

UN Betrayal of Western Sahara Appears Imminent

By Stephen Zunes

When a country violates fundamental principles of international law and when the UN Security Council demands that it cease its illegal behavior, one might expect that the world body would impose sanctions or other measures to foster compliance. This has been the case with Iraq, Libya, and other international outlaws in recent years.

One would not expect for the United Nations to respond to such violations by passing a series of new and weaker resolutions that essentially allow for the transgressions to stand.

However, this is exactly what appears to be taking place in the case of Morocco and its 25-year occupation of Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), better known as Western Sahara. Soon after the International Court of Justice ruled against Morocco's claims to the territory and the right of the Sahrawis for self-determination, Morocco invaded Western Sahara in November 1975. At that time the UN passed UN Security Council Resolution 380 calling for Morocco to withdraw immediately from the territory. The U.S. and France not only blocked the UN from imposing sanctions and otherwise enforcing its resolution, but they also sent military advisers and hundreds of millions of dollars worth of arms in subsequent years to support Morocco's conquest. As a result, the majority of the country's population was forced into exile in neighboring Algeria.

By 1991 the UN had dropped its insistence insisting that Moroccan forces withdraw unilaterally. Instead it called for a UN-sponsored plebiscite involving the Saharis themselves on the fate of the territory. UN Security Council Resolution 690 outlined the process for registering voters and proceeding with the plebiscite. Recognizing that the Sahrawis would likely vote for independence, Morocco stacked the voter rolls with Moroccan citizens who had

immigrated into the occupied territory or otherwise claimed had ancestral ties to the area. Using their power on the Security Council, the United States and France repeatedly blocked the UN from enforcing its mandate for a Sahrawi plebiscite.

In September 1997, the diplomatic stalemate appeared to be broken through the efforts of UN Special Envoy and former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker that appeared to have worked out the registration process obstacles, which included some further concessions to the Moroccans. This was endorsed in UN Security Council Resolution 1133. Still fearing it would lose, however, Morocco has refused to implement this agreement as well.

With the diplomatic umbrella of France and the United States protecting the monarchy from its international obligations, it now appears that Baker will soon be recommending that the UN drop the idea for a plebiscite and replace it with a settlement providing Western Sahara with limited autonomy for an interim period while recognizing its annexation to Morocco.

The Western Saharan government-in-exile has rightly dismissed this proposal as a fundamental violation of right of Sahrawi self-determination, the UN charter, and basic principles of international law. Indeed, it has threatened to go to war, possibly with the support of Algeria, rather than have Morocco's conquest stand uncontested. The SADR has been recognized by more than 75 countries and is a full member state of the Organization of African Unity. There is likely to be strong resistance against a Western-led effort to legitimize what most African states see as an act of colonialism.

Should Baker's proposal be accepted, it could not only provoke a regional war but

would also set a dangerous precedent of rewarding the conquest of territory by force and likely embolden potential aggressors around the world. As with the analogous case of East Timor, it may take a mass mobilization by human rights activists around the world to force the major powers to allow the UN to enforce its obligations and allow an oppressed people their right to self-determination.

Stephen Zunes

zunes@usfca.edu is Middle East/North Africa editor and senior policy analyst for the Foreign Policy in Focus Project. He is an associate professor and chair of the Peace & Justice Studies Program at the University of San Francisco.

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