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HELPING AND HINDERING: THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES AND UNITED NATIONS IN THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT

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The Western Sahara conflict has contributed to North African instability for more than 25 years. Although a resolution depends primarily upon Morocco, Algeria, and the Polisario Front of the native Sahrawi people, external states and organizations also have influenced the conflict. This article examines the role of the United States and United Nations and shows how they have prevented the conflict from becoming more violent but also impeded a satisfactory settlement. Because the conflict impacts both US regional and international interests, the article recommends that Washington should more actively pursue a resolution.

Observers of the Western Sahara conflict were optimistic about its resolution as the 1990s began, thanks to a series of accommodations by both Morocco and Algeria and the development of a UN referendum plan (Damis 1990, Smith de Cherif 1991). More than a decade later, however, this conflict appears to be no closer to resolution; indeed, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently described the future of the

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peace process as “rather bleak (UNSC 2002, 7).” A series of UN attempts to resolve the situation have been stymied by the parties involved, and there has been talk of a returned to armed conflict by both Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front of the native Sahrawi people.

Even if it remains at its current low-intensity level, the Western Sahara struggle will continue to impact Moroccan internal stability, regional harmony, and Moroccan and Algerian external affairs, as well as perpetuate a 25-year-old refugee crisis. The conflict also could have significant international implications. Because the Sahrawis’ claim is based partly on a 1975 International Court of Justice ruling, the outcome of the dispute could either strengthen or weaken international law. Resolution of the Western Sahara conflict depends chiefly upon the actions of the three primary players—Morocco, Algeria, and the Polisario. However, this paper will show that extra-regional actors, such as the United States and the UN, also have played an important role and may be able to take actions that persuade and/or allow the primary actors to resolve the dispute. Failure of the United States and the UN to follow the principles of international law in this situation could damage the reputations of both, particularly among the developing countries that have given the most support to the Sahrawi cause. Moreover, the United States has significant political and economic interests in the region; it therefore must take action to promote a peaceful resolution.

This article will utilize historical data and recent actions to evaluate the interests of the United Nations and United States in North Africa and to demonstrate how they may have prolonged the conflict and impeded its resolution. First, however, it will examine the domestic and regional aspects of the conflict. The article will conclude with recommendations for U.S. policy.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT

The region in question is a dry, barren stretch of 102,703 square miles located south of Morocco on the Atlantic coast, also bordering Algeria and Mauritania. While lacking in arable agricultural land, Western Sahara is home to major deposits of phosphates and other minerals, and the coastal waters contain prime fishing grounds and, possibly, extensive oil fields. Approximately 233,000 people—mostly Moroccans not indigenous to the region—currently live in the territory, while an estimated 167,000 native Sahrawis live in refugee camps in Algeria (Dunbar 2000).¹

The current conflict can be traced back to the mid-1970s, when Spain, the territory’s colonial administrator, announced plans for a self-determi-

nation referendum that was expected to lead to Western Sahara's independence. Morocco, which also claimed the region, took the matter to the International Court of Justice, which in 1975 upheld the Sahrawis' right to self-determination. In response, King Hassan II of Morocco mobilized 350,000 civilians, along with the Moroccan armed forces, for the so-called "Green March" to claim the Western Sahara as Moroccan territory. Rather than fight the marchers, Spain signed the 1975 Tripartite Agreement with Morocco and Mauritania, which transferred administrative authority—though not sovereignty—to them. Thousands of native Sahrawis fled into exile in southwestern Algeria.

The Moroccan and Mauritanian troops met heavy resistance from a Sahrawi nationalist movement, the Polisario Front,² as they occupied the region. The Front was backed by Algeria (and, until 1983, Libya), which, seeing an opportunity to antagonize its western rival and bound by its own history to support a self-determination movement, provided the Polisario money, arms, supplies, and diplomatic support. The Polisario declared the creation of the independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and established a government in exile in February 1976. Mauritania renounced its claim to the southern third of the territory in 1979, partly because of the success of Polisario attacks, but by 1987 Morocco had managed to conquer nearly the entire region, including the former Mauritanian sector (Zoubir 1993). While Morocco was winning the military struggle, the Sahrawis were gaining ground on the diplomatic front; by 1990, 73 countries had recognized the SADR, and no countries had officially recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the region (Damis 1990).

