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Summary

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Editorial

It is generally agreed today that the Western Sahara dispute is totally deadlocked. The ceasefire in force since 1987 has, it is true, maintained the peace, but has not helped to resolve the conflict. The repeated failures to organize a referendum demonstrate that this is not the most appropriate form of settlement. Furthermore, the current balance of power in the Maghreb is not conducive to an agreement between the two contenders for regional supremacy, Morocco and Algeria.

The complexity of the situation is fully taken into account in Laurence Ammour's paper, which offers a realistic reading of this conflict of varying dimensions by analysing the impact of new issues at stake on the actors concerned.

The author begins by noting two very obvious facts: the obsolescence of the judicial mechanisms "governing settlement proposals", and the Polisario Front's loss of strategic weight, alongside a hardening of Algeria-Morocco antagonism. She refines her analysis by underlining the economic and security priorities of Euro-Mediterranean and US-Maghreb partnerships and those of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. This new scenario has led to competition between the two countries to secure the role of leading strategic actor in the Maghreb.

Within this context Laurence Ammour considers "prospects of overcoming the crisis". After discussing the signs that portend the Polisario Front's political decline and loss of membership, she examines the prospects of the embryonic plan being developed by Morocco, which advocates more wide-ranging autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty and could be the start of a consensual settlement. In the meantime, not only the hopes but also the doubts and suspicions of Sahrawi actors are being raised. Sahrawis living under Moroccan sovereignty support the plan for wider autonomy and continue to hold talks with the Martyr Line, which has bases in Tindouf (in Algeria), Spain and Mauritania, and has said that it is willing to negotiate with the Moroccan authorities. However, the autonomy plan has been totally rejected by the Polisario Front, at the instigation of Algeria, which upholds the principle of self-determination. One thing is certain: the international community will not risk imposing a solution if one of the parties is opposed to it: hence the UN Secretary General's call for direct negotiations between all parties.

The inclusion of Morocco and Algeria in the Atlantic Alliance's strategic matrix through the Mediterranean Dialogue and the fight against terrorism, particularly in the Sahel and in the Mediterranean, could help bring political and military officials in both countries round to a philosophy of compromise and mutual concessions. But this will depend on the adoption by their elites of the democratic ideals that are struggling to gain ground in the Maghreb political arena. It could, therefore, be argued that a Morocco-Algeria alliance is essential for the stability of the Maghreb and its environment in the same way that the Franco-German alliance is essential for the equilibrium of Europe.

Rashid EL-HOUDAIGUI, Research Fellow, NATO Mediterranean Dialogue

NB: The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author and should not be attributed to the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

THE FROZEN CONFLICT IN WESTERN SAHARA: WHO BENEFITS?¹

Laurence AMMOUR²

Continuity in Change

The 30-year dispute between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front epitomizes the geopolitical issues at stake in the Maghreb. The conflict is now at an impasse. The constraints imposed to contain the dispute and prevent a resumption of war that would ignite the Maghreb have resulted in a frozen conflict, whose significance has changed over time, as the world has changed. It has spanned recent history, from the age of decolonization to the tensions of globalization, from the cold war to the war on terror, and from confrontation between two opposing blocs to a philosophy of security and regional cooperation. But so far the problem has remained insoluble.

The situation has developed according to two parallel but separate dynamics, generated by the internal logic of the conflict and by the transformation in the international scenario. With the advent of a new era, the main people concerned, the Sahrawis, have been pushed to the sidelines by regional and international actors. This has resulted in collective amnesia with regard to their cause. The actors directly involved have skilfully stalled every political settlement process and have managed to "freeze" the conflict, revealing their divergent views on history, sovereignty, territorial integrity, state building, the concept of a people and international legality. They have exploited the conflict to the full and put it on the broader agenda of their own private interests.

