

The Western Sahara Conflict: Morocco's Millstone

An Intelligence Assessment

Secret

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April 1979

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The Western Sahara Conflict: Morocco's Millstone (s)

An Intelligence Assessment

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on 23 March 1979.*

This assessment was prepared at the request of and coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia.

The author is [redacted] Office of Political Analysis. Contributing offices are the Office of Strategic Research and the Office of Economic Research. Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to [redacted]

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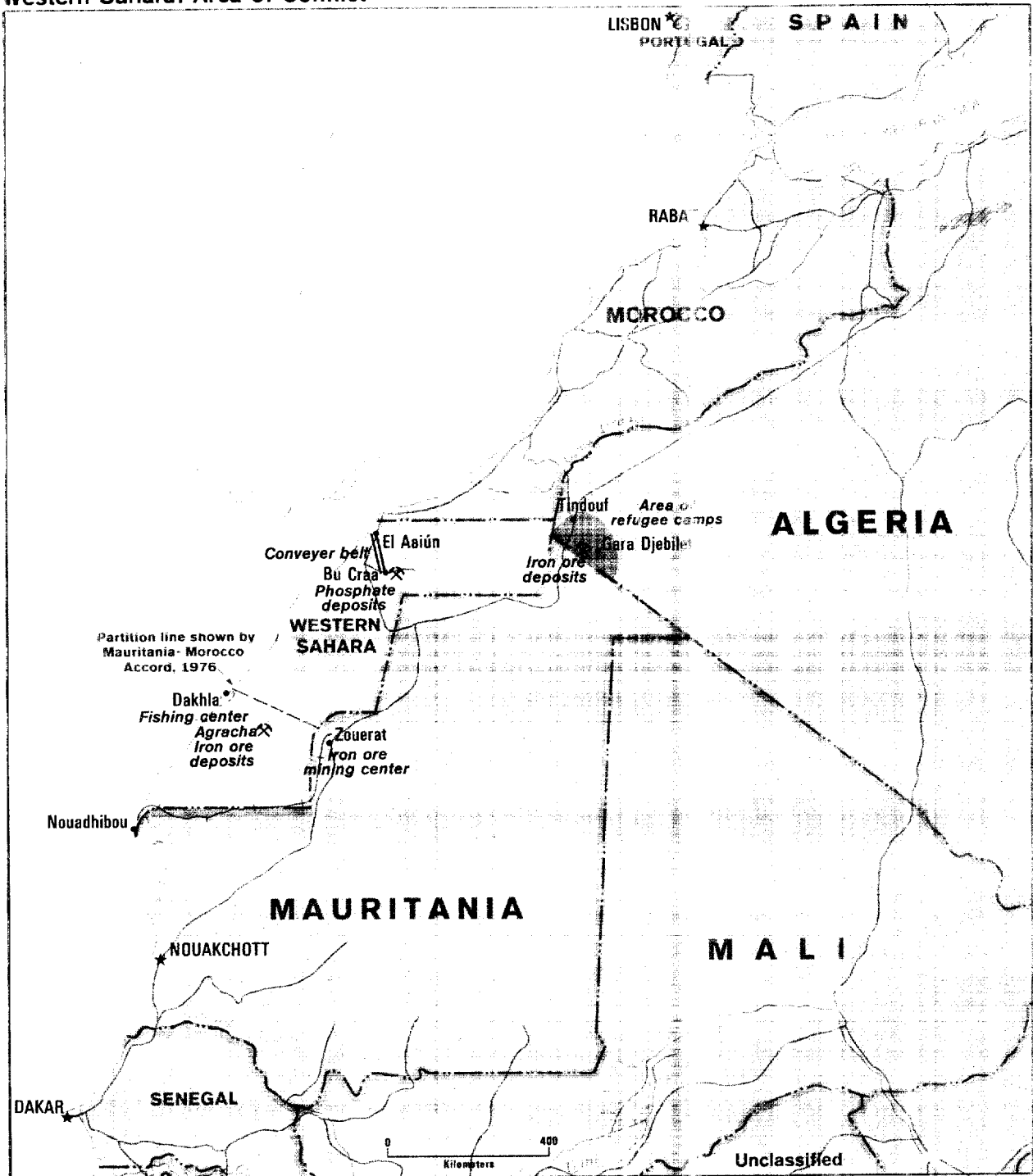
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April 1979

Western Sahara: Area of Conflict



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The Western Sahara Conflict: Morocco's Millstone (s)

Key Judgments

Morocco has lost the initiative in its effort to maintain its hold on the former Spanish Sahara in the face of unrelenting harassment by the guerrillas of the POLISARIO Front. The tide of war is running in favor of the POLISARIO, and we do not believe that Morocco will be able to reverse this trend as long as the flow of military supplies from Algeria continues and the Algerian safehaven for POLISARIO guerrillas is maintained. The Moroccan problems have been compounded by Mauritania's withdrawal from the fighting, allowing the guerrillas to concentrate their offensive against the Moroccan-administered sector of the Western Sahara. (s)

POLISARIO's 3,000 to 5,000 combatants are exploiting the tactical advantages of the sparsely populated desert terrain, and while they probably cannot drive the Moroccan Army out of the Western Sahara, they can probably make the price of staying there unacceptable to Morocco. (s)

King Hassan won popular support by his 1976 annexation of Morocco's portion of the Western Sahara, but since then the cost in men and resources has become a political liability. A political settlement is badly needed, but he would lose considerable prestige—and possibly his throne—if he were to back down on his claims. (s)

Algeria's new leadership has not slackened from the late President Boumediene's commitment to the cause of Western Saharan nationalism. Algeria continues to refuse to recognize the Moroccan-Mauritanian annexations and provides the POLISARIO guerrillas sanctuary and material support. There appears to be little immediate prospect of a negotiated settlement to this conflict without the prodding of outside mediation. (s)

NOTE—This study addresses the principal developments—leadership changes in Algeria and Mauritania and Mauritania's withdrawal from the war—that have occurred in the two years since publication of the Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, *The Conflict in the Western Sahara*.

Several developments in the dispute seem plausible over the next few years:

- Growing domestic opposition to the war in Morocco may within a year or so seriously weaken Hassan's negotiating position. In the absence of negotiations, political, economic, and military constraints will probably keep the conflict from escalating into a conventional war. (s)
- The POLISARIO will continue to move at will through the countryside, scoring occasional military successes and inflicting heavy casualties on Moroccan forces. Some guerrilla attacks—notably those in southern Morocco proper—will have considerable propaganda value. For their part, Mauritanian forces will continue to honor their cease-fire with the guerrillas and may pull out of their sector altogether.
- Buoyed by the guerrillas' battlefield successes, Algeria and the POLISARIO may become less and less disposed to compromise. A political settlement would most likely have to take the form of Moroccan acknowledgment of Saharan self-determination and territorial concessions to the new Saharan state.
- If a Saharan ministate were created in the Mauritanian sector, such an arrangement would be unstable. POLISARIO leaders would view their ministate as a liberated zone from which they would continue their insurgency in the Moroccan Sahara. They would turn to Algeria for military support when threatened by Morocco.
- Most countries have not acknowledged the partition of the Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania, and the POLISARIO's government-in-exile will slowly gain broader recognition.

