

# ***The Western Sahara Conflict: Regional and International Dimensions***

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KING Hassan II of Morocco informed the French press in December 1988 that he was willing to talk to the *Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro*, known as the Polisario Front, which had been waging a war of national independence during the previous 15 years. Although the Moroccan Sovereign insisted that the subsequent meetings which took place on 4–5 January 1989 in Marrakesh constituted ‘discussions’ rather than ‘negotiations’, they undoubtedly represented a breakthrough in what has been dubbed by many as the ‘forgotten war’, not least because the mere acknowledgement of the Front’s existence was in itself a *de facto* recognition of the Sahrawi liberation movement.

The King’s invitation marked a total departure from his earlier position, thus raising hopes that the conflict in the Western Sahara would finally be resolved through a negotiated settlement. What were the regional and international factors behind this somewhat surprising development? And would the Palace and the legal opposition – as irredentist as the King on the Saharan issue – accept the existence of an independent state should the inhabitants choose independence when, and if ever, a referendum takes place?



The article will attempt to show that Morocco has not changed its attitude towards the claims of Polisario, which still receives significant support from Algeria, and that the continuing albeit intermittent war in the Western Sahara is once again leading to renewed tensions between the two Governments, despite a substantial improvement in their relations during 1988–9.

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BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>

It was Spain's failure to hold a referendum on self-determination in its former Saharan colony, as called for by various U.N. General Assembly resolutions from 1966 to 1973, that led to new regional tensions in the Maghreb. Under the terms of the Madrid *accords* of November 1975, Spain ceded the Western Sahara to Mauritania and Morocco, and it was the latter's occupation of the territory over which it claimed historic sovereignty that resulted in strained relations with Algeria. The immediate proclamation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (S.A.D.R.) by the Polisario Front was followed the next month by Algeria's recognition of the new state, and this led Morocco to break off diplomatic relations with its eastern neighbour. Although a military confrontation between the two countries seemed imminent, an all-out war was averted. However, since Hassan II considered that the Sahrawis were Moroccan secessionists being sponsored by Algeria, he declined to view the Western Sahara as a decolonisation issue, and refused to agree to direct talks with Polisario representatives.

Initially, Morocco occupied about 60 per cent of the territory while Mauritania took possession of only 15 per cent in the south, and it was the losses suffered there as the result of armed attacks by Polisario that helped to precipitate the overthrow of Mokhtar Ould Daddah in July 1978. However, as soon as the leaders of the new régime in Nouakchott had signed a peace agreement the following year with the Front in Algiers that included, *inter alia*, the end of Mauritania's claim to the territory and the withdrawal of its troops, the areas so vacated were taken over by the Moroccans before they could be occupied and held by Polisario. This goes a long way to explain why the S.A.D.R.'s 'liberated sectors' account for only a small part of the Western Sahara, since at least 75 per cent continues to be controlled by Morocco, backed by the presence of armed forces estimated to number as many as 120,000.

Morocco greatly improved its military position during the 1980s by building costly defensive walls which were relatively difficult for Polisario to penetrate. But the Kingdom became politically and diplomatically isolated as so many governments (74 by April 1990) recognised the S.A.D.R., and the latter's admission as a full member of

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account and analysis of the historical background of the conflict, see Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: the roots of a desert war* (Westport, Ct., 1983), and John Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa: the Western Sahara dispute* (Stanford, 1983).

the Organisation of African Unity in 1984 led to the withdrawal of Morocco from the O.A.U. Actually, Algeria and Morocco never ceased to communicate either directly – albeit secretly – or through intermediaries. But although President Chadli Bendjedid and King Hassan II met publicly in 1983 and 1987, these meetings produced no tangible results because both maintained their respective positions. The King insisted on Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, while Bendjedid defended the notion of a referendum for self-determination. Moreover, although direct discussions have taken place under U.N. and O.A.U. auspices between officials representing both sides in the conflict – e.g. in Bamako in 1978, Algiers in 1983, Lisbon in 1985, and New York in 1986 – Morocco continued to oppose the December 1985 U.N. resolution 40/50 which urged direct negotiations with Polisario.

#### RELATIONS BETWEEN MOROCCO AND ALGERIA

The re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Rabat and Algiers in May 1988 created a new political atmosphere which, although positive, generated some questionable interpretations regarding the status of the S.A.D.R., including suggestions that Algeria could no longer afford to support Polisario,<sup>2</sup> and that the construction of a Greater Maghreb had taken precedence over the conflict in the Western Sahara.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear from the joint Algerian-Moroccan communiqué that one of the provisions set forth for the renewal of diplomatic ties was a political settlement in the Western Sahara:

Eager to promote the success of international efforts undertaken to hasten the process of good offices for a just and definitive solution to the Western Sahara conflict through a free and regular referendum for self-determination held without any constraints whatsoever and with utmost sincerity... [the two countries] have decided to re-establish diplomatic relations.<sup>4</sup>

According to high-ranking Algerian officials, Hassan agreed with their assessment regarding the future of the region; namely, that only Maghrebi unity could alleviate increasingly difficult socio-economic problems:

<sup>2</sup> *The Economist* (London), 4 July 1987, gives the probably exaggerated figure of \$300 million a year as Algerian aid to Polisario. What is more certain, however, is that the military build-up undertaken to keep a balance with Morocco, combined with the drop in oil prices, has surely had an adverse effect on Algeria's economy.

<sup>3</sup> *Jeune Afrique* (Paris), 28 September 1988.