Legal arbitration of the dispute has proved inadequate and ineffectual, since the judicial principles governing settlement proposals were inspired by ideals in vogue in the 1960s and have remained unchanged for 30 years. Successive settlement plans have not been renewed to meet emerging requirements, have become progressively out of step and are now completely at variance with the new global configuration. The Polisario Front has lost its cold war partisans and backers, and is now the poor relation of the new regional and international groupings whose chief objective is to implement lasting stability and deepen cooperation, mainly in the area of Maghreb security. The Western Sahara dispute has gradually entered a vicious circle and is now a timeless conflict, paralysed by a status quo that has proved to be the least bad solution for all concerned. The international community has turned its back on this frozen conflict and little by little dismissed it from memory. The conflict has therefore changed its significance and direction throughout the vicissitudes of its long history. It is unlikely to flare up again today, given the recurrent legal and political impediments, the local actors' conflicting interests and lack of political will, and the international community's loss of interest in a cause that is dismissed as obsolete. This conflict is one of the main causes of the delay in regional integration and of the United Maghreb Arab Union's helplessness.³

In the dual process of globalization and regionalization, it is absolutely essential to address this accidental, though not insoluble, division of the Maghreb, in order to face 21st century security and development challenges.

¹ This paper translated from French by Julie Dixon, addresses matters concerning NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, and is a synthesis of the master's thesis for the *Master 2* in "*Sécurité internationale et défense*", directed by Jean-François Guilhaudis, and presented by the author in September 2006 at Espace Europe, Faculté de Droit, University of Grenoble (France), on the subject: "*Où en est le conflit du Sahara occidental?*" (The Western Sahara conflict: the current situation).

² Sociologist, Academic Research Branch, NATO Defense College, Rome, Italy.

³ The Arab Maghreb Union has been at a standstill since the cancellation of the meeting scheduled to take place in Tripoli on 25 and 26 May 2005 and postponed indefinitely, following disagreements between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara. It would have been the first summit since 1994.

The Sahel: A New *limes*

Morocco's position is unequivocal: the Western Sahara belongs to Morocco and will continue to do so. The country has based its identity largely on its territorial integrity. Although the Kingdom is under the worrying pressure of Islamism⁴ and beset by economic problems, the Moroccan identity of Western Sahara continues to forge a sense of national identity and is supported by all political parties. In this climate, Moroccan public opinion, conditioned by twenty-five years of patriotic rhetoric, is unlikely to modify its perception of the Sahara question.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the creation of an independent Sahrawi state is equally unpalatable to Morocco. The Kingdom would lose a sizeable portion of the territory it administers, and in any case would not under any circumstances accept a new African state on its borders that, to cap it all, would have very close links with Morocco's rival, Algeria. The emergence of such a state would deprive Morocco of important natural resources (phosphates, minerals, off-shore oil and fish).

For historical reasons, self-determination and freedom are close to Algerian hearts. But the argument put forward by Algeria since the 1960s is a smokescreen for geo-economic ambitions and interests. Algeria's economy is based on its underground resources, accounting for 95% of the cash payments it receives, which form the bedrock of its economy⁵. To export these resources, its only access is to the Mediterranean Sea. Some analysts believe that Algeria wants to gain access to the Atlantic ports in order to make substantial reductions in export costs. Also, an access far from Mediterranean crisis areas would guarantee safe oil and gas supply. But other analysts believe that Algeria does not want access to the Atlantic because all it would need is a vassal state on its border to control a strategic Sahel area and act as an uncontested counterweight to Morocco. That is why the Western Sahara question has always been, and continues to be, a domestic policy issue.

The conflict has been exploited by Maghreb leaders whose policies are dictated by their political weakness. Management of the dispute has led to fierce diplomatic and strategic competition between Morocco and Algeria for regional hegemony.

France, Spain and the United States are careful not to take sides with either of the two countries directly involved in the Western Sahara crisis, because they do not wish to fuel existing tensions. They do not want to impose any constraints on Morocco with regard to the Western Sahara and are anxious to maintain good relations with both Algeria and Morocco, in order to safeguard the stability of the area, which is viewed as a top priority and therefore takes precedence over a less important "stalled" conflict. As the European Union expands eastwards, the Euro-Mediterranean area's future and importance have no guarantee of protection. Even Madrid, which previously adopted a neutral stance towards Moroccan claims, is now attempting a rapprochement with the country by proposing direct negotiations between the parties.⁶

The United States wants to control an area of influence from Morocco to Pakistan, as part of its plan for a secure "Greater Middle East", but do not want to be the only visible actors. Their main stated objective is to prevent the Sahara from becoming a grey area and a safe haven for Islamic terrorists, as Afghanistan was.