Polisario and Moroccan troops intermittently continued the struggle until 1991, when the UN negotiated a cease-fire, established the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (known as MINURSO, its Spanish acronym) peacekeeping force, and proposed a self-determination referendum for the Sahrawis to choose either to become independent or join Morocco. This referendum initially was scheduled for January 1992. However, despite efforts in recent years by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and his personal envoy, former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, implementation has repeatedly been delayed, owing largely to disputes over the number and eligibility of those who might vote in the referendum.³

Prospects for the self-determination referendum seem to have worsened over the past year. In June 2001, the UN announced the so-called "framework agreement" alternative that would grant Western Sahara

autonomy under Moroccan control for five years, dividing government competencies between the territorial population and Rabat. This alternative also proposed a referendum on the final status of the territory within five years of autonomy, which would grant all residents of more than a year the right to vote (UNSC 2001). Morocco embraced the proposal, while the Polisario—backed eventually by Algeria—soundly rejected it. Most recently, in February 2002, Annan stated that the UN faces “a rather bleak situation with regard to the future of the peace process,” and presented the Security Council with four options: implementation of the original referendum and settlement plan, a revision of the autonomy option, division of the territory, or termination of MINURSO (UNSC 2002, 7–8). Each could be implemented without the concurrence of Morocco, Algeria, or the Polisario. At Annan’s recommendation, the Security Council voted to extend MINURSO’s mandate until 30 April 2002 while it considers the four options.

This lack of progress may send the conflict, largely free of violence since 1991, into warfare once more. The Polisario has made several threats in recent years to break the cease-fire, although it has yet to take action. In February 2002, the Moroccan government said the new partition option “is sowing the seeds of instability in the region” and sets “a dangerous precedent for a new war in Africa (Karam 2002, 13).” While unlikely to evolve to the level of conflict and instability seen in Kosovo or the Middle East, the Western Sahara presents a major challenge to the region and the international community.

DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL FACTORS DRIVE THE CONFLICT

Before exploring the role of domestic actors, it is useful to have a better understanding of the domestic and regional factors driving the dispute. This section will discuss the stances and motivations of the primary actors—Morocco, the SADR/Polisario Front, and Algeria—and show how Moroccan regime survival, regional competition for power, and the Sahrawi desire for independence, have caused and prolonged the struggle.

Morocco

Most scholars argue that Moroccan nationalism—as a means of ensuring regime survival—is the driving factor behind Rabat’s position. King Hassan II utilized the conquest of the Sahara and the pursuit of “Greater Morocco” (comprising Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, and even parts of Mali and Algeria) as a means of easing a seriously unstable political

situation in the 1970s. Since then, the legitimacy of the monarchy has been tied to the “Moroccanness of the Western Sahara (Reid et al 2001).” Spencer argues “the Saharan issue has been fundamental to domestic cohesion” and has provided “a national policy that united opinion across the political spectrum (1993, 44).” There is some debate about the current level of Moroccan support, however; one poll by Spain’s *El País* showed that 75 percent of Moroccans want out of the region (cited in Ruddy 2000). Nevertheless, it seems Moroccan control over the territory is still supported by both the military and the Moroccan political establishment (Dunbar 2000). Any attempt by the king to relinquish control could conceivably result in a coup attempt or other political instability.

Some have attributed Morocco’s interest in the Western Sahara to the territory’s large deposits of high-grade phosphate, but many scholars dismiss this as a secondary factor, at best (for example Damis 1983). The possible presence of oil off the Western Saharan shore may be a more likely motivator. In October 2001, just months after a consortium struck oil off the coast of Mauritania, Morocco signed oil exploration deals for two companies to search off the coast of Western Sahara, predictably angering the Sahrawis.⁴ The fish-plentiful waters along the Western Sahara also may bolster Morocco’s desire for the territory (Bhatia 2001).

