater support for its own solution. Its confidence must have been badly shaken a month later when the 35th Session of the UN General Assembly passed yet another resolution calling on Morocco to withdraw and to negotiate directly with the Polisario. Eighty-eight nations voted in favor and only eight against.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of unity among OAU members over the membership request of SADR must be understood in light of the internal and external pressures faced by some African states. A few examples illustrate just how economically dependent African nations are on Western nations, mainly their former colonial rulers, in shaping foreign policy.

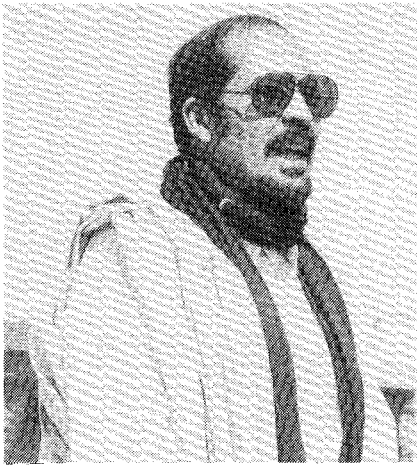
Ever since independence President Senghor of Senegal has relied heavily on French support for his fragile economy. Moreover, even before the war over the Western Sahara, he maintained a constant French military presence in order to discourage his opposition which despises the French economic interests and has, more recently, expressed support for the Sahrawi.

#### DIPLOMATIC RECOGNITION FOR SADR

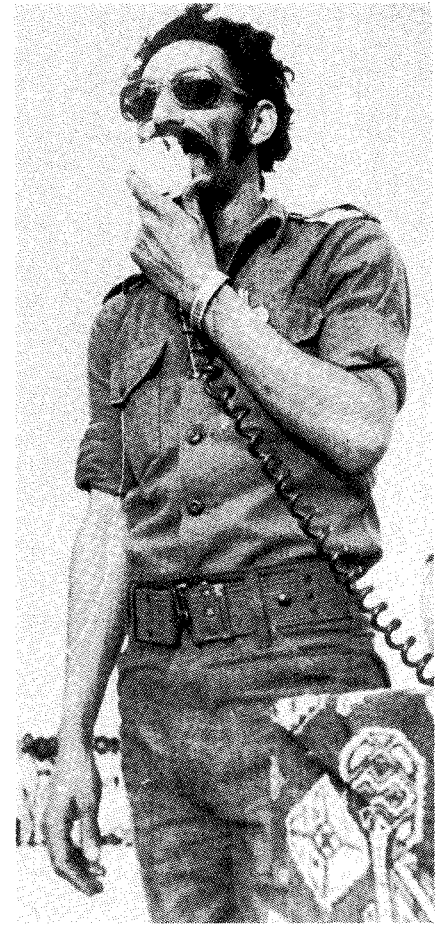
- 1976: Madagascar, Burundi, Algeria, Benin, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Korea (PDRK), Togo, Rwanda
- 1977: Yemen (PDY), Seychelles
- 1978: Congo (PR), São Tomé and Príncipe, Panama, Equatorial Guinea, Tanzania
- 1979: Ethiopia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Afghanistan, Cape Verde, Grenada, Ghana, Guyana, Dominica, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Uganda, Nicaragua, Mexico, Lesotho, Zambia
- 1980: Cuba, Iran, Sierra Leone, Syria, Libya, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Chad, Mali, Costa Rica, Vanuatu (New Hebrides)



Above: Mohamed Lamine Ahmed, Revolution Council member and President of the Council of Ministers. Below: Brahim Ghali, Command Council member and Defense Minister.



Polisario leadership of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (counterclockwise from top): Mohamed Abdelaziz, General Secretary and President of the Command Council, with the President of the Popular Republic of Benin; Omar Hadrami, Executive Committee and Command Council Member; Brahim Hakin, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Mohamed Salem Saleck, Information Minister and PF Political Bureau member.