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* Costly and embarrassing attacks from Algerian-based POLISARIO guerrillas seem likely to continue, and King Hassan may be pressured into a more aggressive policy toward Algeria. Given the military balance, which is greatly to Morocco's disadvantage, Hassan is likely to restrict cross-border operations to commando raids that carry minimal risks of drawing a major response from Algerian regular forces, but also afford only minimal promise of slowing the insurgency. (S)

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iv

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The Western Sahara Conflict: Morocco's Millstone (s)

After more than three years of conflict, Morocco's military capability to fight an effective counter-guerrilla war has been seriously eroded. Moroccan forces are increasingly defensive minded and show little ability to detect and respond to concentrations of POLISARIO forces. Other factors contributing to declining Moroccan effectiveness are failures resulting from inadequate maintenance, lack of spare parts, poor intelligence and security operations, command failures, and low morale. (S NF)

The POLISARIO forces are well armed and supplied. They have not yet attempted to occupy and hold territory, preferring to operate from bases in Algeria and thereby deny superior Moroccan forces a fixed target. The POLISARIO probably hopes that a protracted guerrilla war will force Rabat to accept a political settlement creating an independent Saharan state. (S NF)

POLISARIO Military Advantages/Limitations

The guerrillas continue to take advantage of their ability to move virtually at will through southern Morocco, Mauritania, and the Western Sahara. They also have benefited from the 10 July coup in Mauritania, which has resulted in a cease-fire in Mauritania and the Mauritanian-controlled section of the Sahara and allowed the POLISARIO forces to enhance their logistic capability through the establishment of additional base camps. Since the coup in Mauritania, Moroccan casualties have increased to about 100 men killed per month. Moroccan troops based in Mauritania are not expected to undertake offensive operations against the POLISARIO forces. (S NF NC OC)

The POLISARIO lacks the manpower base to pursue anything other than a guerrilla strategy. POLISARIO's objective is not to defeat the Moroccans, but to force them to the bargaining table or to withdraw. The guerrilla forces are dependent on military aid primarily from Algeria, and to a lesser extent from Libya,

in order to maintain the current level of pressure on Moroccan troops. The guerrillas would have to scale down their operations considerably if these supplies were reduced or cut off. The loss of Algerian military support would not mean the end of POLISARIO resistance, but it would probably be reduced to a level that could be contained by the Moroccan forces. (S NF NC OC)

POLISARIO Front Political Orientation

The POLISARIO Front (The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro)¹ was formed in May 1973 by members of its predecessor organization, the Saharan Liberation Front, a guerrilla movement that opposed Spanish control of the territory.² The POLISARIO's goal, enunciated at its second congress in 1974, is the establishment of an independent, nonaligned, socialist Arab republic. In their drive for independence, POLISARIO militants have mobilized and politicized large numbers of Saharans and conducted an effective public relations campaign. More important, the POLISARIO has grown in the past five years—with strong Algerian backing—from an insignificant band of fighters into a well-organized and equipped force that has driven Mauritania from the war and forced Morocco into a defensive posture. It has become a relatively independent political and military force that will have to be reckoned with in any future settlement of the Saharan dispute. (S)

The majority of POLISARIO partisans are Reguibat tribesmen, probably the most powerful of the Saharan peoples.³ They traditionally have followed a nomadic

¹ Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro were the former names of the two regions comprising the Spanish Sahara. The acronym is derived from the Spanish translation *Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro*.

² For details on the origins of the POLISARIO and background on the dispute, see Interagency Intelligence Memorandum *The Conflict in the Western Sahara*.

³ The census of 1974 gives the population of the Western Sahara as 75,000. A more recent estimate gives a range of from 50,000 to 60,000. In addition, there are an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 Western Saharan refugees in the Tindouf area of southern Algeria.



Guerrillas in Land Rovers departing for mission in Western Sahara.

Confidential ©

lifestyle, ranging with their camels across wide expanses of northwest Africa. They are known for their ferocity, pride, and skill with firearms and have dominated the eastern part of the territory for some time. (U)

Fragmentary information on the POLISARIO Front's shadowy leadership permits us to draw a few tentative conclusions on its political orientation, ideology, and objectives. The key figures are single-minded young men in their thirties who seem prepared to fight as long as necessary to achieve independence. The Front does not seem to be tied to a single ideology but is a coalition of factions representing diverse political leanings. (S NF SC OC)

The dominant ideological orientation within the POLISARIO leadership reportedly is Arab nationalism. Secretary General Mohamed Abdelaziz and most influential POLISARIO leaders stress non-Marxist Arab socialism and unity, the fight for independence, and nationalism as the main features of the POLISARIO struggle. POLISARIO leaders advocate a hardline mili-

tary approach as the only effective means of achieving independence. (S NF SC OC)

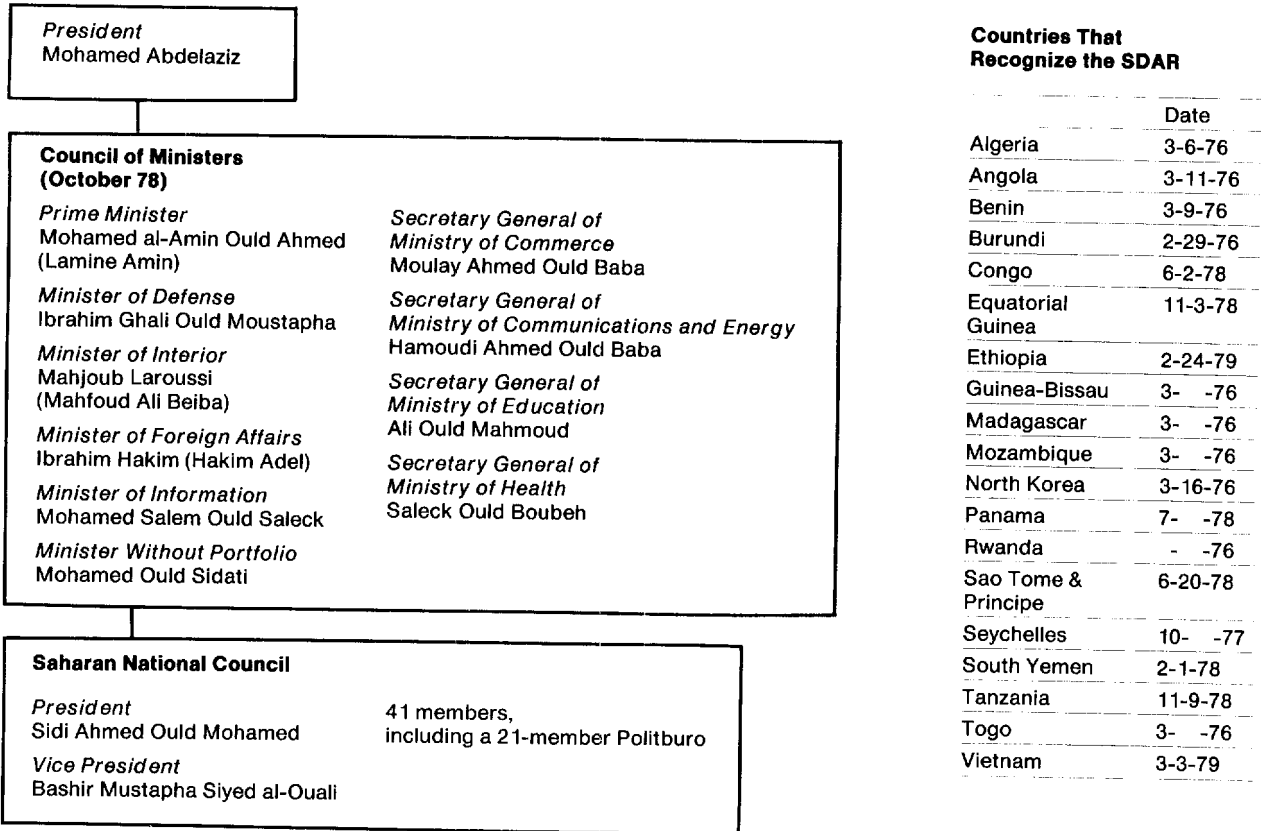
Other POLISARIO notables are identified with one or more of the following ideological lines: pro-Algerian/non-Marxist, pro-Algerian/Marxist, and pro-Libyan. There appear to be few confirmed Marxists among POLISARIO's top leaders. Some POLISARIO leaders were born in Mauritania and have close ties with a militant faction in the Mauritanian leadership aligned with Algeria. (S NF SC OC)