The new regional alignments created by the Maghreb countries' commitment to security and economic matters and their adoption of "vertical bilateralism" has led to the redefinition of a

⁴ Recently personnel have been dismissed from the Royal Armed Forces following "reports from intelligence services of fundamentalist infiltration of the army", *Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent*, 12 August 2006.

⁵ Its oil reserves are estimated as 1% of world reserves and its gas reserves as 5 billion tonnes. An indication of the economic vitality of this country was the announcement in February 2006 that over half its foreign debt, 18.5 billion dollars would be paid ahead of schedule. On the other hand, a draft law in 2005 on hydrocarbons (entitling multinationals that discover new oil fields to a minimum share of 70%, with the option of owning the remaining 30% if the national company Sonatrach does not claim them or is unable to invest in them, whereas up to now Sonatrach has received 51% of the oil extracted by multinationals), can be interpreted as a new form of "political pragmatism", whose objective is to accelerate the inclusion of Algeria in the world exchange system. It was accompanied by Algeria's application for membership of the World Trade Organization. But on 14 October last, Algeria backed down and decided to keep 51% of the capital for Sonatrach.

⁶ See interview with the Spanish ambassador, Luis Planas, *Le Matin* (Morocco), 11 October 2006.

specifically Mediterranean area of strategic interests, whose boundaries now cross the Sahara. The process of North-South integration has shifted the border southwards. The southern boundaries of the Euro-Mediterranean area are now within the Sahel, a sea of fluid, shifting sands which the Maghreb states have difficulty in controlling, despite vigorous African diplomacy.

Despite its indisputable ideological decline, the Polisario Front is still a radical socialist movement in both its rationale and its methodology. It claims, for example, that the number of Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps has been the same for years: 155,430 people. The UNHCR puts the present figure between 70,000 and 90,000. The Moroccan estimate is even lower. The Polisario Front has two reasons for inflating this number. It enables it to strengthen its legitimacy as a party to the conflict and the referendum, and also to receive humanitarian aid, which is distributed in proportion to the number of refugees.

But time is definitely not on the SADR's side⁷. After being admitted to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1982,⁸ and formally recognized by more than 60 states in the 1980s, it suffered a series of setbacks when several states withdrew formal recognition⁹. South Africa's decision in 2004 to recognize the SADR can be seen in the light of its determination to secure leadership of the African Union and also as the result of Algeria's proactive diplomacy in Africa.

Today, the movement is losing momentum and all the signs indicate that it will continue to weaken if the status quo persists. The Polisario Front is desperately clutching at the straw of the referendum as the only alternative that will permit it to be an active player once again in the conflict. If this option were to be abandoned as the result of a direct agreement between Morocco and Algeria, the movement would simply disintegrate of its own accord.

Public information provided by analysts and centres of research on terrorism and reports on missions or by western secret services suggest that the Polisario Front is involved in illegal trading and maybe even in the trafficking of sub-Saharan migrants transiting through the Western Sahara to the Spanish enclaves in the Mediterranean or the Canary Islands. If this is true, then the Polisario would pose a threat to regional security. Aymeric Chauprade goes so far as to suggest a link between the Polisario and Al Qaeda networks: *"As a result of the combined effect of a decrease in its political and military power, and the arrival of a new generation of Polisario recruits who have absorbed fundamentalist ideology in Algerian universities, the movement is seeking fresh logistic and ideological impetus."*¹⁰ In Chauprade's view, the Polisario could eventually swing towards radical Islam and terrorism. This change is being accelerated by the current transformation of "the Sahara fundamentalist belt" into Al Qaeda rear bases manned by *"500 to 600 Afghanistan veterans (...) already installed in what others call the "grey areas of the Sahara"*¹¹. "Deterritorialization"¹² of terrorist violence, then, would imply that the Sahara could be used as a base to prepare terrorist attacks to be executed elsewhere, for logistic support and transit of armed groups such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC), which whom Algerians and Americans are only too familiar. A solution to the conflict needs to be found urgently, to prevent terrorism from taking root.