Senghor demonstrated his pragmatism by condemning U.S. and European military intervention in Africa while watching French jets take off from their Dakar base on their way to bomb the Polisario.

While expressing support for Hassan's claims over a "greater Morocco," he had reasons for fearing the presence of Moroccan troops on Senegal's river border with Mauritania. Anticipating the latter's ultimate collapse, Senghor even considered a division of Mauritania between himself and Morocco. He pointed to the ethnic divisions of Mauritania and the logic of the ethnically and culturally related southern black populations joining with Senegal. He even accused Mauritania of discriminating against blacks.<sup>23</sup>

Senghor's consistent support for Morocco's claims to the Western Sahara has made him continually fearful of attack from the Polisario and necessitated stationing troops along the borders of Senegal with Mauritania and Mali, a burdensome expense for his troubled economy.

Senegal's dependence on French and, more recently U.S., aid has insured Senghor's accord with the policies of these countries on a wide number of international issues. As might be expected, Senegal's Arab relations are with so-called moderate states; Algeria and especially Libya are regarded as threats. Before his retirement, Senghor's fears of his own conservative Muslim opposition led him to denounce what he called Libya's destabilizing activities in Senegal and to cut diplomatic ties with that country. (Since his retirement there is some evidence that Senegal's policy may be shifting.)

Tensions generated by the conflict in the Western Sahara have also spilled over into Mali. As noted earlier, Morocco's delineation of "greater Morocco" includes sections of the northern Mali desert. Initially President Traoré of Mali supported the division of the Western Sahara as arranged in Madrid because he hoped it would keep Hassan out of Mauritania and thus away from his own long frontier. Algeria's influence on Mali subsequently swung Malian support toward the Polisario. Polisario bases

were set up in Mali and before 1979 battles between the Polisario and Mauritanian forces were fought there.

Mali's status is no less vulnerable than Senegal's. Traoré's coup against Modibo Keita, in 1968, replaced an anti-French radical government with the present "moderate," "interim" military regime. Impoverished, drought-ridden Mali accepts aid from virtually any source: China, U.S.S.R., North Korea, Cuba, U.S., Arab conservatives. Uranium discoveries in 1978 brought Japanese and French investment. The U.S. is prospecting for oil there, the U.S.S.R. for gold. Its military is small, consisting of 4,000 men, several light tanks and MIG planes. French aid increased following a visit from Giscard d'Estaing in 1977, which caused Mali again to turn toward Morocco. But the objectives of the Polisario are widely supported by the people.

When Mali became independent in 1960 the nomads of Mali's Adrar des Iforas attempted to persuade the Algerians to take over their region, and recent drought victims have often preferred to seek aid from neighboring states rather than from Mali. In 1962-63, there was an uprising in Adrar des Iforas and 15 years later, just after Giscard d'Estaing's visit with his promise of increased aid, 5 imprisoned leaders were executed. This action may have been related to Polisario's threat to retaliate against Mali's reversal of policy by rearming the northern nomad dissidents. It was only on the very eve of the OAU summit on July 4, 1980, that Mali again reversed its policy and recognized the SADR.

Niger, another French-dominated economy, has only recently taken a more independent stance by inviting countries besides France to exploit its uranium wealth. Like Mali, Niger's leaders are keenly aware that many nomads within their borders want an ethnically unified state in the western desert. Ould Daddah had tried to convince Senegal, Mali, and Niger that the Polisario was an invention of Algeria as part of a wider scheme to promote that objective and bring about their combined downfall. As a result, Niger has sidestepped recognition of the SADR.

Togo also has economic ties to France and Morocco which directly affect its policy toward the Western Sahara. Phosphate is the chief source of export earnings of this small country. When the Togolese government recognized the SADR in 1976, Morocco immediately withdrew its financial and technical assistance in the phosphate industry. In addition, Morocco banned all exports to Togo.