<sup>4</sup> *El Moudjahid* (Algiers), 17 May 1988, translated by the author, as have all sources hereinafter in Arabic and French.

We told King Hassan before the rapprochement: in view of the international situation and our domestic problems, our only chance of survival is to create a Maghrebi union very soon. Unity is our only future. But, the Western Sahara problem still exists and, although we don't want to hurt the Kingdom, we will continue to support the Sahrawi people. If we really want unity, an acceptable solution to Western Sahara must be found. The King agreed with this approach.<sup>5</sup>

The re-establishment of ties between Algeria and Morocco was viewed positively by most countries, notably in the United States, where it had been argued that such a rapprochement would probably doom the Sahrawi cause.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, a number of observers and diplomats, particularly in Europe, speculated about the possibility that a 'fix' had been arranged between the two Governments, and that the Western Sahara would become an autonomous region of Morocco as soon as agreement had been reached on a face-saving formula.<sup>7</sup>

For Algerian officials, however, the search for a resolution of the conflict was interpreted as a serious desire on the part of the King to fulfil the pledge he had made before the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, and hence their appointment of Abdelhamid Mehri, a heavy-weight in the Algerian political élite, as ambassador to Morocco. Opinions were divided as to whether or not Algeria's attitude towards the Sahrawis would change, but although Polisario leaders were initially nervous, they became hopeful that renewed diplomatic relations would compel Hassan to seek a political solution.<sup>8</sup>

An important rôle in the rapprochement between Algiers and Rabat was played by Saudi Arabia, and since the authorities in Riyadh were eager to keep up the momentum, they helped to arrange secret discussions in Taëf during July 1988 between Sahrawis and Moroccans. Although these talks did not produce any concrete results, they helped to create an atmosphere for continued dialogue,<sup>9</sup> and the following month the U.N. Secretary-General, Perez de Cuellar, proposed a peace plan which included, *inter alia*, a cease-fire and a referendum on self-determination. These two suggestions were accepted, albeit with reservations, by both Morocco and the Polisario Front.

Despite much optimism, the new commitment to peace did not mean an end to the fighting in the desert, and Polisario launched a heavy

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with a senior official in the Algerian Government.

<sup>6</sup> *Africa News* (Durham, N.C.), 30 May 1988.

<sup>7</sup> This scenario was 'played up' following Hassan's interview published in *Le Monde* (Paris), 3 August 1988. The King argued that he would grant the Sahrawis autonomy if they decided to remain Moroccan, albeit making it clear that he was opposed to their independence.

<sup>8</sup> *Africa News*, 30 May 1988, and *The Guardian* (London), 28 September 1988.

<sup>9</sup> On these talks, see *Jeune Afrique*, 2 November 1988.

offensive in September against the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces in Oum Dreiga, inflicting serious losses. The virtual absence of reports about this attack in the media in Algeria was interpreted as a sign that the Government headed by Bendjedid was no longer willing to give overwhelming support to Polisario, and that it was reluctant to jeopardise its improved relations within Morocco.<sup>10</sup> The latter, too, valued the recent rapprochement sufficiently not to blame Algeria for the Oum Dreiga attack,<sup>11</sup> despite the fact that it had not reduced its backing of Polisario. As President Bendjedid explained in September 1988:

We have been clear [with the Moroccans] from the beginning. In no way, will Algeria ever renounce her fundamental principles regarding the defence of just causes and the right of people to self-determination. This was understood by our Moroccan brothers. We believe that the Sahrawi question is a just one.<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that this statement was made in a speech directed against the so-called 'radicals' who were opposed not only to the President's socio-economic and political reforms, but also to better ties with Rabat. Moroccans were convinced, however, that two factions existed within the Algerian Government as regards the Western Sahara issue, and that Bendjedid himself was one of the moderates or 'liberals' who were believed to be so understanding of the King's position as to need only a face-saving solution in order to abandon all support for Polisario. Hence the view held in Rabat that the mere holding of a referendum in the Western Sahara would satisfy Algerian leaders and make it easier for them to drop the issue altogether. This perhaps explains Morocco's insistence that the referendum was simply a 'procedure and an episode'.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE KING'S DECISION TO TALK TO POLISARIO

In October 1988 a number of violent urban disturbances erupted throughout Algeria, and it took about a week before an uneasy calm was restored in the main towns and cities. The ransacking of Polisario's information office in the capital inevitably led to suggestions in Morocco that the Sahrawi cause was very unpopular, and certainly

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 28 September 1988.

<sup>11</sup> *The New York Times*, 25 September 1988.

<sup>12</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 21 September 1988.

<sup>13</sup> See *Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Near East and South-Asia* (Washington, D.C.), 8 and 12 September 1988, hereafter *FBIS/NES*.

some Algerians may have blamed the economic crisis on their Government's financial and military backing of the Front.<sup>14</sup> According to Istiqlal's newspaper, *L'Opinion* (Casablanca), this was an event of 'profound significance', which should convince Algerian leaders 'who back the mercenaries', that is to say, the Sahrawi nationalists, 'to change their attitude'.<sup>15</sup> As far as the Palace was concerned, full support was to be given to the Algerian President because he was perceived as a liberal reformer and 'a good man... having no personal ambitions and desirous to live in peace with us'.<sup>16</sup> King Hassan called Chadli Bendjedid at least twice during the disturbances in order to underline the extent of his own sympathy and understanding.<sup>17</sup>