The POLISARIO Front has been concentrating on strengthening its shaky political credentials while conducting guerrilla operations against Morocco and, until last July, Mauritania. In February 1976 the POLISARIO Front announced the creation of the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic, in effect, a government-in-exile.⁴ The SDAR consists of a skeleton cabinet of little-known figures and a legislative council. The Front, however, is the dominant authority. A

⁴ See figure 1.

Saharan Democratic Arab Republic (SDAR)

Figure 1



nine-member Executive Committee is the formal executive body, but we suspect the shadowy Revolutionary Command Council—perhaps an amalgam of the party's political and military wings—is the real power center.⁵ There may be other influential bodies representing specific interest groups, for example, the commanders of fighting units based at Tindouf. (s)

Nineteen governments recognize the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic. Eight, including Vietnam and Ethiopia, have granted recognition in the past 13 months, suggesting that the Front's diplomatic effort is gaining momentum. Morocco's decision in March to refuse to discuss further the Sahara issue in international forums inevitably will strengthen the POLISARIO's position. Rabat's decision in March 1976 to break relations with Algiers served as a deterrent to recognition of the Saharan government-in-exile by

See figure 2.

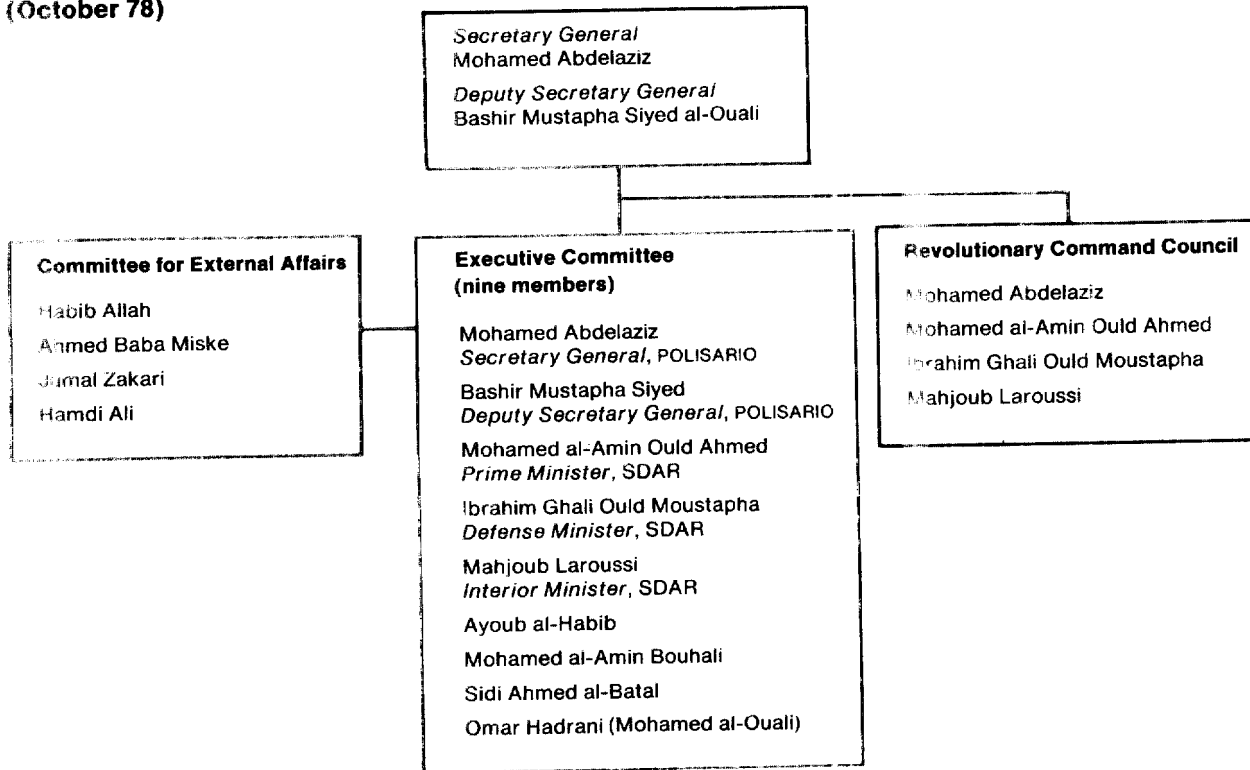
states that value relations with Morocco. Among the Arab states, only South Yemen has followed Algeria's lead in recognizing the SDAR. (s)

The POLISARIO leadership is closely allied politically to Algeria, with which it shares the common objective of weakening Morocco. That tie, however, should not obscure the fact that Saharan nationalists have their own interests and objectives and are not mere appendages of Algiers. (s)

An independent Saharan state would form close ties with Algeria and Libya, the latter probably the POLISARIO's second most important backer, and would be heavily dependent on them for financial assistance. A new Saharan regime would probably emulate these states in establishing an Arab socialist political and

**POLISARIO Front
(October 78)**

Figure 2



economic system. It would seek close political ties with "progressive" Third World states and adopt a nonaligned posture. POLISARIO leaders would probably retain interest in a relationship with the United States; they appear to appreciate the US policy of denying arms to Morocco for use in the Sahara. (S)

The leaders of an independent Western Sahara—though presumably socialists—are probably not Moscow oriented. They might, however, be susceptible to efforts by the Soviet Union and Cuba to wield influence locally. The USSR, Cuba, and other Communist states currently give limited political and nonmilitary support to the POLISARIO cause. This could provide an opening wedge for Communist penetration into a newly created Saharan state. The Soviets and Cubans, however, might proceed cautiously for fear of causing strains in their relationship with Algeria and Morocco. (S NF NC OC)

Mauritania Drops Out

Coup and Disengagement

The military coup in Mauritania on 10 July 1978 ended 18 years of rule by Moktar Ould Daddah and brought to power a government committed to ending Mauritania's involvement in the dispute over Western Sahara. (S)

