

# ***The Non-Interventionary Norm Prevails: an Analysis of the Western Sahara***

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FEARS that the supposedly sacred norm of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states has eroded in the last few years are not entirely groundless. Excuses to intervene, that now receive sanction by the Security Council of the United Nations, include humanitarian concerns, as in Somalia and Rwanda, international peace and security, as in Kuwait and Bosnia, and the denial of democracy, as in Haiti, all of which differ from the interventions of the cold war years.<sup>1</sup> As Thomas Buergenthal has pointed out, ‘Once the rule of law, human rights and democratic pluralism are made the subject of international commitments, there is little left in terms of governmental institutions that is domestic.’<sup>2</sup>

Yet the vast majority of long-standing conflicts that survived the cold war will continue to endure without the threat of external involvement. The disputes over the Western Sahara, Cyprus, Ceuta and Melilla, Gibraltar, East Timor, and Tibet represent but a small sample. This article addresses why non-intervention occurs and how it can actually contribute to the intractable nature of some conflicts – especially those caused by nationalist sentiment – by examining the case of the Western Sahara.

## INTERVENTION AND NON-INTERVENTION

What do these terms imply? Intervention is a coercive tactic used to manipulate a country into taking a certain path that would not otherwise be chosen. Defined in strict terms, it consists of military

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<sup>1</sup> The recent Russian interventions in Chechenya, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan were undertaken without international consultation or approval.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Buergenthal, cited by Thomas Franck, ‘The Emerging Right to Democratic Governance’, in *The American Journal of International Law* (Washington, DC), 86, 46, 1992, p. 68.

involvement or the encouragement of the use of force by an outside power in a domestic conflict. This differs from attempts to influence and steer the policy of a government with the carrot-and-stick approach, by incorporating methods such as economic aid through loans, outright grants for non-military purposes, or at times, sales of armaments.<sup>3</sup>

Some theorists have argued that outside interference increases the scale of a conflict, as in Afghanistan, Angola, or Vietnam. This line of reasoning is often employed to eschew international involvement, based on the assumption that the conflict, if left alone, will be regionalised and toned down, thereby encouraging its earlier resolution. In many nationalist confrontations, however, the opposite can also be true. When a powerful state has the option to intervene on behalf of one side in a conflict without posing a great risk to itself, but specifically chooses not to, this inaction can serve to aggravate the struggle over territory by permitting the dispute to carry on unhindered. Non-intervention can also occur when similar pledges are made to both sides in a struggle. Parity is not a requisite as long as those concerned are cognisant of the commitment that each has been given.

Non-intervention has been an international norm ever since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. An updated version was legally enshrined in the UN Charter in Article 2(7), and its precise meaning appears to be definitive: 'Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially the domestic jurisdiction of any state'. Yet an appeal to Chapter VII is permitted – the Security Council can advocate intervention in the interest of international peace and security. Hence the recent UN-supported actions taken in Bosnia, Haiti, Kuwait, Rwanda, and Somalia.

The lessons from Vietnam and Afghanistan during the cold war, and Kuwait and Somalia since then, serve as formidable reminders of the expense incurred – both in financial terms and in human lives – when states interfere. Countries will go to great lengths to avoid involvement, except in extreme cases where it is seemingly clear-cut, as in the Falklands, Kuwait, or Somalia; while full-scale military involvement in more opaque and intractable disputes is generally avoided, such as in

<sup>3</sup> The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank use the first two methods to force less developed countries to implement economic reforms, often in attempts to reduce price controls or lower inflation. Recently, multilateral organisations like the UN, and governments, like those of the United States and France, have tried to link aid to democratic reforms, notably the holding of multi-party elections.

what was formerly known as Yugoslavia. Witness the rapid progression of Security Council resolutions in favour of the Gulf war alongside the persistent hedging and limited action undertaken by the West in Bosnia.