Post-cold war regional realignments

A few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, individual north African states strengthened bilateral relations with certain EU member states, chief among them France, and with the US, to the detriment of inter-Maghreb relations and Mediterranean regional prospects. This process is known as "vertical bilateralism". The priority given by Maghreb countries to North-South exchanges serves only to fan the flames of existing inter-Maghreb conflict, to

⁷ Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

⁸ As a result, Morocco left the Organization two years later.

⁹ The SADR has not been recognized by the US, or by any European countries, or by China or Russia.

¹⁰ Lecture given at the University of Geneva on 6 June 2005.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Term used by Olivier Roy.

deepen mistrust of neighbouring countries, and to aggravate territorial disputes and identity tensions.

Bilateral relations are being rapidly developed and intensified mainly in two areas:

- 1- Homeland security and Mediterranean security, particularly (though not exclusively) with the United States, which is an indispensable and committed partner in military cooperation aimed at the modernization of armies, as a corollary to the fight against terrorism.
- 2- The economy, in two ways: more South-North energy supply contracts, and “structural adjustment”, promoted by the IMF, through privatization and liberalization of Maghreb economies.

New strategic partnerships

In 1998, Stuart Eizenstat, US Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, emphasized America's interest in the Maghreb's security. Until then, the region only had peripheral status in US eyes; the Mashrek was more important. But after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, security and political cooperation with the three Maghreb states were strengthened.

The war against terrorism led the Americans to step up aid to Morocco, their longstanding North African ally, from 20 million dollars in 2004 to 57 million in 2005. In 2004, Washington accorded Morocco the status of preferential non-NATO ally, allowing the country to take part in American defence research and development programmes.

In Algeria, the rise of Islamism, followed by the civil war that started in 1992, aroused deep fears for the stability of the entire Maghreb. When the civil war ended, Algeria was seen as a potentially good partner for American oil and gas companies. In 2000, the decision to have closer ties with NATO¹³ brought the country out of its isolation at a time when the army was planning to devote a significant portion of its oil revenues to modernization. All these signals confirmed the Algerian authorities' desire for strong integration in the new security framework and North-South exchanges. The events of 11 September were an important catalyst, then, in relations between the US and Algeria, which has become a valuable ally for the US. The new military cooperation has altered America's perception of Algeria and attenuated the ideological differences that induced the US to give priority to its Moroccan ally in the region. Algeria is now regarded as a key regional player.

The strengthening of Pentagon links with Maghreb armed forces has also resulted in more rounds of visits by American officials to the Maghreb, regular invitations of Maghrebian Heads of state to the White House, and an increase in the number of joint exercises and initiatives and visits by high ranking military officers and senior intelligence officials¹⁴. As part of the “Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorist Initiative”¹⁵ (TSCTI), from 6 to 8 June 2005 the special forces of eight African countries (Chad, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, Morocco,

¹³ Subsequently, Abdelaziz Bouteflika's visit to NATO in December 2001 led to the implementation of a cooperation programme, as well as joint exercises in the Mediterranean between Algerian and NATO forces.

¹⁴ They include the creation in Algiers of the African Centre for Study and Research on Terrorism, following the adoption by the African Union in July 1999 (also in Algiers) of the Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, which came into force on 6 December 2002. In January 2003, Peter Rodman was received in Algiers by President Bouteflika and the Chief of Staff of the National Popular Army (ANP), General Mohamed Lamari. In March 2005, David C. Welch, former US Ambassador to Egypt, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, North Africa and the Arab peninsula, visited Algiers. Robert Mueller, Director of the FBI, visited Rabat and Algiers on 6 and 7 February 2006. American Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld visited Algiers, Tunis and Rabat on 11, 12 and 13 February 2006 respectively. From 17 to 20 April 2006, the Chief of Staff of the Algerian Army, Ahmed Gaïd Salah, went to the United States at the invitation of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Peter Pace.