The decision to cast its lot with Morocco in partitioning the territory of the former Spanish colony proved fatal to the Ould Daddah government. Algerian President Boumediene warned Daddah in November 1975 that siding with Morocco would be his undoing. As the conflict unfolded in 1976, the POLISARIO Front shifted the focus of its attacks to Mauritania, the weaker of its

two antagonists. The relentless pressure of the guerrillas on the poorly trained and equipped Mauritanian forces ultimately broke the Mauritians' will to fight. (s)

The new military government, led by President Mohamed Saleck, has, in effect, already withdrawn from the war, and it appears determined to extricate Mauritania from the dispute altogether. Mauritania has worked to preserve a cease-fire that the guerrillas declared unilaterally last July shortly after the coup. Nouakchott's leaders have made a permanent peace in the Western Sahara their overriding objective, but many key factors are beyond their control. (s)

Moving cautiously in deference to Rabat, the Mauritians have made extensive contacts with Algeria, the POLISARIO Front, and a number of potential mediators, including France, Libya, and Mali. Since the beginning of the year, the Mauritanian leadership, faced with growing POLISARIO impatience, has inched closer to a unilateral withdrawal from the Sahara. Public and private Mauritanian statements have indicated that Nouakchott now:

- Accepts the principle of Saharan self-determination.
- Would agree to a referendum under OAU or UN auspices.
- Admits tacit POLISARIO control of the Mauritanian sector of Western Sahara. (s)

The guerrillas, buoyed by recent battlefield successes, are demanding more. They argue that agreement to a settlement covering the Mauritanian portion would undermine their claim to an independent state comprising all of the Western Sahara. They reportedly have threatened, [REDACTED] to renew attacks against Mauritanian targets if Nouakchott refuses to accede to an ultimatum that calls for:

- A public statement by Mauritania that it has relinquished control of its sector of the Western Sahara to the POLISARIO Front.
- Withdrawal of Mauritanian forces from the Western Sahara.

- Mauritanian diplomatic recognition of the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic.

By early March, Mauritania's talks with Algeria and the guerrillas appeared to have reached an impasse. (S NF NC OC)

Troubled Relations With Morocco

Mauritania's courting of Algeria and the POLISARIO Front has created strains in its relations with Rabat. Such is the intention of the Algerians and the guerrillas, who exploit each opportunity to drive a wedge between Rabat and Nouakchott. (s)

The obvious inability of Mauritania to continue its role in the costly conflict has encouraged Morocco to reassess its position and look for a political rather than military solution. Both Morocco and Mauritania now agree on the need for a negotiated settlement, but they diverge on tactics and Morocco is much tougher on terms. King Hassan recognizes that a harsh Moroccan reaction against Mauritanian peace feelers might backfire and drive Nouakchott to renounce its claims to its portion of the Western Sahara, leaving Rabat even more isolated internationally. For the near term, Mauritania will probably continue to press the Moroccans to take a more flexible approach toward negotiations in return for a pledge from Nouakchott not to conclude a separate peace with the guerrillas. (s)

The principal constraint on Mauritanian freedom to seek a unilateral settlement is the presence in Mauritania of a 6,000- to 8,000-man Moroccan military force sent there in 1975-76 at the request of the Ould Daddah government. After the coup the new government requested their withdrawal. King Hassan grudgingly acceded, apparently in the belief that the political costs internationally of using Moroccan forces in Mauritania to block a separate peace would be prohibitive. [REDACTED]

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Economic Imperatives

From Nouakchott's perspective, renewal of hostilities would be economically disastrous. Mauritania's decision to withdraw from the Saharan conflict was based largely on its worsening economic situation. The war created severe strains on the budget in the past two years even though Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Arab countries provided \$400 million in financial support. During this period an estimated 60 percent of the budget was spent on defense, while nonmilitary spending was reduced by at least 20 percent. (S)

The war cut deeply into Mauritania's foreign exchange earnings. Last year repeated guerrilla attacks against the vital iron ore rail line from the Zouerat mines to the port of Nouadhibou sharply reduced iron ore exports. Combined with falling iron ore prices, this cut into foreign exchange earnings. Iron ore export earnings for 1977 were \$127 million below the average for the previous four years. (U)

Although a settlement in the Western Sahara would improve Mauritania's long-term economic prospects, several factors preclude a quick recovery. The price of iron ore—which constitutes 86 percent of Mauritania's exports—is depressed on world markets and is not expected to recover soon. Mauritania therefore will need to diversify its exports and encourage more private participation—both foreign and domestic—in development schemes. Saudi Arabia and other affluent Arab states will remain necessary important sources of investment capital and financial assistance. (S)

*View from Algiers**New Regime's Position Toward Conflict*

There is no slackening of support for the POLISARIO Front in the new Algerian Government under Chadli Bendjedid, who was elected President on 7 February. It has become clear that Algerian support for the POLISARIO Front before President Houari Boumediene's death was government policy as well as a personal commitment by Boumediene. (S)

The new leadership has emphasized continuity with Boumediene's Saharan policy, implying support for maximum POLISARIO objectives. The inflexibility of Algeria regarding a face-saving compromise with

Morocco on their dispute in part derives from internal power politics. President Bendjedid does not enjoy Boumediene's unchallenged authority and depends on the support of the Army. Until power relationships are sorted out, Bendjedid and his military backers will probably hold fast to Boumediene's Saharan policy to deny powerful rivals any exploitable openings. (S)

Algeria has no territorial claims on the Sahara, although it has steadfastly maintained that it is an interested party with political and security interests to protect. In keeping with its carefully cultivated anticolonial image, Algeria has publicly supported a referendum on self-determination for the people of Sahara. (S)

The realities of Algeria's position are more complex; Western Sahara is but one aspect of the larger problems of Algeria's relations with Morocco and Maghreb stability. Algiers opposes Moroccan absorption of the northern Sahara, with its rich phosphate deposits, because this could reduce Algerian pre-eminence in northwest Africa. The ideological divergence between socialist Algeria and the traditional monarchy of Morocco has intensified their geopolitical competition. Moreover, the specter of an irredentist Morocco, which has laid claim to part of Algeria, and memories of the 1963 border war have not faded. (S)

Views Toward a Peaceful Settlement

Algeria's role will be crucial if there is to be a negotiated settlement of the Western Sahara conflict. Only Algeria has the leverage to persuade the guerrillas to come to the conference table. The Algerians provide the POLISARIO Front with vital military assistance—sanctuary, arms, and training—without which the guerrillas' fighting capability would be seriously impaired. (S)

The chances are very slim that Algiers will decrease its support of the guerrillas in an effort to force them to accept a settlement that falls short of Saharan self-determination. There would seem to be little incentive for Algiers to abandon a policy that is succeeding in weakening its regional rival at relatively little cost. (S)

Algiers is likely to be interested in an accommodation only if Rabat is willing to discuss self-determination for the Saharans. Algerian leaders reportedly will not

urge the guerrillas to agree to a cease-fire and negotiations until they have secured a strong military position. (S NF NC OC)