Despite the occupation’s benefits, Morocco’s efforts to control the Western Sahara may actually have worsened its troubled economy. Besides the troop deployment, estimated by some to cost Morocco U.S. \$2 million per day, Rabat has pumped billions of dollars into infrastructure work to attract Moroccan settlers and indigenous support in the region (Thomas 2000b; “Maghreb” 2001).⁵ Many analysts argue that the Moroccan government would actually improve its stability by relinquishing the Western Sahara, thereby freeing up resources and funds to develop its own economy. Ironically, the country’s current socioeconomic status makes this move unlikely. *Arabies Trends* recently predicted that Morocco may be headed for disaster, based on economic indicators (Ulph 2001). The poor economic situation, coupled with slow progress toward democratization and increased civil rights, has resulted in a loss of public confidence in both the government and the main opposition party. In this climate, the king and government are reluctant to take any action that could be perceived as threatening the integrity of the country or the position of the monarchy; moreover, they are likely to continue using the Western Sahara to draw attention away from the country’s structural problems.

The position of King Mohammed VI has attracted a great deal of speculation. When he assumed the throne in 1999 following the death of King Hassan, many were optimistic that Mohammed would be a new force for economic improvements, political reforms, greater civil rights, and other changes. However, apparently Mohammed has retained his father's goal to integrate the Western Sahara into Morocco; he recently proclaimed, "Morocco will not relinquish a single inch of the territory ("Morocco" 2002, par. 2)."

Despite its internal problems, Morocco seems completely resistant to accepting any type of independence for the territory, including partition. Rather, it is likely to continue stalling against the referendum while pushing for a negotiated autonomy settlement and increasing the "Moroccanization" of the territory.

SAHRAWI ARAB DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (SADR) / POLISARIO FRONT

The Sahrawis, by contrast, are motivated primarily by a simple desire for self-determination. The Sahrawis are recognized as an ethnonational group separate from the Arab and Berber communities of North Africa (Thomas 2001).⁶ C.R. Pennell argues that a true national identity and political consciousness did not develop until the middle of the twentieth century, when the UN General Assembly resolved that all peoples had the right to self-determination and African colonies began to win their independence. Inspired by this climate and provoked by state repression, the nationalist movement headed by the Polisario Front was born (Pennell 2000).

The Sahrawis are unlikely to accept any solution that does not result in the creation of an independent state. Until recently, this left implementation of the self-determination referendum—with eligible voters based solely on the Polisario's criteria—as the only option, but the Sahrawis also have indicated a willingness to consider a division of the territory. A UN push for the autonomy option would increase the chances that the Sahrawis will resume armed conflict. Although the Polisario has not yet made good on past threats to break the cease-fire, observers who have traveled to the region seem convinced these are not idle words. Both Polisario soldiers and a U.S. Air Force colonel with MINURSO confirmed an increase in military activity during the end of 2000 and the beginning of 2001, according to Bhatia, who also found that the Sahrawis' views on a return to war were "less driven by passion, than by a subtle rational calculation and desire (Bhatia 2001, 293)."⁷ The Polisario cannot match

Morocco in terms of army size (SADR troops have been estimated at 10,000 to 15,000, with a similar number available on short-term call, compared to around 160,000 Moroccan troops in the territory) and military resources. But those elements have never been its strength; instead, Polisario forces were able to counter the superior Moroccan forces due to factors like their greater knowledge of the territory, hit-and-run tactics, ability to choose the location and timing of the attacks, and commitment to the cause (Harris 2000). Additionally, the Polisario continues to hold more than 1,300 Moroccan prisoners of war, most of whom have been imprisoned for more than two decades.

