



Morocco and Western Sahara

By Stephen Zunes

On Africa's Atlantic coast, at the western extremity of the Arab world, lies Western Sahara, site of Africa's longest post-colonial conflict. While more than one billion people have been decolonized over the past fifty years, Western Sahara is still recognized by the international community as a "non-self-governing territory," occupied for more than twenty years by its powerful neighbor, Morocco. Just prior to the scheduled end of Spain's colonial administration in 1976, the territory—then known as Spanish Sahara—was partitioned between Morocco and Mauritania and, within three years, came under exclusive Moroccan control. This occurred despite the landmark October 1975 decision by the International Court of Justice that upheld the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination in the face Morocco's irredentist claims.

Spain had promised the country independence, but pressure from Morocco and the U.S. forced the Spanish government, in the midst of its own delicate transition to democratic rule, to capitulate. The U.S. was concerned about the prospects of an independent Western Sahara under the Polisario Front, the left-leaning independence movement, and also wished to boost the political fortunes of Morocco's pro-Western monarch, King Hassan II.

Front. The parties agreed on an identification process for voters and a code of conduct for the long-awaited plebiscite to determine whether the territory becomes independent or is integrated into Morocco.

This breakthrough appears to have come not because of U.S. diplomacy, however, but despite it. And whether the referendum will finally take place as planned or (like previously scheduled votes) will be postponed, due to disputes between Morocco and the Polisario over eligible voters and other logistics, may depend on whether Washington is willing to exert the necessary leadership to pressure its Moroccan ally.

The U.S. and Morocco have a longstanding special relationship. They have had a treaty of friendship since 1787, the longest unbroken peace agreement the U.S. has maintained with any country in the world. Morocco has nearly thirty million people, making it the second largest Arab country, and is rich in mineral resources that may become important to the U.S. in coming years. It is strategically located in the northwest corner of Africa, bordering both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, and includes the Straits of Gibraltar. Since 1950, Morocco has received more U.S. aid than any other Arab or African country, except for Egypt. Indeed, since the beginning of the war over Western Sahara, Morocco has received more than one-fifth of all U.S. aid to the continent, totaling more than \$1 billion in military assistance and \$1.3 billion in economic aid.

In return, Morocco has remained one of Washington's closest strategic allies in either Africa or the Arab world, particularly during the early years of the Reagan administration. Morocco allows the U.S. Navy access to its port facilities and grants the U.S. Air Force landing, refueling, and overflight rights. There has been close binational cooperation in intelligence and communications. Despite a history of close relations with Iraq, Morocco sent forces to Saudi Arabia in 1990 to support the U.S.-led war effort to liberate Kuwait. In addition, the United States and Morocco have cooperated militarily in supporting pro-Western regimes in Africa, and Morocco has engaged in destabilizing efforts against radical African states, with apparent close collaboration with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Meanwhile, the U.S. has been largely silent about the Moroccan government's ongoing human rights abuses against its own people, and Washington has prodded Morocco to pursue questionable neoliberal economic policies. With the demise of the anticommunist rationale for the cold war, Morocco is now being touted as a bulwark against Islamic extremism and as a model for U.S.-backed economic reforms.

Key Points

- Morocco has occupied Western Sahara since 1975 in violation of resolutions by the UN Security Council and a decision by the International Court of Justice.
- The United States has provided military, economic, and diplomatic support for Morocco's war effort.
- A cease-fire and proposed referendum bring promise for peace in the territory, but U.S. leadership is needed to insure its implementation.

Moroccan forces invaded the territory, but initially suffered heavy losses to the Polisario. Mauritania was defeated outright and withdrew. By 1987, however, due in large part to large-scale American military support, Morocco succeeded in conquering virtually the entire territory, including the former Mauritanian sector. The U.S. blocked enforcement of the 1975 UN Security Council resolution demanding Morocco's withdrawal and recognizing Western Sahara's right to national self-determination.

The country remains occupied today, with most of the indigenous population, known as Sahrawis, exiled in refugee camps in neighboring Algeria.