The Algerians have little interest in extricating Hassan from a war that is becoming an increasingly serious political liability for him. They would probably prefer keeping the Moroccan Army bogged down in a long and costly insurgency in the hope that Moroccan military coup plotters, war-weary and disgruntled with Morocco's mounting economic problems, will topple Hassan. Algerian leaders would see the end of the Alaouite dynasty as forestalling indefinitely Moroccan aspirations for hegemony in North Africa and clearing the way for Algerian preeminence in the region. (s)

Small Cost of the War

Algiers can sustain its commitment to the POLISARIO at a relatively small cost. It presently provides financing, arms aid, logistical support, and a haven for both POLISARIO fighters and some 20,000 to 40,000 refugees near Tindouf. Financing the insurgency has not been a significant drain on Algerian resources and has not interfered with economic development, Algeria's number-one priority. (s)

The proportion of Algeria's budget spent on national defense fell from 14 percent in 1976 to 10 percent in 1978, the latter amounting to \$469 million. It is not clear that these figures include support for the POLISARIO Front. Such financial outlays, in any event, are probably small because the guerrillas have been supplied only with small arms, ammunition, and light equipment. (s)

Morocco's Limited Options

Political Repercussions

The stability of King Hassan's regime is closely tied to the outcome of his Saharan venture. Hassan committed his personal prestige to this policy. His success in forcing Spain in 1975 to relinquish its Saharan province to Morocco and Mauritania greatly boosted his popular image initially, but enthusiasm has waned in the face of military stalemate and rising costs. (s)

Morocco's leadership, despite setbacks in the war, continues to view annexation of Morocco's portion of

the Sahara as vital in domestic political as well as national strategic terms. Hassan links the successful absorption of the Sahara to his ability to compete with his primary geopolitical rival, Algeria. Having committed his personal prestige, moreover, Hassan would lose considerable domestic support—and possibly his throne—if he were to back away from Morocco's claims. (s)

The King's objective of absorbing the northern sector of the Western Sahara as an integral part of Morocco is popular, but his failure to achieve results is not. The unending conflict over mineral-rich Western Sahara is Hassan's principal preoccupation. Complaints from Moroccan citizens about the costs of the war and from students about the sacrifices involved in holding on to the Sahara have increased markedly. The King's moderate response to a highly embarrassing POLISARIO raid in late January on the southern Moroccan town of Tantan—even though intended to keep the door open for negotiations—evoked widespread criticism of the government and the King and probably contributed to a popular image that the King is weak and indecisive. (s)

The principal constraint on Hassan in preserving his hold on power is the loyalty of the armed forces. That loyalty cannot be taken for granted; the leaders of the two coup attempts in 1971 and 1972 came from the senior officer corps. Military officers, like their civilian counterparts, support Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara, but they are increasingly frustrated with the unending guerrilla war there. The inevitable strains on troops engaged in a no-win situation in the desolate Sahara have compounded other morale problems—poor discipline, lackluster leadership, and a poor logistics system. (s)

Hassan's options in reaching a resolution of the three-year-long conflict that will leave his power intact are extremely limited. The Moroccan Army has demonstrated its inability to bring the insurgency under control and is steadily losing ground to the guerrillas. Hassan recognizes that a political settlement offers the only hope of extricating himself from this predicament. It is difficult, however, to visualize fruitful negotiations, given the inflexible positions of his opponents and the lack of incentive to push them to compromise.



Moroccan soldiers and equipment captured during raid on Tantan, Morocco

Unclassified * ©

Hassan's ability to obtain a political settlement depends on a shared perception by all parties that a military solution is impossible and Morocco's willingness to make previously unpalatable territorial concessions. Algeria and the guerrillas may increasingly believe that a military solution in their favor is indeed possible. The cool response of Algeria's new leadership to the Moroccan Foreign Minister's peace feeler in an open letter on 1 February does not augur well for an early negotiated settlement. (S)

The declining fortunes of the Moroccan Army are converging with increasingly pressing domestic problems; together they encourage domestic opposition and weaken the King's position. In the absence of a political solution, the King's political skills will be severely tested in the year ahead. (S)

At some point Hassan may conclude that the risk of continuing the present policy outweighs that of chang-

ing it. With the cooperation of or coercion from the Army, he may eventually try some bold initiative, including major concessions, to break out of his increasingly constricting predicament. (S)

Economic Constraints

The Saharan venture is unlikely to divert popular opinion much longer from chronic economic problems of unemployment, inflation, and depressed wages, which are causing social unrest. The Western Sahara conflict has contributed to a marked downturn in Moroccan economic growth since late 1977 following five years of expansion. Other factors contributing to the economic slowdown are depressed prices for phosphates—Morocco's leading export—and European Community import restrictions on other Moroccan exports such as textiles. (S)

* *Photograph from Algeria Presse.*

Morocco's overall economic situation in 1979 appears considerably less favorable than it was two years ago. Foreign exchange holdings have declined steeply since mid-1977. Rabat has been forced to resort to large-scale foreign borrowing to finance a reduced version of an ambitious development program begun in 1975. Morocco's foreign indebtedness rose by about 50 percent to \$4 billion during 1977 and by September 1978 was nearly \$5 billion. (s)

Sizable expenditures on military operations in the Western Sahara have aggravated budgetary problems. Although a foreign-financed defense budget—\$800 million from Saudi Arabia alone—paid for many of the outlays through 1977, there have been large indirect costs that have fallen on the Moroccans. An estimated 40 percent of Morocco's 1978 budget of \$4.3 billion went for military expenditures, and the outlay is likely to be as high this year. (s)

Morocco's financial problems reached crisis proportions after Saudi aid flows were cut in early 1978. Since then, the burden of the Saharan war and the military modernization program has weighed heavily on Morocco. This setback, if not overcome, will force King Hassan to reconsider how much longer Morocco can finance the war. (s)

Involvement of Outside Powers

Soviet Role

Soviet sympathy for the Algerian position on the Sahara issue is clear. The Soviets have supported Algeria's calls in the United Nations for self-determination for the Sahara, and they have collaborated with Libya in support of Algeria and the POLISARIO. Moscow has sanctioned, for example, the transfer of weapons from Libyan stocks to Algeria for use in the Sahara and the border region. This method allows Moscow to remain one step removed from direct involvement. (s)

Indirect support of the POLISARIO offers several advantages to the Soviets. They have been able to avoid being pulled into deeper involvement in the crisis, particularly when direct clashes have occurred between Algerian/POLISARIO forces and Moroccan forces in the Sahara. The Soviets have also been able to

avoid unnecessarily alienating the Moroccans, with whom they have negotiated a major deal involving phosphates. In addition, neither the Arab nor African nations were backing the Algerian position, and the Soviets did not want to be openly identified with a less-than-popular cause. (s)

The Soviets have longstanding and expanding military assistance programs, a substantial economic aid program, and significant trade ties with Algeria. The integration of Soviet military equipment into the Algerian armed forces and its reliance on Soviet technical expertise have led to an expanded Soviet presence there. An estimated 1,000 Soviet military personnel and 2,500 civilians are currently in Algeria. (s)

Even so, Algiers has been an inconsistent friend. It has publicly attacked Soviet aspirations in the Middle East and has rejected a special Soviet role among the nonaligned. The late President Boumediene periodically called for the removal of the Soviet as well as the US Navies from the Mediterranean. The Soviets were disappointed with the selection of Colonel Bendjedid as Algeria's new President, favoring party coordinator Yahiaoui, who they thought might push for closer military ties with the USSR. (S NF NC OC)

