

Morocco's Designs on Western Sahara Pose Danger to Palestinians

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ABSTRACT

On the Republican side, Elliot Abrams, the "deputy national security adviser for global democracy strategy," a hawkish pro-Israeli supporter and one of the neocon devisers of the Iraq war, also has been pushing the Moroccan plan, betraying the same insouciance toward legal technicalities that he did when convicted for lying to Congress about the Iran/Contra scandal.

FULL TEXT

APRIL 30 WAS just another day at the U.N. Security Council stakeout. As the veteran Polisario representative to the U.N., Ahmed Boukhari, was answering questions about the resolution that had just been passed, someone called the UNTV control room and told them to fade the cameras to black. No one has confessed, but some current or former Moroccan member of the U.N. staff doubtless will be rewarded by his grateful Kingdom. Morocco plays tough on this issue, as one would expect from a country that stands international law on its head.

As an old Brazilian saying has it, "For our enemies, the law, for our friend-that's different." It is a message Washington clearly has learned well. Sadly, however, the Americans are not alone in their expedient view of international law.

We know that Arabs will protest loudly when an occupier seizes land, dispossesses people and replaces them with settlers, while building a massive ugly barrier to keep out terrorists, in defiance of U.N. decisions and International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgments.

So why is there complete silence from most of the Arab world when Morocco has done just that in Western Sahara?

Arab friends have told me that there are not that many Saharwis, so why bother? But then non-Arabs also ask why we spend so much time on a relatively minor problem like the Palestinians.

The point about law, domestic and international, is that-theoretically, at least-it applies equally to rich and poor, strong and weak. Former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain rightly lives in ignominy for handing Czechoslovakia over to Hitler because it was a "quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing."

It is clear that lawbreaking sets a precedent. For over 15 years the U.N. Security Council has addressed the issue of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara every six months, agreeing to pour yet even more money into the sand for MINURSO, the peacekeeping force.

Everyone wishes the issue would just go away, since it poses such a clear challenge to the U.N. and to international law. Before Morocco occupied the territory, the ICJ ruled that there should be a referendum. The Security Council said Morocco should end its occupation, and in 1991 endorsed a cease-fire that was to end in a referendum which would allow the Saharwis to decide whether they wanted independence, or incorporation into Morocco.

As part of that cease-fire, even the late King Hassan II of Morocco had said there should be a referendum-although he stopped saying that as soon as it became apparent he could not win it, since the U.N. and MINURSO would not let him pad the electoral rolls with Moroccans.

But no one had enough of a dog in the fight to force Morocco to abide by Security Council resolutions. On the other hand, smaller members, who naturally want to uphold international law as their only protection against larger powers, have been concerned enough to thwart the perennial plans of France and others to legalize handing over the territory to Rabat.

In his last week in office, just before Christmas, for example, former Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar tried to smuggle through a solution favorable to Morocco.

On April 30 of this year the French were joined by the Americans, but once again could not railroad a decision past the atavistic attachment of the smaller members to legality and the principle of self-determination. Even so, the resolution that Bukhari was discussing shamelessly thanks the Moroccans for their latest initiative, while only "noting" Polisario's willingness to go along with the full letter of U.N. resolutions.

The compromise resolution did not endorse the Moroccan plan, but called for talks between Morocco and Polisario "with a view to achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara." The Moroccan plan directly precluded self-determination and offered less autonomy than Puerto Rico enjoys.

Significantly, over the same period of time the PLO also renounced armed struggle and put its faith in international law and diplomacy. The PLO has spent over a decade refining and reiterating the corpus of U.N. and ICJ decisions that support its case, while invoking multilateral bodies like the signatories of the Geneva Convention. They have done this with the full and served support of the Arab and Islamic bloc. But all their work could be for naught if the Moroccans were to succeed in getting U.N. endorsement of their autonomy proposal-which does in fact bear an uncanny resemblance to the Bantustan that Israel would like to see the Palestinians accept.

If Morocco can overturn international law, and legalize its movement of settlers into and annexation of occupied territory, then why can't the U.N. Security Council simply hand over Jerusalem and the settlements to Israel regardless of its previous decisions? Arab countries that stand aside and let Morocco get away with this are forging the legal weapons to dispossess the Palestinians-not to mention condemning their Arab brothers of the Sahara to a justly condemned regime that consistently violates their human and national rights.