¹⁵ The former “Pan Sahel Initiative”, launched in 2002, was renamed the “Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative” in 2004. It is a military aid programme based in Dakar, and designed by the Pentagon, the CIA and the Department of State to assist Maghreb and Sahel armed forces. Its budget rose from 6.5 million dollars in 2004 to 500 million dollars in 2005. In this framework, in March 2004 the chiefs of staff of eight countries (Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Algeria, Tunisia) met at Stuttgart at the headquarters of the US army's European command (US-Eucom). See Andrew Koch, “US Steps up Counterterrorism Training in the Sahel”, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, vol. 16, no. 11, November 2004, pp. 30-31.

Algeria and Tunisia) participated in Operation Flintlock 2005 in the Sahara, directed by General Charles F. Wald, Joint Commander in Chief of US Forces in Europe (US EUCOM). The attacks on 11 September 2001 inaugurated a new era in US-Maghreb relations, mainly to address security concerns. Algeria believes that the *Salafist Preaching and Combat Group* (SPCG) is involved in banditry and terrorism in the Sahara, and Morocco thinks that elements of the Polisario Front based at Tindouf are linked to these maverick groups.

Some recent events show that the Sahel is becoming the new safe haven for numerous terrorist groups. In June 2005, the SPCG claimed responsibility for the attack on a military barrack at Lemgheity, 400 km from Zouerate, on the border between Algeria and Mauritania. American, French, Moroccan and Algerian intelligence services, quoted in the press, reported a plan to install Al-Qaeda at Zouerate, 900 km north of Nouakchott. According to these open sources, the first wave of recruiting agents arrived in this town in December 2005¹⁶. The latest statements by Al-Zawahiri confirm the recent affiliation of the SPCG to Al-Qaeda. However there is no tangible evidence of links between Al Qaeda and the Polisario Front.

The US continues to step up its military and police cooperation programme with the countries of the region. Peter Rodman, US Assistant Secretary of Defense, made another visit to Algiers from 5 to 7 November last for the purpose of strengthening US-Algerian defence and security relations through joint military exercises, officer and information exchanges, and equipment procurement.

Closer bilateral economic ties: a priority

The trade agreements between Maghreb countries and the major powers are presented in the form of political projects aimed at democracy and reform. The competition between the US and the EU in the region works first of all to the advantage of the Maghreb countries, because it raises the stakes in their favour, and allows them to diversify their partnerships and play on opposition between them. As in security matters, South-North bilateral relations are given priority, to the detriment of inter-Maghreb cooperation.

France openly supports Morocco's position on the Western Sahara issue. With a total trade of 5.3 billion euros and a 20% share in the market, about 600 French enterprises employing 70,000 staff and almost 40,000 French residents, it is Morocco's main business partner.

By launching a number of partnership initiatives, the US hopes to advance economic integration and, step by step, foster reconciliation between Morocco and Algeria. The US has overcome its reticence and decided to adopt Morocco's solution to the Western Sahara, envisaging integration of this territory into the Kingdom of Morocco, but with wide-ranging autonomy. Although the US was unable to choose between the two countries, until recently it had always given preference to Morocco. Now that Algeria is included in North-South exchanges, US support will have to be reallocated accordingly. A framework trade and investment agreement was therefore signed with Algeria in July 2001, while Morocco had already signed such an agreement in 1995. A second Free Trade Agreement was signed with Morocco in June 2005. It "*envisages the elimination of 95% of customs tariffs on industrial and consumer products. Its objective is to establish a customs union within nine years ...*"¹⁷. It is true that, for Washington, the Maghreb and Western Africa (Gulf of Guinea) constitute two complementary reserves of fossil energy in the Middle East. They provide a useful cover for protected Atlantic exports far from the conflicts in the Middle East and from rivalry between Asian countries. If the Western Sahara were to become an autonomous region within Morocco, the current configurations would not be affected.

The novelty of the current situation lies in the existence of two parallel, concomitant strategies: on the one hand, competition between Morocco and Algeria to seduce the great powers and secure the first place and the best terms, justified and supported by their

¹⁶ For more details see *Maroc multiple et pluriel*, 20 April 2006. The influence of Al Qaeda, which has sleeper cells in Mauritania, is considerable. In the words of two US generals, Charles F. Wald and James Jones, "the Sahel is the new Afghanistan that Al Qaeda wants as a safe haven". Quoted in *Le Quotidien d'Oran* (Algeria), 7 June 2005.