Although it has been argued that Algeria's position on the Western Sahara hardened following the October riots,<sup>18</sup> the evidence suggests that its policy remained consistent. In his speech to the U.N. General Assembly on 5 October 1988, the Algerian Foreign Minister, Ahmed Taleb Ibrahim, insisted on the necessity of direct negotiations between Morocco and Polisario in order for a cease-fire to take place, and affirmed that the referendum should occur under conditions that precluded Moroccan administrative and military intimidation.<sup>19</sup> This rather conciliatory declaration had clearly been influenced by the decision to improve bilateral relations with Rabat and to create solid foundations for Maghrebi unity. Two days later the Moroccan side also displayed a moderate attitude when the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdellatif Filali, maintained that the improvement of inter-governmental relations had had a positive impact on a 'definitive solution' to the conflict in the Western Sahara, and his praise for the helpful rôle played by the O.A.U. was significant because of Morocco's absence

<sup>14</sup> It seems likely that very few Algerians blamed the October 1988 events on the conflict in the Western Sahara, and the attack on the Polisario information centre can have had little significance since other offices were also targeted, including those of Lufthansa and the widely popular Palestine Liberation Organisation.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Libération* (Paris), 10 October 1988.

<sup>16</sup> *FBIS/NES*, 16 December 1988, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 7–8 and 12 October 1988. Obviously, the Moroccan authorities feared that the rioting in Algeria might be copied in their urban centres. As explained by King Hassan: 'When the last word is left to the streets... it is a very dangerous and contagious disease. And one has no interest to see his neighbour ill. One only hopes that he will recover'. *Maghreb Arabe Presse* (Rabat), 14 December 1988, reported in *FBIS/NES*, 16 December 1988, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. George Joffe, 'Algeria's New Militancy', in *Middle East International* (London), 4 November 1988, p. 11. See also 'Sahara: l'Algérie durcit le ton', in *Jeune Afrique*, 26 October 1988, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Permanent Mission of Algeria to the United Nations, 'Declaration du Dr. Ahmed Taleb Ibrahim, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères à la 43ème Session de l'Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies', New York, 5 October 1988, p. 9. These were the same conditions mentioned in his speech to the U.N. General Assembly the previous year; *El Moudjahid*, 9–10 October 1987.

from that organisation since 1984. It should be noted that Filali avoided making any reference to direct negotiations with Polisario by emphasising his full trust in the U.N. Secretary-General, aided by the O.A.U., in setting out the necessary means and mechanisms of a referendum for self-determination.<sup>20</sup>

King Hassan may have hoped that the social turmoil in Algeria would strengthen his bargaining position with President Bendjedid, but on the other hand his pragmatic attitude must have been motivated, at least to some extent, by the necessity to respond positively to the peaceful atmosphere prevailing in international relations, and to make up for the diplomatic setbacks experienced as a result of Morocco's continuing war against the Polisario Front. Therefore, supporting the O.A.U. and the U.N. was aimed at paving the way for rejoining the former organisation and regaining prestige in the latter.

Important changes took place in Algeria in the aftermath of the October riots, notably the replacement of Mohamed Cherif Messadia, described as a 'radical' on the Western Sahara,<sup>21</sup> by Abdelhamid Mehri, ambassador to Morocco, as head of the national preparatory commission for the forthcoming sixth party congress of the *Front de libération nationale* (F.L.N.).<sup>22</sup> Just a few days earlier, the U.N. Fourth Committee had voted overwhelmingly in favour of Resolution 43/23 – by 87 votes for and none against, with 53 abstentions – which called for direct negotiations between Polisario and Morocco as the best avenue for

bringing about a cease-fire to create the necessary conditions for a peaceful and fair referendum for self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, a referendum without any administrative or military constraints, under the auspices of the Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations.<sup>23</sup>

From the point of view of the Moroccans, however, there was no need for direct negotiations, and they much preferred the U.N. Secretary-General's efforts to mediate between the two parties.<sup>24</sup>

On the 13th anniversary of the so-called 'Green March' into

<sup>20</sup> Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations, 'Intervention de S.E.M. Abdellatif Filali, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères et de la Coopération du Royaume du Maroc, devant la 43<sup>ème</sup> Session de l'A.G.N.U.', New York, 6 October 1988, pp. 15–17.

<sup>21</sup> Joffe, loc. cit. pp. 11–12. It should be noted that until his removal, Mohamed Cherif Messadia was the President's emissary to Morocco to discuss issues relating to Maghrebi unity.

<sup>22</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 30 October 1988.

<sup>23</sup> *General Assembly, Forty-Third Session, Supplement No. 23* (New York, 1988), A/43/23, ch. IX. The General Assembly adopted the Fourth Committee's Resolution 43/23 on 22 November 1988 by 86 votes for and none against, with 53 abstentions.

<sup>24</sup> *Maghreb Arabe Presse*, 22 October 1988, reproduced in *Arab Press Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.), 5, 81, 28 October 1988.



Sahrawi territory, Hassan himself revealed the contradictions of the Palace on the Western Sahara:

We are about to embark on a referendum and I know best the atmosphere surrounding this referendum... I say to those [i.e. the Sahrawis] who went astray and lost their way that they should fear God for the sake of the homeland and kinship. They should realise that the referendum on which we embark with all our determination and strength and our belief in our right *will further enhance the right that has already been confirmed for years and centuries.*<sup>25</sup>

This declaration must have been irritating not only to Algerians and the Polisario Front, but to the Saudis and Americans as well, and certainly re-raised suspicions about the King's real intentions.

