



# Executive Summary



Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press

## WAR AND INSURGENCY IN THE WESTERN SAHARA

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At the crucial crossroads between Africa and Europe, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and the “Arab World” and the West, Morocco has long had a special place in U.S. diplomacy and strategic planning. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Morocco’s importance to the United States has only risen, and the more recent uncertainties of the Arab Spring and Islamist extremism in Africa have further increased the strategic value and operational relevance of the Moroccan-American alliance. Yet, one of the pillars of the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy – its claim to the Western Sahara – remains a point of violent contention. Since the Spanish withdrawal and subsequent occupation of the territory by Morocco in 1975, the United States has poured many millions of dollars in materiel, training, and intelligence into the Moroccan armed forces. But the latter has failed to inflict a decisive defeat on the Polisario Front, whose goal is full independence for Western Sahara.

This monograph provides an historical analysis of the conflict in Western Sahara, stressing developments of relevance to the U.S. Army and to American and regional strategic interests since Morocco’s independence in 1956. Points of emphasis include evolving human and physical geography; the role of the United States, Algeria, and other outside powers in the conflict; and military tactics, operations, and strategies. The monograph also analyzes the current situation in the region and makes recommendations for U.S. policy and military planning.

The host to valuable natural resources and the largest functioning military barrier in the world, the Western Sahara has seen intifada-style resistance to Moroccan occupation since the mid-1990s. Communications and coordination between the pro-independence Polisario sympathizers in the “liberated” and “occupied” territories and in refugee camps in Algeria – facilitated in no small part by the Internet – have also increased, especially among the increasingly radicalized Sahrawi youth, who appear to have lost faith in the Polisario leadership even as they continue to embrace its basic anti-Moroccan outlook. In the meantime, terrorist and criminal elements threaten to infiltrate the territory and the camps in Algeria.

One cannot understand the Polisario insurgency’s socio-cultural roots or military achievements, or the reason why both sides eventually settled on a ceasefire without a good grasp of Western Saharan physical and human geography, neither of which has remained static. In fact, changes in both created the conditions for the insurgency and enabled it to develop so successfully. At the same time, Morocco’s slowly-learned ability to respond to and alter geographical conditions helped bring about the ceasefire of 1991, even though Morocco’s actions also made a long-term solution more elusive in some ways.

Natural resources have shaped human geography, outside interests, and insurgent movements in the Western Sahara since the Spanish period, and they may influence long-term U.S.

interests in the region. Morocco's expansion into Western Sahara did not stem from the mineral resources there, but Morocco clearly stands to gain from their full exploitation. The desire to develop the economic potential offered by the Western Saharan geography began to grow in earnest after the discovery of large phosphate deposits by the Spaniards after World War II. Phosphate is a limited resource that is crucial to modern industrial agriculture, and the global demand for this limited resource continues to rise. Fishing and the potential for oil exploitation have also shaped the development of the region and the evolving strategic interests of the major players.

Although complicated questions of ethnicity, history, and cultural traditions make generalizations about Sahrawis difficult, a complete picture of the conflict entails a good understanding of the origins and development of the Western Saharan identity, from which has emerged one of the world's youngest but most vigorous nationalist movements. The lack of agreement on the fundamental question of what constitutes a Sahrawi complicates the efforts of the United Nations (UN) and others to find reliable census figures or organize a plebiscite.

The popular appeal of the concept of "Greater Morocco" goes far to explain why Rabat has resisted outside pressures and refuses to compromise on the issue, even after the military and financial costs of occupying the territory contributed to considerable social unrest. In October 1957, the newly independent Moroccan state officially adopted the ideology of Greater Morocco, and the 'Alawi dynasty has staked its legitimacy in part to the preservation of its "southern provinces," as it calls Western Sahara. As a component of Moroccan national identity, the belief that Western Sahara is an integral part of Morocco enjoyed widespread domestic support, although the human and financial costs of the war against the Polisario have also had some negative impact on the regime's popularity.

Historically, Spanish control over the territory rested on a relatively effective system of military occupation and administration, but Spanish

military authorities failed to grasp how changing geographical and social conditions fomented the rise of nationalist resistance, especially among younger Sahrawis. Spanish military responses to the rise of Sahrawi nationalism and unrest among the youth exacerbated the growing conflict.