¹⁷ Interview given by Khadidja Mohsen-Finan to Cyberscopie, March 2005. The US exports an average of 475 million dollars' worth of goods to Morocco and imports the equivalent of 500 million dollars. There are about 120 American companies operating in Morocco who have made a total investment of 600 million dollars and created 90,000 direct or indirect jobs.

contributions to the fight against terrorism; and on the other, diversification of their military and economic bilateral agreements, which works to their advantage by creating rivalry between the various Western interlocutors.

Besides, the “armaments race” in which the two Maghreb heavyweights are competing is dictated not only by the need to diversify their supply sources, but above all by a deliberate policy of dissuasive escalation, aimed at demonstrating their power to the rival country, under the guise of very real military modernisation and reform. This race was clearly illustrated recently during Vladimir Putin’s trip to Algiers on 10 March 2006. The total number of Algerian military orders from Russia, including aircraft (3.5 billion dollars), was over 7.5 billion dollars. Despite the embargo, France continued its arms shipments to Algeria from 1996 to 2005 to the tune of 100.8 million euros¹⁸. Morocco has negotiated a deal with France for the supply of 18 *Rafale* aircraft, a total of 2.5 billion euros.¹⁹

Prospects of overcoming the crisis

Would the break up of the Polisario Front be a way out of the crisis?

There are tangible signs of the Polisario Front’s loss of bargaining power, political decline and disaffection among the ranks:

- The secretary general of the Polisario Front (the SADR president) is increasingly hostile to any criticism of the movement’s management methods, and recently threatened an American NGO with war and terrorism;
- In early June 2006, the UN Secretary General received a complaint concerning the issued Polisario by the French contingent participating in MINURSO²⁰ “*in reaction to France’s support for the Moroccan position*”;
- The Front leadership has introduced a rentier economy based on hijacked humanitarian aid.²¹ This is why, in his last report in May 2006, the High Commission for Refugees decided to make a 43% cut in its aid to the Tindouf camps. Despite numerous requests from the UN (1977, 2001, 2003 and 2005), Algeria has consistently refused to divulge the exact number of refugees, and this lack of transparency has enabled it to continue to receive maximum humanitarian aid;
- To this should be added the fact that in June 2006 Algeria would not allow the UN Secretary General’s personal envoy, Peter van Walsum, to visit the Tindouf camps;
- A number of Sahrawis are leaving the camps to settle permanently in Mauritania: in March 2006, according to the Mauritanian daily *El-Hayat*, well-to-do Sahrawis (officers and dignitaries) have left the Tindouf camps to settle in the town of Zouerate in the North of the country;
- The Sahrawi population of Western Sahara is constantly on the decline, while the number of Moroccan residents and their descendants is on the increase: according to Jacob Mundy, there are 300,000 to 400,000 Moroccan residents, and 160,000 Sahrawis.²² This explains why the Polisario Front continues to give preference to the 1974 electoral rolls for the referendum on self-determination;
- A new movement was created in July 2004, named *Khat Al-Shahid* (Martyr Line) which advocates a negotiated settlement of the Sahara dispute, but does not rule out armed action if necessary²³;

¹⁸ Ghania Khelifi, “L’Algérie modernise son armée de l’air”, *L’Expression* (Algérie), 30 October 2006.

¹⁹ Arezki Louni, “L’Arabie Saoudite arme le Maroc”, *L’Expression* (Algérie), 31 October 2006.

²⁰ French acronym for Mission des Nations Unies pour l’organisation d’un référendum au Sahara occidental (UN Mission for the Organization of a Referendum in Western Sahara).

²¹ This is corroborated by the arrest of a Polisario member in Tombouctou in February 2006 for the sale of food products supplied by international organizations and intended for the Tindouf camps. See *Le Matin* (Morocco), 21 February 2006.

²² Jacob Mundy, “Autonomy & *Intifadah*: New Horizons in Western Saharan Nationalism”, *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 108, June 2006, p. 255. Khadidja Mohsen-Finan suggests the figure of 2 Moroccans for 1 Sahrawi; see *Afrique du Nord: stabilité et instabilité au XXIème*, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, actes du 18 janvier 2006, p.22.

