

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

Western Sahara

By Stephen Zunes

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History

Traditionally inhabited by nomadic Arab tribes with a long history of resistance to outside domination, the area known as Spanish Sahara was occupied by Spain during much of the twentieth century and held for more than a decade after most African countries achieved their independence. The nationalist Polisario Front launched an armed independence struggle against Spain in 1973, and Madrid eventually promised to grant independence. Irredentist claims by Morocco and Mauritania were brought before the International Court of Justice, which ruled in 1975 that the right of self-determination was paramount. A UN Commission visited the territory that same year and reported that the vast majority of Sahrawis supported independence. Despite this and its earlier pledge to the Polisario, Spain partitioned the territo-

ry between Morocco and Mauritania in November 1975. Most of the population fled into refugee camps administered by the Polisario in neighboring western Algeria. The Polisario proclaimed independence as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and—with Algerian-supplied weaponry—fought the occupying armies. By 1982, the Polisario had liberated most of the territory, but large-scale French and American military aid reversed the war in Morocco's favor, resulting in Moroccan control of virtually the entire country, including the establishment of an 800-mile "wall" to exclude the Polisario from their own country. Meanwhile, Rabat was encouraging thousands of Moroccan settlers to emigrate to Western Sahara. A military stalemate continued until 1991, when a cease-fire was declared and plans were established for a UN-supervised referendum on the fate of the territory. Morocco,

however, has prevented the referendum from proceeding by insisting upon stacking the voter rolls with Moroccan citizens that it claims have tribal links to the Western Sahara.

Main Actors

Kingdom of Morocco—occupies Western Sahara

Polisario Front—nationalist movement of Western Sahara

Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic—government-in-exile of Western Sahara led by the Polisario Front, recognized by more than 70 countries

Islamic Republic of Mauritania—granted administration of southern third of Western Sahara in 1975; renounced claim in 1978 after defeat by the Polisario

Foreign Policy In Focus Self-Determination Regional Overview

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Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria—principal backer of the Polisario and home to most of the Sahrawi refugee population

Republic of France—major military and diplomatic supporter of Morocco

United States—major military and diplomatic supporter of Morocco

Kingdom of Spain—colonial ruler of Western Sahara

Proposed Solutions and Evaluation of Prospects

Despite initial demands by the UN Security Council in 1975 for Morocco to withdraw its occupation forces unconditionally and respect the Sahrawi's right to self-determination, the UN agreed in 1991 to organize and oversee a referendum whereby voters in the territory could choose between independence or incorporation into Morocco. The UN established a special force, known as MINURSO, to supervise the cease-fire, help with the repatriation of refugees, and make preparations for the plebiscite. Both parties agreed to base the voter rolls on residents tabulated in a 1974 Spanish census and their descendants. However, Morocco has insisted on also including large numbers of Moroccans who could trace their ancestry to Sahrawi tribes, effectively stacking the electorate in favor of incorporation. Meanwhile, Moroccan troops remain in Western Sahara, and any pro-independence political activity is severely repressed. The refugees remain in their Polisario-managed camps in Algeria.

Both France and the United States have blocked the UN from imposing sanctions or putting pressure on the Moroccans to compromise. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, through

his special envoy, former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, has been engaged in seeking a resolution. Despite Polisario threats to return to war, Algeria—which has undergone serious internal conflict over the past decade—is unlikely to provide military assistance necessary to challenge Moroccan control.

Role of U.S.

The United States, along with France, has been the principal military backer of Morocco in its 25-year occupation of Western Sahara. U.S. counterinsurgency advisers and equipment played a key role in reversing the war in Morocco's favor in the 1980s. Morocco has long been considered a strategic ally of the West, initially during the cold war as an anticommunist force and more recently as an asset against Islamic militancy. So far, the U.S. has rejected the increasingly moderate and pro-Western tone of the Polisario, though a coalition of liberal and conservative members of Congress has begun to pressure the administration to support Sahrawi self-determination. Successive U.S. administrations have feared that should Morocco lose a fair referendum—a likely scenario—it could mean the downfall of Morocco's pro-Western monarchy, which has staked its political future on incorporating what it refers to as "the southern provinces." As a result, although Washington gives lip service to Baker's mission and related UN efforts and provides a few dozen military and civilian personnel to MINURSO, the U.S. is unlikely to encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict, Africa's longest-running and final anticolonial struggle.

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