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**The Polisario Front and the World: Leveraging International Support
for Sahrawi Self-Determination**

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for Sahrawi Self-Determination**

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2014

Abstract

The Polisario Front and the World: Leveraging International Support for Sahrawi Self-Determination

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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For over 30 years now, the Polisario Front has led the Sahrawi struggle for independence in Western Sahara. Following Spanish decolonization of the territory in 1976, Morocco claimed the territory of Western Sahara leading to a protracted war against the Polisario Front. The 1991 United Nations brokered ceasefire agreement prompted the Polisario to switch from warfare as its main tactic to leveraging international support for Sahrawi self-determination and raising awareness of the conflict. This paper discusses how the international community helps the Polisario Front gain recognition for its cause, the Polisario Front's tactics for leveraging international support, and the limits of relying on the international community.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
BACKGROUND	6
INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT	12
THE SAHRAWI ARAB DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC	20
NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT	23
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	29
Bibliography	34

Introduction

In January 2001, the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army of 3000-6000 men mobilized overnight to take positions at 30-kilometer intervals along the entire length of the berm, Morocco's 1,700-kilometer defensive wall¹. Members of the Sahrawi Diaspora in Europe who were eager to fight flew into the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf and the Sahrawi government evacuated their hospitals in anticipation of Moroccan air strikes. This incident constituted the one time since 1991 that the organization leading the Sahrawi people's struggle for independence in Western Sahara, the Polisario Front, sought to violate their 1991 ceasefire with Morocco.

Press reports explained the Polisario Front's rapid mobilization as a response to the Paris-Dakar rally raid's plans to cross through Polisario-controlled territory without previously obtaining permission from the Polisario Front.² However, a far more serious reason behind this sudden escalation stems from Moroccan violations of the ceasefire. While demining the five-kilometer buffer zone between the berm and Polisario-controlled territory, a Moroccan army unit fired shots at the Polisario Front. This incident exemplifies the precariousness of the situation in Western Sahara. Already frustrated with the international community's refusal to hold Morocco accountable and the numerous times that the UN reneged on promises to the Polisario Front and Sahrawi people, the Polisario Front was ready to use these infringements on their territory to reignite its previous 16-year long guerilla war against Morocco.

The proclamation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic tellingly states that, "Until our people have completed the liberation of their national territory, there will be neither peace nor stability in this region."³ In fact, the massive economic costs of the conflict exhibit the consequences of this instability. A functioning Arab Maghreb Union

¹ Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 27. Boukhars 13-17

² Rory Carroll, "War on Want: Saharan rebels stranded in camps: In the field: Casualties of the stalemate between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario rebels, 100,000 refugees subsist on aid," *The Guardian* (London), February 7, 2001.

³ "Proclamation of the First Government of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic," February 27, 1976, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://www.arso.org/03-1.htm>.

remains impossible as long as Morocco continues to assert its rule over Western Sahara and Algeria supports the Polisario Front in its calls for independence. The ICG cites a loss of 2 percent of each country's GDP and a loss of 3 billion US Dollars of foreign direct investment into the region stemming from the nonexistence of the Arab Maghreb Union⁴. Lack of trade, infrastructure, and security cooperation difficulties between the Maghreb countries also hinders development in the region⁵. Morocco bears additional costs of promoting development in Western Sahara as opposed to other regions of the country and devoting up to half of its military budget to its presence in Western Sahara.⁶ The most significant costs of the conflict arguably fall on the Sahrawis in the refugee camps in southern Algeria who have waited through over thirty years of broken promises for referendums or settlement agreements from the international community.

Indeed, the Sahrawis and their leadership, the Polisario Front, have successfully leveraged international support to obtain widespread international recognition of their movement and legal rulings in support of Sahrawi self-determination.⁷ They have also cultivated strong allies such as Cuba and Algeria. Algeria has granted the Polisario Front governance over the refugee camps and provided them with weapons, food-aid, and financial assistance. The Polisario Front also has a colonially demarcated space that it envisions as the future territory for Sahrawis, but neither the international institutions who have supported the Polisario Front nor its allies have succeeded in helping the Polisario Front achieve its ultimate goal of independent Sahrawi governance over all of the Western Sahara territory.

The goal of realizing an independent state in Western Sahara defines the Polisario Front; it is its means for creating and maintaining a popular movement. Their second

⁴ *Western Sahara: The Cost of Conflict*, Middle East/North Africa report no. 65 (Cairo/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007), 18.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁷ Most countries recognize their cause, and even those, such as France who strongly ally with Morocco still support a solution to the conflict through UN arbitration. Morocco, however, argues that Algeria has fabricated the conflict and Western Sahara is therefore a conflict between Morocco and Algeria and not Morocco and the Polisario Front.

main goal, which is synonymous with independence, includes a referendum that would allow for the self-determination of the Sahrawi people. In their speeches and public documents, Polisario leaders frequently invoke the need for Sahrawi self-determination, which indicates that it is a core tenet of their ideology. Even the constitution of SADR combines these two goals.⁸ Thus, while independence in Western Sahara comprises the ultimate goal, the Polisario Front's goals cannot be achieved without a referendum that speaks to the organization's ideology as a bottom-up movement. Nevertheless, there are no strongly compelling reasons to doubt that a referendum with an option for independence would overwhelmingly support independence in Western Sahara.⁹

The Polisario Front's tactics for achieving its ultimate goal include leveraging international support for the Polisario Front against Morocco. UN resolutions calling for self-determination in Western Sahara and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that Morocco did not have a historical claim to Western Sahara were instrumental in the Polisario Front's formation and bolster its legitimacy as a movement. While continuing to use international law to its advantage, the Polisario Front has expanded its tactics to include international diplomatic activities, grassroots organizing on human rights issues and natural resource extraction from Western Sahara, and a commitment to nonviolence that helps increase international support.

The past 22 years of the conflict's history have shown that the Polisario Front's reliance on support from international institutions contains significant shortcomings. Just as the ICJ has no means of enforcing its verdict, international human rights organizations are incapable of directly intervening to stop human rights violations. At the United Nations, the UN mission in Western Sahara, MINURSO has a very limited mandate and

⁸ "Constitution de la RASD," September 4, 1999, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://www.arso.org/03-const.99.htm>.

⁹ The Western Sahara scholar Pablo San Martin writes, "I will not be able to write that I have found a single refugee that would not vote for independence in a future referendum. If James Baker considered that Rabat rejected his plan because 'they were worried that they wouldn't win the vote', exactly the opposite could be said about the *relaxed* attitude of the Sahrawi nationalists. If it ever takes place, no one is in any doubt about the result of a just and fair consultation" Pablo San Martin, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 10.