²³ See interview given by Mahjoub Salek, spokesperson for the movement, in *Tel Quel* (Morocco) no. 243-2006, in which he explains that *Khat Al-Shahid* is presenting itself as an alternative to the current Polisario Front leadership, and is preparing a draft resolution of the conflict addressed to all the parties concerned, including Spain, the EU and the UN, but gives no further details.

- Lastly, claims to independence began to be made in May 2005 by young Sahrawis who are not Polisario members but seem to be acting individually: this could be an indication of the Polisario Front's inability to attract the younger generations.

If there truly is a risk of this territory becoming a "grey area" for the rear bases of Islamist groups, the Polisario Front could change into an active element or at least an occasional support group. Assuming that it does have fairly close ties with terrorist groups, some of its members could develop a strategy to isolate and wear down the Polisario Front. The movement would then fall apart on its own, which would justify putting an end to the hard line leadership. The weakening of the movement that is indeed taking place could over time lead to the break up of its structure and the total collapse of its power base. The Front would thus be totally neutralized, disappear from the political scene and no longer be an obstacle to overcoming the crisis. It would then be up to Morocco and Algeria to work out a solution. The recent appearance of a new movement, following the rift within the Polisario Front, may be either a hindrance or a help in solving the crisis, depending on whether it is prepared to negotiate.

Will the recent autonomy plan be viable?

Even if the idea of autonomy is not new, Morocco has recently proposed a project for the autonomy of the "southern provinces". For the time being, is not at all clear what the basis of this autonomy will be or what form it will take, since the Kingdom of Morocco has not yet formally submitted its proposal to the other parties and the UN. The project, which aims to be a "consensual political solution"²⁴ including all the parties concerned in the conflict, has been well received by all political sides.

With this aim in mind, in March 2006 Mohamed VI proceeded to renew the Royal Consultative Council for Sahrawi Affairs (CORCAS), to which Sahrawi tribal members are appointed personally by the king.

However, the king's autonomy proposal is not without its risks. Its implementation would require an amendment to the Constitution and to the Moroccan state apparatus, and a move from a centralized to a regionalized system. Autonomy based on regional (and also "ethnic") identity could be a danger to the Kingdom, partly because other Moroccan regions, particularly those that have always been irredentist, (like the Rif region, for example), might be tempted to claim special status, similar to that of Western Sahara; and partly because recognition of special regional status could be harmful to national identity and lead to partitioning of the territory. If regionalization is founded on a Spanish-style federal state, then of course the question of territorial reorganization and redistribution of economic and administrative power will be a difficult and lengthy process. In Morocco the poorest area is in the North.

The path to autonomy should also include direct negotiations with Algeria. This is what Kofi Annan proposed in his report in April 2006.²⁵ Since both sides were entrenched in their respective positions, had rejected all the proposals submitted in successive plans and absolutely refused to compromise, the Secretary General dismissed both parties and asked them to assume their responsibilities, find their own form of mediation, and abandon their "winner takes all" approach. The Secretary General is realistic about the ambiguous attitude of direct and indirect actors. He realizes that the current impasse is in everyone's interests and that it is essential to involve all actors in a search for a solution that takes individual interests into account.

The Security Council meeting on the Western Sahara²⁶, on 31 October last, confirmed that the preferred option was direct talks between the actors involved in the conflict. The United States urged Morocco "to move quickly to fulfill promises to table a

²⁴ "Discours de la Marche verte", *Le Matin* (Maroc), 6 November 2006.

²⁵ *Report of the Secretary General on the situation concerning Western Sahara*, United Nations, S/2006/249, 19 April 2006.

²⁶ All subsequent quotations have been translated into English from the original French text and are from the following document: *Sahara occidental: le Conseil de sécurité demande un déblocage de la situation*, service d'information des Nations Unies, 31 octobre 2006 (French language site of the UN Department of Public Information, 31 October 2006).

comprehensive and credible autonomy proposal”, since MINURSO cannot be “*a viable alternative to a permanent solution*”. The dismantling of the force was addressed for the first time, should it “*continue to prove ineffective in fulfilling its mandate or the concerned parties prove unable to make substantial progress towards a political solution*”. This new tone is indicative of the weariness of UN authorities when confronted by the obstinacy and unwillingness of the actors in the conflict. The UK emphasized that “*no UN mandate should be regarded as indefinite*”.

