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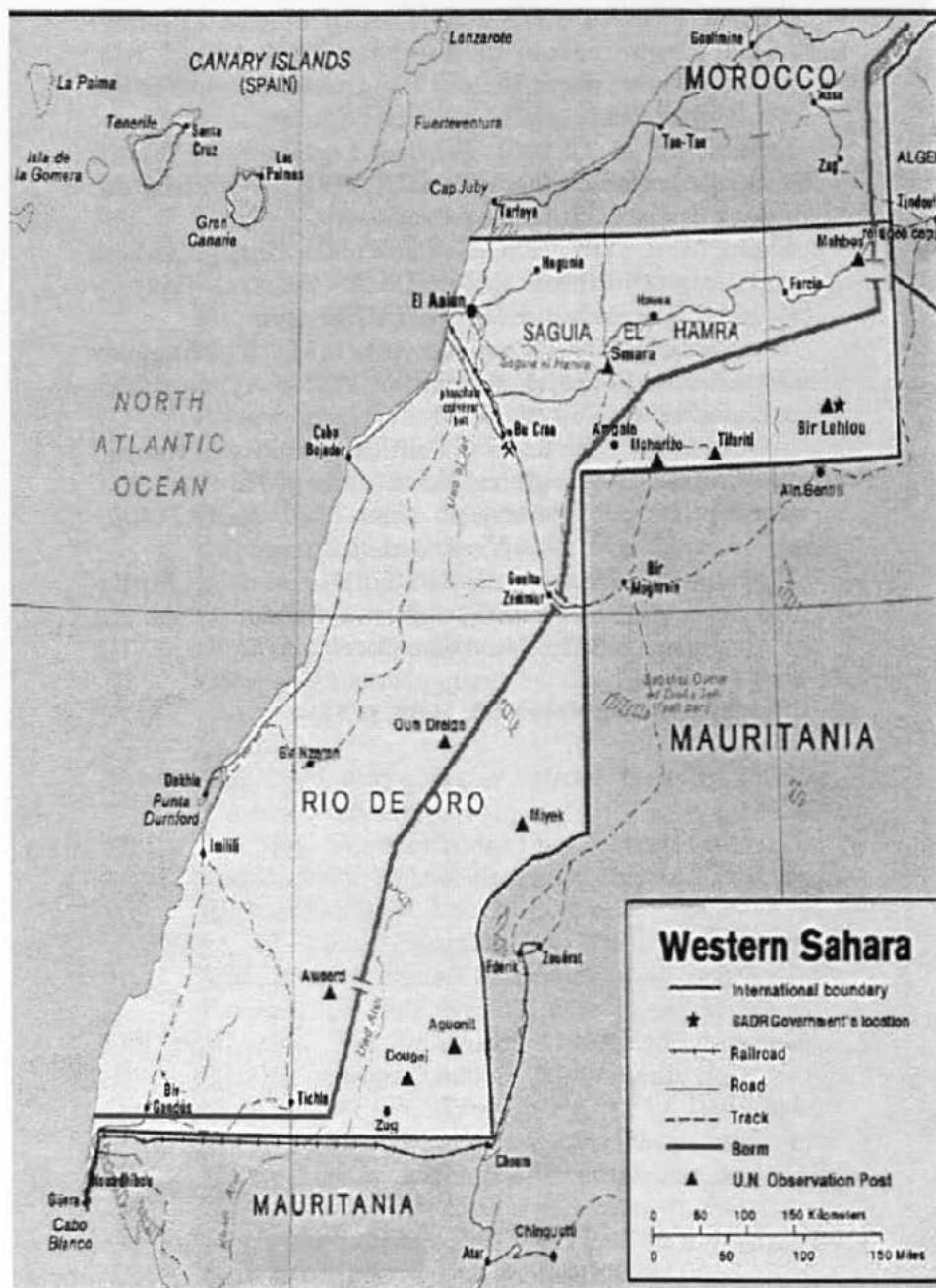
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# **The Western Sahara Conflict: A Case Study of U.N. Peacekeeping in the Post Cold War World**

**Jennifer Labella**

## **Abstract**

*The article evaluates the history of UN involvement in Western Sahara as a model by which to assess the organization's trusted and perceived efficacy in resolving conflicts in the post Cold War international system. The paper discusses the proposed UN sponsored referendum that would give the Sahrawi people the choice of independence or incorporation into Morocco. The conflict in Western Sahara is the longest, most protracted dispute in the history of the United Nations; its resolution would provide an important platform for the advancement of free and fair referenda and democracy in other parts of Africa. By focusing on US-Moroccan relations and mismanagement of the referendum process, the author analyzes reasons why the referendum has yet to be held and offers various hypotheses about the future of Western Sahara.*

## **Introduction**

One of the least hospitable regions on earth, the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara might seem an

unlikely territory to be coveted by anyone. Yet this bleak land, wedged between the Atlantic Ocean, Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria, has been the site of the longest, most protracted dispute in the history of the United Nations. For twenty-five years, Morocco has been battling for supremacy in Western Sahara against a well-armed and highly motivated nationalist movement, the Polisario Front.<sup>1</sup> Although progress towards peace has been made, a final resolution to the dispute over the decolonization and disposition of the territory has yet to take place. Thus, Western Sahara remains Africa's last colony still waiting to exercise its right to self-determination. With a population of under a quarter million, the region continues to be recognized by the international community as a non-self-governing territory.

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of economic problems, recognized as the major threat to regional security in a continent ravaged by internecine enmities, have increased the importance of a peaceful resolution to the divisive and potentially dangerous Western Sahara conflict. Since 1991, hopes for a settlement of the dispute have hinged on the UN sponsored referendum which would give the Sahrawi people the choice of independence or incorporation into Morocco. However, more than ten years after the United Nations Security Council approved the enactment of a referendum on the fate of Western Sahara, the Sahrawis have not yet had the chance to decide their own destiny.

In order to demonstrate the importance of a resolution of the conflict to achieve stability in the Maghreb, this article focuses on the historical background and evolution of the dispute<sup>2</sup> from the perspective of the parties involved: the core, made up of Morocco and the Polisario Front; the periphery, consisting of Algeria, Mauritania, and Libya; and the international players, including the UN, the OAU, and outside powers. The paper then discusses the UN sponsored referendum process and analyzes the reasons why it has yet to succeed. The essay concludes by using the Western

Sahara case as a model by which to assess the UN's trusted and perceived efficacy in resolving conflicts in the post Cold War international system.

## **Origins and Evolution of the Conflict**

### **- The Core**

The dispute over Western Sahara stems from two fundamentally incompatible claims to the same territory. For the Polisario Front, the territory of Western Sahara and its people are distinct from Morocco and should therefore be independent. For Morocco, however, sovereignty over Western Sahara has become a central aim and a significant unifying force in the country.

In the mid 1960s, the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations began to put considerable pressure on Spain to hold a referendum on self-determination in the territory known as the Spanish Sahara. Two UN resolutions passed in 1972 and 1973 clearly affirmed the rights of the people of the Spanish Sahara (the Sahrawis) to be independent. In May 1973, Sahrawi nationalists created the Polisario Front, an anticolonial organization which began guerrilla attacks on Spanish garrisons. As a result of growing international pressure, along with effective Polisario military assaults, Madrid agreed to hold a referendum under UN auspices in early 1975.