France, Britain, and the US have repeatedly blocked efforts to expand the mandate or to require Morocco to adhere to previous agreements with the Polisario Front such as plans to go through with a referendum. Additionally the US, Britain, and France remained unwilling to persuade Morocco to accept the UN Secretary General's personal envoy, James Baker's, Peace Plan in 2003. The Polisario Front has also succeeded in cultivating significant grassroots support in Europe by hosting film festivals and marathons in the camps and participating in a program to send Sahrawi children to stay with families in Spain for the summers. These programs do succeed in increasing awareness of the conflict and contain financial incentives for Sahrawis, but the support base that they generate does not include decision makers at the UN or among Morocco's most powerful allies.

The Polisario Front's choice of tactics indicates its position of weakness. The Polisario Front controls a limited amount barren of territory east of the berm and has little self-generated income. It relies on aid from Algeria, food from the World Food Program, and remittances from Sahrawis abroad to support the population in the camps. The army, although able to quickly mobilize and threaten Morocco's stable hold on the territory through guerilla attacks, cannot fully defeat Morocco's armed forces. Algeria, the Polisario Front's most ardent supporter, is no longer willing to support the Polisario Front in a war with Morocco and cannot put pressure on Morocco.¹⁰ Given this position, the Polisario Front has chosen to cultivate international support while leaving violence as a threat on the table if the international community fails to act on their behalf.

While multiple historical narratives explain different sides of the conflict surrounding Western Sahara, this paper focuses on the Polisario Front, its narrative of the conflict, and its goal of obtaining a free and independent Western Sahara. A small body of academic and policy literature discusses the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara. Most

¹⁰ "Abdelkader Messahel, the Algerian minister-delegate for Maghreb and African Affairs, told Crisis Group: If the Great Powers wanted a solution, it would be very easy. Is it that the status quo serves the interests of the United States, France or Spain? I do not know. But they have not put their weight into the balance. Algeria does not have the power or the means to put pressure on Morocco but they do." *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, Middle East/North Africa report no. 66 (Cairo/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007), 5.

of the policy papers either subscribe to the Moroccan narrative of the conflict or provide detailed accounts of the UN-mediated negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario. The academic literature, on the other hand, explores Sahrawi nationalism and culture. This paper will combine both approaches by focusing on the Polisario's tactics as gleaned from Polisario-produced documents and media and explaining their policy implications without focusing on the minutia of UN negotiations.

Background

As the name implies, the territory of Western Sahara does contain a significant amount of desert. Nevertheless, its phosphate deposits, minerals, and plentiful fisheries render the territory valuable for any governing power. The usually dry Saqiyya al-Hamra⁹ river lies in the northern part of the territory along with the city al-‘Ayun near the Atlantic coast and Smara to the east. This region also contains the territory’s largest phosphate deposit, Bou Craa’ and a 98 km-long conveyor belt connecting the phosphate deposit to the ocean. The region towards the south, Rio de Oro, is home to the Dakhla peninsula, upon which the city of Dakhla is situated. Western Sahara’s southern boundary shares a border with Mauritania while a small corner in the Northeast sits next to Algeria. Some Sahrawis live in this northeastern corner, but a much larger population lives just over the border in refugee camps in southern Algeria. Others, however, still remain in the Moroccan-controlled territory.

In 1884, the Spanish officially colonized parts of the territory now known as Western Sahara, but their presence remained limited to the coast for a long period of time. In 1912 Spain and France determined their borders in the region with each of them administering territories in Morocco. Upon Moroccan independence in 1956, Spain ceded the northern part of its territory to Morocco. This period of time also witnessed a large guerilla insurgency against the Spanish and French as part of a broader anti-colonial movement. These guerillas who were mostly nomads, under the guise of Jaysh al-Tahrir, would raid French and Spanish outposts and then retreat into newly independent Morocco. In 1958 the joint Spanish and French counterinsurgency operation Ouragan quickly repressed the guerilla movement and, along with a drought, caused a massive Sahrawi migration to cities.

Once the Sahrawi nomads relocated to the cities in Western Sahara and southern Morocco, a new Sahrawi identity began to emerge as different tribes settled in the same areas. Spanish investments in the phosphate industry brought massive wealth to Spanish Sahara and encouraged migration to its cities. In this context, Sahrawis from different

tribes and areas began to mix and identify with each other as opposed to the Spanish. San Martin summarizes identity formation during this time:

Young Saharawis from the Ulad Delim, Tridrarin, Arosien, Ait Lashen, Ulad Chej, Imeraguen, Berikala, et cetera, studied and played together in the streets of Villa Cisneros (now called Dakhla). At school there were no differences between them, as there were no differences between the sorts of jobs and salaries of their parents and older relatives. The economic revolution of the territory dramatically undermined the traditional social structure and displaced descent and kinship to a secondary role as a principle for the organization of social life.¹¹

This new social structure later helped solidify a Sahrawi cultural consciousness where Sahrawis from Western Sahara, Morocco's Tarfaya Strip to the north of Western Sahara, and Mauritania came to identify with a shared Sahrawi or Hassaniya culture.

While the constitution of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) describes the Sahrawis as an Arab, African, and Muslim people, certain aspects of their culture separate them from their Moroccan neighbors. Some of the most prominent cultural differences include speaking the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, instead of Moroccan Arabic, women wearing a garment called the *melfha*, a distinct tea ceremony, and an attachment to their nomadic past. A separate colonial history and shared past also distinguishes the Sahrawis from the Moroccans. As a formerly colonized people under the Spanish, the Sahrawis use Spanish as their European second language as opposed to the Moroccan use of French.

The first Sahrawi national movement to gain significant popularity among Sahrawis in Spanish Sahara included Mohammed Bassiri's Harakat al-Tahrir (Trans: movement of liberation). He and his followers staged a large demonstration on June 17th, 1970 in al-Zamla Square in al-Ayun. When they presented the Spanish with a petition for autonomy, the Spanish opened fire on the demonstrators killing several Sahrawis and

¹¹ Pablo San Martin, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 55.

abducting Bassiri. Bassiri was never seen again, and the demonstration became known as the Zamla Massacre, one of the first significant events in the Sahrawis modern struggle for independence.

In 1973 the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro* (Polisario Front) emerged and soon after became the sole representative of the Sahrawi people in their struggle for independence. Its leader El Ouali Mustapha Sayed had studied in Moroccan universities, grown to identify with the anti-colonial and non-aligned movements, and built a pro-independence network of Sahrawis in Morocco and later Spanish Sahara. The group's first armed action took place on May 20, 1973 in al-Khanga, and by 1975 a UN visiting mission observed that the Polisario had obtained widespread support among the Sahrawi population in Spanish Sahara.