A number of other factors speak both to the Sahrawis' ability to return to armed struggle and to implement a viable state. Conditions in the refugee camps have deteriorated over the years, and despite some growth of local commerce, the refugees are largely dependent upon international assistance (UNHCR 2001). However, despite high unemployment rates (up to 95 percent in the camps), the Sahrawis boast a 90 percent literacy rate and equal rights for women (Thomas 2000b). The refugees also have developed a viable administrative structure, including elections of officials and schools and hospitals within each district/camp. Bhatia therefore argues that unlike Kosovo and East Timor, where the UN was forced to impose transitional administrations after the withdrawal of the governing authorities, the SADR/Polisario already have prepared a government plan and would be able to transfer the administrative structure to the territory (Bhatia 2001). Resource wealth within the territory also suggests a Saharan state would be functional.

Nonetheless, the prospects for an independent SADR are low. To many Sahrawis and other observers, the development of the framework agreement last year signaled the death knell for the referendum process, and Morocco opposes a divided territory or forced solution. Even given its military strengths, the Polisario is unlikely to recapture the Western Sahara or expel the Moroccan troops, although it appears remotely possible that it could inflict enough damages to encourage Morocco's withdrawal from the territory or affect regional stability (Harris 2000).⁸ Since Morocco is unlikely to grant the Sahara independence, Dunbar argues that a negotiated settlement may be the Polisario's best option; however, he also cautions that the Polisario leadership may feel pressure from the refugees to take an all-or-nothing approach to the referendum (Dunbar 2000).

Algeria and the North African Context

Although it lays no claim to the disputed territory, Algeria is the third major actor involved in the conflict. Without Algerian support, the Polisario likely would either no longer exist or pose only a minor threat to the Moroccan government today. Damis argues that the struggle not only concerns the basic issues of Saharan decolonization and self-determination, but also reflects “a larger geopolitical struggle” between the “competing and antagonistic political and economic systems” of Morocco and Algeria (Damis 1983, xvi). The Western Sahara has long been a source of tension between the two regional powers; in fact, Morocco broke off diplomatic relations with its neighbor in 1976 after Algeria recognized the SADR. The two countries did not reestablish official relations until 1983, when they began a two-track approach: disagreeing on the Saharan issue, but not letting that interfere with improvements in their bilateral relations. Since then, relations between the two countries have been mixed, taking a downturn in February 2002 as Morocco claimed that Algeria was backing the partition plan and augmenting the chance of regional instability (Karam 2002). Like the Polisario, Algeria remains committed to the UN referendum but is willing to consider a partition option.

There are mixed signals regarding its position, however. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika faces problems at home—including the threat from Islamist insurgents opposed to the secular government, Berber unrest and demonstrations, 30 percent unemployment, a housing shortage, and corruption—that could draw the government’s attention and aid away from the Sahrawi issue. There already have been signs that Algeria’s support for the Polisario may be waning; some observers cited Algerian pressure as the main reason the Sahrawis did not resume their armed struggle in 2001 (Tremlett 2001). Others note that Algerian policy may be determined partly by powerful military elements who back the Polisario and might favor using the Sahrawis as a proxy against Morocco (Harris 2001).⁹ But support for the Sahrawis is not limited to the government and military; for example, following the announcement of the framework agreement, the independent Algerian newspaper *El Watan* stated “by adopting the Moroccan views Mr. Annan becomes an accomplice of Morocco’s expansionist policy, working for injustice and against peace (“Maghreb Media” 2001, par. 12).”

The Western Sahara conflict has greater regional implications as well. The founding of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA by its French acronym) in 1989—consisting of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania—

was hailed by some as a framework for solving the conflict, offering a forum in which regional development might become more important than political boundaries. This has not happened; instead, Western Sahara, and by extension the tepid relations between Morocco and Algeria, appears to be a major barrier to the full realization of the UMA.¹⁰ Although regional unity would almost certainly offer North Africa greater leverage in its relations with the European Union (EU), it apparently has not been a large enough incentive for the two rivals to overcome their differences. As a result, recent years have seen individual Maghrebi countries pursue individual accords with the EU. Interestingly, the UMA is seen by some as detrimental to the future of an independent Sahrawi state. The Treaty of Marrakesh that established the UMA contains a number of statements that would seem to preclude Western Sahara statehood—for example, “the five states undertake not to allow any activity on their territories which threatens the security, territorial integrity, or the political system of a member state (Chtatou 1993, 278).”