Further distinctions can be drawn with respect to nationalist conflicts: non-intervention seems to be the norm in irredentist disputes until the territory is appropriated,<sup>4</sup> and then external states intervene in an attempt to reinstate the previous order, as in Kuwait or the Falklands. On the other hand, secessionist sentiment is often catered to, normally by regional powers, until the area actually or almost secedes, and then no effort is made by outside powers to stop it, as in Biafra, Eritrea, Goa, or the former Yugoslavia. This reversal can be attributed to the difficulties inherent in preventing the emergence of a new state, while in cases of irredentist aggression, the international community need only restore the pre-existing, internationally recognised borders. Secessionist tendencies are also based on the quest for self-determination, a more legitimate claim than mere territorial aggrandisement in irredentist manoeuvres.

The legality of intervention in nationalist disputes is not manifest, moreover, because opinions differ as to whether they are 'essentially' domestic affairs; thus the concepts of the UN Charter are even more evasive. Involvement rarely transpires because other states do not perceive such conflicts as threatening the international order (unless annexation occurs, a rare phenomenon), and because most governments have embarrassing 'domestic' problems in which they would not want others to intervene – Northern Ireland, the Basque regions, and Kashmir are among many examples.



The influence of a non-interventionist policy on nationalist disputes, especially irredentist campaigns, is always likely to be significant. As will be shown, the efforts made to keep the war in the Western Sahara as a regional dispute have allowed it to endure for almost two decades. The major powers involved, primarily the former Soviet Union, the United States, France, and Spain, have purposely followed policies of placating both sides in attempts to remain unbiased. Non-intervention

<sup>4</sup> 'Irredentism' refers to an historical claim made by one sovereign state to land and/or people outside its internationally recognised boundaries, justified on the grounds that the earlier separation was illegal or forced.

alone cannot fully account for the long life of this conflict, but it has had a major contributory effect.

#### THE WESTERN SAHARA

The dispute over the Western Sahara is a bilateral, non-democratic, third-world struggle that encompasses a deep-rooted dislike between Morocco and Algeria. Because it has endured in a critical manner for many years, external powers have been unable to ignore the ensuing war that has had a spill-over effect on the surrounding community. Yet their activity has been conducted in a way that can be interpreted as non-interventionary: the states involved have managed to maintain impartial policies by openly assisting both sides through the supply of arms and economic aid.

The antecedents of the conflict can be traced back to Spain's hasty withdrawal in 1976 from the largely uninhabited desert that was then known as the Spanish Sahara. Morocco and Mauritania took advantage of the power vacuum in Spain after General Franco's death, and pushed for partition of the region. Since gaining independence in 1956, Morocco had been voicing its irredentist claim to the Spanish Sahara, based on the desire to restore the boundaries of the ancient Almoravid Empire of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

With phosphate deposits that amount to the second largest (after Morocco) in the world, not to mention an abundance of fish in its coastal waters, the Spanish Sahara was found to be more than a desert. And while many of the inhabitants were uniting under the *Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro* (Polisario Front) – the Saharawi liberation movement backed by Algeria and, at times, by Libya – Morocco and Mauritania felt it was unfair for a tiny region with a small population to control such wealth, arguing that 'one Kuwait in the Arab world was enough'.<sup>5</sup>

On 27 February 1976, the Polisario proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic Saharawi Arab Republic (SADR), and the territory became known to most outsiders as the Western Sahara. Since its inception, the Polisario has been fighting for independence by guerrilla attacks: first, against the Spanish, then against the Moroccan/Mauritanian coalition forces, and finally, after defeating Mauritania

<sup>5</sup> The population was approximately 75,000 according to the 1974 Spanish census, and 163,868 according to the Moroccan census taken in September 1982, of whom 96,784 were stated to reside in the capital, El-Ayoun.

and signing a peace accord in 1979, against the Moroccan *Forces armées royales*.