Unfortunately for the Sahrawis, Morocco and Mauritania were vying to gain control of Spanish Sahara once Spain left. Their goals came directly up against UN calls for Sahrawi self-determination and an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that stipulated that Morocco and Mauritania did not have any historical claims to the territory. In 1974 Morocco had initially requested the UN General Assembly to call for an ICJ advisory opinion determining whether or not Spanish Sahara had initially been Moroccan territory. The two questions that the ICJ ruling answered were if Western Sahara was a *terra nullis* (belonged to no one) at the time of Spanish colonization and if there were legal ties to the territory and Morocco and the territory and Mauritania. The ICJ found that agreements that tribal leaders had made with Spanish officials during Spain's early colonization provided evidence that the Western Sahara was not a *terra nullis*. Morocco's argument for historical ties to Western Sahara included cases where Sahrawi tribes had either directly or indirectly pledged allegiance to Morocco's Sherifian sultan and King Hassan I. The ICJ, however, concluded that the allegiances between Saharan leaders and the Moroccan Sultan applied to territories within Morocco. The court ultimately ruled 14 to 2 that there were no legal ties between Morocco and the Western Sahara territory and 15 to 1 that there were no legal ties between Mauritania and the territory. Morocco,

however, had appointed the one judge who ruled in favor of Morocco and Mauritania's claims.¹²

The international community remained unable or unwilling to enforce these rulings. On October 17, 1975, the day after the ICJ decision, Morocco led the Green March where 350,000 Moroccans marched south to Spanish Sahara to reclaim their historical land. The following month, on November 14, 1975, Morocco, Spain, and Mauritania met in Madrid and divided Spanish Sahara such that it fell under Moroccan and Mauritanian governance at the beginning of 1976.

Upon the Moroccan and Mauritanian invasions of Spanish Sahara, many Sahrawis fled and resettled in the Eastern region of Western Sahara and then just over the border in Algeria. On February 27, 1976, in Bir Lahlou in the eastern region of Western Sahara, the Polisario Front declared the establishment of the first Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which quickly became responsible for caring for the thousands of Sahrawi refugees fleeing the Moroccan and Mauritanian invasions of Western Sahara. Since then, SADR, under the Polisario Front's leadership, has established a functioning government in refugee camps in southern Algeria that administers day-to-day aspects of life.

With the exception of popularly governed camp administration, the Polisario Front's decision-making takes place among an unclear elite group of Algerian officials and Polisario "historic" figures.¹³ In 1976, after the death of El Ouali Mustapha Sayed the General Congress containing elected delegates chose Mohammed Abdelaziz as the Polisario Secretary-General. A 5th General Congress meeting that was held in secret in 1982 further solidified Abdelaziz's power by combining the Polisario Secretary-General position with that of RASD President. Such authoritarian leadership, however, did not go unchallenged among the population in the camps. Upon the end of armed conflict in the early 1990s, the camps underwent a "revolution within the revolution" that led to changes in the governing structure at the 1991 General Congress. These changes included replacing some of the Polisario's unelected governing bodies with an elected National

¹² Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, 109.

¹³ *Western Sahara: The Cost of Conflict*, 13.

Secretariat along with a new constitution. Nevertheless, Abdelaziz continues to hold considerable authority and was reelected during a contested election at the 2003 General Congress and an uncontested one in 2007.

Despite its egalitarian rhetoric, the Polisario Front's authoritarian leadership continues to decide the organizations course of action in terms of warfare and international diplomacy. The elite diplomatic corps of Polisario Front representatives to the UN and a variety of countries presumably has some input in agreement the Polisario makes as part of the UN process and the nature of bilateral relations with other countries. When the Polisario Front negotiators at the UN accepted the Baker Plan in 2003 Sahrawis in the camps were disturbed that their diplomatic corps had accepted such an agreement without consulting the population first. ¹⁴ One of the other points of contention in the Polisario Front's hierarchical structure includes allegations that power is concentrated among certain factions of Rgaybi tribe members, which causes unequal distribution in international aid. ¹⁵

The fifteen years following SADR's establishment contained a long war with Morocco and Mauritania. Mauritania, however, was overwhelmed by the Polisario Front's raids on its army and surrendered its share of Western Sahara in 1979. Morocco quickly invaded the remaining portion of the territory and continued fighting the Polisario Front. By 1981, the Polisario Front had gained control of most of Western Sahara with the exception of the cities in the northwest, Al-Ayun, the phosphate mines, and Smara. With support from France, the United States, and Saudi Arabia, Morocco began building a sand wall in concentric circles spanning out from the cities in the North. Once completed, the wall disabled the Polisario Front's guerilla operations and led to a stalemate.

At the behest of the UN, the Polisario and Morocco signed a cease-fire agreement in 1991 that included a UN mission to monitor the ceasefire, MINURSO, and a referendum allowing Sahrawis to choose between independence or Moroccan rule.

¹⁴ Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, 121.

¹⁵ *Western Sahara: The Cost of Conflict*, 14.

Instead of working towards a compromise, for the next ten years, Morocco and the Polisario Front were at “war by other means.”¹⁶ From 1991 until 2000 Morocco and the Polisario Front deliberated over who would be eligible to vote in the referendum and who could be defined as a Sahrawi. Morocco attempted flood the voting body with Moroccans who might vote in their favor but after realizing that they could not win the vote, Morocco abandoned plans for the referendum in 2000.

Throughout the next ten years, the UN Secretary General’s personal envoys mediated negotiations between the Polisario Front and Morocco. James Baker, the personal envoy from 1997-2004, put forward two plans for four-year trial periods of Sahrawi self governance under Moroccan rule to be followed by a referendum. The parties rejected both of these plans, and Baker resigned in frustration in June 2004. During this time, Morocco drafted its own autonomy plan for the territories that it intended to implement while nonviolent Sahrawi protests in the territories broke out and became a regular occurrence beginning in 2005. In 2009 the Secretary General appointed the former US ambassador, Christopher Ross as his new personal envoy. Since then, Ross has conducted negotiations on and off with no success.

¹⁶ Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, xxix.

International Support

The Polisario Front's tactics for obtaining sovereignty for Western Sahara through a referendum are heavily reliant on international legal and diplomatic norms. Due to the Polisario Front's position as a non-state actor with limited resources, incorporating accepted international norms into its strategy and goals provides the organization with leverage against a powerful adversary. By utilizing already accepted institutions such as international law, the UN, and predefined territorial boundaries, the Polisario Front legitimizes its claims for Western Sahara while attempting to gain more powerful allies.

Calling for a referendum for Sahrawi self-determination also signifies the Polisario Front's adherence to widely accepted international processes. Years before the Polisario Front existed, the international community advocated for self-determination for people under colonial rule. In 1960 the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 1514, which, in section XV declared all people's rights to self-determination.¹⁷ Later resolutions specifically addressed the Spanish Sahara and called for a referendum "enabling the indigenous population of the Territory to exercise freely its right to self-determination."¹⁸ By incorporating self-determination into their ideology, the Polisario Front conveys its reliance on international norms and institutions in defining its movement and bolstering its legitimacy.

Indeed, the ICJ ruling in 1975 legitimized the Polisario Front's claim on Western Sahara. Without this ruling and the UN resolutions for a referendum, the Polisario Front's goals would not have as much legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. If the ICJ had instead ruled in favor of Morocco's historical claim to Western Sahara, the Polisario would have less of a legal basis for seeking independence. These claims are therefore fundamental to the Polisario Front's legitimacy. They additionally show the Polisario Front's reliance on international institutions to rule in their favor. However,

¹⁷ United Nations General Assembly. Resolution 1514 (XV). "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples." 14 Dec 1960.

¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly. Resolution 2229 (XXI). "Question of Ifni and Spanish Sahara." 20 December 1966.

these rulings are simply legal opinions since the ICJ has no means of enforcing its verdict that the Sahrawis have a historical claim on Western Sahara.

Since international legal opinions and UN resolutions are so fundamental to the Polisario Front's legitimacy, the Polisario leadership frequently invokes these rulings. Articles in the *Sahara Press Service* regularly detail letters that the Polisario Front leadership writes to international organizations such as the UN and AU or to specific countries imploring them to enforce international law.¹⁹ These letters, which rarely lead to concrete action, have a symbolic rhetorical effect in reminding the international community that it has continuously failed to enforce the rulings that bestowed legitimacy upon the Polisario Front's cause.

Additionally, the Polisario Front's reliance on the UN for its financial support and role in presiding over negotiations has helped increase quality of life in the camps but has not worked in the Polisario Front's favor politically. As previously stated, UN resolutions proved instrumental in defining the Polisario Front's goals, but the UN supplies the Polisario Front with numerous other means of support in mitigating the Western Saharan conflict. By mediating negotiations between the Polisario Front and Morocco, the UN plays an active role in helping the Polisario Front reach a final settlement. Second, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which was originally responsible for implementing the referendum, monitors the cease-fire, and helps implement confidence building measures on behalf of the Polisario and Morocco. Third, UNHCR and the UN World Food Program provide aid for the majority of Sahrawi refugees in the camps with UNHCR also overseeing family visits between Sahrawis in the camps and territories.

¹⁹ One article says "The Moroccan authorities of occupation insist on maintaining its colonial policies in Western Sahara against all the requirements of the international law" adds the President Mohamed Abdelaziz in his letter to OHCHR and AU Commission." "Western Sahara: President of Republic Draws Attention of Ohchr to Deteriorating Situation of Human Rights in Occupied Territories," in *AllAfrica*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, September 13, 2012, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201209170798.html>.<http://allafrica.com/stories/201209170798.html>

Despite the UN's influential role in the conflict, the UN Security Council's permanent members are unwilling to expand MINURSO's mandate and persuade Morocco to adhere to UN-brokered agreements. For example France refused to fully endorse Baker's 2003 Peace Plan or coax Morocco to compromise on its refusal to allow for a referendum with the option of Western Saharan Independence. France's position thus resulted in a watered-down Security Council resolution in 2003 expressing "strong support" for the Peace Plan and calling for a "mutually acceptable solution," thereby not pressuring Morocco to adjust its position.²⁰ In addition to France's unfailing support for Morocco's position, the US and UK at times are also unwilling to put pressure on Morocco for fear of jeopardizing an important geo-political alliance. This dynamic renders the Security Council unsupportive of the Polisario Front's position and exacerbates the power imbalance between the Polisario Front and Morocco.

One of the Polisario Front's major complaints about the UN process lies in the UN's inability to monitor human rights in the occupied territories. In one of the many letters to the United Nations, SADR president Abdelaziz writes:

We stress the UN responsibility in ensuring the protection and monitoring of human rights in Western Sahara on a territory under its supervision, and thus to rapidly take all the necessary measures to enable the Saharawi citizens of their fundamental rights to security, expression, assembly and peaceful demonstration, as to end to the brutal repressive practices carried out by Moroccan occupation state.²¹

However, the UN remains unable to expand MINURSO's mandate to include human rights monitoring because Morocco has persuaded France to block this initiative. In 2013 the US mission to the UN under Susan Rice's leadership wrote human rights monitoring into their draft resolution for renewing MINURSO's mandate but omitted it upon France

²⁰ *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, 3.

²¹ . "Saharan government condemns Moroccan repression, urges UN to execute resolution," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, May 3, 2013, LexisNexis Academic.

and Morocco's strong rejection. To this date, MINURSO is the only UN peacekeeping mission without a human rights monitoring mandate.

Nevertheless, widespread human rights abuses in the territories help the Polisario Front gain international support and sympathy. According to the *Sahara Press Service* and international human rights groups, nonviolent protests calling for Sahrawi self-determination regularly face Moroccan police forces attempting to disperse the protestors with batons. The Moroccan authorities often raid Sahrawi homes following the protests and arrest activists and participants. Sahrawi activists in Moroccan jails frequently report being tortured, and many of these activists have gone on hunger strikes to protest their detentions. One young man who spent six and a half months in al-Ayoun's Black Prison due to his participation in a demonstration recounts his experience in prison:

I was prisoner inside a small cell which could not accommodate more than 20 people, but there were more than 60 persons crowded into the cell. This especially proved a problem when we tried to sleep. We were not allowed blankets during the winter season, and we were denied doctor visits by the order of the prison director Abdel Ilah Zanfouri.⁷⁴ There was no running water in the room and we had only five containers of five liters per day for all 60 of us. Our families were not allowed to give us clothes because the investigating judge's order prohibited the introduction of clothes and cigarettes. We were also denied the opportunity to leave the cell and to go to the yard...we were constantly beaten by prison employees and auxiliary forces brought from other cities to torture us.

These human rights abuses thus remain a focus for the international human rights community that advocates against human rights abuses on behalf of the Sahrawis in the Territories.

One of the high profile hunger strike cases occurred in 2009 when the Sahrawi human rights activist Aminatou Haidar was denied entry to Western Sahara upon attempting to return to her home in the Moroccan-controlled territories. When filling out

the customs form on her flight to al-Ayoun from abroad, Haidar declared that she was a Sahrawi citizen en route to the “Territory of Western Sahara.” Upon receiving her form, the Moroccan authorities declared that she had renounced her citizenship, confiscated her passport, and expelled her to the Canary Islands. Haidar then undertook a 32-day hunger strike in the Canary Islands, which gained significant attention from the international community and eventually pressured Morocco to allow her to re-enter Western Sahara. Haidar has received numerous international awards and nominations such as the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights award for her commitment to nonviolent protest and human rights in Western Sahara. She also travels internationally to speak on behalf of the Sahrawi people.

Another event in the territories that garnered international attention includes the Gdiem Izik protests in October 2010 where thousands of Sahrawis erected a tent camp near al-Ayoun to protest discrimination, poverty, and human rights abuses. Clashes between the Moroccan authorities and protesters occurred on October 24th killing one Sahrawi boy and injuring three others. Moroccan authorities then violently dismantled the camp on November 8th 2010 and arrested roughly 200 Sahrawis throughout the following month.²² Many of the Sahrawis who were arrested were tried via military tribunal and have reported being tortured during their detention.²³ In February 2013 Morocco allowed international observers to attend a trial in military court for 24 Sahrawi activists 23 of whom were sentenced with upwards of 20 years in prison. A report from the RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights notes that, “The Sahrawis identified as human rights defenders received the harshest sentences, including a life sentence for one defendant in absentia who was previously tried and acquitted by another tribunal.”²⁴

²² "Morocco military trial of Sahrawi civilians flawed from the outset," Amnesty International, last modified February 1, 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/morocco-military-trial-sahrawi-civilians-flawed-outset-2013-02-01>.