That Libya has given support to the Polisario has been a further source of division and confusion among African states. Libya's close ties with the Soviet Union, its "Greenbook" Islamic socialism, Kaddafi's willingness to give refuge to such diverse personalities as "Emperor" Bokassa (Central African Republic), Idi Amin (Uganda), and Ahmet Niasse (Senegal) and the recent involvement of Libyan military forces in Chad have raised doubts among African leaders about Libya's motives in black Africa. Moreover, Kaddafi's support for South African groups opposing apartheid has not been enthusiastic.

Since there is no critical press within Libya, information about this country and the intentions of its leader are based largely upon Western news sources that emphasize Kaddafi's avowed aim to create a radical Islamic bloc in black Africa under Libyan aegis. This has led more than one African state to fear influence extended through Libyan aid. On the other hand, some African leaders have used the "Kaddafi bogey" as an excuse to repress internal dissidents.

For the Polisario, Libya is only one source of arms and support. In fact, before the peace treaty with Mauritania, relations between Libya and the Polisario were strained; Libya greatly reduced its contributions because the Polisario had attacked and damaged Libyan-funded development projects in Mauritania.

Libyan support is, nevertheless, a very sensitive matter for the Polisario and their representatives are careful to draw attention to other sources of aid. More recently, however, the U.S. government's unequivocal support for Morocco may have pushed the Polisario to lean more heavily on Libya.

### "THE KADDAFI BOGEY"

President of Senegal Leopold Senghor, before his retirement, seized on fear of Libyan intervention to crack down on Muslim groups who opposed his government although there was little or no evidence to suggest connections with Libya. (Ahmet Niasse, son of an influential Muslim leader, went to Libya where he made many radical pronouncements, only after he attempted to assume his deceased father's role, but was not taken seriously in Senegal.) This convenient scapegoat was also employed in the Gambia to justify the arrest of a small number of people who had been outspoken in their criticism of blatant government corruption and mismanagement. These arrests coincided with the arrival of Senegalese troops who came to patrol the streets of Banjul, emphasizing the precarious independence of this small country. (The logic of its separate existence as a state has been questioned since the early days of colonial expansion.)

The campaign by the Ghanaian government to discredit the June 4 revolution and, in particular, to raise suspicions over the ambitions of Jerry Rawlings, chairman of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, also exploited possible ties between Rawlings and Kaddafi after the Ghanaian visited Libya in summer 1980; rumors spread through government (and diplomatic) circles in Accra implying that Rawlings would not return until he had arranged for Libyan financing of another coup. During the first week of December 1980 the Ghanaian press reported anti-Libyan demonstrations in Niamey and raised local fears by claiming that a "Niger Brigade of the Sahel Army" had been formed in Libya and was

preparing for an expansion of the "Libyan zone of influence in Africa." Ghana, Gabon, Senegal, and the Gambia have all broken diplomatic ties with Libya alleging interference in their internal affairs.<sup>1</sup>

Nigeria, alarmed over signs of Libyan activities on its frontier, nearly took similar action in 1980, after two Libyan aircraft landed at Maiduguri, the pilots explaining that they had run out of fuel while searching for a third plane which had been lost in the desert.

Libya has been accused of enlisting Nigerians as mercenaries to fight in Chad,<sup>2</sup> and Kaddafi has criticized Nigeria along with Mali for having ill-treated its Tuareg-Arab refugees, subjecting them to "undignified labor." He called on Nigeria to repatriate them all to Libya where they would be welcomed as fellow Arab citizens. Nigeria even suggested that Kaddafi may have had a hand in the Kano riots in December 1980.<sup>3</sup>

While the movement of Libyan troops into Chad at the invitation of the leader of one side of this long and bitter civil war has greatly increased alarms over Kaddafi, some have used this fear to advantage: it was only necessary for Sergeant Doe to threaten to visit Libya to bring more American aid to Liberia's rescue.<sup>4</sup>