The Sahrawi nationalists were not alone in striving for control over the Spanish Sahara. The drive for territorial consolidation was an integral component of modern Moroccan nationalist ideology and the struggle for independence. Since the mid-1960s Spanish Sahara became the central focus of Moroccan nationalist aspirations (Maddy-Weitzman, 1992: 135). From 1974 onward, King Hassan made the Western Saharan issue an objective by which he strengthened and reinforced his domestic political authority. Hassan promised to oppose by force any result of the referendum that did not return Western Sahara, part of historic "Greater

Morocco,"<sup>3</sup> to his country's jurisdiction. In addition to his nationalist aims, Hassan's desire to control Western Sahara derived from his recognition of the value of the territory's greatest natural resource: abundant phosphate deposits. Western Sahara also has rich fishing waters, iron ore, and oil - resources which could help the ailing Moroccan economy.

In December 1974, Morocco persuaded Spain, through the United Nations, to delay holding the referendum until after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rendered its opinion on Morocco's historic claim to the territory. In October 1975, the ICJ ruled that "historic claims" were irrelevant to the issue of self-determination, which could only be decided through a "free and genuine expression" of the will of the Sahrawi people (International Court of Justice, 1975: 56-57).

Despite the ICJ's ruling, Spain backed away from the referendum, bending to pressure from Morocco at the time of Madrid's difficult transition to democracy following General Franco's fatal illness. In November 1975, King Hassan mobilized 350,000 volunteers to march across the Western Saharan border to assert Morocco's territorial claim over the neighboring region. After the successful outcome of the "Green March," Hassan declared: "cette Marche a fait de nous un peuple nouveau, une nation nouvelle" (Hassan II, 1976: 9). Later that year, Spain secretly signed the Madrid Accords, a tripartite agreement that granted Morocco administration of the northern two-thirds of the colony and Mauritania the remainder. International law does not recognize secret agreements; therefore, Spain to this day has legal control over Western Sahara.

The subsequent occupation of Western Sahara by Moroccan and Mauritanian troops not only created tension in the region, but also complicated the prospects of a peaceful settlement. The day after Spain formally withdrew from Western Sahara on February 26, 1976, the Polisario Front proclaimed Western Sahara an

independent state to be known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Polisario shifted its guerrilla war to openly confront the Moroccan and Mauritanian occupying forces. The emergence of the Polisario as a challenge to Moroccan ambitions was a bitter surprise for Hassan who aspired to exercise a cohesive influence over the region.

The Polisario had been established in the early 1970s by groups of Sahrawi youths - some of them students in Moroccan schools, others with families that originated in southwestern Algeria and Mauritania. From a sociological perspective, the organization can be seen as a supratribal grouping formed in reaction to the socio-economic and cultural changes beginning to take place in Western Sahara, and stemming from a desire to secure a more "modern," inclusive identity (Hodges, 1987: 56). By the eve of the Spanish withdrawal, the Polisario had achieved considerable success among the populace; yet, the obstacles to independence proved formidable. The signing of the Madrid Accords by which Western Sahara was handed over to its North African neighbors stifled all hope that it could exercise its right to independence without recourse to violence. Morocco's Green March had already produced floods of refugees from the major Sahrawi cities; the tripartite agreement, together with the Moroccan bombardments of the refugee camps set up outside the cities, created a new wave of forced migration. Approximately a third to half of the population sought refuge in the southwestern part of Algeria where camps were opened and administered by the Polisario. About 170,000 Sahrawis still live in the Algerian desert. This refugee status has strengthened and sharpened the collective Sahrawi identity: the Polisario has proved capable of mobilizing the population in support of the struggle for independence while providing essential educational and health services in the face of extremely harsh living and climatic conditions. Tribal differences and distinctions, formerly a crucial factor in Sahrawi

society, have been submerged in the common goal for independence.

### - The Periphery

Since the Moroccan occupation, the Polisario has been supported by the Algerian government as a result of Algeria's traditional commitment to movements of national liberation. More importantly, perhaps, Algeria believed that a determined challenge to Morocco's claim to Western Sahara would prevent Morocco from strengthening and enriching its position in North Africa, and would allow Algeria to become the pre-eminent power in the region.

Two years after the conflict began, it was considered to be "a proxy war between Morocco and Mauritania on the one hand and Algeria on the other" (Price, 1977, 3). While Algeria has never asserted a claim to Western Sahara, it has been a major player in the Saharan conflict. Far from being a disinterested neighbor, the Algiers government openly refused to accept a development -the Moroccan-Mauritanian take-over of Western Sahara- that worked against long-term Algerian national interests.

During their struggles for independence, the Moroccan and Algerian nationalist movements provided each other with considerable material and political assistance. However, when Algeria achieved its independence in 1962 (Morocco gained independence in 1956), relations between Rabat and Algiers became problematic and strained. Geopolitical rivalry ensued as each country sought dominance over the strategically important Maghreb with its lack of agreed Saharan borders. Ideological differences have also played a role: monarchical, capitalist, conservative, and pro-Western Morocco contrasts sharply with the revolutionary, single-party, socialist, and anti-Western Algeria. When in mid-1975 Algerian President Houari Boumedienne came out strongly in favor of Saharan self-determination and



agreed to provide the Polisario with weapons, political support, sanctuary, and information facilities, he essentially caused a break in Moroccan-Algerian relations that would last until the mid-1980s. Although a few isolated border clashes have erupted between the two countries since the Western Sahara conflict began, these have never resulted in an all-out war.

From the time of Boumedienne's death in 1978 and his replacement by Chedli Benjedid, King Hassan hoped that the Algerians would tire of their support for the Polisario and accept Morocco's annexation of the territory. Communication lines were kept open, and on several occasions, Saudi Arabia mediated negotiations between the two countries. Despite the re-establishment of diplomatic ties in May 1988, Algeria has remained ideologically committed to the Polisario and conditioned an effective renewal of its relations with Morocco based on the latter's willingness to accept the principle of holding a referendum in Western Sahara. In the Algerian view, the Moroccans are clearly to blame for the Saharan conflict and are consequently responsible for the failure of proposed resolutions.

Libya and Mauritania have also played important roles in the development of the conflict. While Libya<sup>4</sup> does not border Western Sahara, Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi initially saw the conflict as an opportunity to destabilize Morocco and promote his own ideology in the Maghreb. Yet throughout the history of the Western Sahara contest, several of Qadhafi's objectives have clashed with one another, producing ambiguities and inconsistencies of policy. During the first two years of the Polisario's existence, Libya was the Front's largest financial and material supporter. Qadhafi also lobbied in the OAU on behalf of the Polisario. The Libyan leader disapproved, however, of the Polisario's goal to create what he considered to be another "artificial" Arab state. According to Qadhafi, the Arab world needed unity, not further fragmentation. He ceased arms shipments to the Polisario in 1983, and the next year entered into a two-year

alliance with Hassan - the Arab-African Union - based on a *quid-pro-quo* of Qadhafi's cessation of all aid to the Polisario in return for Hassan's tacit support of Libya's ambitions in Chad.