²³ *Nowhere to Turn: the Consequences of the Failure to Monitor Human Rights Violations in Western Sahara and Tindouf Refugee Camps* (Washington, DC: Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, 2013), 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Multiple international organizations such as Amnesty International, the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, and Human Rights Watch monitor events such as this trial along with the general status of human rights in the territories and camps to the best of their abilities. The Polisario Front leadership and the *Sahara Press Service* cite these organizations' reports to add legitimacy to Sahrawi complaints about human rights in the occupied territories.²⁵ These organizations along with grassroots pro-Sahrawi groups throughout the world also provide the Polisario Front with a valuable international network that advocates on its behalf. Human rights issues, therefore, help the Polisario Front gain an international network of supporters without having to completely create its own. Nevertheless, human rights organizations remain paralyzed by the same issues as the ICJ because they have few means for enforcement and cannot directly intervene to stop the human rights abuses that they observe.

The battle over natural resources in Western Sahara also generates significant international attention. Morocco has sought to develop Western Sahara economically by cultivating the natural resources in the territory such as fishing, oil and gas, solar power, and phosphates. The Polisario Front, however, believes Morocco's licenses for foreign companies to extract natural resources from the territory are plundering the resources of their future state. The UN Undersecretary General for Legal Affairs supported the Polisario Front's opinion in his 2002 ruling that Moroccan contracts for oil exploration in Western Sahara violated international law for non-self governing territories.

Other mechanisms have achieved limited success in preventing companies from buying Western Saharan natural resources from the Moroccans. The EU fisheries agreements with Morocco that allow EU vessels to fish off of the entire coast of Morocco and Western Sahara remains a source of contention for the Sahrawis. At times European

²⁵ In a letter to the organization Liberal International, President Abdelaziz discusses Morocco's trial of Sahrawi activists, "A host of international human rights organisations and groups have also expressed their deep concern about the proceedings of this unjust trial, which Amnesty International has considered flawed from the outset. In addition, Amnesty International underlined that "the trial of civilians before a military court does not meet internationally recognised standards for a fair trial." "Polisario leader urges Liberal International to seek arbitrary verdicts reversal," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, February 28, 2013, LexisNexis Academic.

Parliament members and EU states such as Sweden and Norway have voiced support for the Polisario Front's calls to respect the laws surrounding resource extraction in non-self governing territories. In December 2011, the European Parliament failed to renew the treaty citing overfishing and economic costs of the treaty in addition to qualms about the territory of Western Sahara. The European Parliament, however, has renewed the treaty since then.

The civil society organization, Western Sahara Resource Watch, monitors companies extracting and purchasing natural resources from Western Sahara through Morocco and lobbies them not to do so.²⁶ Their website lists ten companies that have ceased extracting natural resources from Western Sahara as a result of their pressure.²⁷ This group thus constitutes another international network that the Polisario Front depends on to work in its interests. Preventing natural resource extraction thus helps raise international awareness of the conflict and cultivate international grassroots support. Nevertheless, just as with many of the other sources of the Polisario Front's international support, these grassroots networks are not always capable of enforcement. For example Pro-Sahrawi activists have not been able to convince oil companies to halt exploration in Western Sahara.

The Polisario Front also seeks to assert its authority over natural resource extraction in the part of Western Sahara under its control. In August 2013, the Sahrawi Coordinator with MINURSO announced that an Australian company had agreed on a contract with SADR for mineral exploration in the liberated territories east of the berm.²⁸ SADR has also completed agreements with nine oil companies to allow for exploration in

²⁶ Western Sahara Resource Watch describes itself as an "international network of organizations and activists researching and campaigning the companies working for Moroccan interests in occupied Western Sahara" <http://www.wsrw.org/a114x515>

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ "Investment in natural resources in Saharan 'liberated territories' sought," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, August 24, 2013, LexisNexis Academic.

the same area.²⁹ Selling natural resources in the territories ties into some of the Polisario Front's other strategies to normalize SADR's role as a government and render it self-sufficient in addition to symbolically investing in the part of Western Sahara that it can control.

In many respects, the Polisario relies on international law to add legitimacy to its movement and international organizations to enforce these laws. The ICJ ruling in 1975 coupled with the multiple UN resolutions that preceded it provided the Polisario Front with an international foundation for its movement. In addition to calling on the international community to aid them in achieving independence for Western Sahara, the Polisario Front depends on the international community to address human rights abuses in Western Sahara and prevent resource extraction. All of these initiatives help the Polisario build an international network of allies in support of a free Western Sahara, but the members of these networks are either powerless in furthering the Polisario Front's goals or remain bogged down by divisions within the UN Security council.

²⁹ "Western Sahara: Saharawi Delegation Meets SADR Partners in London," in *AllAfrica*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, March 20, 2014, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201403201713.html>.

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic

The Polisario Front's functioning government in the refugee camps in Algeria, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, fosters a sense of being a distinct people for the Sahrawis while showcasing the Sahrawis' capability for self-governance to the international community. The Sahrawis comprise the administration for the camps, distribute aid, and provide medical care for its inhabitants. This directly contrasts with the situation in most refugee camps internationally, which contain a large NGO presence and have international organizations distributing food aid. In the camps in Tindouf, the Sahrawis themselves distribute the food aid from the World Food Program. All of these activities are carried out through different popular committees within SADR's government. In addition to presiding over activities in the camps, the Polisario Front, through SADR acts as the Sahrawis' representatives abroad fostering diplomatic relations with other countries and participating in international organizations. These two primary functions of SADR and its successes in administering the camps and conducting diplomatic relations abroad provide a model for the future state they wish to govern in Western Sahara.

SADR's activities as a state in exile also foster a sense of belonging among the Sahrawi population. As Randa Farah argues, the Sahrawis' ability to have institutions on "borrowed" Algerian territory turns refugees "into virtual citizens of a Sahrawi state-in exile" and entrenches "a sense of belonging to a unified Sahrawi nation."³⁰ These institutions include government administration buildings, free and compulsive public education, Sahrawi-run healthcare, and a functioning army. The Sahrawi government also attempts to promote institutions or create items that symbolically denote a nation. The Sahrawi flag remains the most ubiquitous of these symbols as it hangs on the SADR administrative buildings and demonstrators use it in protests in the occupied territories.