Another perspective on the Libyan "bogeyman" was given by Dr. Yusufu Bala Usman, a leading Nigerian intellectual and adviser to the governor of Kaduna State in an open letter to the Nigerian government which appeared in *West Africa*. He pointed to the advantages to Western (particularly France's)

interests of exaggerating the Libyan threat and reminded readers of the large number of French troops present in various African countries and how these military ties were connected with economic interests. He recalled how Bokassa had been removed by French paratroopers and suggested that the increased French military presence in the Central African Republic, far from protecting the country from Libya, might have been a convenient way of influencing local elections. Nigeria's leaders, he cautioned, should be wary of the "chauvinistic and racist propaganda" of the Western media which distorted Libya's intentions and which were being used to bring Nigeria to the "brink of war," in the meantime encouraging them to expend money on arms to protect the country against an imagined threat of Libyan invasion. By so doing, he asserted, Nigeria would find itself defending "French imperialist interests in Central Africa and serv[ing] NATO's current global strategy." Referring to the recent visit of Lord Carrington and some British businessmen to Nigeria, he reminded them that "The arms salesmen and commission agents are already on the move."<sup>5</sup>

Libya also exports crude oil to France and is the third largest supplier to the U.S., providing 11 percent of its consumption.<sup>6</sup> On May 6, 1981, the U.S. ordered the Libyan diplomatic corps out of the country, technically stopping just short of a total break in diplomatic relations. In reply Libya denied that it had any expansionist aims in Africa or that it was, as had been claimed, a "potential staging area for the Soviet Union."<sup>7</sup>

1. *Daily Times* (Nigeria), December 1, 1980; *Daily Graphic* (Nigeria), December 1980.

2. *Daily Times*, November 27 and December 1, 1980.

3. *West Africa*, January 12, 1981.

4. *Guardian*, December 2, 1980; *West Africa*, December 8, 1980.

5. *West Africa*, March 7, 1981.

6. *Guardian*, May 7, 1981.

7. *Guardian*, May 16, 1981. Also see *West Africa*, June 1, 1981 for President Siaka Stevens' comments on Kaddafi.



Morocco, more and more isolated internationally, has recently launched an intense diplomatic campaign to raise fears of the Libyan menace, sending special emissaries to 90 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. One of King Hassan's top aides recently paid a personal call on Margaret Thatcher: the dossier he presented alleges that Libya has built secret air bases in Chad, Mali, and Mauritania from which it supplies the Polisario and it draws attention to Libya's increased Soviet backing (overlooking the fact that some of Morocco's own military aid comes directly from the Soviet Union). In a recent press conference in London, Mr. Mohammad Ould Sidati, a senior Polisario representative, challenged Moroccan claims and referred to Hassan's campaign against Kaddafi as "a diplomatic waltz danced to the rhythm of intransigence and deception."

#### **The Religious Factor**

Islam profoundly affects politics in Africa to a degree that has never been properly appreciated by Western policymakers. For centuries, Morocco has been the seat of religious authority for northwest Africa, King Hassan claiming direct descent from the Prophet. Many Moroccan Muslims are members of the Tijaniya sect; the founder, an Algerian, was educated in Morocco. Most West African Muslims belong to this sect, but there are many other orthodoxies in Morocco as elsewhere in West Africa.

Morocco is seen by the West as one of the moderate Islamic states, whereas the Sahrawi brand of Islam may be more radical because of the Polisario's association with Libya, where most of the people are followers of the Idrisia sect. Within Morocco, moreover, over the past two years several non-Tijaniya have attacked Hassan's divine right to rule. Fundamentalists in Morocco have attacked the King's hypocrisy, reproaching him for his ostentatious life in his ten palaces while the country suffers economic hardship caused by the war. In 1980 there was a wave of arrests in Morocco after the discovery that Moroccans were among those captured in the aftermath of the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

The Muslim Brotherhood is also active in Morocco. Originating in

Egypt, the Brotherhood began as a religious and moral reformist organization. Some of its missionaries now sanction the imposition of an Islamic state through violence where necessary. Muslim Brotherhood influence now extends into many parts of West Africa, and rumors abound alleging support for it from Saudi Arabia or Iran.