In late 1980, the Moroccan army constructed *berms* or 'defensive walls' made of sand and rock, buffered by mines and barbed wire, around the annexed northern section of the disputed territory. Later extensions covered approximately four-fifths of the Western Sahara.<sup>6</sup> Behind the *berms*, one-half of the entire Moroccan armed forces have been guarding the area with artillery and modern weaponry, mostly supplied by the United States and France.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the erection of these earthen walls, Polisario's chances of wearing down the Moroccan forces were high. Since then both sides have been stuck in a stalemate, with occasional skirmishes and attacks. The UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara has been in place since September 1991, but little progress has been made under its supervision, although the cease-fire has in general been observed. Despite both sides agreeing in principle to hold a referendum, there have been continual delays, and the next attempt is not scheduled until October 1995.

Morocco's unyielding claim that the Western Sahara played a pivotal rôle during the cold war is difficult to document, despite the flow of Soviet arms to the Polisario, directed mostly through Algeria and Libya, and aid to Morocco, both in the form of arms and loans, from the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup> But as claimed by Øyvind Østerud in 1989, 'The Western Sahara conflict is no extension by proxy of Superpower rivalry. The roots...are basically regional, framed by the legacy of colonialism in the area, and evolving in the interplay of northwest African interests'.<sup>9</sup> The war was left to be fought out between Morocco and Algeria, with their differing ideological systems, always propelled by Saharawi belligerency, 'a force in its own [right]'.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of the involvement of the major powers will demonstrate that such a non-interventionary policy prevailed, despite assertions to the contrary.

<sup>6</sup> See Anthony G. Pazzanita, 'Morocco versus Polisario: a political interpretation', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 32, 2, June 1994, p. 271, for a map of 'Western Sahara and Neighbouring Countries'.

<sup>7</sup> Estimates of Morocco's annual expenditure on this costly guerrilla war have been in the \$1,000 million range, but the *berms* at least permitted the resumption of phosphate production which had been hampered by repeated Polisario attacks.

<sup>8</sup> At times, Soviet arms also came via Czechoslovakia and Cuba, but these slowed down significantly after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

<sup>9</sup> Øyvind Østerud, 'War Termination in the Western Sahara', in *Bulletin of Peace Proposals* (Oslo), 20, 3, 1989, pp. 311-12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

### 1. *Soviet Involvement*

Moscow supported Saharawi self-determination prior to Spain's departure, and thereafter as tension in the Maghreb increased, adopted a policy of conciliation towards Morocco and Algeria so as not to antagonise either ally, albeit not always with success. In 1974 Leonid Brezhnev tried to conclude a major deal over phosphates with the Moroccans, who used their leverage to hold out until March 1978 to improve their bargaining position.<sup>11</sup> The agreements finally signed – the largest between a third-world country and the U.S.S.R. – provided Morocco with over \$2,000 million for phosphate development at a new mine at Meskala, and \$300 million for the fishing industry, both granted at an incredibly low interest rate of 2.5 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, Morocco had become the Soviet Union's most important trading partner in Africa, and thereafter claimed that during 1980 and 1985 exchanges between the two countries had grown from 750 million to 1,600 million dirhams.<sup>13</sup> In real dollar terms, however, the exchanges had actually declined by 16 per cent, from \$190.4 million (in 1980 US\$) to \$159 million (in 1985 US\$) as the official exchange rate more than doubled during this period. The important point is that the Moroccans wanted to convey the impression that their relations with the Soviets were still strong.

While consummating the early phosphate deal with Morocco, the Soviets needed Algerian support during the Angola crisis, which was given by letting them transfer arms and supplies to the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) via Algiers in 1975. In exchange, the Soviets called for the Saharawis to 'have the full right to determine their future' in a crucial UN debate.<sup>14</sup> When Algeria protested about the 1978 fishing agreement with Rabat, the Soviets declared that they had not thereby recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.

<sup>11</sup> The USSR ranked second in world production of phosphates, yet Soviet domestic demand, as well as that of its satellites, was so great that it necessitated a deal. Further, many of the Soviet resources are located in the north, where the harsh climate hinders mining for several months.

<sup>12</sup> Yahia Zoubir, 'Soviet Policy toward the Western Sahara Conflict', in *Africa Today* (Denver), 34, 3, 987, p. 24. Imports of Moroccan phosphates increased again when the United States cut off its supply to the Soviets after the invasion of Afghanistan. Throughout this period, Morocco obtained approximately 60 per cent of its oil needs from the U.S.S.R.