After the Spanish withdrawal from the territory in 1975, Morocco waged a brutal military campaign against the Polisario, and large numbers of people fled to refugee camps, where traditional tribal identities softened and Sahrawi national consciousness grew. In the meantime, the Polisario's early military successes against Morocco and its ally, Mauritania, defied expectations. The reasons for the Polisario's survival included its access to outside support and sanctuaries (mainly Algeria), Moroccan mistakes, and Mauritanian weaknesses. Also crucial were the strategic thought of the Polisario's military leadership and the tactical skills of its soldiers, their high level of morale, and their ability to use geography to their advantage. The Mauritanian armed forces disposed of relatively few human and materiel resources, withdrawing from the war in 1979 after suffering repeated attacks by the Polisario—including some deep inside Mauritania. Although they continued to fight, the Moroccan armed forces revealed ineffectiveness and operational shortcomings against the guerrilla tactics of the Polisario on various occasions.

After the repeated tactical failings of the Moroccan armed forces began to gain strategic significance, the United States greatly increased its contribution to the fight against the Polisario. After the fall of the Shah of Iran and the Polisario's damaging attacks within Morocco, Washington wanted to make sure that it did not lose another strategic ally in Africa and the Middle East. Beginning in 1981, Morocco began construction of the largest functional military barrier in the world, "the Berm," a very expensive enterprise that eventually allowed the country to occupy and control about 80 percent of the Western Sahara. The decision to erect the Berm signaled an acknowledgement by Moroccan leaders that decisive defeat of the Polisario was not possible; hence, Rabat had adopted a

strategy of static defense. The Berm facilitated the UN-brokered ceasefire of 10 years later, which occurred after both sides, thoroughly exhausted, realized that they could not achieve a decisive victory. Thereafter, the struggle continued in the diplomatic sphere.

In the occupied territory, Morocco spent much money on security and economic development, but devoted virtually no efforts to winning the hearts and minds of the Sahrawi people. It also imported large numbers of people from Morocco, in part with the hope of thereby foiling the Polisario's prediction that it would win a referendum on the future status of the territory. UN envoy James Baker exerted considerable efforts trying to reach a settlement, but resigned in 2003 in the wake of Moroccan intransigence and Washington's unwillingness to pressure Rabat.

In the meantime, dissatisfaction has grown in the refugee camps and the occupied territory, especially among the younger Sahrawis. Many express impatience and disappointment with the traditional Polisario elites and their failure to make gains on the diplomatic front. This dissatisfaction has manifested itself in intifada-style protests. Recent kidnappings and arrests suggest that terrorist and criminal organizations, some with ties to al-Qaeda, are attempting to infiltrate the Western Sahara and the refugee camps, although the Polisario appears to be making a genuine effort to keep them out. Still, they may come to constitute a major threat to regional security.

Given the importance of Moroccan stability and the threat that increased terrorist activity in the region would pose to the United States and Europe, Washington has a strong interest in promoting a solution to the Western Sahara problem. In theory, a solution could be reached that has something to offer all of the immediately-affected parties (Morocco, the Polisario, and Algeria). But Europe will need to play a leading role in propelling negotiations; the United States should consider ways to leverage European countries to do so. In the meantime, the United

States should continue to monitor the security situation in the Western Sahara closely, which has relevance to current U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) activities. At the same time, the United States should take advantage of the relatively Western-friendly, modern outlooks among many Polisario leaders and other Sahrawis, who are less susceptible to radical Islamist appeals. The Polisario should have a role in any negotiations on the future status of the Western Sahara.

The U.S. Army should use the military history of the Western Sahara as a source of concrete lessons, in particular with regard to guerrilla tactics and the role of fortified walls (the Berm) in counterinsurgency and static defense in general. It should also learn more about the Moroccan military and prepare for the possibility of more joint operations. In addition to learning about the Polisario's tactical, operational, and strategic successes and failures, U.S. military planners should also take into account the skills and limitations of the Moroccan armed forces and adjust their expectations accordingly.

The United States and Europe should support Moroccan programs of political autonomy for the Western Sahara, but the autonomy must be genuine and accompanied by significant human rights improvements. Collaboration with European countries, especially France and Spain, could prove very helpful to these ends. Further international cooperation in military planning, intelligence, and operations may also prove effective. Because the possibility exists, albeit remote, that war may again break out in the region, military planners should study the Western Sahara's military history, geography, and political and social circumstances. As the history of the region illustrates, the Western Sahara problem defies easy solutions. On the other hand, the situation there is not without hope. With proper, historically-informed policy decisions and appropriate leveraging by the United States, a solution that has something to offer all the interested parties is indeed possible.

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