The political situation is thus complicated by competition among the differing orthodoxies, and it is this that sometimes explains otherwise inexplicable alliances. Nigeria, for example, has recognized the Polisario, but it was not among the 26 African states to recognize the SADR. Many Nigerians say that President Shagari's support for the Polisario has been diluted by the Islamic factor. Shagari comes from Sokoto, an important seat of Islamic power with direct links with the religious establishment in Morocco and it is felt that unless the people from the south of Nigeria bring more pressure to bear, his support for the SADR may never go beyond rhetoric. Moreover, it is said that Nigeria is still under obligation to Morocco for its support during the Biafran war.

#### **U.S./France/South Africa Connections**

In his report to the U.S. Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1979, Representative Stephen Solarz argued that U.S. military support to Morocco "is compatible neither with our ideals nor our interests." Earlier, Thomas Franck, an international lawyer, had pointed out that U.S. support of Morocco's

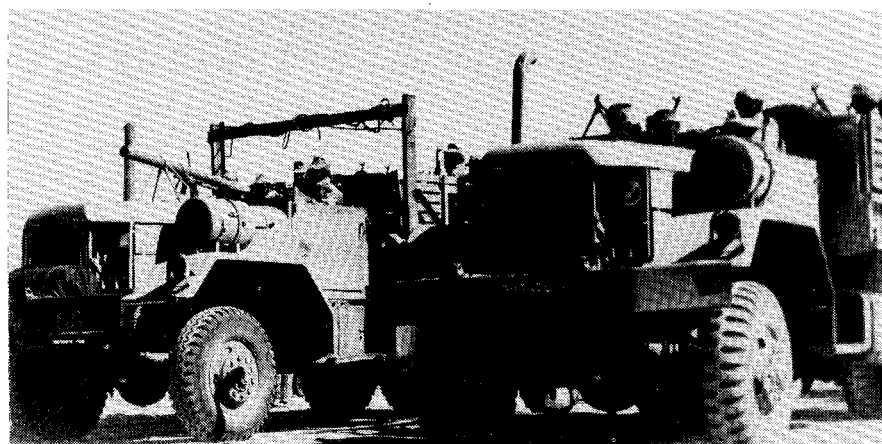
expansionism was a blatant contradiction of its principles, warning the American government of the grave consequences of their actions. As he said, it may be argued that this policy is one of political expediency, but concern for winning is inevitably taking priority over concern for the rule of law.<sup>24</sup>

Ironically, U.S. and French arms have been used by both sides in the Western Sahara, the Polisario having captured arms from its enemy. As one combatant said as I was being shown some of the captured arms, "The Front is especially pleased with the performance of the GMC trucks for desert warfare." I saw a great many GMC trucks around the refugee camps.

As early as 1977 Polisario seizures of arms and ammunition revealed that among Morocco's active friends was South Africa. Photographs and statements by captured Moroccan officers testify to the presence of



*GMC trucks and U.S.-made mortar rounds captured by the Polisario.*





South African military advisers and technicians in Morocco. There is evidence to suggest wider complicity: in 1979, for example, when Rabat placed an urgent order with France, armed AML-90MM troop carriers, manufactured under French license in South Africa, arrived in Morocco.