<sup>13</sup> Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, 'Morocco News Summary', Washington, DC, September and October 1985, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Pravda* (Moscow), 4 November 1975, cited by Zoubir, loc. cit. p. 20. In 1979, the Soviets again voted to recognise the Polisario as the representative organ of the Western Sahara, primarily in order to please African and other Non-Aligned Movement member-states of the United Nations.

Throughout the cold war, they continually denied having a rôle in the dispute, asserting that 'No Moroccan of Western official can provide even the smallest bit of evidence of intervention by the USSR or any other socialist country in the Western Sahara conflict.'<sup>15</sup> In fact, the Polisario was the only major liberation movement in Africa that did not receive direct assistance from the Soviets. Although they provided Algeria and Libya with approximately 90 per cent of their military requirements, that did not imply Soviet intervention, but rather a localised decision-making process whereby those two countries supplied the Polisario with what weapons they could spare/afford.<sup>16</sup>

Following Morocco's occupation, the Soviet Union and its allies voted for every resolution in the UN General Assembly advocating self-determination, albeit always stressing that a solution should 'take into consideration the interests of all the parties to the dispute'.<sup>17</sup> Moscow was thus able to champion Saharawi self-determination in principle without repudiating Moroccan claims to the territory.

## 2. *US Involvement*

A policy of neutrality was likewise 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. Yet in practice, America leaned closer to Morocco than to Algeria or the Polisario – indeed, the former was supplied between 1975 and 1988 with over \$1,000 million worth of arms, as well as \$1,300 million in security and economic assistance programmes.<sup>18</sup> Washington also put great store on the staying power of King Hassan II, although his influence may have been overstated. As explained by a former US Congressional staff director:

Hassan is a moderate leader, has always had some sort of relationship with the Israelis, with the CIA, and the United States. We were arguing at the time that his influence on the whole of the Middle East was vastly exaggerated by those who were trying to help him. He did help host meetings between Israeli

<sup>15</sup> Moscow broadcast in Arabic, 29 October 1979, cited by Zoubir, loc. cit. p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> The former Soviet Union provided \$2,700 million of arms to Algeria between 1986 and 1993, far outpacing other suppliers. Richard Grimmett, 'Conventional Arms Transfers to the Third World, 1986–1993', Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, 29 July 1994.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Moscow radio in Arabic to North Africa, 2 March 1981, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service/Soviet Union* (Washington, DC), 3 March 1981, p. H1.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Special Committee Records, 1337th Meeting, 9 August 1988, pp. 2–16, report from John Zindar, Center for Defence Information.



and Egyptian officials that led one step towards the Camp David agreement. But to argue from that fact that he was indispensable is just a total exaggeration.<sup>19</sup>

President Jimmy Carter drastically reduced arms sales to \$10 million in 1978, and stipulated that the weapons could not be used in the Western Sahara.<sup>20</sup> The fall of Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua and the Shah of Iran forced the US Administration to pay more attention to its third-world allies. Although Washington was afraid that if it continued to supply Morocco with an increasing supply of arms, the Polisario might be embraced by the Soviets, Rabat threatened to seek weapons from them if their needs were not met. Carter's last arms agreements reflected these concerns: \$232.5 million in 1979 and \$274.4 million in 1980, larger than any previous deals, albeit with the proviso that the sales would only be finalised if Morocco held to the on-going negotiating process.<sup>21</sup>

That stipulation was dropped by President Ronald Reagan because of his fear of the Soviet threat and his conviction that the Polisario had a Marxist–Leninist orientation, even though its leaders preferred their own brand of Islam-inspired socialism. Two days after taking office in November 1981, he announced additional arms sales to Morocco worth \$182 million, as well as the delivery of some promised goods stalled by Carter.<sup>22</sup> During 1984–8, grants amounting to US\$172.7 million significantly outpaced loans totally \$71.8 million (many of which were forgiven), thereby illustrating the determination of the United States to keep Morocco in its sphere of influence.<sup>23</sup> From 1986 to 1993, America delivered \$300 million worth of arms,<sup>24</sup> and overall supplied Morocco with approximately 30 per cent of its military needs from the late 1970s to the early 1990s – even Rabat's two-year *rapprochement* with Libya from 1984 to 1986 did not cause a lasting rupture in this important relationship.