They also should look at the friends Morocco has bought in the USA. Rabat has been spending some \$30 million in lobbying and, through its surrogate, the "Moroccan American Policy Center" (MAPC), has been tickling the soft underbelly of Congress. It has identified its friends in Washington, who amassed over 160 congressional signatures for a resolution supporting the Moroccan proposal. For most of the signatories Western Sahara is indeed a faraway country which may as well be Freedonia for all they know about it.

But the people heading the lobbying effort do know what they are doing: they are the architects of Washington's disastrous policies on the Cuban embargo, on Central America and Iran-Contra, on the spurious War on Terror, on Iraq and on Israel. With friends like these Morocco should be ashamed.

The congressional signatories are almost a roll-call of anti-Castro, pro-Israel members of the House of Representatives, and their numbers doubtless were boosted when the MAPC recently hired the legal-and-lobbying firm of Alberto Cardenas, a veteran anti-Castro Cuban American who served two terms as head of Florida's Republican Party and co-chaired Bush's 2004 effort in the Sunshine State.

For Morocco's supporters, an enemy's friend is a hated foe. Polisario has the dubious benefit of Castro's support and that (plus a \$15,000 monthly retainer to Cardenas) is enough to rally the Florida delegation, which has noticed that Castro has a soft spot for the Palestinians as well, with similar results on their voting patterns.

The Anti-Castro Connection

Prominent among the resolution's signers was Florida Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who is at least consistent. In addition to hating Castro she has been waging war on UNRWA and Palestinian refugees, so it seems fitting that she shows no concern for Saharwi refugees.

Toby Moffett, a former Democratic representative from Connecticut who had been elected on a Naderite clean-up-Congress ticket, engagingly described a week in the life of a lobbyist in the Los Angeles Times recently:

"I leave and rush to the House side of the Capitol to meet another client, the ambassador from Morocco. We have a meeting with a key member of the Appropriations Committee. Morocco has a good story to tell. It is a reliable friend of the U.S. It believes that the long-standing dispute with Algeria and the rebel Polisario group over the Western Sahara must be resolved.

"We tell the congresswoman and her staff that the region is becoming a possible al-Qaeda training area....My idea is to sell this as a chance for Democrats to resolve a dispute in a critical region, in contrast to the president's utter failure to fix anything."

On the Republican side, Elliot Abrams, the "deputy national security adviser for global democracy strategy," a hawkish pro-Israeli supporter and one of the neocon devisers of the Iraq war, also has been pushing the Moroccan plan, betraying the same insouciance toward legal technicalities that he did when convicted for lying to Congress about the Iran/Contra scandal. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Abrams sees the parallels between Israel and the Palestinians and the Moroccans and the Saharwis, and appreciates the precedent it would set.

In Washington, the Moroccan Embassy hired the Edelman PR firm for \$35,000 a month as its lobbyist. This, of course, had nothing to do with the timely letter from an increasingly conservative and belligerent American Jewish Committee weighing in with a letter of support for King Mohamed VI, who combines being chair of the Organization of the Islamic Conference's Committee for Jerusalem with being one of Israel's best friends in the Arab world.

Most of these organizations and signatories piously profess support for democracy but happily overlook the mere detail that Freedom House and similar bodies give Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara the same human rights score as Zimbabwe-just beating, by a wrenched-out finger-nail, Tibet, Cuba, North Korea and Sudan.

If in doubt, of course, invoke terrorism. Most of the letters from the king's men and women invoke the Polisario-held areas as potential heartlands of al-Qaeda-style terrorism. In the real world, oddly enough, the Polisario's biggest supporter is Algeria, which is battling Islamic extremists with some considerable vigor—indeed a little too much for some tender-minded observers. Until recently, moreover, Polisario itself was proclaimed a communist plot by American politicians, which is why they have tacitly supported the Moroccan occupation all these years. In Morocco itself, the king's repressive policies have made the Islamic party the most popular, as free elections would show.

Thus, should Morocco get away with denying self-determination, it would be bad for the rule of law, bad for the Saharwis—and bad for the Palestinians.

Sidebar

The USS Liberty the day after Israel's June 8, 1967 attack (Courtesy ussliberty.org).

AuthorAffiliation

Ian Williams is working on a book about U.N.-Haters in the U.S., and has a blog at <www.deadlinepundit.blogspot.com>. His last book was *Rum: A Social and Sociable History of the Real Spirit of 1776*.

DETAILS

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