Early in December 1988 an incident took place in the Western Sahara which could have had serious repercussions, because Polisario fired on two U.S. A.I.D. DC-7s and brought down one, killing all five occupants.<sup>26</sup> After investigation, the Front admitted that its troops had mistaken the aircraft for U.S.-made C-130s which were being used by the Moroccan military to transport troops, and that it would fully co-operate with the U.S. Government in retrieving the bodies, thereby indicating its anxiety to establish a good *rapport* with the Americans.<sup>27</sup> Both the State Department and the White House accepted Polisario's explanations, while insisting that 'this tragic event underscores the importance of bringing a peaceful end to the Western Sahara conflict which has already taken far too many lives'.<sup>28</sup>

Despite its somewhat ambivalent nature, U.S. policy towards this long-lasting armed struggle now apparently became more even-handed, including a stronger endorsement of the U.N. Secretary-General's approach.<sup>29</sup> Undoubtedly, Washington had come to realise that a military solution to the conflict was unlikely and its modified attitude may have constituted yet another reason for King Hassan to opt for a negotiated settlement because it was precisely at this moment that he declared to the French press that he would agree to a meeting with Sahrawi nationalists, including representatives of the Polisario Front.<sup>30</sup>

At least four reasons prompted the King to make such a decision.

<sup>25</sup> Rabat Domestic Service in Arabic; *FBIS/NES*, 7 November 1988, p. 15, my emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> *The Washington Post*, 9 December 1988.

<sup>27</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 9–12 December 1988, and *The Washington Post*, 13 December 1988.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Redman, 'Department of State Daily Press Briefing', Washington, D.C., 12 December 1988. A similar statement was made by a spokesman for the White House.

<sup>29</sup> See report of Chester Crocker's interview in *Jeune Afrique*, 7 December 1988, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Point* (Paris), 12 December 1988. See also *Le Monde*, 25–27 December 1988, *El Moudjahid*, 25 December 1988, and *The New York Times*, 28 December 1988.



First, the recent chill in relations with Algeria may have convinced Hassan that some 'concession' had to be made, not least because the Maghrebi summit scheduled to take place in February 1989 in the Kingdom would be jeopardised unless Algeria's demand for direct talks between Morocco and Polisario was accepted. Second, Rabat's categorical refusal to comply with U.N. and O.A.U. resolutions was continuing to upset several governments, and obviously it would hardly be feasible to return to the O.A.U. while still ignoring the strongly-held views of so many member-states. Third, President François Mitterrand had put pressure on the King during the franco-African summit to speed up the peace process.<sup>31</sup> The riots in Algiers and other cities had worried the French considerably, and from their point of view a rapprochement between Morocco and Algeria, coupled with a political solution to the conflict in the Western Sahara, could only have positive effects. Fourth, and not least, the United States had also shown increasing interest in seeking a settlement that would promote stability in the region.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Rôle of the Superpowers*

Undeniably, the on-going détente between the superpowers has also had a positive impact on the Maghreb, although the conflict in the Western Sahara had never brought them close to a confrontation because both the United States and the Soviet Union had avoided pursuing policies which might have alienated either Morocco or Algeria. However, unlike Moscow's genuinely neutral attitude toward the conflict,<sup>33</sup> Washington had pursued a rather contradictory policy despite its official neutrality, because though unwilling to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, it had accepted its administration. More importantly, the United States has provided Morocco with considerable military and technical support since the beginning of the war. As explained by Peter Duignan in his remarkably candid editorial foreword to a study published in 1983 by the Stanford-based Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace:

<sup>31</sup> Admitted by King Hassan II in the interview reported in *Le Nouvel observateur* (Paris), 12–18 January 1989.

<sup>32</sup> Crocker, loc. cit. See also *U.S. Senate Foreign Affairs Appropriations Bill, FY 1990* (Washington, D.C., 1989), and *House Foreign Aid Appropriations Bill, FY 1990* (Washington, D.C., 1989).

<sup>33</sup> Yahia Zoubir, 'Soviet Policy toward the Western Sahara Conflict', in *Africa Today* (Denver), 34, 3, 1987, pp. 17–32. See also I. William Zartman, 'Conflict in the Sahara: options for an outside power', in *S.A.I.S. Review* (School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.), 1981–2, p. 170.

The United States has used Moroccan territory for air bases and communications and will need to do so again if the Rapid Deployment Force is to become a reality. If Hassan were to lose the Western Sahara, his regime would probably be toppled. An unstable or unfriendly Morocco will hurt the interests of Israel, Egypt, and Zaire... The United States will have to provide money, arms, and food to help Morocco in the struggle against the Polisario. It is worth the price to keep Morocco friendly and stable.<sup>34</sup>

Washington's support for Morocco has remained almost unconditional, except for the period 1977–9, because of its indisputable geo-strategic importance, as well as King Hassan's 'moderate' policies.<sup>35</sup> However, despite the fact that the United States has never previously put much, if any, pressure on Morocco to settle the Western Sahara conflict, the situation does appear to have changed, at least to some extent, because of a number of factors.