As might be expected, Algeria was upset by such extensive US military support for Morocco, not least when the Reagan Administration agreed to the sale of 108 M60 tanks just two days after Algeria

<sup>19</sup> Interview, 7 June 1991, in Virginia.

<sup>20</sup> Prior to that, the Administration of Gerald Ford had agreed to a \$222 million arms sale for Morocco, the total of all previous deals having amounted to only \$47 million. Zindar, loc. cit. pp. 2–16.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: the roots of a desert war* (Westport, CT, 1983), pp. 358–9.

<sup>22</sup> Hodges, op. cit. p. 359.

<sup>23</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies, *Military Balance* (London, 1988), p. 223. The totals differ from some of the announced sales as they were often delivered several years after being promised.

<sup>24</sup> Grimmett, op. cit.



helped to broker the agreement that freed American hostages in Iran.<sup>25</sup> In spite of this resentment, American firms have been involved since the early 1970s in construction contracts in Algeria worth over \$6,000 million, and Export–Import Bank loans and guarantees totalled \$1,400 million.<sup>26</sup> In 1979, the United States was the largest buyer of Algerian exports (60.2 per cent of the total, including over half the country's crude oil),<sup>27</sup> and by 1992 ranked fourth in terms of Algeria's imports (9.3 per cent of the total).<sup>28</sup>

Some researchers have argued that US assistance to Morocco was intended to sustain the war, possibly out of a wish to support the American arms industry.<sup>29</sup> An example of this sentiment can be seen in the letter sent by Senator John C. Danforth to Cyrus R. Vance, Secretary of State, towards the end of Carter's term, which emphasised the contradictory policy of denying arms to Morocco while concurrently supplying 20 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters to Libya: 'Cy, I recognize that weapons sales are not the universal answer to stability around the world, but in certain cases the sale of specific military equipment can become an important, visible symbol of American support.' Danforth's home state, Missouri, was where McDonnell–Douglas, the state's largest employer, had its headquarters, and the Senator did not understand why the United States could not assist Morocco in light of its 'obvious defence needs', especially when the issue of sovereignty over the Western Sahara was unclear: 'Surely resistance to insurgents and maintenance of the peace are an essential component of administrative control'.<sup>30</sup>

Despite a continued close association with Morocco – affirmed when Al Gore, the US Vice-President, met King Hassan in April 1994 – the United States has also maintained a cautious relationship with Algeria. Because Washington has not adopted a hard-line policy towards the Western Sahara, even allowing the dispute to drag on virtually under its tutelage (by the provision of arms), this non-intervention has served

<sup>25</sup> *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), 22 December 1981. As reported in *Financial Times*, 29 January 1981, Washington asserted that the sale had been finalised before Algeria got involved in the negotiations.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen J. Solarz, 'Arms for Morocco?', in *Foreign Affairs*, 58, Winter 1979–80, p. 289.

<sup>27</sup> 'Foreign Economic Trends and Their Implications for the United States: Algeria', prepared by the American Embassy in Algiers, and released by the US Department of Commerce, November 1980, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *The World Economic Factbook, 1994–5* (London 1994), p. 53. Although the US was only purchasing 15.1 per cent of Algeria's exports in 1992 (as against 60.2 per cent in 1979), this amounted to the third largest share.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Hodges, *op. cit.* p. 362.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Senator John C. Danforth to Cyrus R. Vance, Secretary of State, dated 12 March 1979.

only to fuel the conflict. (There is some evidence that the aid provided to the Moroccans has only been enough to maintain their stocks of weapons, not to increase them significantly.)