There has been a cease-fire in effect since 1991, but the promised UN-supervised referendum on the fate of the territory has yet to take place. The long-running diplomatic stalemate was broken through the efforts of UN Special Envoy and former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker in September 1997 in a historic agreement between representatives of Morocco and the Polisario

Both the U.S. refusal to take a strong stand against the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and the Moroccan government's ongoing reluctance to cooperate with the UN-mandated referendum establish dangerous precedents and send the wrong signal to potential aggressors elsewhere in the world. The United States organized and launched a devastating war against Iraq in 1991 on the grounds that such territorial conquests would not be tolerated. U.S. acquiescence to Moroccan aggression against its resource-rich southern neighbor not only raises serious questions regarding the actual motivations for the Gulf War, it also represents a dangerous precedent in U.S. foreign policy. Soon after the conquest, Allan Nanes, a specialist in U.S. foreign policy for the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, identified the shift in U.S. policy whereby the U.S. "would not automatically reject a territorial transfer brought [about] by force." Less than a month after Morocco was given the green light in Western Sahara, Indonesia launched a similar—and even more devastating—invasion in East Timor.

Just after Morocco's invasion, Thomas Frank of the New York University Law School stated before Congress that the invasion "constitutes a particularly destabilizing precedent for Africa and indeed the whole world." Fifteen years later, perhaps in reward for Morocco's modest support during the Persian Gulf crisis, Washington back-pedaled on its initial support of the peace agreement when Morocco became recalcitrant soon after signing the accords. According to the Los Angeles Times, "The problems have been exacerbated by the evident unwillingness of the United States to put much pressure on King Hassan." Indeed, then-Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs John R. Bolton acknowledged that Morocco had been "unhelpful" regarding the UN accords but that Morocco's role in supporting U.S. foreign policy had to be taken into account in determining the U.S. response.

Despite recommendations by the 1992 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report urging Washington to pressure Morocco to comply with the terms of the accord, the shift in U.S. policy back toward the strong pro-Moroccan position of the Reagan administration was strengthened still further when President Clinton assumed office. As with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Clinton administration appears to have taken a position to the right of its immediate Republican predecessor. Indeed, there appears to have been a conscious shift on the part of President Clinton in favor of permanent Moroccan control over Western Sahara. In November 1995, the United States sponsored a UN Security Council resolution that would have forced the referendum to proceed without Polisario approval, based largely on Moroccan-supported voter rolls. This resolution was withdrawn, however, as a result of vigorous protests from Algeria and South Africa.

Given the leadership role the United States has taken in the United Nations regarding other violators of UN resolutions—such as Iraq, Libya, and Sudan—the

apparent acquiescence to Morocco raises serious questions regarding Washington's commitment to international law and its support of the United Nations as a neutral arbiter of international conflict. As with Israel, the Clinton administration appears quite willing to make exceptions for countries it deems to be strategic allies. In that sense, it seems that little has changed since the end of the cold war, during which the U.S. proved itself quite willing to sacrifice its more idealistic principles regarding international law, self-determination, and human rights for what were viewed as the strategic imperatives of anticommunism. Although communism is no longer a threat, the perceived need to support allied regimes—despite their rejection of both international law and the authority of the United Nations—remains unabated.

On a less global scale, the continued irresolution of the Western Sahara problem contributes to Morocco's internal instability. Morocco has spent billions of dollars both in supplying tens of thousands of troops along a 1,200-mile berm to keep the Polisario out of the territory and in building and maintaining an infrastructure in a thus-far unsuccessful effort to win the hearts and minds of the remaining Sahrawi population. This drain on resources has exacerbated Morocco's already-serious economic problems, encouraged dangerous ultranationalist demagoguery, strengthened the political role of the armed forces, and encouraged political repression, all of which contribute to political instability in this important country.

The Western Sahara standoff also constitutes the major obstacle to greater cooperation between the countries of northwestern Africa—known as the Maghreb—and has nearly triggered open warfare between Morocco and the neighboring states of Algeria and Mauritania. Such regional instability, particularly in light of the growing challenge of Islamic radicalism in the region, does not serve U.S. interests.

Meanwhile, U.S. insistence on economic liberalization in Morocco without concomitant political liberalization has only served to encourage political instability and the rise of radical anti-American movements. As in the Persian Gulf region, the United States—itsself the product of a republican revolution—finds itself in the awkward position of defending an absolute monarchy against those who strive for a more democratic system. As with previous cases where the U.S. has identified itself with economic policies that disproportionately hurt the poor and with governments that are unpopular and autocratic, the likelihood that a successor regime will be strongly anti-American is greatly enhanced.