Although the Polisario Front's efforts to offer free public education to its population, eliminate epidemics in the camps, and peacefully distribute food aid prove

³⁰ Randa Farah, "Sovereignty on Borrowed Territory: Sahrawi Identity in Algeria," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 2010, 59.

impressive in the eyes of the international community, its attempts to operate as a state on borrowed territory belie the unconventional nature of its statehood. Operating in one of the most barren parts of the Sahara desert, the *hamada*, the Polisario Front has minimal self-generated income and resources at its disposal. The Sahrawi population primarily relies on food-aid from the World Food Program, which has proved difficult in recent years as donor countries faced economic crises causing the WFP to reduce its aid to SADR. Furthermore, the Sahrawis' starch heavy diet from this aid results in widespread malnutrition.³¹ Undersupplied hospitals and schools along with rampant unemployment among the Sahrawis in the camps also indicate the Polisario Front's inability to provide for its population. Indeed, many of the Sahrawis with university degrees from abroad return to the camps unable to put their education to use. Despite a well-organized governing and public services system in the camps, the Polisario Front's dependence on the UN and international NGOs to fulfill its population's basic needs exemplify the limits of its statehood.

The Polisario Front's diplomatic activities internationally provide another example of its efforts to operate as a state and present itself abroad as a competent governing power. SADR participates in AU activities as a full member and also attends meetings for the Non Aligned Movement and Socialist International. Over eighty countries have recognized SADR, but many of these countries have revoked or frozen their recognition. Of these eighty countries, fourteen host SADR embassies. Additionally, the Polisario Front sends representatives to countries that have not recognized SADR such as the United States, Spain, the UK and France.

These diplomatic activities enable the Polisario to cultivate a network of countries that vocally support the Sahrawi cause and maintain contact with pro-Sahrawi grassroots organizations abroad. Sahrawi citizens also benefit from these diplomatic activities through scholarships that allow them to attend universities in Spain, Algeria, and Cuba. The Polisario Front thus receives from some measure of international political support,

³¹ Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, 132.

but none of the states that officially recognize SADR are powerful enough to influence Morocco or UN Security Council members' positions on the conflict.

SADR's army, the Saharan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), also plays an important role in the conflict in that it adds legitimacy to the Polisario Front's threats to renew guerilla warfare. Under the current ceasefire, SADR's army contains between 3,000 and 6,000 soldiers, but could probably mobilize a much larger force from its adult male population within 24 hours to recommence fighting.³² Despite its inferior technology to Morocco, the SPLA has the advantages of superior knowledge of the territory, the ability to surprise Morocco with hit-and-run tactics, the choice of when and where to attack, and can utilize sandstorms that disable the Moroccan Army's technology.³³ Furthermore, SPLA troops are continuously stationed at observation points along the berm. In addition to rendering threats to return to violence plausible, the SPLA's constant preparedness also conveys the Polisario Front's hesitancy to rely on the international community to act on its behalf if Morocco were to make advances east of the berm.

³² Michael Bhatia, "The Western Sahara under Polisario Control," *Review of African Political Economy* 28, no. 88 (June 2001): 294.

³³ *Ibid*, 295.

Nonviolent Movement

Given the Polisario Front's history as an armed guerilla group, its current nonviolent tactics denote a conscious choice to not use arms in the Sahrawi quest for independence. As previously mentioned, the Polisario Front and Morocco have upheld the 1991 ceasefire, which shows the Polisario Front's commitment to honoring their internationally sanctioned agreements. In addition to not renewing guerilla operations, the Polisario front has chosen not to adopt terrorist tactics that would harm civilians. Even though the Polisario Front's army may be limited by the berm, the Sahrawis living in Moroccan controlled territories could conceivably take up terrorism. Polisario Front leadership, however, has chosen not to adopt these tactics. In a 2001 interview Polisario Front Commander Brahim Badileh explains:

All of these years, we have avoided all kinds of activities that do not comply with international law. Our soldiers are free, it would be easy to go inside the Moroccan territory, to infiltrate, and to bomb hotels or civilians, or to mine roads or the airport. We know that their main source of income is tourism. But we wait for a legal solution because we are a pacific and responsible government. We always respect the rules dictated by the UN and international organizations. We never opted for the ways of terrorism or something like that, in spite of quite a lot of provocations by the enemy. We have been bombed by napalm, including the city centers of the Sahrawis. And yet, we always have been fighting in legal terms.³⁴

Zunes and Mundy also posit that the years of war between Morocco and the Polisario Front exhibited traditional warfare with the Polisario Front staging surprise guerilla attacks on Moroccan troops. The Polisario Front's choice to only target Moroccan troops

³⁴ Michael Bhatia, "Interview with Brahim Bedileh, Commander, 2nd Military Region (Tifariti), Polisario Front," *Review of African Political Economy* 28, no. 88 (June 2001): 298-9.

further evidences its commitment to respecting international norms of warfare and not directing violence at civilians.³⁵

By eschewing terrorism and not returning to guerilla warfare, the Polisario Front appeals more easily to the international community. While some countries are known to fund terrorist movements, many of the Polisario Front's allies such as the Italian Parliament, Spanish civil society, and a handful of U.S. Congress members would most likely balk at the idea of supporting a terrorist group. The Polisario Front's nonviolent position also enables them to present themselves as victims when Morocco violently cracks down on nonviolent Sahrawi protesters and activists. This image as the innocent victims coming up against Moroccan authorities' beatings, kidnappings, and jailing and torturing activists enables the Polisario Front to appeal to the international human rights community that is familiar with Morocco's violent repression of dissent.

In addition to not taking up violent tactics, the Polisario Front actively positions itself *against* terrorism in order to negate Morocco's narrative that the Polisario and Sahrawis in camps are terrorists. Due to Morocco's lobbying efforts and large pool of funds, this narrative extends beyond Morocco and is especially prevalent in France, which is Morocco's strongest advocate in the conflict. At times, the Polisario directly addresses these accusations. For example, one *Sahara Press Service* article remarks:

The Saharawi government categorically denies the telegram signed by Serge Daniel from AFP office in Bamako that, "many fighters of the Movement of the Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in northern Mali have returned to the Saharawi refugee camps. The Saharawi government denounced this "kind of permanent manufacturing" the office of the France Press Agency (AFP) in Bamako.³⁶

³⁵ Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, 25.

³⁶ "Saharan government denies 'false' AFP dispatch," in *BBC Monitoring World Media*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, April 18, 2013, accessed January 26, 2014, LexisNexis Academic.

The Polisario also recognizes that the Sahrawis-as-terrorists narrative is a tactic on Morocco's part to undermine, "the struggle of the Saharawi people by linking it to terrorism and drug trafficking."³⁷ Any return to violence on the Polisario Front's part would add legitimacy to this narrative and potentially cause them to lose international support.