EXTRA-REGIONAL ACTORS

While external actors neither started the dispute nor have the ability to impose a solution, many have played a significant role in the region. The following section will examine two of the chief extra-regional actors—the United Nations and the United States—and demonstrate that their actions have helped both prolong the conflict and minimize its violence.

United Nations

Because of its mediation and peacekeeping activities, the UN is arguably the most important extra-regional actor. It was relatively inactive until the early 1980s, when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) invited it to be a co-partner in convincing Morocco and the Polisario to accept a self-determination vote. Its importance grew in 1991, when the UN-sponsored cease-fire came into effect and MINURSO was deployed. For much of the past decade the UN has worked to implement the self-determination referendum, a process that can hardly be deemed a success.

The UN neither has the power to unilaterally announce and enforce a peace settlement (at least not without the support of its Security Council members), nor has it shown a strong track record in facilitating negotiations between the chief parties. Primarily, the UN role in the conflict has been twofold. First, its involvement has allowed both the Moroccans and the Sahrawis to prolong the situation, possibly beyond its natural end.

Indeed, Dunbar finds there is “ample evidence that infinite patience has served badly both the search for a solution in Western Sahara and the credibility of the United Nations (Dunbar 2000, 534).” Morocco has been able to use the delays of the past 10 years to continue consolidating its control. For the Sahrawis, the delays have had a more mixed outcome, allowing them to prepare economic and administrative frameworks and work toward greater international recognition, but also preventing them from taking proactive action and possibly stimulating dissension in the ranks. Second, the UN also has been largely responsible for preventing the degree of violence seen in similar flashpoints such as East Timor, Kosovo, and Israel/Palestine. Ironically, this may be one of the reasons some member states have hesitated to push strongly for the referendum. The UN has stated it will not deploy troops to enforce the outcome of any referendum, thus raising the fear of East Timor-style violence (Reid et al 2001).

Additionally, by recognizing the Sahrawis as deserving of self-determination, the UN has afforded the nation a degree of international legitimacy it might otherwise not have enjoyed; however, its refusal to grant the diplomatic recognition given the SADR by many of its member states also has hurt the Sahrawis’ ambitions. At the same time, the UN’s continued acquiescence to Moroccan demands—particularly its 2001 announcement of the autonomy option—is seen by many as legitimizing what was an internationally condemned and illegal invasion of another state. Others also charge that the UN, despite its supposed neutrality on the issue, has actively favored the Moroccan side (due largely to the influence of two of its permanent Security Council members, the United States and France) (Zunes 1998b). Dunbar states that there appears to be no sentiment, at least among permanent council members, for punitive action against Morocco, either in terms of military action or economic sanctions (Dunbar 2000).

The four options outlined in Annan’s most recent report represent an interesting development at the UN. Observers saw last year’s announcement of the autonomy option as another bow to Moroccan desires; many predicted it would stimulate renewed violence rather than peace. The continued inclusion of the referendum option, and the new partition option, may signal a greater openness to Sahrawi and Algerian aims. This development could be essential in order for the UN to increase its credibility with the Sahrawis, at least according to observers who have visited the camps. Additionally, the Secretary-General’s suggestion that the UN act without the concurrence of all parties raises questions. History

has proven the UN unwilling and/or unable to act against Morocco, while any action against the Polisario would be opposed by many of the body's developing world members.

United States

Zunes and others argue that the United States has been a major player from the beginning of the dispute, pressuring Spain to sign the Tripartite Accords in 1975 due to fears that American ally King Hassan II of Morocco might otherwise be overthrown. At the UN, the U.S. ambassador fought to prevent effective UN action following the Moroccan Green March, with the ambassador later writing in his memoirs that "the United States wished things to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about (Zunes 1998b, 132)."