Like Morocco, Mauritania asserted a claim over Western Sahara. The Mauritanian claim, however, was undermined by several factors. Like his counterparts in Rabat, Algiers, and Tripoli, Mauritania's President Ould Daddah had regional aspirations. While these were partially fulfilled by the tripartite agreement of 1976, Mauritania - because of recurrent shifts in its Saharan policy - proved too weak to consolidate its control over the southern third of the territory. Mauritania, unlike Morocco, could never show a strong national unity on the Saharan issue. The Polisario's military pressure and its threat to destabilize the state proved too strong to resist and consequently forced Mauritania to withdraw in 1979. Before the Polisario could succeed in reclaiming the territory, Moroccan troops assumed control of it. Since its withdrawal, Mauritania has sought to remain neutral, but the frequent regime upheavals and the shared border with Western Sahara have made this difficult. Furthermore, the Polisario continues to use Mauritanian territory to stage its raids. Morocco's responses to these attacks, and efforts by both parties to influence Mauritania's policies, have rendered the country especially vulnerable and therefore eager for a resolution of the conflict (Maddy-Weitzman, 1992: 140).

### - The International Players

One of the reasons it is taking so long to resolve the Western Sahara conflict is that the region never became a Cold War arena, a prize in the East-West struggle for global hegemony. Soviet leaders concluded that Western Sahara, unlike other areas of Africa during the 1970s, provided little opportunity to advance the USSR's geopolitical interests. The Soviets realized that they had much to lose and little to gain in Western Sahara. Thus,

despite its ideological affiliation with Algeria and its belief in self-determination for colonized peoples, Moscow maintained an official policy of neutrality on the Sahara issue. In 1978, Soviet economic ties with Morocco expanded with the signing of a multibillion dollar phosphate agreement and a \$300 million fishing agreement (Damis, 1983: 129). The USSR, however, also provided assistance to a variety of Algerian development projects. The Soviets needed Algerian support during the Angolan crisis; in exchange for this support, the Soviets called for the Sahrawis to have the full right to determine their future. Yet, the Polisario was the only major liberation movement in Africa that did not receive direct assistance from the Soviets. Throughout the Cold War, the USSR stressed the importance of finding a solution that took into consideration the interests of all the parties to the dispute.

A policy of neutrality has likewise been pursued by the United States out of necessity, as Morocco has been its closest political ally and Algeria its strongest economic partner in North Africa for several decades. This is not to suggest, however, that the US has not taken actions which have influenced the evolution of the conflict. While the United States is a principal purchaser of Algerian crude oil and natural gas and while it is appreciative of Algeria's mediation services during the hostage crisis with Iran, the United States and Morocco have a long-standing special relationship that dates back to a treaty signed in 1787. Strategically, Morocco has always been deemed vital by US officials, and there has been an established military - strategic link between Washington and Rabat. Morocco was a major supporter of the United States in the Persian Gulf War. In addition, it supported the convening of the Middle East Peace process (Bolton, 1998, 7). The United States played a major role in pressuring the reluctant Spain to sign the Madrid Accords, recognizing that the failure to do so could result in the overthrow of the US ally, King Hassan II (Hodges, 1983: 215). Moreover, the United States was anxious that

another state not be added to the list of socialist countries aligned with the USSR. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger voiced his concern over the possibility of an independent Sahrawi state when he declared that "the United States will not allow another Angola on the east flank of the Atlantic Ocean" (Kamil, 187: 44). After the fall of the Shah in Iran and Somoza in Nicaragua, there was intense pressure in the White House to come to Hassan's aid. The US thus pledged its support to Hassan -hesitantly under President Carter, then more solidly under Ronald Reagan. In 1981, the US sold Morocco \$235.5 million worth of planes and helicopters for use in Western Sahara. The arms sale, which was paid for by Saudi Arabia, was deemed to simply be a "political signal" of US support to Hassan, a signal that would allow him to negotiate from a position of strength (Hodges, 1980: 42). Because Washington has not adopted a hard-line policy towards Western Sahara and has allowed the dispute to drag on by the provision of arms, this so-called "non-intervention" has served only to further fuel the conflict. In failing to recognize the impact that the Western Sahara conflict has had on regional stability in the Maghreb, the US has worked to reaffirm its alliance with Morocco primarily to protect its interests in the Middle East. As Mahmoud Abdelfettah of the Polisario Political Bureau asserted: "I think the United States views the Western Saharan problem from a Middle Eastern perspective, whereas the problem has great importance [especially] for Africa" (Hodges, 1980:49).

Like the United States, France has also been concerned about regional stability in North Africa and eager to maintain good economic and political relations with both Morocco and Algeria. On several occasions, the French Air Force engaged in operations on behalf of the Mauritanian government against the Polisario. Combined with American military aid, France's support made it possible for Morocco to consolidate its control over 80 percent of Western Sahara. In order to strengthen its position, Morocco used the aid it received to make

considerable investments in the occupied territory and to almost double the size of its armed forces. In 1981, after a series of heavy military defeats, Morocco was helped by its Western allies to build costly but effective defensive walls, or berms, which surround the major Moroccan-held settlements in the occupied territory. Stretching over 2,000 miles, the berms constitute a highly fortified defensive system with a double barrier of sand and stone bunkers where artillery and infantry units are sheltered. There are over 100,000 soldiers stationed along the wall and the entire system is protected by Western supplied mines on the Algerian side and trenches on the Western Saharan side. With its extensive defense system, Morocco spends \$2 million a day on its armed occupation of Western Sahara.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their overt assistance of the Moroccan effort, neither Paris nor Washington has been willing to confer *de jure* recognition on the Moroccan annexation in the absence of a formal, internationally sanctioned process. In the long term, Morocco's agricultural exports to European Community countries, its ability to attract Western investment and capital, and its maintenance of migration outlets in Europe for its expanding, disproportionately youthful population depended on it maintaining its image as a moderate, pro-Western, democratic country that conformed to accepted standards of justice and human rights. The failure to demonstrate a willingness to seek a political settlement could jeopardize this image; hence, in the late 1980s King Hassan resolved to exercise a measure of flexibility in dealing with peacemaking initiatives to resolve the conflict.

The Organization of African Unity sponsored numerous mediation efforts in Western Sahara in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The OAU envisioned direct negotiation between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front which would bring about a cease-fire and create the necessary conditions for a peaceful and fair referendum for self-determination.<sup>6</sup> As the result of successful diplomatic efforts, the OAU succeeded in getting

Hassan to agree to the concept of a plebiscite. The OAU failed, however, to carry forth its successful initiative as the result of a number of factors: its lack of experience in conducting similar referenda elsewhere in Africa; the refusal of Morocco to negotiate directly with the Polisario; and the pro-Sahrawi sympathies of an increasing number of OAU member states.

The complete collapse of the OAU effort came in 1982 when the SADR was awarded full membership in the organization, a step which paralyzed the OAU for approximately two years as Morocco and its allies fought to prevent the SADR from taking its seat. When the SADR finally took its place as an OAU member in 1984, Morocco resigned from the organization in protest. With this, the most active period of OAU involvement in Western Sahara came to an end as the organization's referendum plans were halted by the absence of one of its most important members.<sup>7</sup> While OAU involvement in Western Sahara diminished after 1984, the years from 1985 witnessed a renewed United Nations role in attempting to resolve the conflict.