The growing public opinion in the U.S. against Morocco, fueled by evidence of cooperation between South Africa, the U.S., and France, resulted in 1978 in a freeze on arms sales to Morocco. Hassan was outraged, threatening to withdraw support for President Sadat's détente with Israel. Subsequently, in acknowledging that Morocco was violating American law by employing U.S. weapons in the Western Sahara, the government decided not to replace the F-5 aircraft or the OV-10 Bronco counterinsurgency aircraft Hassan had requested, although it "might sell helicopter gunships to be used in the event of a main-force engagement with Algeria." (In 1978 Hassan was still claiming that his war was essentially with Algeria.) At about the same time, Northrup Page confirmed a contract for a \$200 million electronic surveillance system to be built in Morocco and paid for by Saudi Arabia. Those who backed this sale argued that the system should not be included in the embargo since it was not actually a weapon. President Carter was also reminded that he held the veto over decisions of the Office of Munitions Control, which opposed the sale.

After a visit to Morocco, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State said such sales would mean "that a strengthened Morocco will be better able to seek and achieve a just and peaceful solution."<sup>25</sup> Senator Kennedy, on the other hand, pointed out that U.S. foreign policy must both serve the needs of its allies and, at the same time promote international peace. To continue arms

sales to Morocco would "nourish the conflict" rather than encourage peaceful negotiation. He reminded the government that King Hassan had "never shown any inclination towards negotiations" and this sale would only prolong the conflict and reduce the possibility of a negotiated agreement. And he laid emphasis on one of the greatest dangers of continued military support for the war: "It will eventually weaken Morocco."<sup>26</sup>

In November 1979 Carter was given the go-ahead to provide Morocco with more arms, including helicopters, gunships, and aircraft.<sup>27</sup> The new Reagan administration has maintained this policy, even dropping the condition that Morocco should seek a negotiated peace.

#### Global Strategy and Super Power Politics

French international affairs analyst and Sahrawi sympathizer Elsa Assidon sees the conflict in North-west Africa as part of the larger tangle of international, and specifically U.S., concern over the Mediterranean and the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Political turbulence in Morocco in 1974 and Franco's imminent death in Spain produced anxiety over secure access to the region. The result has been a flurry of new agreements to influence NATO alignment, siting of radar detection systems, and use of air bases. Since the revolution in Iran, according to these arguments, the strategic importance of a Moroccan alliance has increased and sympathy for progressive liberation movements has diminished.

The war for influence is waged economically too, and nowhere do politics and economics become more complicated than in arms deals. France is the third largest supplier of arms to the Third World, the U.S. being first and the U.S.S.R. second.<sup>29</sup>

In both Algeria and Morocco, France and the United States have found themselves in direct economic competition, and in 1975 the U.S. surpassed France as Algeria's chief economic partner. At the same time, the importance of preserving their footholds in these countries has forced them to work together to influence those "moderate" forces in Algeria and to prop up the reactionary regime of King Hassan II in Morocco.

No one knows how Mitterrand's new socialist government will deal with the many intricacies and contradictions in African foreign policy it has inherited. Already the French Socialist Party has announced there will be a "radical change in foreign policy" toward South Africa: it supports sanctions, a rapid reduction in imports from South Africa, an end to all public investment, and a total arms embargo. It has also promised political and diplomatic support to SWAPO and humanitarian aid to the refugees in Namibia. And it has given "every indication that France would take a leading role in opposing the United States' influence on the other countries of the Contact Group—Britain, France, Canada, and West Germany."<sup>30</sup> France's domestic economic problems are Mitterrand's first concern, however, although this too will necessarily affect events in Africa, given the close economic ties.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although this discussion has touched on only a few of the elements of American and French economic and military involvement on the continent of Africa, it should be clear why groups supporting the Polisario's fight to achieve independence describe it as basically an anti-imperialist struggle.

(August 1981)

#### NOTES

1. Thomas M. Franck, "The Stealing of the Sahara," *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 70, 1976.

2. Sir Geoffrey Furlonge, "A Desert No Man's Land?" *Middle East International*, January 1976.

3. E.G.H. Joffe, "War in the Desert," *Middle East International*, March 1976.

4. Sir Geoffrey Furlonge, "A Desert No Man's Land?"

5. The mission's report included some interesting comments on the *djemaa*,

the local administrative body set up by Spain after 1958. It noted that the members "depend considerably for guidance on the Spanish authorities" and were "largely of the older and more conservative element in Saharan society, owing to the method whereby they

are chosen." The report also observed that Morocco had denounced the "so-called assembly," which they claimed could only endorse decisions taken by the colonial authorities.