Washington seems to have decided that Algeria is no longer a radical, intransigent, and revolutionary state, and like Rabat has come to regard Chadli Bendjedid as a pragmatist whose economic and political reforms should be given support,<sup>36</sup> not least in the hope that Algeria will limit her friendship with, and military dependency on, the U.S.S.R. Furthermore, the United States now seems to be convinced that Algeria is not interested in encouraging any move to topple King Hassan. Despite its great superiority in firepower, Morocco has not been able to defeat Polisario, and its growing domestic problems have clearly been exacerbated by the conflict during all these years. Indeed, without Saudi and other outside financial support a chaotic situation may occur in the Kingdom. Therefore, a peaceful settlement in the Western Sahara and improved relations with Algeria seem to represent the best possible guarantee for the Monarchy's survival. Finally, Washington has become increasingly aware that Polisario is far from being a Marxist-Leninist movement.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the Soviet Union and its European allies have neither given direct support to the Front nor recognised the S.A.D.R.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Peter Duignan, Introduction to *Damis*, op. cit. p. xii.

<sup>35</sup> See Stephen Zunes, 'The United States and Morocco: the Sahara war and regional interests', in *Arab Studies Quarterly* (Belmont, Mass.), 9, 4, Fall 1987, and Tony Hodges, 'At Odds with Self-Determination: the United States and Western Sahara', in Gerald Bender, James Coleman, and Richard Sklar (eds.), *African Crisis Areas* (Berkeley, 1985), especially pp. 266 ff.

<sup>36</sup> See I. William Zartman, 'Algeria Today and Tomorrow: an assessment', in *CSIS African Notes* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.), 65, 28 November 1986, especially pp. 4–5 and 9–10.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Stephen Zunes, 'Nationalism and Non-Alignment: the non-ideology of the Polisario', in *Africa Today*, 34, 3, Fall 1987, pp. 33–46.

<sup>38</sup> See Zoubir, loc. cit.

## MOROCCO AND SAHRAWI SELF-DETERMINATION

In light of the above information and analysis, King Hassan's decision to agree to talk to Polisario should not have come as a total surprise since otherwise better relations with Algeria would have been in jeopardy, and hence Maghrebi unity. Although Hassan had ignored such considerations during the previous 15 years, he may have reached the conclusion that the severe difficulties likely to arise through the creation of the single European Market in 1992, let alone after his own succession, could best be resolved if preceded by a rapprochement with Algeria and an agreed political solution in the Western Sahara within the context of the *Union du Maghreb arabe*.

The leaders of the Polisario Front welcomed the direct talks with King Hassan which, they claimed, would lead to 'the active phase' of the peace process and allow the two side to 'move on, hand in hand, to a free and fair referendum on self-determination among the people of Western Sahara'.<sup>39</sup> Algeria's reaction was also optimistic, with both the media and the Government applauding direct talks between the protagonists.<sup>40</sup> King Hassan was given full credit for his breakthrough by the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Boualem Bessaih, who declared that 'the meeting at Marrakesh has constituted a positive development which, I hope, will be remembered in history as a decisive turning-point in the evolution of the conflict in Western Sahara'.<sup>41</sup>

The superpowers, too, welcomed the new developments. The American ambassador to Morocco presented a letter to Hassan from President Ronald Reagan in which the King was congratulated for 'seeking a diplomatic solution in Western Sahara'.<sup>42</sup> The spokesman for the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gennadi Gerassimov, expressed Moscow's satisfaction with the Marrakesh meeting: direct contacts between Morocco and the Polisario Front constituted a 'positive step' which 'attests to the political realism of their participants'.<sup>43</sup> However, the Soviets remained cautious about the arrangements for the referendum, because of the 'persisting contradictions stemming...from the presence of Moroccan troops in the

<sup>39</sup> Polisario's official communiqué on talks with Morocco was published in *Algérie Presse Service*, 9 January 1989.

<sup>40</sup> See, especially, Ahmed Kasmi's commentary in *ibid.* 6 January 1989.

<sup>41</sup> Interview published in *El Moudjahid*, 15 January 1989.

<sup>42</sup> *Maghreb Arabe Presse*, 14 January 1989.

<sup>43</sup> *Tass* (Moscow), 11 January 1989; *FBIS/Soviet Union*, 12 January 1989, p. 7.

territory and from the Moroccan administration during the voting period',<sup>44</sup> and have become increasingly emphatic in their statements favouring a negotiated settlement under the auspices of the U.N. and the O.A.U.<sup>45</sup>

Despite Morocco's insistence that the King 'only talked' with the three Polisario representatives in January 1989, the substance of their discussions could well be described as quasi-negotiations, since not only were the details of the referendum raised, but also arrangements for a truce and an exchange of prisoners.<sup>46</sup> In any case, there is no evidence that any agreement was reached about autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty,<sup>47</sup> although according to the local press 'the talks... focused on the situation prevailing in *our southern Saharan provinces* in the perspective of the referendum decided upon'.<sup>48</sup> It must be explained that the opposition parties in Morocco have adopted an uncompromising position on the Western Sahara, and hence the reassurance given to their leaders by Hassan that Morocco 'will not give one inch of its territory'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, he denied that he had met any Sahrawi nationalists – 'it is Moroccans who have gone astray that I met in the hope that they would be put back on the right path. Never were they received as members of so-called Polisario'.<sup>50</sup>

The King's immediate objective in agreeing to hold these 'talks' may have been to appease Algeria and the United Nations. In any case, the benefits of such a move, *a priori*, outweighed any costs in the short-term since Hassan was able to convince almost everyone in Morocco, including the legal opposition, that no concessions had been made as regards the Western Sahara. On the other hand, both Polisario and Algeria seemed to believe that professed Moroccan sincerity had to be tested against concrete moves concerning the holding of a referendum, including the removal of soldiers and officials from the territory. As an editorial in the influential Algerian newspaper *El Moudjahid* asked rhetorically: 'Should not one demand the withdrawal of Moroccan military and administration forces as the surest and most honest means

<sup>44</sup> *Izvestia* (Moscow), 12 January 1989.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 25 October 1989, and 'Statement by the U.S.S.R. Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Permanent Mission to the United Nations', Press Release 201, 1 November 1989.