Like the OAU, the United Nations has a particular interest in issues related to decolonization and self-determination. When the Spanish Sahara question first appeared on its agenda in 1966, the UN recommended that Spain relinquish its colony and grant the territory independence. In October 1975, UN secretary-general Kurt Waldheim proposed the withdrawal of Spanish forces and the creation of a temporary UN administration which would oversee a referendum for self-determination. The UN's action succeeded where the OAU had failed in breaking the diplomatic deadlock and initiating a conflict-resolution process. By the mid-1980s, the situation was ripe for mediation given the "hurting stalemate" whereby neither side was able to achieve a decisive outcome - each possessing a number of assets and each concerned that the continued impasse would prove detrimental to its cause. In addition, the new Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar had the credibility of a neutral observer,

the necessary clout provided by the support of the Security Council, and the skills of a seasoned diplomat to wisely nudge the parties towards a solution. Pérez de Cuéllar provided the Moroccans with the chance to seem responsive to the will of the international community without simultaneously appearing to succumb to the pressure of hostile parties.

### **The United Nations and the Proposed Referendum**

UN Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar visited North Africa in July 1985 but ruled out UN mediation of the conflict unless there were direct talks between the adversaries (a proviso that Morocco initially refused to accept, as Rabat recognized neither Polisario's belligerent status nor its claim to represent the peoples of Western Sahara). In October 1985, Morocco accepted a UN supervision of a referendum in the territory, but still refused direct talks. The Polisario in turn proposed a UN-supervised referendum, a direct UN administration of the territory, a joint UN-African security force, and the withdrawal of Moroccan forces and settlers from the territory immediately before the vote.<sup>8</sup>

In late 1987, the UN sent a fact-finding mission, which included OAU observers, to Morocco, Algeria, and Western Sahara. It met with the respective governments as well as with Polisario leaders and reported its findings to the Secretary-General in early 1988. In May of that year, Pérez de Cuéllar made a second tour of the region, talking with all parties. The Secretary-General was quick to recognize that the situation was ripe for finally breaking the impasse. After separately meeting delegates from the two sides in New York on August 11, 1988, Pérez de Cuéllar drafted a joint UN-OAU plan to resolve the conflict. The plan called for a cessation of hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario, troop withdrawals, the setting up of a UN force—the United Nations' Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO),<sup>9</sup>—the establishment of an Identification Commission to

assemble and publish a list of eligible Sahrawi voters, and a referendum to be held about six months after the beginning of the process. The choice for the Sahrawi people was to be between integration with Morocco and independence. Although a number of crucial matters were still to be negotiated, Pérez de Cuéllar's proposal was to form the basis of all subsequent UN mediation efforts in Western Sahara.

The UN document was creatively ambiguous in its construction. On the one hand, the plan's clear goal was to enable the people of Western Sahara "to exercise their right to self-determination and independence," but with the option to choose between independence and incorporation into Morocco. On the other hand, the proposal was characterized as "a compromise" providing "a practical and reasonable basis" for implementing UN and OAU resolutions "while taking the parties' interests into account" (UN Security Council, 1990: 5). The contradictions in this formulation were certainly not lost on its drafters, but were deemed vital for what one analyst characterized as the UN's technique of "entrapment" in the diplomatic process (Maddy-Weitzman, 1991: 599). From the mediator's point of view, this proposal ideally would carry the process far enough so that a refusal to resolve the dispute would become politically too costly for all parties.

A vital part of the plan was the call for the "appropriate, substantial and phased reduction" (UN Secretary-General Report, 1990) of Morocco's armed forces in Western Sahara - estimated at between 120,000 to 170,000 men. These remaining troops were to be confined to designated locations under the supervision of a UN observer group. Similarly, all of the Polisario's estimated 8,000 armed men were to be confined to UN-monitored locations. The exact extent of the reduction of Morocco's forces would be a bone of contention for the next three years. With regard to the voting eligibility, the reference point was to be the 1974 Spanish census which counted 73,497 persons over 18 years of age in



the territory. In August 1988, both Morocco and the Polisario gave their qualified acceptance of the settlement proposals.

On September 20, 1988 the Security Council adopted Resolution 621 which approved the referendum and authorized Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar to appoint a special representative for Western Sahara. The UN efforts to finalize the referendum plan came to a halt, however, with the crisis engendered by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 (Bolton, 1998, 2).<sup>10</sup> Immediately upon the conclusion of the Gulf War in early 1991, Pérez de Cuéllar publicly declared Western Sahara to be at the top of his agenda for the remaining ten months of his term as secretary-general. In April 1991, the Security Council approved the formation of MINURSO and set the approximately 36-week referendum process in motion (UN Secretary-General Report, 1991). It was decided that the peace campaign would start on September 6, 1991, the date of the beginning of the cease-fire. According to the UN schedule, the fate of Western Sahara would be decided by January 1992.

### **Stalemating the Peace Process**

Between September 6 and the end of 1991, the situation in Western Sahara deteriorated. Pérez de Cuéllar proceeded with the deployment of 240 MINURSO military observers at ten strategic locations in the conflict-torn territory to monitor the cease-fire. Before the UN's interim administration could be fully functional, however, Morocco insisted that population-related issues be resolved. Thus, the UN forces from various countries, including France and the United States, had little to do but monitor the cease-fire, which was holding despite Moroccan air attacks in August and September 1991 against Polisario-controlled towns and new facilities built by the Polisario for MINURSO.

Regarding the work of the Identification Commission, UN Special Representative for Western

Sahara Johannes Manz was encountering enormous problems. In the summer of 1991, the Commission arrived at a list of 70,204 prospective voters, an insufficient number from the standpoint of both Morocco and the Polisario, but including the most realistic number of persons who could easily be proven to have resided in Western Sahara before or in 1974. Almost as soon as the UN presence in Western Sahara had been established, however, Morocco sought to alter the composition of the voter pool by moving thousands of people across its border into Western Sahara and asking that their voting applications be evaluated by the Identification Commission. The new arrivals in the region may or may not have been Sahrawis, displaced and forced to live elsewhere by earlier armed conflicts, but the evaluation of their petitions promised to consume much additional time and resources on the part of the Identification Commission, inevitably delaying the referendum. In a US Congressional forum, former UN Secretariat and MINURSO official John Bolton explained: "as the fall of 1991 went on, it became increasingly clear that the UN logistically, and we [MINURSO], in budget terms, simply could not handle the processing of 170,000 new names submitted by Morocco" (Bolton, 1998:3). While attempts were made to overcome this setback, Morocco appeared unwilling to allow the United Nations to assert its transitional authority over Western Sahara and barred its military observers from moving freely in the region. Soon after the cease-fire, the Sahrawis living in Western Sahara were informed by Moroccan authorities that they could not make contact with any foreigners, including journalists or members of MINURSO. The MINURSO headquarters in El Aaiún, the capital of Western Sahara, were virtually surrounded by Moroccan police, and personnel stationed there reported their frustration at not being allowed to talk with the local population. In addition, UN troops on patrol were often intimidated by Moroccan authorities. Demonstrations by Sahrawi youths in the fall of 1991 were brutally repressed. Morocco also

reportedly made Sahrawi political prisoners declare their loyalty to the King and to the cause of a Moroccan Sahara before granting them amnesty (under the peace agreements Morocco was to release all political prisoners). According to reports from Polisario President Mohamed Abdelaziz, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, there are hundreds of Sahrawis who have "disappeared," 500 of whom still remain unaccounted for. The Moroccan government has repeatedly denied knowledge of these "disappeared," but testimonies by Sahrawis who were released from Moroccan prisons, where they were brutally tortured and inhumanely treated for years without ever officially being charged with a crime, suggest that Morocco has been committing grave human rights abuses.<sup>11</sup> On the other side, the Polisario has been holding some 2,000 prisoners of war, some of them for more than 21 years (Ober, 1997). While these individuals have been denied any contact with their families, there is no proof that the Polisario has committed human rights abuses on nearly the same scale as Morocco and has in fact shown its goodwill with the recent release of Moroccan prisoners on December 14, 2000.