Several questions will still have to be answered if autonomy is achieved: what will happen to the armed forces of both countries? What effect will this have on the guaranteed income of the Moroccan military, who receive double pay when they are posted to Western Sahara? What will happen to the troops based in the militarized area of Tindouf, an essential centre for forging military identity and cohesion, but also an area with a high rate of cross border trafficking? Lastly, would not the withdrawal of Moroccan, Algerian and UN troops risk laying these vast territories wide open to international terrorism?

Conclusion

If a true economic, energy and strategic community is ever to exist in the Maghreb, it would be in the interests of Morocco and Algeria to initiate a process of regional regrouping. But these two states, stubbornly clinging to their own nationalist interests, continue to overstate the past to give them a free hand and justify their actions. Morocco upholds its “historical rights” dating from the Palace’s overlordship over tribes who swore allegiance to the prince; Algeria sees itself as the champion of decolonization and the freedom of the peoples of the Third World. The two states are both well aware that termination of the conflict will be very advantageous to economic growth: in addition to relieving them of a heavy financial burden, it will foster economic integration within the Maghreb Arab Union. This also means that each of the actors will have to give up some of its sovereignty. “*They are (...) not inclined to regional cooperation and are suspicious about sharing or transfer of expertise at supranational level.*”²⁷ Indeed, “*these countries are witnessing a marked domestication of foreign policy, which has become a source of political legitimacy and (...) an indispensable factor in state building.*”²⁸ Moreover, if the current impasse continues, there is a risk that the present colonial configuration of Maghreb states will be maintained, based purely on revenues from raw materials and extraverted, essentially rentier, economies.

The Sahwaris have benefited for a long time from this status quo but today their future is no longer one of the priorities on US, European, the Security Council or African Union diplomatic agendas. There is a risk of the Polisario Front disappearing as a structured movement. Up to now it has been in the Front's interest to prolong the situation in order to protect its own survival, publicize its cause and what it is fighting for, and obtain political support. Today it is not sure that this is the right option, since it is no longer the leading player in the conflict.

Security Council resolutions and extensions of the MINURSO mission have become routine²⁹. The complexity of the legal and political situation, the key players’ systematic rejection of all the proposals of the UN Secretary General’s special envoy, the fact that there has been no armed conflict since 1980, the urgency of other, far more serious, armed conflicts in Africa and elsewhere, plus the gradual erosion of both Maghreb and international interest, have made this a conflict of secondary importance. “*It is purely a product of the cold war and the ideological divisions of that era*”³⁰. Today it is no longer a decolonization conflict but part of a struggle for hegemony between two states who continue to stir up the past to justify their rivalry and consolidate their regional influence.

²⁷ Rashid El-Houdaigui, *Le rôle des acteurs non-étatiques dans la production de la politique étrangère dans le monde arabe*, Study conducted for the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs Secretariat, Brussels, April 2006.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ MINURSO’s mandate was renewed on 31 October 2006 for six months.

³⁰ Aymeric Chauprade, in an interview on 8 October 2005 to the newspaper *Maroc multiple et pluriel*.

The current situation contains several paradoxes. While the conflict is not intense enough to attract the attention of the major powers, the antagonism between the Morocco and Algeria Maghreb heavyweights serves as a tool to legitimize domestic power in both countries. Although North Africa has been the subject of more sustained interest since the end of the cold war, it has remained a “peripheral” concern³¹, especially since the Iraq war: this has given both Algeria and Morocco a free rein while ensuring that the conflict remains frozen. In this confrontation, the Sahrawis have become one of history’s forgotten peoples. Unless there is a dramatic reversal in the situation, it is difficult to see how their cause could become a crucial security issue. That is why, to avoid the emergence of a new “failed state”, the status quo is preferable and far more convenient than any attempt to overcome the crisis that could jeopardize political, security and economic interests and disrupt the region's fragile equilibrium and stability.

³¹ Term used by Jean-François Daguzan, in *Afrique du Nord: stabilité et instabilité au XXIème siècle*, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, actes du 18 janvier 2006, p. 7.