The Soviets have apparently decided that they have little to gain by more forthright support for Algiers, although they remain a reliable source of military supplies. Although sympathetic to Algeria's interest in denying the Western Sahara to Morocco, Moscow has been publicly neutral on the issue in recent years and has withheld recognition of the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic. The Soviets do not want to risk their growing economic stake in Morocco, and they will probably keep Algeria uncertain about Soviet backing in the event of hostilities. (s)

The POLISARIO guerrillas currently count for little in Moscow's calculations. The Soviets are undoubtedly aware of the movement's potential value, but they recognize that Algeria wants to remain POLISARIO's principal foreign backer. Moscow probably would not want to jeopardize its ties with Algeria by seeking to influence Algeria's POLISARIO clients. Moscow has not

provided the POLISARIO any direct military support, but it has made no attempt to block Algeria's transfer of Soviet weaponry to the guerrillas. (S)

Political differences between Morocco and the USSR over Soviet and Cuban activity in Africa have not curbed the growth of commercial dealings that could make Rabat the Soviet Union's most important trading partner in Africa. The short-term prospects for Soviet political gains in Morocco are not good, but the Soviets may see in their commercial relations the basis for influence over the longer term. (S)

Of enduring importance to both countries is the \$2 billion economic aid agreement signed in March 1978 for the development of the Meskala phosphate deposits. This 30-year arrangement—which could rise to \$9 billion with trade and credit transactions—is the largest single accord Moscow has ever negotiated with a Third World country. It underscores the importance to the Soviet agricultural program of developing a stable source for this critical fertilizer component. A fishing agreement was signed the following month after Moscow assured Algeria that the agreement did not contain an implicit recognition of Moroccan claims to Western Sahara territorial waters. Moscow has also supplied to Morocco minor amounts of military equipment. (S)

If the current level of fighting in the Sahara continues, the Soviets are likely to try to pursue their balancing act. In order to reaffirm their credentials with the new regime in Algiers, they may expedite deliveries of arms to Algeria, but they would probably couple this with intensified efforts to assuage Rabat. (S)

Should large-scale fighting break out, the Soviets would offer political backing to Algeria and probably make at least a limited effort to resupply Algerian arsenals. This might consist of some resupply flights and an increased flow of seaborne arms deliveries. Nevertheless, Moscow is not likely to underwrite an all-out Algerian military effort against Morocco. (S)

The attitude of the United States toward a Moroccan-Algerian conflict would have an important bearing on Soviet policy. The Soviets do not currently view the Sahara issue as a superpower contest. But if the United

States moved dramatically to increase military shipments to Rabat, the Soviets would be under much greater pressure to respond with substantial resupply of Algeria. (S)

French Interests

President Giscard, like his predecessors, sees North Africa as France's natural sphere of influence and believes France has a special responsibility to ensure stability and preserve French and to a lesser extent Western interests there. A durable solution would extricate France from a conflict that threatens extremely important if not vital French interests. Many thousands of French live and work in the former North African colonies in positions ranging from senior advisers and company directors to mechanics and shop clerks. (S)

Paris is primarily concerned that the moderate government of King Hassan—which faces manifold domestic and foreign policy problems including the Western Sahara, will be replaced by a "progressive" regime as difficult to deal with as Algeria. Although officially neutral in the Western Sahara dispute, France is pro-Moroccan because of its economic interests in and military relationship with Morocco and the congruence of French and Moroccan security interests elsewhere in Africa. (S)

The French do not want a widening of the fighting in the Sahara nor a greater French military role, but they have been frustrated by the impotence of the Mauritanian Army—which they have been helping to train—to control the POLISARIO or protect French interests in Mauritania. (S)

With the changes of government in Algeria and Mauritania, France has tried to adopt a more balanced position. It has been acting as broker, but with little success. Paris wants to continue to improve its relationship with Algeria, with which it has more important trade ties than it has with Morocco. (S)

France has demonstrated in the past, however, that it is willing to risk Algerian hostility as well as domestic and international criticism by taking military action against the POLISARIO when it believes its interests are threatened. In the winter of 1977-78 and again in May

1978 France carried out effective air strikes in retaliation against the POLISARIO in Mauritania for the taking of French hostages from the mining complex at Zouerat. (S)

France wanted to display its determination to protect French citizens and demonstrate to pro-French governments in Africa that Paris would use force when necessary to safeguard its interests. The raids were well received by the French public, which greeted with enthusiasm the subsequent release of the French hostages. The government recognizes, however, that military intervention usually pays few dividends domestically, especially should there be French casualties. Thus, France has been careful to emphasize the selective and defensive character of its strikes in Mauritania. (S)

Should military hostilities break out between Algeria and Morocco, France would support Morocco militarily—discreetly, if possible. The French have continually stressed the need for a political solution and initially would probably offer to mediate. If unsuccessful, they probably would expedite delivery of previously ordered equipment to the Moroccans and might send some advisers. They might also provide pilots for restricted use in Morocco and the Western Sahara. Paris continues to promote the idea of an African mutual security organization, and the French might try to aid Morocco under the guise of an ad hoc African defense force. (S)

Spain's Residual Ties

Madrid's policy toward the Western Sahara is also based on a need to maintain a rough balance in its relations with Morocco and Algeria. Spain continues to pay lipservice to the Madrid Tripartite Agreements of November 1975, in which Madrid surrendered administrative power over the Spanish Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania. This position is calculated to please Morocco. Madrid has sought to hedge its bets and placate Algiers by insisting that sovereignty over the region resides with the people of the Sahara, whose aspirations toward independence must be determined in a UN-sponsored referendum. (S)

Strong Spanish security interests in North Africa are closely tied to the struggle between Morocco and Algeria. The Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on

the Mediterranean coast of Morocco are coveted by Moroccans, and Madrid worries that friction with Rabat could provoke a "green march"⁶ against the enclaves. Spain is even more determined, however, to keep its Canary Islands—where Algiers has demonstrated an ability to stir up trouble among a small separatist group in order to apply pressure on Madrid to renounce the Sahara settlement. Spanish fishermen, moreover, are vulnerable to Moroccan-, Algerian-, and POLISARIO-sponsored attacks as they ply the fishing grounds off the Saharan coast. (S)

The transition to democracy in Spain has also brought pressure on the government from the socialists—the principal opposition party—who threw their support to the Algerian-backed POLISARIO Front in 1977. Partly in order to protect his government from charges of favoring the Moroccan monarchy, Prime Minister Suarez has encouraged informal public contacts between leaders of his party and the POLISARIO; he also seemed to be moving toward a rapprochement with Algeria last fall when Boumediene's declining health interrupted negotiations. (S)

Torn by conflicting pressures, Madrid is likely to stay aloof from direct involvement in any negotiations. The Spanish Government believes that Spain pulled out of the Sahara just in time to avoid a colonial war, and it is determined not to be drawn back into the fray. In the event of hostilities between Morocco and Algeria Spain would keep its distance, while possibly offering to mediate. (S)

Should a settlement create an independent Saharan state, Madrid would probably offer what limited financial and technical aid it could to bolster the new regime. The Spanish Government would hope that such support would be favorably received internationally. Spain's support to an independent Western Sahara would also assuage guilt feelings over the precipitate withdrawal of Spanish forces in early 1976 and perhaps facilitate Spanish access to the phosphate deposits in the Sahara. (S)

⁶ See Chronology entries for 16 October and 6 November 1975.