Continuing appeals to the UN from human rights organizations helped assert pressure on the international body to continue with its efforts to resolve the conflict. Pérez de Cuéllar's primary aim was to avoid a complete derailing of the peace process. Thus, the decision was made to widen the eligibility criteria for potential voters. "People who fled colonial rule," stated Pérez de Cuéllar's report, "cannot be deprived of the right to decide on the future of the Territory to which they belong." Thus, "a member of a Saharan tribe belonging to the Territory" would be considered eligible to participate in the referendum if, prior to 1 December 1974, he or she had (a) resided there for six consecutive years or (b) intermittently resided there for twelve years (UN Secretary-General Reports, 1991).

While not completely adopting Morocco's position, Pérez de Cuéllar's decision promised a substantial addition

of persons presumably favoring union, not independence. The Moroccans welcomed the Secretary-General's report; the Polisario on the other hand called for its rejection. Polisario officials also accused MINURSO personnel, both in the field and among Manz's top assistants, of leaning towards Morocco.

By 1992, UN peacekeepers became increasingly preoccupied with the crises in Yugoslavia, Cambodia, and El Salvador. In addition, the new UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali showed minimal interest in keeping the Western Sahara issue on the agenda. It was not long, therefore, before the peace process reached a stalemate. With the appointment of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Polisario's Bachir Musapher Sayed, who is in charge of the National Commission for a referendum in Western Sahara, described the main difficulty as being the lack of political will to resolve the whole conflict (Zoubir and Pazzanita, 1995:620). In Boutros-Ghali's opinion, the basic problem derived from "fundamentally divergent positions of the parties in the establishment of the electorate, one party (i.e. Morocco) wanting to make all persons who are Saharans eligible to participate in the referendum, and the other (i.e. Polisario) wanting to limit the electorate as far as possible to those counted in the Territory in 1974" (UN Secretary-General Report, 1994).

Having criticized the positions of both disputants, Boutros-Ghali held fast to his predecessor's compromise proposal as the best way to ensure that the final enrollment of voters could proceed without further delay. Boutros-Ghali was most critical of MINURSO's overall failure to reverse the deadlock by attempting to arrange for negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario. The Secretary-General set out three options: the first was to hold a referendum regardless of whether Morocco or the Polisario was co-operative. Under this course of action, MINURSO would conclude its duties by December 31, 1994. The second option was to continue the UN effort to reconcile the parties' respective positions. The third option was to abandon the UN endeavor in the Western Sahara

entirely, for a fixed period of time, or to indefinitely suspend voter registration, while keeping some MINURSO troops in the territory to enforce the cease-fire (UN Secretary-General Report, 1994). Boutros-Ghali himself appeared to favor either a quick referendum or the abandonment of the whole MINURSO operation. By March 1995, Boutros-Ghali hoped that, if the process continued uninterrupted, the transition period could begin in August 1995 and the referendum might finally be held in January 1996 (UN Secretary-General Report, 1995). As the result of problems within the UN and with the voter registration process, Boutros-Ghali's hopes were not to be realized.

Two and a half years after the referendum was to originally take place, the identification process finally began at the end of August 1994. From the outset, the UN relinquished any control over the voter registration by agreeing that the parties, and not MINURSO, would be responsible for distributing application forms. MINURSO's involvement at this stage would have guaranteed that all individuals were given an equal opportunity to participate in the process. In 1991, Morocco transferred 40,000 people into Western Sahara in violation of the terms of the UN settlement plan. This population, which lives under 24-hour guard in "tent cities," receives free food and other benefits from the Moroccan government. According to members of the MINURSO voter identification commission, a large number of the applicants submitted by Morocco have no documents proving links to Western Sahara, are unfamiliar with the tribal structure of the region, and have memorized responses to the factual and biographical questions posed by the commission (Ziai, 1996:39). Another serious violation of the referendum process was the omnipresent Moroccan security and intelligence forces who routinely denied access to Sahrawis seeking to submit voter applications to the UN headquarters in El Aaiún. Moreover, Morocco refused to allow the nearly 100 civilian police units of the UN staff to guard the UN compounds.

There was also evidence of Moroccan attempts to intimidate and control applicants in the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, including allegations that voter registration cards had been confiscated. Individual applicants were also denied access to registration centers; instead, they were gathered at a central location and taken to and from registration centers in Moroccan vehicles. When the voting process began, the Moroccan-controlled media denied MINURSO permission to advertise and inform the Sahrawi population of the opportunity to register to vote and take part in the identification process. The day before the identification was to begin, the Moroccans ordered MINURSO staff in El Aaiún to remove all United Nations insignia from the UN building where the identification was to take place.

In addition to their complaints about Morocco's conduct, the Polisario also accused the United Nations of mismanagement and an apparent pro-Moroccan tilt. There have been reports that UN personnel had passed on to Moroccan authorities confidential computer disks containing the names of individuals from the 1974 census rolls who had died, allowing Moroccan settlers to claim their identities (Zunes, 1996:230). Should these allegations prove to be true, this would help explain why MINURSO failed to establish its authority on the Moroccan side and refused to condemn or seek to stop repeated Moroccan violations of the cease-fire. While Boutros Boutros-Ghali did place most of the blame for violations of the cease-fire and difficulties of MINURSO's operations on Morocco, it was widely believed that the Secretary-General was biased towards Morocco. A personal friend of King Hassan, Boutros-Ghali was one of Morocco's few defenders in international forums when he was in the Egyptian foreign ministry. According to Frank Ruddy, US ambassador and former deputy chairman of the Identification Commission of MINURSO, "Morocco conducted, without a raised eyebrow from Boutros-Ghali's hand-picked representatives who ran the referendum, a campaign of terror against the Saharan

people" (Ruddy, 1998:1). Furthermore, Polisario charged that MINURSO's application forms for voting were unclear and incomplete. It claimed that the forms did not allow space for Sahrawis to mention alternative criteria for qualification that they might wish to use. They also alleged that, by the summer of 1995, Western deputies, international jurists, and the foreign media had not been allowed free access and free movement inside the Territory to observe what was taking place (Sayed, 1994).