<sup>46</sup> Algiers Domestic Service in Arabic, 4 January 1989; *FBIS/NES*, 5 January 1989, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> *The Washington Times*, 13 January 1989, for instance, reported one 'source' as saying that 'Polisario is talking about something that is not full integration into Morocco and not full independence'.

<sup>48</sup> *Maghreb Arabe Presse*, 6 January 1989; *FBIS/NES*, 9 January 1989, p. 26, my emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> *Agence France Presse* (Rabat), 16 January 1989.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* See also *Jeune Afrique*, 25 January 1989, pp. 38 ff. Compare this statement with the one made in *Le Point* in December 1988.

to guarantee that their presence may not be assimilated with physical and mental pressures?'<sup>51</sup>

The Algerian press warned the two protagonists against 'narrow visions', 'conjunctural calculations', and 'artificial solutions', which would make a mockery of U.N. resolutions,<sup>52</sup> and there is reason to believe that such was also the Government's position. In other words, Algeria's message to Morocco was that a 'confirmatory' referendum obtained through intimidation would be unacceptable and an impediment to Maghrebi unity.

When interviewed in January 1989 by the French magazine, *Le Nouvel observateur*, the King admitted that he should have met the Sahrawi nationalists much earlier, albeit continuing to insist that the Western Sahara is Moroccan territory. He argued that the referendum would be 'bothersome' even to Polisario – the implication being that the result was a foregone conclusion – and that he had agreed it should be held only to avoid having Morocco put on the defensive and accused of expansionism. Hassan had apparently been convinced by some foreign leaders, particularly Mitterrand, that 'only the concerned populations could give the proof of their willingness to belong to Morocco', and he praised President Bendjedid for his genuine desire to find a way to 'rid the region of this problem which is a poison for Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania'. Finally, he promised the Sahrawi nationalists that 'once they have reintegrated their homeland, they would benefit, like the other Moroccan provinces, from the regionalisation plan which has been envisaged'.<sup>53</sup> The King's reported ambivalence clearly indicates that the Western Sahara is likely to cause him a great deal of trouble for some time to come.

On the domestic front, assuming a willingness to resolve the conflict politically regardless of the outcome of the referendum, Hassan will still have to face the Moroccan opposition parties and, more importantly, the military. Both will use the issue as a lever to extract corporatist demands from the Palace. Hassan's decision not to involve any members of his Cabinet in the talks with Polisario indicates not only that solving the Western Sahara issue is his own affair, but also that he wants to use it for political ends.

Externally, the King has continued to hope that Chadli Bendjedid will help to end the controversy over the future status of the disputed territory, perhaps by finding a face-saving formula. And here Hassan

<sup>51</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 20–21 January 1989.

<sup>52</sup> *Algérie-Actualité* (Algiers), 12–18 January 1989.

<sup>53</sup> *Le Nouvel observateur*, 12–18 January 1989.

has been quite successful because renewed diplomatic ties have been welcomed by Algerians, many of whom believe that the Western Sahara is no longer an issue between themselves and their western neighbour. In this sense, Rabat has made gains in the propaganda war waged by the two countries, for it has always argued that the Western Sahara cause was unpopular among Algerians, and that the problem was largely a creation of the previous régime headed by Houari Boumédiène. By supporting Bendjedid and consolidating ties with Algeria, Hassan has made it more difficult for the latter to reverse the evolution of their bilateral relations.

King Hassan's unwillingness to renew talks with the Sahrawis provoked the Polisario in March 1989 to end the unilateral ceasefire it had declared for the whole of February as a goodwill gesture.<sup>54</sup> However, it was in that very month that the *Union du Maghreb arabe* between Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia had been inaugurated at their summit meeting in Marrakesh after more than three decades of pan-Maghreb rhetoric.<sup>55</sup> In so far as the King had achieved his goal of securing the creation of the U.M.A. without the participation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, it began to appear as if the latter might become sufficiently ignored and isolated as to die what the Moroccans hoped would be 'a natural death'. Yet what looked like a shrewd manoeuvre began to backfire later.

#### PROGRESS AND SETBACKS IN 1989

It seems obvious that King Hassan had only agreed to hold a referendum in the Western Sahara in the expectation that this would legitimise its absorption into the Kingdom,<sup>56</sup> not least because the inhabitants of the Moroccan settlements in the territory – to which the U.N. has been opposed – will vote overwhelmingly for integration. Neither the Government nor the legal opposition have shown any indication that they would be willing to relinquish the Western Sahara, and hence are extremely unlikely to agree to the withdrawal of Moroccan military forces and administrative personnel since this would not only make the results of the referendum more unpredictable, but might also represent a threat to the Palace. The King's decision to

<sup>54</sup> According to *Algerie Presse Service*, 30 January 1989, the King had 'promised' to meet with Polisario again in mid-February, although the Moroccans later denied publicly that any such undertaking had been given.

<sup>55</sup> See Ahmed Aghrout and Keith Sutton, 'Regional Economic Union in the Maghreb', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 28, 1, March 1990, pp. 115–139.