Officially, the United States has been neutral regarding the final status of the Western Sahara territory, recognizing Moroccan administration of the region but not endorsing Rabat's claim of sovereignty. However, the United States historically has supported the Moroccan government. This was particularly true beginning with the Reagan administration, which ended the Carter administration's attempts to link arms sales to progress in the peace process. Both administrations argued that military aid increased the chances of a peace settlement, by helping Rabat feel more secure in the region and thus more open to negotiations. Zunes argues that the opposite actually happened, citing as evidence a pair of hard-line actions taken by Morocco following U.S. announcements of aid increases (Zunes 1998b). During the first Bush administration, although U.S. military aid and cooperation continued, U.S. officials began emphasizing the necessity of a negotiated settlement and started supporting UN efforts. Despite the shift, U.S. foreign policy remained more favorable to Morocco; in 1995, for example, the United States sponsored a UN Security Council resolution that would have forced the referendum to go ahead without Polisario approval. But the United States also has played a more moderate role at times, blocking a 1993 French initiative favorable to Morocco and pushing Rabat to engage in direct talks with the Polisario. Additionally, the U.S. State Department has drawn attention to potential human rights violations by Morocco in the territory.

Many analysts cite the "longstanding special relationship" between the United States and Morocco, which have had a treaty of friendship since 1787. The United States has many interests in continuing this relationship: Morocco's rich mineral resources; its strategic location; the history of military cooperation between the countries (including collaboration to

support pro-Western regimes in Africa); the relatively moderate, Western bent of the Moroccan monarchy; and the country's role in trying to facilitate the Middle East peace process. King Mohammed has also pursued greater ties with the United States since he came to power in 1999.

However, the United States also has pursued better relations with Algeria. President Bouteflika has visited Washington and met with President George W. Bush twice now, making him the first Algerian leader invited to the United States since 1985. The United States is particularly interested in broadening opportunities for U.S. investment in Algeria's energy sector. Washington also hopes better Algerian ties may increase regional stability, and in the wake of the 11 September attacks, has sought cooperation in the war against terrorism. In return, Algiers appears to be requesting more military aid and hardware to fight its own Islamist insurgents (Drummond 2001).

Additionally, the United States appears to be courting better relations between Algeria and Morocco to promote economic union in the Maghreb. Chtatou argues that the United States sees the UMA as an institution to promote stability, peace and development in a strategically important region, and also hopes the UMA will become an instrument for democracy and liberalization, as well as Arabic/Islamic moderation (1993). The United States and three of the Maghreb countries (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) have even formed the U.S.-North Africa Economic Partnership to increase the region's attractiveness as a destination for U.S. business and investment by encouraging structural reforms and regional economic integration.

Such developments offer a mixed prognosis for the U.S. role in the Western Sahara conflict, but overall they suggest a further weakening of the Sahrawi position. The U.S.-Morocco relationship seems unlikely to sour anytime soon—given the “war on terrorism” and rapidly deteriorating Arab-Israeli relations, the United States may attach even more weight to the support of its Arabic ally. Although Morocco has historically not been a vital economic partner, that may be changing. U.S. companies have expressed great interest in exploring the oil and gas reserves off the Western Sahara coast; they likely would favor a known, friendly Moroccan government to the unknown SADR. Those factors, taken with former Secretary of State Baker's leadership on the autonomy proposal and the U.S. government's apparent backing of that option, do not bode well for the SADR, despite calls from some congressional representatives to retain the U.S. commitment to the referendum process.

The effect of the growing U.S. rapprochement with Algeria is more difficult to assess. The key variable will likely be the power perceptions in the Washington-Algiers relationship. If Bouteflika and his regime find that increased U.S. investment and improved diplomatic relations are necessary to bolster both the regime and the state, they may be encouraged to abandon, or lessen their support for, the Sahrawi cause. Indeed, some Algerian intellectuals believe “Algiers may sacrifice its stance for economic gain and cave in to American pressure, perhaps in return for rescheduled foreign debt (Thomas 2000a, 15).” Also possible is that Washington will use its increased influence to persuade Algiers to pressure the Polisario toward a settlement. If, on the other hand, the need for regional stability and North African support makes Algeria a necessary ally, Washington may take a more favorable position toward the SADR, forcing the United States into an increasingly complex interaction with the two regional powers.