The one instance of "terrorism" on Polisario soil in 2011 when European aid workers were kidnapped elicited a strong response from the Polisario. In the same article that announced that one Italian and two Spanish aid workers were kidnapped from the refugee camps in Tindouf, the *Sahara Press Service* mentions that a Sahrawi was wounded in an exchange of gunfire while pursuing the hostage takers.³⁸ The Polisario Front leadership then proceeds, in subsequent press releases and interviews, to distance themselves from the kidnapers. President Abdel Aziz calls the kidnapping a terrorist act and voices the Polisario Front's commitment to finding the hostages.³⁹ The *Sahara Press Service* later contains a statement from the Polisario Defense Minister saying that Polisario members caught the kidnapers.⁴⁰ This turn of events highlights the Polisario Front's willingness to act against terrorism and their efforts to distance themselves from it.

However, the Polisario Front's choice to operate as a nonviolent movement remains a subject of significant controversy among the Sahrawi population. Both disenchanted youth in the camps and more seasoned members of the SPLA consider the 1991 cease-fire agreement to be a mistake. San Martin writes that many former Polisario

³⁷ "Moroccan intelligence attempting to link Saharans to terrorism, says president," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, June 14, 2012.

³⁸ "Western Saharan authorities say two Spaniards, Italian kidnapped by 'terrorists,'" in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, October 23, 2011, LexisNexis Academic.

³⁹ "Kidnapping of European supporters 'terrorist act', says Saharan president," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, October 29, 2011, LexisNexis Academic.

⁴⁰ "Moroccan intelligence behind Westerners' kidnapping, says Saharan minister," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, December 17, 2011, LexisNexis Academic.

Front fighters claim that they became able to circumvent the berm and attack Moroccan troops by the late 1980s. One of the Polisario members who he interviewed asserted that, “if we have learnt anything after more than 10 years of negotiations, it is that a bullet is always more productive than a thousands words’.”⁴¹ This same sentiment is echoed among the youth and frequently cited in policy papers.⁴² A blog post from a Sahrawi discussion forum summarizes the situation:

The young generations feel they are being left behind and their voices are not heard. They are ready to shout out loud and clear if given the OK by the Polisario. There is a general consensus that war will be the sting Moroccan need in times like this. The world would not do anything unless there is blood shed. Their patience has limits, and pressure is building up on both sides of the berm.⁴³

General disillusionment with the slow pace of the UN process has led to renewed calls for violence. Many Sahrawis spanning from Polisario veterans and retired generals to youth in the camps see bloodshed as a necessary for adding a sense of urgency to the stalled negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front.

Threats of returning to violence also appear in the Polisario leaders’ speeches and writings. During a celebration in 2013 on the anniversary of the creation of the Polisario Front, President Abdelaziz said that he had not ruled out taking up arms if the UN process failed to result in a referendum.⁴⁴ The same sentiment was present in a statement in 2011 by the Polisario representative who said that the Sahrawis will resort to military

⁴¹ Pablo San Martin, "Nationalism, Identity and Citizenship in The Western Sahara," *The Journal of North African Studies* 10, nos. 3-4 (September 2005): 579.

⁴³ Mohamed Brahim, *Sahara Opinions* (blog), entry posted May 27, 2010, <http://saharaopinions.blogspot.com/2010/05/western-sahara-and-sahrawis-cross-road.html>.

⁴⁴ "Saharans to mark 40th anniversary of outbreak of armed struggle 20 May," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, May 19, 2013, LexisNexis Academic.

tactics if a solution is not reached.⁴⁵ A long history of guerilla warfare and a regularly active army renders these threats credible. Even though the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army would probably not be able to win back the whole territory through guerilla warfare, their attacks would threaten both Morocco's and the region's stability and thereby make the status-quo unsustainable.⁴⁶

These threats to return to violence serve dual purposes. On one hand they appeal to the sections of the Sahrawi population who wish to return to violence. More importantly, without actually taking up arms, the Polisario Front and Sahrawi youth have added a sense of urgency to resolving the conflict. Judging from the many policy papers and UN reports that bring up growing discontent within the camps, the international community also recognizes that time is running short to resolve the conflict.

The Sahrawis' strict adherence to the 1991 ceasefire has shown that the Polisario Front and Algeria have been able to restrain the more violently inclined Sahrawis in the camps. The Algerian government holds considerable influence over any Polisario Front decision to renew its insurgency. When the Polisario Front mobilized over the Paris-Dakar Rally at the beginning of 2001 the Algerian General Mohamed Lamari ultimately persuaded Abdelaziz to call off his troops.⁴⁷ The Polisario Front's success in aborting its military operations in 2001 and subsequent successes in enforcing the ceasefire among its population indicates that it maintains control over when and how and if the Sahrawis in Algeria will renew their insurgency against Morocco.

Even though the Algerian government clearly has a strong influence over preventing the Polisario from returning to war, Zunes and Mundy argue that the Polisario could still go to war without Algeria's support. Funding from remittances and the camps' economy along with access to weapons through the regional black market would allow

⁴⁵ "Political goals behind Europeans' kidnapping, says Saharan envoy to Spain," in *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, previously published in *Sahara Press Service*, June 22, 2012, LexisNexis Academic.

⁴⁶ Pablo San Martin, "Nationalism, Identity and Citizenship in The Western Sahara," *The Journal of North African Studies* 10, nos. 3-4 (September 2005): 586.

⁴⁷ Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism*, 27-8.

the Polisario Front to renew its armed struggle.⁴⁸ Therefore the Polisario, not Algeria, still maintains control over when to switch from nonviolent to violent tactics. Nevertheless, neither the Polisario nor the Sahrawis in the Moroccan-controlled territories have chosen to resort to violence. Instead the Sahrawis are catering to the international community's respect for nonviolent movements and honoring the Polisario Front's role as the sole representative of the Sahrawi people. Yet, renewing guerilla warfare remains a threat on the table if the international community fails to act on the Polisario Front's behalf. Another plausible scenario could include the Polisario Front losing its monopoly on armed resistance resulting in a split among Sahrawi nationalists. If this split were to occur, Morocco would have far more difficulty negotiating settlement.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The UN negotiation process between Morocco and Western Sahara is currently at an impasse. The past twenty years have witnessed times where a solution seemed possible and times when the UN process was clearly at a standstill. Nevertheless, the Polisario Front has held strong to its commitment to the negotiation process and the ceasefire while relying heavily on the UN to help advance their goals. Needless to say, the Polisario has not achieved its goals of obtaining an independent state in Western Sahara or conducting a self-determination referendum. However, the Polisario Front has successfully maintained its position as the sole representative of the Sahrawi people. As of now, the Polisario's well-functioning state in exile, international diplomatic activities, and monopoly on violence allow the organization to represent the Sahrawi people internationally. Disillusionment with the UN process and growing calls to take up arms in the camps challenge the Polisario's authority.