<sup>56</sup> See *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), 12 April 1989.

engage in publicised discussions with Polisario in early 1989 was made partly in order to test the overall internal reaction. Although the meetings proved very effective – at least in the short term – in winning world opinion, domestically the King had to minimise their meaning and substance.

Undoubtedly, the focal point of Algeria's foreign policy recently has been the strengthening of ties with Morocco and the consolidation of the U.M.A., as well as an improvement of relations with the West, particularly with France. Despite growing rumours, however, there is no evidence that Algeria intends to 'let down' Polisario, and/or withdraw support from the S.A.D.R., as made clear by an article in the semi-official *Révolution africaine* that could only have been published as a result of governmental approval:

the Western Sahara problem is neither a 'parasite' nor an 'intruder' in the Maghreb [as the King had argued following the proclamation of the U.M.A.], but a question of decolonisation and of self-determination of a people who have been waging an armed struggle for more than a decade. To reduce it to a 'grain of sand' [as described by the King] is to insult the thousands of victims of this conflict, the 71 states which have recognised it, and the international organisations, such as the O.A.U. and U.N. which have adopted very clear resolutions on this question.<sup>57</sup>

Despite such critical statements, Algerian officials have acted discretely as regards the unresolved Western Sahara conflict in the knowledge that their Government continues to be faced with far more urgent domestic problems, especially since the October 1988 riots. However, the emphasis being put on the importance of improved bilateral relations with Morocco is still surprising given that the latter is the main beneficiary. King Hassan has been able to repair ties with his eastern neighbour without making any noticeable concessions on the Western Sahara. His tactical manoeuvres have been successful in helping the Kingdom to come out of its former isolation, and several governments have recently improved or renewed their relationships with Morocco.<sup>58</sup>

More importantly, the King has continued to foster the image of a divided Algerian leadership, thereby suggesting that the more realistic and peaceful 'moderates' are likely to agree on a compromise over the

<sup>57</sup> *Révolution africaine* (Algiers), 3 March 1989, pp. 47–8.

<sup>58</sup> To give two African examples: according to *Agence France Presse*, 18 December 1988, Morocco resumed diplomatic relations with the Seychelles after a 10-year break caused by the latter's recognition of the S.A.D.R., and *Jeune Afrique* reported on 25 January 1989 that relations with Mali had improved considerably. In addition, relations with India and Yugoslavia were renewed in early 1989.



Western Sahara. In addition, several important economic links are in the process of being considered between the two countries that could tie Algeria's hands with respect to the Western Sahara issue, notably the proposed natural-gas pipeline from Algeria to Europe via Morocco.<sup>59</sup> In order to isolate the Polisario Front even further, the King announced in March 1989 that he would ratify the 1972 Treaty of Ifrane, which delineates the Kingdom's borders with Algeria and recognises the 'Algerianity' of the Tindouf area,<sup>60</sup> and he kept his word two months later.

Despite Algeria's improved relations with Morocco, the Secretary-General of the F.L.N., Abdelhamid Mehri, reaffirmed his Government's support for Polisario at its seventh party congress in April 1989.<sup>61</sup> Algerian spokesmen have consistently referred to the significance of their clear understanding with King Hassan regarding the Western Sahara, and have recently become increasingly irritated with his tactics. For example, when Morocco indicated in July 1989 that a precondition for rejoining the O.A.U. was that the S.A.D.R.'s membership must be frozen, Algeria's Foreign Minister, Boualem Bessaih, made it clear that although welcoming 'the eventual return of Morocco to the O.A.U. ... [this] shall not be achieved to the detriment of another member-state with full rights'.<sup>62</sup>

At the beginning of September 1989, King Hassan promised Chadli Bendjedid that he would hold new talks with Polisario before his forthcoming trip to Spain, only to declare bluntly three weeks later that this was unnecessary, for 'there is nothing to negotiate because the Western Sahara is Moroccan territory'.<sup>63</sup> A few days later, Polisario launched an attack against the King's forces that received the editorial sympathy of Algeria's semi-official newspaper *El Moudjahid*:

Morocco is not yet mature for peace ... [it] still dreams of a 'Great Morocco' and has returned to an obsolete language [of calling Sahrawis, Moroccans]. Sahrawi leaders have consequently drawn the conclusion [that] one can no longer accommodate a régime... which only understands the language of force.<sup>64</sup>

Concurrently, President Bendjedid accorded an interview to *Al Sharq al Awsat* in which he made the following statement:

<sup>59</sup> The United States and the E.E.C., as well as a number of Arab states, are said to be interested in financing the construction of this Afro-European project which would take several years. See *Le Monde*, 9 February 1989, and *Jeune Afrique*, 22 February 1989.

<sup>60</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 3-4 March 1989.

<sup>61</sup> *Agence France Presse*, 29 April 1989.

<sup>62</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 25 July 1989.

<sup>63</sup> *ABC* (Madrid), 24 September 1989. See also *West Africa* (London), 2-8 October 1989, p. 1666.

<sup>64</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 2 October 1989.

we agreed [with Morocco] when we renewed our diplomatic relations that the Western Sahara issue could not be concealed [*occultée*]... The day the Sahrawi people can express themselves, without constraint whatsoever, then we shall respect their wish whatever it might be.<sup>65</sup>

It seems clear that the Algerian Government, having become frustrated by Morocco's tactics, has decided to go public and reiterate its position on the Western Sahara.