### 3. *French Involvement*

Apart from the fact that many French citizens still live in Algeria and Morocco,<sup>31</sup> France needs to preserve friendly relations with these former francophone colonies because of their natural resources, notably petroleum, gas, uranium, phosphates, iron ore, and precious metals. Involvement in North Africa also gives the French considerable political leverage in international fora, especially when it comes to justifying their permanent seat at the UN Security Council.

In 1975, an Algerian presidential memorandum ordered state-owned companies to avoid contracts with the French because they had been assisting Mauritania during its campaign against the Polisario. After new contracts had fallen from 7,000 million French francs in that year to 2,000 million in 1977, French business leaders put pressure on the Government to reverse its position. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing changed tack during his last three years as President (1978–81), from claiming that there were too few Saharawis to form a state, and that he was against the creation of 'micro-states' (although concurrently backing an entity of similar size in Djibouti), to acknowledging the right of the Western Saharans to self-determination.<sup>32</sup> In August 1981, the French Government received a member of the Polisario, and seven months later allowed the organisation to open an office in Paris. Good trade relations with Algeria continued into the 1990s – for example, France was that country's top importer (23.8 per cent) in 1992, and received the third largest share of its exports (10.1 per cent).<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, France was supplying 55 per cent of all weapons imported by Morocco during the late 1970s and early 1980s (albeit reduced to 10 per cent by 1992).<sup>34</sup> Agreements were reached on the sale of French Mirage 2000 aircraft, and cordial relations have been evident

<sup>31</sup> Approximately 20,000 French citizens have been living in Algeria (though that number has been reduced significantly in the last year due to violence), and 25,000 in Morocco, while as many as 615,000 Algerians and 570,000 Moroccans are living legally in France. This information supplied in 1994 by the French Embassy in London comes from the 1990 and 1992 censuses.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Balta, 'French Policy in North Africa', in *The Middle East Journal* (Washington, DC), 40, 2, Spring 1986, p. 243.

<sup>33</sup> *The World Economic Factbook*, op. cit. p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> Vicenc Fisas Armengol, 'El Contencioso con Marruecos y el Futuro Estratégico de España', in *AFERS Internacional* (Primavera, 1983), p. 30, and *SIPRI Yearbook of World Armaments and Disarmament* (Stockholm, 1993), p. 479.

since 1983 when Morocco was visited by Mitterrand,<sup>35</sup> who even called the Saharawi a 'population' instead of a 'people' in an attempt to appease Rabat.<sup>36</sup> By the early 1990s, France had become Morocco's number one trading partner and its top supplier of development assistance.<sup>37</sup>

Because of conflicting interests, it has been difficult for the French to attempt a resolution of the Western Sahara dispute. As the aforementioned US Congressional staff director concluded:

The French kept saying they were very careful what they were giving to the Moroccans; there was some reluctance to give them everything they wanted. Everybody was playing both sides. They did give Morocco Mirages and other weapons. Then there was always, 'Are you going to give them more Mirages?' Morocco couldn't pay for any of it. It became mixed up: Are they not giving it to them because they can't pay for it or are they not giving it to them because the French want a balance with Algeria? It was always a mixture.<sup>38</sup>

France voiced support for the Polisario and had a good trading relationship with Algeria, while also assisting Morocco militarily and economically.

#### 4. *Spanish Involvement*

The quandary of the Spanish was based on a desire not to offend Morocco in order to maintain their presence in Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish enclaves in North Africa, and on their complete reliance on other countries for petroleum, with Algeria as a major supplier. At the same time, guilt played a part, because the Western Sahara was a former colony and the rapid Spanish withdrawal did not lay the groundwork for independence. The three post-Franco governments (led respectively by Carlos Arias Navarro, Adolfo Suárez, and Leopoldo Carlo Soltelo) claimed that Spain had not ceded sovereignty in the Madrid agreements, but rather had handed over only the administration of the Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania. Suárez's open meeting in May 1979 with Polisario's leader Mohammed Abdelaziz in Algiers relayed this message.