Key Problems

- U.S. support for Morocco's invasion and occupation legitimizes territorial aggression, which serves as a dangerous precedent.
 - The ongoing occupation is a source of political instability both in Morocco and in the region as a whole.
 - The U.S. has supported an autocratic government in Morocco and is proffering questionable economic priorities.
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The Houston Agreement reiterates and strengthens the key aspects of the original UN settlement: refugee repatriation, troop confinement, release of prisoners, freedom to campaign, access for accredited international observers, equal access by the parties to the media, and UN authority to intervene to insure the fairness of the electoral process. The agreement's definition of eligible voters appears to be much closer to the Polisario's assumption of a legalistic territorial meaning than to Morocco's rather vague ethnic referents. Whether it can actually be implemented remains to be seen.

method agreed upon by both sides, will take part." Lawmakers have furthermore requested that the Clinton administration fully support such a referendum process.

This is exactly the position the U.S. government needs to adopt. Washington must be willing to exhibit the same leadership it has shown in other international conflicts to insure that Morocco does not try to back out of the agreement. This might include the threat of military and economic sanctions against Morocco to insure compliance. The willingness of the United States to help guarantee the referendum process could be a litmus test for the credibility of U.S. diplomacy in North Africa and perhaps for the entire world.

A second policy shift that Washington should pursue is closer diplomatic ties with the Polisario Front. Soon after Morocco's invasion, the Polisario declared an independent state of Western Sahara (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic), which was subsequently recognized by 75 countries and is a full member of the Organization of African Unity. The U.S. has traditionally avoided close diplomatic contact with Polisario representatives and has pressured a number of countries to withhold recognition. Washington needs to recognize the Polisario as a legitimate actor in the conflict and must fully consider its perspectives in the ongoing peace process. Should Morocco continue to balk at proceeding with a fair referendum, the U.S. should consider establishing full diplomatic relations with the SADR.

Finally, involving Morocco itself, Washington needs to encourage a transition to a greater degree of democracy. Although a parliamentary system is in place, the king still remains an autocratic ruler. The U.S. should urge the release of political prisoners and should encourage a transition toward a more authentic and open democratic system. In addition, while continuing to endorse economic liberalization that challenges official corruption and dubious prestige projects, Washington needs greater sensitivity to the impact of other economic reforms on the large and growing poor segments of Moroccan society. Morocco's economic growth in recent years has benefited primarily a small minority of the population. Only through a more even and sustainable development program can political and economic stability be enhanced.

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Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should pressure Morocco—possibly employing military and economic sanctions—to comply with UN Security Council resolutions and to proceed with a fair and internationally supervised referendum.
- Closer diplomatic relations with the Polisario Front should be established as a means of strengthening the peace process.
- The U.S. should encourage both political liberalization and efforts at sustainable and broad-based economic development in Morocco.

Since there was an American presence in the thick of the negotiations, the Clinton administration did not feel a great need to interfere. At the same time, the administration did little to support Baker's efforts. Although State Department and Defense Department officials privately hope for a fair referendum in Morocco's favor, most realize that an unfair victory by Morocco would be highly problematic and would likely lead to a resumption of the fighting. As a result—unlike the Reagan administration in the 1980s—the U.S. has not tried to sabotage these peace efforts.

Whether the referendum will actually occur may depend on whether the Clinton administration is willing to take the leadership to insure that its Moroccan ally does not once again seek to delay and sabotage the peace process. There is some speculation that the Moroccans actually hope for open American pressure to help blunt the domestic reaction should the referendum not go in Morocco's favor.

As was the case during the Bush administration, legislators are taking some initiative in the matter through an unusual coalition of liberal and conservative lawmakers from both parties. Congress has passed a resolution supporting a "free, fair, and transparent" referendum "held in the presence of international and domestic observers and international media without administrative or military pressure or interference" where "only genuine Sahrawis, as identified in the

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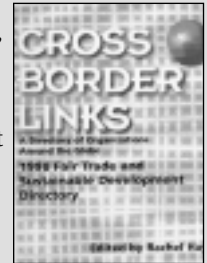
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