Consistent denials by Moroccans that they had ever agreed to a second round of talks with Polisario did not stop them from arguing that the Front's continued military operations had put an end to the 'planned meeting'.<sup>66</sup> Certainly, the renewed drive against Moroccan positions disproved claims about Polisario's alleged loss of credibility, not least when another major assault was launched soon after King Hassan had praised his armed forces for being in control of the situation in the Western Sahara.<sup>67</sup> The Algerian press condoned this offensive, blaming Morocco for spoiling the peace process, and reiterating support for the S.A.D.R.<sup>68</sup> Some indication of the scale and ferocity of the renewed desert warfare may be gained from reports of the outcome of Polisario's four attacks on 7 and 11 October, and 8 and 16 November 1989: according to Rabat's domestic service in Arabic, as many as 75 Moroccans were killed and 100 injured, while the Front was alleged to have suffered over 300 casualties.<sup>69</sup>

#### THE OUTLOOK IN 1990

After attending the independence celebrations in Namibia, the U.N. Secretary-General visited Algeria and Morocco in March 1990 in order to discuss proposals for a cease-fire in the Western Sahara that would be followed by 'substantial, gradual, and appropriate' reductions of the Moroccan forces.<sup>70</sup> Concurrently, a 'convergence of views on all

<sup>65</sup> *Al Sharq al Awsat* (London and Washington, D.C.), 2 October 1989. A week earlier, according to *El Moudjahid*, 27 September 1989, the Algerian Foreign Minister, Sid Ahmed Ghozali, had insisted that his Government favoured a negotiated settlement through a fair and regular referendum, and later declared that Algeria was still trying to arrange for a meeting between King Hassan and Polisario; *Algerie Presse Service*, 2 October 1989.

<sup>66</sup> *Al Sharq al Awsat*, 10 October 1989; *Middle East International* (London), 20 October 1989, and *The Middle East* (London), November 1989.

<sup>67</sup> *Maghreb Arabe Presse*, 7 November 1989; *FBIS/NES*, 16 November 1989, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> See, for instance, *El Moudjahid*, 10 November 1989, and *Algerie-Actualité*, 30 November–6 December 1989. In an article in the latter, Morocco was accused of using the U.M.A. as a framework within which it hoped to induce Algeria to 'sell out' the Sahrawi cause, a miscalculation, in the author's view.

<sup>69</sup> Rabat's domestic service in Arabic, reported in *FBIS/NES*, 10 and 12 October, and 9 and 20 November 1989.

<sup>70</sup> Reported optimistically in advance from New York by *Agence France Presse*, 16 March 1990.

issues' was claimed to have been the outcome of a meeting between Bendjedid and Mohamed Abdelaziz, the S.A.D.R.'s President, on the eve of Perez de Cuellar's visit to refugee camps in south-west Algeria.<sup>71</sup> According to *Echaab* (Algiers), here was an opportunity to speed up the peace process so that the Sahrawis could recover their independence and freedom as had so recently the Namibians, and to encourage dialogue between the Polisario Front and Morocco. The latter's continued resistance to a referendum would only lead to renewed tension and more bloodshed, thereby threatening regional security and stability.<sup>72</sup>

It was thereafter reported from New York that despite agreement about who should vote in a referendum in the Western Sahara, differences remained as to how the necessary truce should be arranged.<sup>73</sup> Driss Basri, Morocco's Minister of the Interior, denied Abdelaziz's statement that direct talks must and would soon be held, by arguing that de Cuellar had been asked to use his 'good offices' in order 'to conduct indirect negotiations between the interested parties' in an attempt to find 'the best means to hold a free, sincere, loyal referendum, without any administrative or military constraints'.<sup>74</sup> The curious inclusion of the word 'loyal' is significant since this refers to Rabat's concept of a 'confirmatory referendum', and helps to explain the U.N. Secretary-General's carefully worded assessment of his on-going search for a solution to the dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front backed by Algeria: 'This time I found a more propitious atmosphere. In a sense, we have made certain progress. But to say that we have overcome all difficulties, that would be going a little too far.'<sup>75</sup>

The past ebb and flow of unrealistically optimistic expectations means that prospects for reaching an agreed peaceful solution remain quite remote. Hopefully there will be no return to the *status quo ante*, although Morocco's failure to negotiate with Sahrawi leaders has led to renewed military operations by Polisario, and to the feeling in Algiers that the King has not implemented his firm May 1988 commitment. It is argued that Hassan's rapprochement with Bendjedid was tactical in nature, and pronouncements on the 'Moroccanity' of the Western Sahara are not unnaturally regarded with suspicion. There seems little doubt that any chilly wind blowing between Rabat and Algiers will affect adversely developments throughout the region, and may jeopardise the institutionalisation of the *Union du Maghreb arabe*.

<sup>71</sup> *Algérie Presse Service*, 25 March 1990.

<sup>72</sup> *Echaab* (Algiers), 25 March 1990.

<sup>73</sup> *Associated Press* (New York), 1 April 1990.

<sup>74</sup> *Agence France Presse*, 2 April 1990.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 1 April 1990.

The continued desert war is not in the interest of either Morocco or Algeria. Both need to allocate their resources to economic development rather than to respectively fighting and supporting a costly conflict. Since miscalculations on either side could have dire consequences, it is obvious that greater Maghrebi integration, coupled with the implementation of the U.N. peace plan, constitutes the best framework for a solution to the impasse in the Western Sahara. The benefits resulting from economic and political co-operation may well outweigh any irredentist gains.