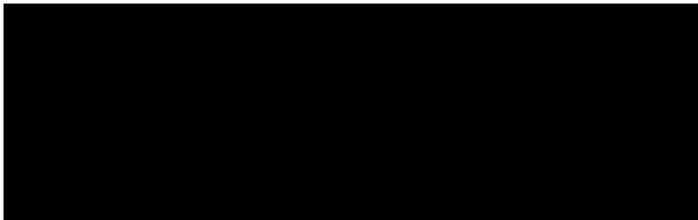
Prospects

No Settlement in Sight

There seems to be little immediate prospect of a peaceful solution to the Saharan dispute, and the war is likely to drag on through its fourth year. Desultory settlement efforts between Morocco and Algeria had stalled at the time of Algerian President Boumediene's death last December. Neither Morocco nor Algeria has yet shown a willingness to back away from its basic position. Although changes of governments in Algeria and Mauritania might have been expected to break the stalemate, the dispute now seems even less tractable than when the war began more than three years ago. (S)

The continuing negotiating deadlock is attributable to several factors. POLISARIO military capabilities in the Western Sahara are growing relative to those of the increasingly frustrated, dispirited, and ineffectual Moroccan Army. The guerrillas' battlefield successes are reinforcing the Algerians in their rigid Saharan policy. The Algerians show no sign of considering the withdrawal of their support to the guerrillas, the one pressure tactic that might compel the guerrillas to settle for something less than independence in all of the former Spanish Sahara. The POLISARIO Front seems more concerned with consolidating its military gains against an increasingly isolated Morocco than with formulating a negotiating position. (S)

For his part, King Hassan is presently unwilling to consider compromises—self-determination and territorial concessions—that might encourage Algiers to press the guerrillas to adopt a more flexible posture. Hassan is likely to continue to temporize, perhaps hoping that outside powers—France or the United States, for example—will encourage Algeria to change its policies. He may also believe that he needs Arab mediation to provide a suitable framework to rationalize territorial concessions in the interests of Arab unity.



The outlines of a political settlement are hard to visualize, given the present positions of the parties, and the likelihood is high that the insurgency will continue to threaten regional stability for some time. (S)

Restraints Against a Moroccan-Algerian War

Costly and embarrassing attacks on Moroccan territory from Algerian-based POLISARIO guerrillas no doubt will continue, and King Hassan may be pressured into a more aggressive military policy toward Algeria. There is wide support in Morocco for direct strikes against POLISARIO sanctuaries near Tindouf in Algeria, even at the risk of war with Algeria. Occasional reports indicate that some members of the Moroccan military share this sentiment, even though Algeria's superiority in military equipment is unquestioned. (S)

Hassan's military alternatives for mounting a punitive operation against Algeria appear as bleak as his options to reach a political settlement of the conflict with the POLISARIO. While the King may permit commando raids against POLISARIO outposts near the Algerian border to assuage public opinion, he is unlikely to mount operations that would draw Algerian regular forces into the fighting. Given Algerian military strength in the Tindouf area, the chances of a successful Moroccan conventional attack are slight, and the costs are likely to be high. (S)

Hassan no doubt recognizes that a humiliating defeat or an inconclusive standoff with Algeria could cost him his throne. Moreover, he is aware that an overt military thrust into Algeria would scuttle efforts toward a negotiated settlement and undercut the diplomatic support for his Western Sahara position that Morocco has worked hard to achieve in international forums and particularly in the Arab world. (S)

A Moroccan decision to carry the war to the Algerian sanctuaries would be influenced by a number of considerations. These include the military balance between Morocco and Algeria, which is greatly to

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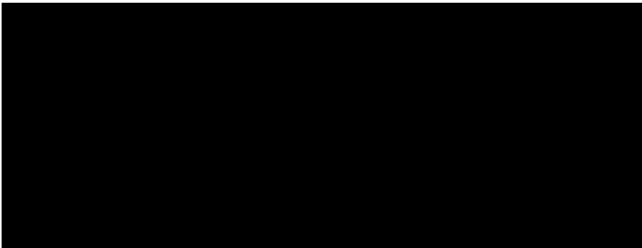


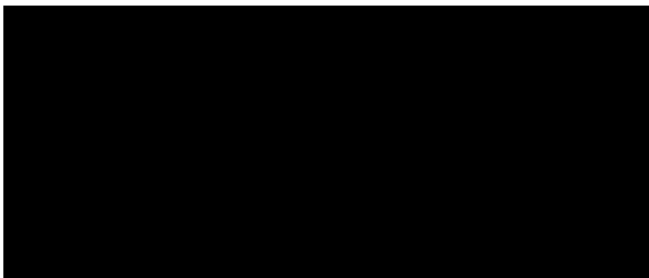
Table 1

Comparison of Military Forces

	Morocco	Algeria	POLISARIO	Mauritania
Personnel				
Army	85,000	80,000	3,000-5,000	10,000
Navy	4,200	4,000	0	365
Air Force (pilots/jet qualified)	7,000 (160/50)	7,500 (275/165)	0	200 (20)
Selected Armaments				
Tanks-medium	145	545		
Light	70	0	0	0
APCs	620	865	0	0
Reconnaissance vehicles	450	220	0	64
Artillery & mortars (over 100-mm)	930	500	0	16
ATGM launchers	315	Unknown	0	0
Air defense artillery	245	520	0	0
SAMS	12 Chapparral launchers	18 SA-2 launchers (32 missiles) 20 SA-6 launchers (200 missiles)	Unknown No. of SA-7s	
Jet fighters	47	230	0	0
Light bombers	0	23	0	0
Transports	20	18	0	2
Missile patrol boats	0	17	0	0
Attack helicopters	0	23	0	0
Foreign Military Advisers				
France	200	90	0	100
USSR	10	500-600	0	0

This table is Secret.

Morocco's disadvantage in the air, the number and capabilities of units available,⁷ troop morale and physical condition—most Moroccan troops have been engaged in operations for well over a year—logistics, and Mauritania's withdrawal from the fighting. (S NF)



There are two other options open to the Moroccans—both highly provocative—which involve the use of regular forces in conjunction with the irregulars. The first is to exercise the right of "hot pursuit" that Hassan proclaimed in September 1977 and has reiterated on several occasions. To our knowledge, the Moroccans have never chased a POLISARIO force into Algeria. The POLISARIO forces obviously have not been cowed by this threat, and it is unlikely to deter them in the future. (S)

It is almost inconceivable that Hassan would authorize a full-scale military offensive against the POLISARIO havens in Algeria knowing that this would lead to

See table 1 for a comparison of Algerian and Moroccan military forces.