In his testimony before the United States Congress, Frank Ruddy asserted that many pro-independence Sahrawis who filled out their applications at the Moroccan-run centers did not appear on the voter rolls and were thus disenfranchised (Ruddy, 1995).<sup>12</sup> Even more problematic was the fact that the Moroccans allowed only Sahrawis cleared by their occupation authorities into the MINURSO identification centers, thus controlling who was identified. As Ruddy stated, "We were unsuccessful in inviting Sahrawis to fill out voter applications at our centers. Nobody was allowed anywhere near us without Moroccan government approval" (Ruddy, 1995).

Ruddy also noted that Sahrawis who reported abuses to MINURSO officials "asked that our UN people keep an eye out for them after they left, in case they disappeared. Many said they were scared for their lives if the Moroccans saw them talking to UN people" (Ruddy, 1995). Indeed, according to Ruddy, Moroccan security forces photographed and videotaped every Sahrawi who entered the identification center. More importantly, Ruddy also reported that Sahrawis were forced to turn in their receipts to Moroccan occupation forces as they left the identification centers, opening up the very real possibility that the wrong people may have been presenting receipts and receiving voter cards.

In light of so many controversies, the UN Security Council was beginning to show signs of frustration at funding a peacekeeping operation that was not

accomplishing anything. Erik Jensen, the head of MINURSO and Boutros-Ghali's special representative for Western Sahara since late June 1995,<sup>13</sup> agreed that there were insurmountable obstacles to the process of identification. In May 1996, the Security Council accepted Boutros-Ghali's recommendation to suspend the identification process. The Polisario found itself struggling with dashed hopes, and frustration mounted over a peace settlement indefinitely postponed. The United States Congress opted to cut off all American aid to MINURSO in 1995.

Given that the status favored Morocco, Rabat was free to delay the process at every turn. Morocco hoped that by continuing to prolong it, the Polisario would be worn down, and the UN would finally give up on an interminable process that was costing its organization a lot of money and resources. Well into 1996, the political balance appeared to be tilting decisively in Morocco's favor. Algeria was distracted by a bloody civil war; non-aligned countries, which traditionally championed the Polisario's cause, were weakened by the fall of the Soviet Union and the debt crisis; and US foreign policy was focused on the demanding problems of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The failure of the Security Council to invoke Article 25 of the UN Charter to make UN decisions binding on Morocco and thereby insure its full co-operation made the prospects of successful implementation of the peace plan appear highly unlikely. It seemed that everything was working against the UN peace plan for Western Sahara, although no one could deny the urgency of the problem and the ever pressing need for a solution. It was this consideration that led to renewed efforts to implement a plan that would finally resolve the Western Sahara conflict.

### **Resumed UN Efforts Towards a Referendum**

When Kofi Annan took over as secretary-general in early 1997, he soon made it apparent that breaking the



stalemate on the Western Sahara peace process would become a major priority. Annan appointed former US Secretary of State James Baker as UN special representative to Western Sahara, thus giving the position unprecedented importance. Annan also made Baker his personal envoy which allowed him to report to the Secretary-General directly. Annan believed that only an American was going to resolve the situation, if it could be resolved. Moreover, he wanted "an American of real prominence, somebody who had a certain amount of independence, somebody who was doing this not because he needed a career in the United Nations, or because he needed another plaque on his wall, but because it was something that he wanted to do" (Bolton, 1998:5). The Secretary-General envisioned that if Baker's mission succeeded, the long awaited free and fair referendum for Western Sahara, with the consequent establishment of peace, would be hailed as a victory for the UN; on the other hand, if it failed, the world body would be justified in terminating the MINURSO operation and in desisting from its involvement in the crisis. Indeed, Baker's mission was viewed as the last chance for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in order to ensure stability and justice in the region (Akpata-Ohohe, 1997:1721 and Abdelaziz, 1997:5).

Baker was advised by virtually every expert that the referendum process could never work, as the idea of an either/or choice between independence for Western Sahara and amalgamation with Morocco was the kind of option that did not permit valid negotiations. Verily, it had been repeatedly proven that initial agreements did not lead to an accepted resolution (Bolton, 1998:5). But when Baker met with Polisario and Moroccan officials, they expressed their desire to proceed with the referendum. Neither side was willing to discuss any other option: each saw it as an all or nothing situation.

From the start, Baker made it clear that he was not just interested in breaking the deadlock on the identification process, but was determined to work out

an agreement that would insure the implementation of an entire peace settlement. While he was willing to make suggestions and offer ideas to facilitate the bridging of differences, he would not try to impose solutions on the parties. In an important departure from previous negotiations, he insisted that no agreement would be considered final until all outstanding issues were resolved (UN Secretary-General Report, 1997). He also promoted direct talks between Morocco and the Polisario, an initiative which the Moroccans had traditionally rejected. Throughout the summer of 1997, the parties met in Lisbon, London, and Houston: it was this latter meeting that finally resulted in an agreement.

The Houston Accords reiterate and strengthen the key aspects of the original settlement regarding a code of conduct for the referendum, a declaration of the authority of the United Nations during the interim period, refugee repatriation under UNHCR auspices, equal access to the media, withdrawal of troops, exchange of prisoners, access for accredited international observers, and UN authority to intervene to ensure the fairness of the process (UN Secretary-General Report, 1997). A new timetable was set, and it was hoped that by December 7, 1998, the referendum would be held. Due to delays in the identification process caused by Morocco's entering of 12,000 more individuals, the December date passed without a referendum. On February 28, 2000, the UN Security Council mandated Mr. Baker to explore ways and means to achieve an early, durable and agreed resolution. After meeting SADR President Mohamed Abdelaziz and Moroccan King Mohamed VI, Mr. Baker declared the UN Settlement Plan to be "very much alive but it is in the ditch" (Western Sahara Campaign, U.K., 2000). The date for a referendum was then set for July 31, 2000, and once again, it was not held. Kofi Annan expressed concern about the strain the delay has caused the two parties: "I am concerned that the current tensions may increase as completion of the identification process approaches. In this connection, I must express concern

about the continuing propaganda against MINURSO in the Moroccan press, which is clearly unjustifiable and should be halted" (Western Sahara Campaign, U.K., 1998). More significantly, beginning in 1998 Interior Minister Driss Basri instructed the country's governors how to hold ethnic workshops to enable Moroccans to pass themselves off as Sahrawis in UN identification sessions (Ruddy, 1998:11). Furthermore, over the years the Moroccan government has enticed thousands of Moroccans to move to Western Sahara with tax breaks and subsidies. El Aaiún has huge shantytowns built for the new arrivals, and the government is spending lavishly to expand the city's port and water supply (*The Economist*, 1998:82). But the UN does have an elaborate voter-identification system designed to weed out phony applicants. Would-be voters are questioned about their family trees, both by the UN and by tribal elders from both sides. Five observers (two each from the Polisario and Morocco, and one from the OAU) supervise every interview, and a computer database is used to compare the testimony of relatives.

Considering their ongoing efforts to sabotage the referendum, why the Moroccans agreed to sign the Houston Agreement is not clear. There is some speculation that they became overconfident in the belief that a former American secretary of state would not take too firm and principled a stance. Unable to back out without serious diplomatic consequences, Rabat had to agree to major compromises on most of its positions. Yet, Moroccan officials describe the vote as a mere formality to confirm Moroccan control. Most likely, King Hassan was eager to finally put the conflict behind him, as he was concerned about succession and the scale of popular discontent from the decay of the social and economic situation in the country. In addition, Hassan was sensitive to pressure from the international community and was concerned about Morocco's decreasing usefulness to the West. With the end of the Cold War and the decline of its government's role as intermediary in Arab-Israeli

negotiations, Morocco's financial supporters have reduced their levels of aid. Perhaps the most compelling reason why Morocco agreed to proceed with the referendum was to avoid the risk of international ostracism which would ensure its bringing the peace plan down.