“Had the United States responded forcefully in opposition to Morocco’s designs on its southern neighbor back in the mid-1970s, the many years of war and tense diplomacy could have been avoided,” Zunes argues (Zunes 1998b, 141). Although Zunes may overstate his case, Washington has played a major role, giving Rabat the diplomatic and military support needed to defend its position. The absence of U.S. support would have seriously compromised Morocco’s stance. Interestingly, it also might have allowed Morocco to undertake necessary steps to enhance its development; Tony Hodges argues that the United States, by enabling Hassan to sustain the war, was “indirectly helping to worsen his country’s economic difficulties, to exacerbate the social tensions in his kingdom, and to undermine his regime’s political stability (Hodges quoted in Zunes 1993, 69).” Conversely, had Washington supported Algiers, the conflict might have gone in a very different direction. With U.S. influence in the UN Security Council and U.S. military and economic power behind it, the SADR could be a fully recognized state within its desired boundaries now.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The prospects for a peaceful end to the conflict seem remote, at best. Given the history of the referendum process, it is unlikely both Morocco and the Polisario will ever agree to a final voter identification and implementation plan; even if they do, the prospects for voter intimidation and East Timor-style violence either before or after the referendum appear highly likely. The two new options developed over the past year—autonomy (rejected

by the SADR) or partition (rejected by Morocco)—are likely to increase the distance between the two sides, and perhaps even provoke a return to armed conflict.

It is vital that the international community continue working to encourage a solution. Not only has the conflict impaired Morocco's internal stability and drawn attention away from the country's real problems, but it also threatens to destabilize an Arabic region that has become increasingly friendly toward the United States. Further, the implicit and explicit support that extra-regional actors have given to Morocco sets a dangerous precedent for international law. The 1975 ICJ ruling that denied Morocco's claim to the territory still stands; promotion of the autonomy option against the Sahrawis' wishes or continuance of the stalemate would permit and even reward Moroccan aggression. Many observers have drawn parallels between the Western Sahara conflict and the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which the UN, United States, and other countries both condemned and took action against as a violation of international law (Zoubir and Volman 1993). Failure to follow the principles of international law in this situation could damage both U.S. and UN reputations in the international community, particularly among the developing countries that have given the most support to the SADR, and also establish a dangerous precedent.

As a result, the United States can no longer follow its present course of pretending to be neutral while implicitly supporting the Moroccan side. It must reformulate its policy in a way that does not reward Morocco for its illegal action, but also does not destabilize the present regime or upset the regional balance of power. Hard-line pressure, including sanctions, seems both unwise and unlikely. Washington cannot abandon its longstanding relationship with Rabat, and a hard-line approach seems likely to encourage Moroccan intransigence. At the same time, the United States must take into account its burgeoning relationship with Algeria, which may enable the West both to reap economic and strategic benefits and promote greater democracy and stability in North Africa.

Therefore, the United States should:

- 1) *Use its improved relationship with Algeria, and its long-standing ties to Morocco, to encourage both countries to come to the negotiating table.* Morocco and Algeria have much to gain from a resolution of the conflict, particularly in terms of bilateral affairs and international trade. The United States should use its good relationship with each, as well as the promise of future aid and investment, to facilitate their work in developing a mutually acceptable solution.