25X6

clashes with Algerian regulars. This course has been urged upon Hassan almost from the outset of the war by some of his military leaders. Their reasoning has been that without the havens in Algeria, the POLISARIO would not be able to conduct operations in the Sahara. The way to end the POLISARIO insurgency, in their view, is to destroy its means of sanctuary and support. (S NF)

It is unlikely that the Moroccans would be successful in destroying the guerrilla bases because of the superior firepower and mobility of the Algerian forces at Tindouf. Algeria's advantage in numbers of combat aircraft should ensure its air supremacy and provide opportunities for effective close air support.

- Recognition by Algeria of Moroccan sovereignty over a truncated portion of the Western Sahara.
- Economic inducements for the protagonists, including financial aid from outside parties--for example, Saudi Arabia--providing for resettlement of Saharan refugees at Tindouf and joint exploitation of the Sahara's mineral wealth.
- A guarantee to Algeria of an access route to the Atlantic.
- Ratification by Morocco of the 1972 border agreement with Algeria. (S)

Morocco's acceptance of any such formula would incur grave domestic political risks for King Hassan, and we judge that chances for his agreement are poor. It is conceivable that he could sell the Moroccans, particularly the military, a compromise that would leave under Moroccan control the large reserves of high-grade phosphate deposits around Bu Craa. Even if a Saharan ministate were created in spite of manifest obstacles, such an arrangement would be unstable. POLISARIO leaders would:

Groping for a Solution

The limited chances for a peaceful solution hinge on the mediation efforts of outside powers, especially Arab. The mediation efforts of Saudi Arabia, begun in 1976, hold some promise of progress.

Mediation efforts by international organizations such as the OAU have had little success, and the UN General Assembly has not taken a stand. In December 1978 the UN again adopted contradictory resolutions on the Western Sahara. (S)

The best chance, but only a slim one, might be persuading Morocco and the POLISARIO to accept an agreement providing for an independent ministate located primarily in the Mauritanian portion of the Western Sahara. Algeria's role in persuading the guerrillas to accept such a solution would be crucial. In view of the guerrillas' diplomatic and military momentum, it is doubtful Algiers and the POLISARIO would settle for a formula that would give the Saharans regional autonomy in an entity tied either to Morocco or Mauritania. We believe that any solution would have to contain the following additional elements:

- Resist confinement to a truncated state in the southern Western Sahara.
- Ignore any agreement in the settlement negotiations to respect the territorial integrity of the Moroccan Sahara and Mauritania.
- View their ministate as a liberated zone, which they would use as a staging area for continuing their insurgency in the Moroccan Sahara.
- Turn to Algeria for military support when threatened by Morocco.
- Seek to build an alliance with the leftist faction in the Mauritanian leadership in covert efforts to create an Islamic socialist state comprising Mauritania and the Western Sahara and aligned with Algeria. (S)

- Territorial concessions by Rabat in which a portion of the Moroccan sector north of the partition line would be ceded to the ministate.

Any foreseeable settlement package would be intrinsically unstable and unlikely to bring a durable peace to northwest Africa because the guerrillas may now believe they can force the Moroccans to cut their losses and pull out of the Western Sahara altogether. The POLISARIO movement has demonstrated its ability to divert significant Moroccan manpower and economic resources. A protracted and increasingly effective guerrilla war seems inevitable in the absence of a Moroccan capitulation or a major intervention by outside powers. (S)

Relations between Morocco and Algeria will remain strained, and the risk will persist that cross-border operations could lead to an unintended escalation of tensions. Prevailing political, economic, and military factors, however, will dissuade both parties from embarking on the course of a full-scale conventional war in the near term. (S NF NC OC)

Chronology

1963

Large deposits of phosphate rock discovered in Spanish Sahara.

1970-73

Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania hold a series of summits professing agreement on the decolonization of Spanish Sahara.

1973

May

POLISARIO Front is formally established.

1974

April-May

Coup in Portugal and Franco's failing health prompt King Hassan to increase pressure on Madrid to honor Moroccan irredentism.

July

King Hassan announces that he will not permit the establishment of a puppet state in the Sahara.

October

Morocco and Mauritania propose that the UN General Assembly seek an advisory opinion on Spanish Sahara from the International Court of Justice.

December

UN General Assembly adopts resolution requesting advisory opinion on Western Sahara from the International Court of Justice.

1975

16 October

ICJ opinion fails to support Moroccan and Mauritanian claims of sovereignty.

16 October

King Hassan announces plans for a mass march by 350,000 unarmed Moroccans into Western Sahara.

6 November

"Green march" of Moroccans begins and lasts for three days without serious incident.

14 November

Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania sign the Madrid Agreements providing for a phased turnover of the territory to Rabat and Nouakchott.

December

UN General Assembly adopts two contradictory resolutions, one taking note of the Madrid Agreements.

First contingent of Moroccan troops assigned to Mauritania, a 250-man force, arrives at Bir Mogrein.

1976

26 February

Spain withdraws from tripartite administration of Western Sahara, and Morocco and Mauritania arrange a rump session of the territorial assembly to approve the territory's integration into Morocco and Mauritania.

27 February

POLISARIO Front proclaims Saharan Democratic Arab Republic.

March

Morocco and Mauritania break relations with Algeria after the latter recognizes the POLISARIO government-in-exile.

14 April

Formal partition of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania.

Mid-April

First guerrilla attack against the rail line in Mauritania.

June

First guerrilla attack on Nouakchott.

1977**January**

First substantial contingent of Moroccan troops stationed in Mauritania arrives at Bir Mogrein, bringing troop strength to 1,300.

First Moroccan-Mauritanian joint sweep operations against guerrillas in Mauritania.

1 May

Attack on Mauritanian town of Zouerat results in six French hostages.

13 May

Morocco and Mauritania sign a mutual defense agreement, providing the framework for military cooperation against the guerrillas.

July

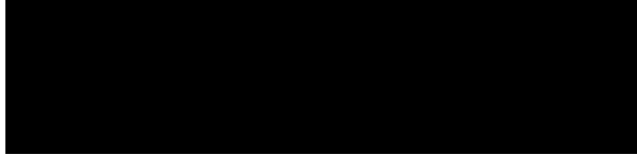
Second attack on Nouakchott.

October

Two more French hostages taken during attack on Zouerat.

December

French air attacks against POLISARIO guerrillas in Mauritania begin.

1978**May**

Last French air attacks on guerrilla formations in Mauritania.

10 July

Military coup in Mauritania brings new regime to power that wants an early peace settlement.

1-3 August

Algerian and Moroccan emissaries meet under French auspices.

September

King Hassan planned to meet President Boumediene in Belgium for direct talks on the Sahara dispute, but illness of Boumediene aborted meeting.

18 November

Algerian President Boumediene lapses into a coma four days after his return from a seven-week stay in the Soviet Union for medical treatment.

December

UN General Assembly repeats action of December 1975, adopting two contradictory resolutions on Western Sahara. The pro-Algerian resolution calls for self-determination for Saharans.

27 December

Death of Algerian President Boumediene. Constitutional succession process begins.

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1979

28 January

POLISARIO guerrillas overrun the Moroccan town of Tantan and subsequently withdraw. Action marked the first time guerrillas had overrun a sizable Moroccan population center.

9 February

Chadli Bendjedid inaugurated as President of Algeria. Algeria officially enters post-Boumediene era.

This chronology is Secret.

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