A more important issue, however, is how willing the current Bush administration is to take the lead in insuring that Morocco does not try to back out of the referendum. No matter how honest or effective the US special envoy may be, as long as the Moroccans know that the permanent members of the UN Security Council are unwilling to enforce the mandate of the world body, they may still subvert the peace process to avoid losing Western Sahara. Should a referendum pass that is not in Morocco's favor, many believe that Morocco will refuse to accept it (Interview with senior UNHCR officer, 1998). In the absence of an international body that is able or willing to force the Moroccan king to abide by the referendum's results, there is no guarantee that even after a referendum is passed the conflict will be resolved.

Beyond the moral or legal obligations of the United States regarding the resolution of the Western Sahara dispute, there are some clear strategic imperatives in favor of supporting a fair peace process that would guarantee genuine self-determination. Traditionally, it was assumed that King Hassan would fall as a result of popular reaction to Morocco losing the referendum. While King Hassan has since died, the stability of the monarchy itself continues to be threatened by the further prolonging of the conflict. Concerning the issue of Western Sahara, King Hassan's son and successor Mohammed VI reaffirmed his father's position when he said that he is committed to defend Morocco's territorial integrity by holding a "confirmative" referendum in the region (Agence Europe News Service, 1999).

Morocco's stability in the long run would likely be enhanced by ending the dispute, even if the referendum went against integration. The occupation has been a major economic drain on Morocco's resources, has

threatened Maghreb unity, has alienated Morocco from many African countries, and has cast the government as an international outlaw in the eyes of many. Thus, supporting the UN's efforts in Western Sahara would be to the US's advantage in order to salvage Morocco's reputation, strengthen the Moroccan economy, and protect its own interests in North Africa.

After more than ten years and expenditures approaching \$500 million, MINURSO has still not been able to hold a free and fair referendum in Western Sahara. In a recent report dated February 20, 2001, Kofi Annan expressed his frustration and his regrets that after a series of talks in London, Geneva, and Berlin in summer 2000, no progress has been made "towards overcoming the obstacles to the implementation of the settlement plan, or towards determining whether the government of Morocco, as an administrative power in Western Sahara, is prepared to offer or support some devolution of authority for all inhabitants and former inhabitants of the Territory that is genuine, substantial and in keeping with international norms" (UN Secretary-General Report, 2001).

The Secretary-General has recently begun to doubt the possibility of achieving "a smooth and consensual implementation of the settlement plan" (UN Secretary-General Report, 2000) and seems to be moving towards a third option, that is to abandon the idea of a referendum and instead explore other ways and means of resolving the conflict. More specifically, Annan is concerned that no mechanism exists to enforce the result of the referendum (UN Secretary-General Report, 2000). Given Annan's increasingly strong conviction that a free and fair referendum is unlikely, the UN Security Council, while still supporting the referendum, is moving in the direction of a solution in which each side gets some, but not all, of what it wanted. Such a "political solution" would be acceptable to all parties involved except the Polisario. If it were to win a referendum, the Polisario would legitimize its cause – even if the Moroccan government

refused to accept the outcome. A "third-option" solution would return the parties to the negotiating table and threaten the survival of the Polisario as a political movement. The interests of the Polisario Front with regards to a referendum emanate from its deep conviction that a referendum constitutes the only framework able to guarantee a just and lasting solution to the conflict over Western Sahara and therefore ensure the restoration of peace and stability to the region. It is also from this conviction and from its belief in the inalienable right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination and independence that the Polisario Front firmly rejects any approach other than the implementation of a referendum.

### **Implications of the Western Sahara Conflict for UN Peacekeeping**

In August 1991, President George Bush reaffirmed the end of the Cold War by stating that "force cannot be used to settle disputes and that when consensus is broken, the world will respond," with "the United Nations playing the role dreamed of by its founders" (Zoubir and Volman, 1993:227). According to Bush administration officials, the response of the Allies (under UN auspices) to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait vindicated and rejuvenated the role of the United Nations in resolving international conflicts. Since the end of the Cold War, the major powers are less likely to see a conflict in a distant country in geostrategic terms. Rather, they are more willing to see a response (or lack of it) emerge from within a UN framework. Since mid-1988, there has been a dramatic expansion in the number of UN peacekeeping and observer forces throughout the world. One of the main reasons for this expansion has been a widespread confidence that the United Nations can have a much more central role in international security, and that its peacekeeping mission can tackle a wide range of urgent problems. It was hoped that the UN would be able to play such a role in settling regional conflicts, such as those in Afghanistan,

Cambodia, Somalia, Yugoslavia, and Western Sahara.

Events in Western Sahara, however, have challenged the UN's ability to serve as a post Cold War peacekeeper and its capacity to monitor referenda. Had the Western Sahara conflict been a Cold War issue, it most likely would have been resolved long ago, but Moscow's neutrality, Algeria's policy of non-alignment, and the Polisario's nationalism and anti-Communist stand did not allow the dispute to take an East-West dimension. Because the US has never had any real vested interest in the region, it has failed to provide the necessary commitment to resolving the conflict. Without US support, the UN proves to be virtually powerless. And while the New World Order theory suggests that conflicts should be resolved in isolation from outside interests, the reality of the Western Sahara dispute demonstrates that the end of the Cold War has not brought an end to the political maneuvering which was a feature of superpower rivalry. The US is reluctant to exert pressure on Morocco because the country is seen as "friendly" to US interests. During a Congressional Hearing on Western Sahara in 1992, John Bolton admitted that Morocco's demands for changes in the voter eligibility were a "violation" of the peace plan, but he also insisted that "[the US] takes no position" on the issue because "its interest in resolving the Western Sahara dispute fits into a larger context of developments in the region" (Zoubir and Volman, 1993:236). This statement made it clear that the United States' commitment to the peace process is secondary to good relations with Morocco. Unless the US takes the lead, the United Nations will find it difficult to make significant progress toward ensuring that the referendum passes. The Western Sahara case illustrates that UN peacekeeping missions are contingent upon the interests of powerful governments.

The absence of a US commitment is not the only reason, however, why the referendum has yet to pass. The lack of media attention on the conflict has also contributed to prolonging the referendum process. In

the aftermath of the Cold War, the media has assumed a greater role as an agenda setter in foreign policy. The Gulf War is perhaps the best example of the media's power to manipulate public opinion. While it is usually the cameras that follow the soldiers and not vice versa, it can be argued that the crises in Somalia and Rwanda were given higher priority as the result of increased public interest. In the case of Rwanda and Somalia, it was images and reports of starving children and displaced populations that primarily generated the increase in public interest and awareness. Few journalists have been allowed into the Sahrawi refugee camps: this limited access translates into a lack of awareness that there is even a conflict taking place in Western Sahara. In the post Cold War era, the UN needs the media to arouse interest in and support for its efforts. As the Western Sahara case demonstrates, without this media attention, there is less public pressure to resolve conflicts; thus, the UN may respond with less urgency.