- 2) *Press Morocco, as firmly as possible without resorting to sanctions or hard-line actions, to moderate its stance on the Western Sahara.* Historically, the United States has too often bowed to Moroccan wishes, ignoring its strengths in the country relationship. With Morocco looking to continue and increase economic ties between the two countries, the United States should consider tying economic development with Rabat's engagement on the Saharan issue. Moreover, economic development, along with the potential for an enhanced role on the international scene, could bolster Moroccan stability and ease the pressure to pursue a "Greater Morocco."
- 3) *Press each country individually for needed economic and political reforms.* By undertaking domestic reforms, Algeria and Morocco could increase regional and international perceptions of their commitment to a final solution. This change could be especially important in Morocco. Whether the Polisario achieves an independent state or accepts autonomy, it must be convinced that Morocco is prepared to guarantee the viability of a Saharan state or region. Again, promises of future U.S. aid and investment would be a major incentive for cooperation from both Algeria and Morocco.
- 4) *Establish closer relations with the SADR.* The voices of the Sahrawis must not be ignored. Although Algeria and Morocco could impose a solution unacceptable to the Polisario, this move would contradict basic U.S. values of democracy and liberty. A new relationship with the SADR also could help convince the Polisario that Morocco will not be allowed to renege on any concessions Rabat may have to make, and that a major international power will help promote regional stability and indigenous rights. The retention of a self-determination process, under any plan, is essential; the Sahrawis are unlikely to accept any proposal that does not allow them to decide their own fate.
- 5) *Take a more unbiased stance in the UN.* As described above, the United States has been one of the principal factors behind the UN's unofficial but real favoritism toward Morocco in the Security Council. Although Washington should not press for hard-line action (such as economic sanctions or offensive military moves) in the world body, it should use its influence to bring greater attention to the conflict and push for substantive developments toward a referendum or agreement. Even if the Security Council votes for a plan that does not require the consensus of all three parties, the United States must take a lead in ensuring that the final plan is just and fair for each. Such

actions would be unlikely to damage its relationships with any of the other world powers, and could facilitate improved relations with the developing countries that back the Saharan cause.

CONCLUSION

“Just as a horse can be brought to water but cannot be forced to drink, so regional peace and reconciliation depend overwhelmingly on the local players; no external power will be able to perform miracles in the absence of indigenous will,” Karsh argues (Karsh 1997, 291). “Indigenous will” is a necessary component for a solution to the Western Sahara conflict, but as shown above, external powers have played a major role in prolonging the situation. There are still significant reasons for hope. The conflict has gone more than a decade without major violence, and all three regional parties have shown the ability and willingness to meet and negotiate in the past. Changes such as those outlined above may be able to create the indigenous will—along with domestic and regional conditions—necessary for a peaceful end to the struggle over the Western Sahara.

NOTES

- ¹ As of 1999, the UN High Commissioner on Refugees estimated there also were around 26,400 Sahrawis in Mauritania (UNHCR 2001).
- ² Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro. The group was formed in 1973 to fight for independence from Spain (Thomas 2001).
- ³ For more on the issues surrounding voter identification, see Dunbar, 2000; also Harris, 2000.
- ⁴ In February 2002 UN Legal Counsel Hans Correll said while it was legal for Morocco to prospect for oil in Western Sahara, commercial drilling would violate international legal principles (Hoyos and Shelley 2002).
- ⁵ Thomas also notes that the troop deployment in the region has created employment in a country starved for jobs: some 300,000 Moroccans are based in the Western Sahara, including around 120,000 in service-related support industries.
- ⁶ The Sahrawis’ ancestors were the nomadic Arabian warrior-preachers from the Arabian Peninsula who introduced Islam to North Africa in the thirteenth century before settling in the Western Sahara (Thomas 2001).
- ⁷ However, in 2000 Polisario leaders stated the final deadline for the referendum was December 2000 and promised a return to war if it was not held (Harris 2000). That this has not yet happened does raise questions about their ability and/or commitment to resume the armed struggle.

⁸ Terrorism also has been suggested as a possible option, but few analysts see that as likely.

⁹ A recent BBC News report states that “strong military factions regularly block initiatives that might bring an end to this key source of regional tension on which the Algerian military justifies its powerful position in the government (Bamford 2001).”

¹⁰ In 1995, for example, Morocco asked the union for a freeze on further economic integration pending the solution of the Western Sahara dispute. For more on the UMA, see Borowiec 2001 and “Algeria Calls” 2001.

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