In order to maintain their power, the Polisario Front must show progress in reaching its long-term goals of conducting a referendum and negotiating some sort of autonomy for the Sahrawi people in Western Sahara. Ever since the plans for a referendum were abandoned and Morocco rejected the Baker Plan, the Polisario has taken a dual track approach of continuing negotiations while working with the international community to achieve some smaller secondary goals. These smaller goals, or tactics, include building a network among human rights organizations that increases awareness of Morocco's human rights abuses and puts pressure on Morocco to rectify them. Another tactic that has achieved limited success includes the Polisario's efforts to work with international grassroots groups to pressure companies and countries not to invest in the natural resources in Western Sahara through Morocco. Their efforts have gained international attention through widely disseminated media sources such as Bloomberg,⁴⁹ Additionally, European banks and the World Bank recently refused to finance Moroccan solar power

⁴⁹ Sarah Topol, "Amid Moroccan Investment in Western Sahara, Tensions Simmer," *BloombergBusinessweek*, May 30, 2013, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-05-30/amid-moroccan-investment-in-western-sahara-tensions-simmer>.

projects in Western Sahara due to their wish to maintain a neutral position on the conflict.⁵⁰

These tactics however, have not produced a long term or sustainable agreement on the fate of Western Sahara. Through participation in the UN process, networking with grassroots groups, and activities in international organizations such as the AU and the Non-Aligned Movement, the Polisario Front's actions indicate their reliance on the international community to help them achieve their goals. Adhering to nonviolent means of protest against Morocco also shows the Polisario Front's interest in making their cause appealing to the international community.

Even though, as a non-state actor, the Polisario Front will have to rely on the international community to some extent, it must seek out allies more strategically. Morocco receives significant support from the French who use their Security Council veto power on Morocco's behalf. The Polisario should seek out another ally, in addition to Algeria, who wields power within the UN and can act on the Polisario Front's behalf. Cultivating a powerful ally can provide the Polisario Front with leverage against Morocco's ability to obstruct the UN process through France's veto power. In the past, Costa Rica and South Africa have advocated for the Polisario Front during discussions to renew MINURSO's mandate and they both contain SADR embassies. Mexico could potentially serve this role as well seeing as SADR has an embassy there, and Mexico recognized SADR in 1979. If the UN process does not produce results in the near future, the Polisario Front could also appeal to a non-involved country to mediate negotiations. Norway's stance against Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara and its support for the UN process would make its role as a mediator palatable to the Polisario Front and can help mitigate the current asymmetrical power dynamic in negotiations. Furthermore, Norway's ability to offer financial incentives or disincentives to Morocco provides a mechanism to hold Morocco accountable. Nevertheless, MINURSO would still have to maintain its mandate to monitor the ceasefire.

⁵⁰ Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Western Sahara dispute dims Morocco's solar dreams," *Reuters*, January 2, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/02/us-morocco-solar-idUSBREA010KC20140102>.

Another major stumbling block to a permanent settlement in Western Sahara includes the Polisario Front and Morocco's mutually exclusive positions. The Polisario Front wishes to obtain independence in Western Sahara while Morocco will not relinquish control over the territory. Given that granting the Sahrawis independence would halve the size of Morocco, Morocco will not completely hand over control of Western Sahara. Instead, both parties will have to concede to a power sharing agreement. This agreement will have to give the Sahrawis significant autonomy in the region while still allowing for some Moroccan oversight. Therefore, the Polisario Front may not be able to achieve its ultimate goal of independence. Nevertheless, Sahrawi self-determination through a referendum still is possible in that the Sahrawi will be able to express their opinions on a final settlement through a vote. All parties involved in the conflict support Sahrawi self-determination, but whether or not an option for independence will be on a future ballot remains a source of contention. However, as long as the negotiating parties put the final agreement to a referendum for the Sahrawis, the Polisario Front will be able to show its constituents their success in negotiating for Sahrawi self determination.

In April 2007, the Moroccan government presented the UN with a proposal advocating for an autonomous region in Western Sahara, which received backing from the US and France. Since then, Morocco has insisted on using the Autonomy Proposal as a basis for negotiations. The proposal is highly problematic for the Polisario Front because it lacks important details. First, the proposal does not specify the territory for the autonomous region, which Morocco could manipulate to flood the electorate with pro-Moroccan voters to prevent the Polisario Front from governing.⁵¹ Secondly, there are no mechanisms to ensure that Morocco will adhere to the agreement and allow for Sahrawi governance in the autonomous region. Given the Polisario Front's past experiences with the international community failing to hold Morocco to its agreements such as the MINURSO referendum, the Polisario Front has little faith that Morocco will not

⁵¹ *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, Middle East/North Africa report no. 66 (Cairo/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007), 6.

undermine Sahrawi or Polisario Front leadership in this territory. Furthermore, the proposal does not commit Morocco to negotiating with the Polisario Front but rather ambiguously mentions “other parties.”⁵² Given these shortcomings, the Polisario Front will not agree to use the Autonomy Proposal as a starting point for negotiations.

The recent change in the structure of negotiations from direct talks to a multilateral “shuttle diplomacy” operation has the potential to help parties reach a final settlement or at least resolve some of the other issues surrounding the conflict such as human rights and natural resources. Since assuming the role of the UN Secretary General’s Personal Envoy for Western Sahara in 2009, Christopher Ross has conducted 13 rounds of direct talks with no success. In the spring of 2013 after a series of meetings with Ross, the Polisario Front, Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria agreed to switch to “shuttle diplomacy.” Since then he has made three visits to Western Sahara, held two rounds of meetings with the Moroccan and Polisario Front negotiators, and also met with representatives from the Group of Friends of Western Sahara in order to gain their support for the new choreography of negotiations.⁵³ In these negotiations the parties have also agreed not to discuss the details of the negotiations with the media. Given the quiet nature of these negotiations, it is difficult to determine their status at the moment, but Ross’s “shuttle diplomacy” may produce productive negotiations.

The parties’ past positions also provide clues to what the makeup of a final agreement may look like. As previously mentioned, a power sharing agreement similar to that in the Moroccan Autonomy Proposal or the pre-referendum stage containing Western Saharan autonomy in Baker’s Peace Plan. For any power sharing agreement to work though, the Polisario Front must be confident that the international community and the UN Security Council will enforce the terms of the agreement. The agreement must therefore contain security guarantees including international policing, a human rights monitoring mechanism, and methods of recourse for if the parties do not adhere to the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ United Nations, Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara*, S/2014/258 (10 April 2014), http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/258.

agreement. Morocco will thus have to allow for more substantive international policing and observation than those granted in MINURSO's current mandate. A referendum regarding any final agreement still seems possible, but the Polisario Front will have to agree to eliminate the option of complete independence from the referendum.

In order for the Polisario Front to maintain its position as the sole representative of the Sahrawi people, time is running out. Widespread disillusionment with the UN process and rising frustration in the camps in Tindouf threaten to split the Sahrawis into groups. The Polisario Front must either show significant progress in reaching a settlement within the next three years or change its tactics in order to avoid having to accommodate a splinter group. Having a second group representing the Sahrawis internationally would complicate the already bogged-down UN process. Given this urgency, the international community and negotiating parties must act fast to ensure that a solution can be reached before it is too late.

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