

geographical and ethnic claims and on the historical argument that Sahraouis recognized the authority of the Moroccan sultan, thus making the territory Moroccan by virtue of allegiances recognized under Islamic law. To counter the increasing international pressure for a referendum in the territory, Morocco submitted its case to the International Court of Justice, which ruled in 1975 that the territory was not *terra nullius* at the time of colonization, and that, although there were some ties of allegiance, these were insufficient to establish Moroccan sovereignty. These findings were supported by the conclusions of a UN Mission of Inquiry sent to the region in May 1975, which clearly established that Sahraouis desired independence. This Mission proved to be a catalyst for Sahraoui aspirations, giving direction to the new unifying force among the disparate tribes.

Morocco takes over

After the Madrid Accords, Morocco and Mauritania took possession of the territory, forcing an exodus of refugees (to Algeria) from the region. Morocco quickly proceeded to implement an extensive development plan in the lucrative and important Saguia el-Hamra, thus hoping to build support within the area and undermine the Polisario. The territory became administratively and politically integrated with Morocco and a number of nationalist countermovements were created to weaken Polisario credibility. Coercive repression and assimilation of Sahraouis in the region became the hallmarks of Moroccan policy. Diplomatically, Morocco deplored the fact that Western Sahara was still being handled as a decolonization case by the UN. Still, on numerous occasions Morocco agreed to a "confirmatory" referendum (independence not being an option), but never acted on its promise. Added to this was an unwillingness to negotiate directly with the Polisario because of the intimate connection between the Moroccan throne and the recovery of the "Moroccan" Sahara, the real political considerations of the possible encircling effect by Algeria, the need to occupy a potentially rebellious Moroccan military and the need to distract an unhappy Moroccan population.

Militarily, Morocco proceeded to consolidate its holdings first by creating several large mobile armed task forces to limit Polisario mobility and communications. This tactic failed, and Morocco then proceeded to build a defensive security perimeter, first around the most populated and economically important regions, and later around the quasi-totality of the territory (see map). This defensive wall consisted of bulldozed sand and rock lined with mines and barbed wire, backed with artillery and rapid intervention brigades and manned by one-half of the Moroccan armed forces. This strategy greatly increased the cost of the war for Morocco, with figures running as high as \$1 billion a year, but permitted the resumption of phosphate production and the establishment of an air of "normalcy" within the region.

Mauritania's role

Mauritania had also advanced claims to the territory based on geographical, ethnic and historical considerations. Between 1969 and 1974, Mauritania had supported self-determination in Western Sahara, first because of Morocco's early refusal to recognize Mauritania independence and later to establish a buffer zone to halt Morocco's move southward. When Mauritania received the Rio de Oro region in 1975 as a result of the partition agreement, it proceeded in a weak attempt to assimilate the new territory. However, it proved unable to defend its territory during

Polisario incursions. This eventually led to the toppling of the regime of Mokhtar Ould Daddah in 1978. Mauritania signed a peace agreement with the Polisario and handed over its share of the Western Sahara to that movement. Morocco ignored the agreement and annexed the whole territory in 1978. Mauritania recognized the Sahraoui Republic in 1984 but has remained neutral in the conflict. It has, however, been in constant danger of reentering the conflict because of Moroccan threats of "hot pursuit" against Polisario units launching attacks through Mauritanian territory as a result of the strategic location of the defensive wall.

Algeria's role

Algeria, unlike Morocco and Mauritania, never laid claim to the territory, but has been the principal diplomatic and military supporter of the Polisario as part of its overall foreign policy. Algerian motivations might also have included its position as a leading standard bearer in the struggle against Western imperialism as well as certain economic gains, such as access to the Atlantic. The power rivalry between Algeria and Morocco was also a foremost concern.

Since 1975, Algeria has supported the Polisario militarily with money, weapons, equipment, training and sanctuary, as well as food, fuel and water. Diplomatically, it has championed the Sahraoui Republic with a well coordinated public relations effort, which met with great success in the OAU (Organization of African Unity) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

In sum, the case of Western Sahara is a prime example of how a nationalist movement has been able to affect regional politics, highlighting the profound ideological and political differences among North African countries, and in turn been molded by these conflicts and contradictions. The situation is also noteworthy for the relative lack of superpower involvement, although each superpower has provided financial and military assistance, directly and by proxy. Spain and France, which had previously known direct involvement in the conflict, have remained neutral. Outside involvement has therefore had only marginal influence on the struggle, even though it is evident that without French, American and Soviet weaponry each side would be weaker.

Polisario Front

The Polisario Front has been the central agent of Sahraoui aspirations ever since its creation in May 1973. As a national liberation movement, its overriding goal has been an internationally recognized independent Saharan state and people. At its second Congress in 1974, while it was still underground, the Polisario proclaimed its intention to "struggle until wresting independence, their wealth and sovereignty over their land." The plan of action called for educating and mobilizing the masses, reinforcing external links, eradicating all forms of exploitation, for the fair distribution of resources, the maintenance of the religious heritage, the realization of national unity, the installation of a republican regime and the creation of a national economy through nationalization, industrialization and agricultural development. The Polisario considered themselves as having an Arab, African and Islamic identity, as participants in the Third World family and as a people opposed to imperialism, colonialism and exploitation.

When the Sahraoui Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was proclaimed in 1976, it was to be a non-aligned, democratic and progressive (socialist) state, its claim to socialism inspired by