At stake in this issue is not only the Sahrawi people's survival, but also the ability of the UN to resolve conflictual situations. Should a referendum finally be held but then turn out to be unfree or unfair, it would nonetheless be a huge defeat for the United Nations. If the referendum is bought and sold, or otherwise distorted in its results and the UN certifies it as free and fair, this would be an even greater debacle for the United Nations, with the world body losing leverage and credibility for its prolonged agony in trying to solve what could be viewed as a relatively straightforward conflict related to decolonization.

At this point, it seems that the possibility of a referendum is increasingly less likely under the current MINURSO mission. But until an acceptable "third option" is proposed, all hopes are still resting on a referendum. If a referendum were to be held, there is a chance that one of the parties may still refuse to accept the results. In that case, the UN would not be in a position to enforce it. If this were to happen, perhaps the only way to ensure



that the referendum outcome is upheld would be for the US to exert pressure in the form of sanctions. The European Union could also take action to ensure that Morocco abides by the referendum. With the largest population of North African immigrants, Europe is directly affected by instability in the Maghreb. Thus, it is within Europe's interest to encourage and support a free and fair resolution to the Western Saharan conflict. In addition, like the United States, the European Union has the leverage and the power to enforce the referendum's results. While the UN would most likely be held responsible should the referendum not be upheld, the international community as a whole would also be blamed for allowing one of the two sides to get away with rejecting the popular will.

If the referendum does not pass by the end of 2001 and if a viable alternative solution cannot be found, the UN will probably abandon its costly mission in Western Sahara. Morocco and the Polisario could be expected to resume fighting. There is no certainty as to the overall implications of renewed hostilities between the parties. On the one hand, a war could be expected to be short, since Morocco is militarily stronger; on the other hand, in the opinion of experts, the conflict could be protracted because the guerrilla tactics of the Polisario might compensate for the lack of military power. Two decades of conflict tend to confirm the latter of these possibilities.

## **Conclusion**

For over three decades, the United Nations has worked to ensure that the Sahrawis have the right to self-determination. Thus far, it has not succeeded. Western Sahara is an important test case for the UN's effectiveness as a peacekeeper in the post Cold War international system. If the referendum is held in 2001, and if both Morocco and the Polisario Front can be made to accept its results, then the United Nations could still emerge

victorious from its lengthy mediation effort. Should the referendum not pass, then the UN's mission in Western Sahara is likely to be terminated and its efforts judged a failure. The world body's credibility and legitimacy will be called into question, and the UN will be forced to answer for its shortcomings in mediating the conflict.

If a referendum were to be held, it is likely that the Sahrawis would vote for independence; however, the question remains whether or not Morocco would relinquish sovereignty over Western Sahara. The only way to ensure that Rabat would accept the referendum's results is if pressure is applied by the United States, the European Union, the AU, and other major powers. As the Western Sahara case demonstrates, the interests of powerful governments continue to have an impact on regional conflict resolution. Unless states decide to act on international law and human rights concerns rather than on the basis of national economic and security considerations, the UN's peacemaking efforts will be null and void. In that case, the international community may be forced to find alternate arbitrating organizations to establish peace and protect human rights. The United Nations itself could still be capable of playing an effective role in these efforts; but in order to do this, the world body may need to be restructured so as to become independent of the interests of its member states.

Present world conditions make the United Nations one of the few supranational organizations capable of intervening in violent clashes and promoting negotiations with a fair hope to succeed. No matter how long, painful, and costly these conciliatory efforts are, they are preferable to the eruption of bloody - and in more than one instance - fratricidal struggles. In a continent like Africa that deserves our closest attention to its potential contribution to the world order and an equally attentive consideration of its many inner conflicts, even an international organization with a limited success rate is worthy of being supported in its efforts to maintain regional stability. If many are the examples of failure,

even a few successful outcomes for UN initiatives are there to justify some measure of support for the peacekeeping missions of the United Nations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Polisario is the commonly used acronym for the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro which was originally founded in May 1973 to fight against Spanish colonial rule.

<sup>2</sup> My account of the historical background to the conflict draws primarily on my telephone interview with a senior UNHCR officer stationed in Tindouf, Algeria (March 9, 2001), and the works by T. Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Connecticut, 1983); T. Hodges, *The Western Saharans* (London, 1983); J. Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Dispute* (Stanford, 1983); Y. Zoubir and D. Volman, *International Dimensions of the Western Sahara Conflict* (Connecticut, 1993), and D.L. Price, "Morocco and the Sahara: Conflict and Development," *Conflict Studies*, No. 88 (October 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Western Sahara is the only accessible remnant of Greater Morocco, a concept that at one time also included portions of southwest Algeria, all of Mauritania, and parts of Mali and Senegal.

<sup>4</sup> D.L. Price, "Morocco and the Sahara" and J. Damis, *Conflict* provide the best accounts of Libyan involvement.

<sup>5</sup> Figure from Jane's Intelligence Review as quoted by Richard Stanforth of the Western Sahara Campaign.

<sup>6</sup> See the OAU Peace Plan on Western Sahara adopted at the 19th Summit of the OAU, Addis Ababa, 6-12 June 1983.

<sup>7</sup> See A. Pazzanita, "The Proposed Referendum in the Western Sahara: Background, Development and Prospects," in Y. Zoubir and D. Volman, 1993:193-97.

<sup>8</sup> The Saharan conflict lapsed into a sort of stalemate about this time. In December 1984, Morocco and Libya had signed a rather improbable political union that lasted just two years, but one of its conditions was suspension of Libyan support for Polisario which helped quell the fighting. King Hassan in turn declared a unilateral cease-fire in December 1985. However, a visit by Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to Rabat in December 1986 caused Libya to break off the union with Morocco. Fighting in the Sahara resumed shortly thereafter.

<sup>9</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 621(1988) of 20 September 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Attentions at the time were also focused on efforts to resolve the ongoing crisis in Central America.

<sup>11</sup> In May 1995, eight young Sahrawi men were arrested in El Aaiún, following a peaceful pro-independence demonstration. They were held incommunicado, in secret detention for more than five weeks, during which they were allegedly subjected to torture and ill-treatment. In June 1995, a military tribunal in Morocco sentenced them to periods ranging from 15 to 20 years each. The trial was condemned as grossly unfair by Moroccan and international human rights organizations, and King Hassan subsequently commuted their sentences to one year. See also Bouya, 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Defenders of MINURSO note that Ruddy, a non-career diplomat appointed by President Reagan, is closely identified with conservative critics of the United Nations that have used MINURSO's problems as an excuse to attack the US support for UN peace-keeping activities in general. However, even those familiar with MINURSO's activities who are generally supportive of the United Nations acknowledge that Ruddy's analysis was essentially accurate.

<sup>13</sup> Erik Jensen replaced Ya'qub Khan, a Pakistani diplomat who the Polisario mistrusted because of his alleged pro-Moroccan views. After the appointment of Khan, John Bolton asserted, "everything stopped...The Polisario continued to sit in the refugee camps. The

Moroccans continued to sit in the Western Sahara” (Bolton, 1998:4).

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