The *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) Government pursued

<sup>35</sup> Phillip C. Naylor, 'Spain and France and the Decolonization of Western Sahara: parity and paradox, 1975-87', in *Africa Today*, 34, 3, 1987, pp. 14-15.

<sup>36</sup> Balta, loc. cit. pp. 245-6.

<sup>37</sup> In 1991, France supplied Morocco with \$312.7 million of development assistance (followed by the US at \$74 million), partly as a reward for supporting the West in the Gulf war, and was also Algeria's number one supplier of development assistance that same year, at 45 per cent of the total. *Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Profile, Morocco, 1993-94*, p. 41, and *Country Profile, Algeria, 1993-94*, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, 7 June 1991.

the same double-edged policy with regard to its North African neighbours when it came to power in 1982. Although the Spanish have vocally supported the Polisario and the referendum over the question of self-determination throughout the duration of this conflict, they do not officially recognise the SADR as an independent state. Polisario has had an office in Madrid since the late 1970s (albeit briefly closed in 1986 in response to Polisario attacks on Spanish fishing boats).<sup>39</sup>

Good relations with Algeria have been vital for trade reasons as well: apart from being Spain's largest export market in Africa, Spain needs that country's hydrocarbons. In 1985 Algeria's Sonatrach and Spain's Enagas concluded an agreement over long-term natural gas, and when visiting Madrid that year, President Chadli Benjedid commented on the need for assistance in ending the war.

Politically and economically, relations with Morocco have also improved in the past decade. Prime Minister Felipe González's first overseas trip was to Rabat, and in 1983 a fishing treaty was signed between the two countries.<sup>40</sup> Spain has been selling arms to Morocco over the years, has provided frigates, technical assistance, and maintenance and repairs for Mirage F-1 fighters, and has even conducted joint exercises in the Straits.<sup>41</sup> Spain agreed in 1986 to help Morocco by means of a \$550 million package of credits and guarantees (including \$221 million for additional military equipment), and has continued to be a main source of arms.<sup>42</sup> Spain also signed a treaty of friendship with Morocco in July 1991, the first with an Arab state, and a year later had become one of its top four trading partners.<sup>43</sup>

### 5. *Other involvement*

Saudi Arabia has provided Morocco with economic and military support, much of it in the form of grants, except during the interlude when King Hassan supported the Camp David accords. The Saudis wanted Moroccan assistance to quell the spread of radical ideas coming

<sup>39</sup> In fact, the Polisario has tried since its inception to force Spain to renounce the Madrid agreements by sporadically attacking Spanish fishing boats off the Sahara coast. Algeria added additional pressure in the late 1970s by supporting the *Movimiento para la Autodeterminación y Independencia del Archipiélago Canario*.

<sup>40</sup> The Spanish consume more fish per head than their European partners, and the coastlines of the Western Sahara and Morocco have rich supplies.

<sup>41</sup> *Tiempo* (Madrid), 29 October 1984, claimed that Spain sold Morocco weapons worth 35,000 million pesetas through Saudi Arabia. See also, Luis Reyes, 'Relaciones con Marruecos', in *Anuario Sobre Armentismo en España* (Madrid, 1986), p. 197.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Maghrib in 1986', in Colin Legum (ed.), *Africa Contemporary Record: annual survey and documents, 1986-87* (London, 1987), p. A122, and *SIPRI Yearbook* (Stockholm, 1994), p. 513.

<sup>43</sup> *El País* (Madrid), 5 July 1991, and *The World Economic Factbook, 1994*, p. 301.

from Algeria and Libya, and used their financial leverage in attempts at conflict resolution, notably by setting up several meetings between Hassan and Benjedid in the 1980s. Although Saudi Arabia was forced to reduce aid to Morocco after the oil crisis, from approximately \$1,000 million in 1983 to a quarter of that amount over the ensuing four years,<sup>44</sup> it remained the country's main source of crude oil into the early 1990s, supplying 25 per cent of its needs, and forgiving \$2,800 million of debt in 1991.<sup>45</sup>

Libya has only supported the Polisario in an intermittent fashion. Having recognised the SADR in 1980,<sup>46</sup> Libya then signed the Oujda treaty with the Moroccans in 1984 which it renounced two years later because of the Kingdom's links with Israel. In fact, Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia have changed positions several times throughout the Western Sahara conflict.