6. Franck, "The Stealing of the ...."

7. John Mercer, "The Sahrawis of Western Sahara," *Minority Rights Group Report*, no. 40, London, 1979, p. 9.

8. *West Africa*, January 27 and March 27, 1978.

9. Mercer, "The Sahrawis of....", p. 9-10.

10. Franck, "The Stealing of...."

11. Joffe, "War in the Desert."

12. My taped interview in the Western Sahara on the site of one of the Moroccan raids against civilians, January 1981.

13. Mercer, "The Sahrawis...."

14. *West Africa*, January 23, 1978.

15. *West Africa*, January 30, 1978.

16. *West Africa*, December 12, 1977.

17. Mercer, "The Sahrawis....", p. 12. Algeria does have economic interests in the Western Sahara. Algeria needs a route through the Western Sahara to allow access to the sea for its yet unexploited deposit of iron ore in Gara Djebilet.

18. Opposition groups which had fled from Mauritania to Senegal and Paris attacked the new government. They publicly expressed support for Morocco

and attempted to destabilize the Mauritanian regime by discrediting it in Arab capitals in an effort to cut off this vital source of financial aid. Furthermore, with the support of Senegal's President Senghor, who had once proclaimed that a referendum in Mauritania would reveal that its black population desired union with Senegal, they worked to sharpen antagonisms between Mauritania's black and white populations, always a source of problems for the government. These were, reportedly, only the first steps in a program designed to return Ould Daddah from Paris to take over power. His pro-Moroccan policy, of course, would insure the reopening of the war against the Polisario.

Mauritania was thus forced to play its cards very close to the chest. Claiming strict neutrality, it was not among the 26 member states that recognized the SADR at the 1981 meeting of the OAU. This careful balancing act has been greatly complicated by its reliance upon the more militant Arab states, such as Iraq and Libya, for financial aid.

19. *New York Times Magazine*, April 27, 1980.

20. *West Africa*, July 14, 1980.

21. Ibid. At the OAU meeting Morocco argued that the SADR should not be recognized since it had not yet achieved an independent status, but this view was countered with the precedent of Guinea-Bissau which had been recognized as a member of the OAU before it had gained independence from Portugal.

22. Since gaining independence in 1956 Morocco has on more than one

occasion shown its contempt for national boundaries. Its provision of armed forces to intervene in Gabon and Zaire on behalf of European and American interests alienated many of its African friends. Its territorial acquisitiveness resulted in armed conflict with Algeria and a humiliating diplomatic defeat in its claims over Mauritania. Why then would any African country support Morocco in its efforts to take over the Western Sahara?

23. Mauritania, it must be noted, formally outlawed slavery only in 1980. These "clients"—a more appropriate term than slave in this African context—were black members of large "white" lineages. High unemployment has meant that many former clients remain as part of the family of their "masters."

24. In his detailed and carefully argued essay cited earlier, Franck shows how the issue of the Western Sahara has ramified, leading even to the undermining of Israel's legitimacy, itself a state carved out of the Arab-Ottoman Middle East by a colonial power at a time when few African and Asian states belonged to the UN.

25. *West Africa*, November 5, 1978.

26. Translated from the French report, *Sahara Libre*, May 20, 1980, no. 104.

27. *West Africa*, November 12, 1978.

28. Elsa Assidon, *Sahara Occidental: un enjeu pour le Nord-Ouest Africain* (Paris, 1978).

29. Ibid.

30. *Guardian*, May 21, 1981.

(Bibliography is appended in Part I)