As many as 73 countries have recognised the SADR, yet the list does not include any from North America or Europe (except the former Yugoslavia and Albania); nor, conversely, do any of them recognise Morocco's annexation of the territory. The SADR became the OAU's 51st member-state in 1982, and as a consequence, Morocco withdrew from the organisation two years later.<sup>47</sup> The Polisario is also supported by the Non-Aligned Movement and the Arab Steadfastness Front, and although Morocco's administration over most of the Western Sahara is acknowledged by the European Union, the latter does not recognise Morocco's claim to sovereignty. Indeed, in March 1989, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for the decolonisation of the territory.

Recent political upheavals in Algeria mean that much of the state's machinery is now concentrated on the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, and hence the Government has somewhat decreased its commitment to the Polisario. Meanwhile, even if the referendum is eventually held in October 1995, after so many past cancellations, the

<sup>44</sup> *Africa Confidential* (London), 28, 8, 15 April 1987, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> *The Economist Intelligence Unit: Country Profile, Morocco, 1993-94*, pp. 25 and 42.

<sup>46</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 11 May 1981, reported a claim by US military experts that Libya had bought 100 West German M-1 light tactical aircraft for delivery to the Polisario, which up to that point had only ground weapons.

<sup>47</sup> Hassan's difficulties in obtaining third-world support were partially based on his involvement in the Cabinda crisis in Zaïre, which alienated radical régimes in Angola, Mozambique, and Tanzania, which viewed Morocco's actions as interference in the domestic affairs of an African state. The King was also condemned by some Arab leaders for conducting a war against his Arab 'brothers' (Polisario members and Algerians). Further, Morocco's assistance with the Camp David accords and its general conciliatory policy towards Israel, along with its purchase of South African weapons during the *apartheid* era, angered most Arab and many African states.

chances of it being respected are slim. King Hassan has said that the Kingdom's troops will be withdrawn from the territory if he loses, but has also promised to provide the Moroccans living there with adequate defence in case of 'genocide'.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF NON-INTERVENTION

The former Soviet Union, the United States, France, and Spain have maintained relations with both sides in the struggle over the Western Sahara primarily because the international community has never been overly concerned with its resolution: the dispute does not threaten stability in the region (Algeria's current crisis is far more ominous), nor has the territory any real intrinsic worth.<sup>48</sup> As succinctly stated by Tony Hodges in 1983, 'For Paris, as well as Madrid and Moscow, an ambiguous neutrality became the favored strategy for the preservation and extension of interests on both sides of the conflict.'<sup>49</sup> There is no doubt that, as the already quoted Congressional expert later claimed, some Americans 'argued that they should become more active because France and Spain and the Saudis were all playing double games.'<sup>50</sup> This implied that the United States tried to utilise other policies of neutrality as an excuse to bolster its own, although Washington had similar reasons for wanting to pursue such a path.

It would be difficult to demonstrate that the major powers utilised the war in the Western Sahara to promote their own arms industries, yet the tenacity of the struggle certainly benefited their manufacturers. And the policy of neutrality – in effect a *realpolitik* – regionalised and thereby sustained the conflict because of the consistent supply of weapons, not to mention the many trade and aid agreements. They helped to prolong a war that might not otherwise have endured in such a protracted fashion. Non-intervention was the *modus operandi* because support was distributed to the opposing sides in a manner that avoided direct military confrontation.

Contrary to claims that containment favours an early settlement of such conflicts,<sup>51</sup> it did not in fact facilitate any resolution of the Polisario's war with Morocco. Some have argued that regionalisation set this dispute apart from others in the continent. Interestingly, the

<sup>48</sup> Phosphate prices have been depressed since the mid-1970s. Even without the Saharan resources, Morocco would still rank third in world production after the United States and the former Soviet Union. <sup>49</sup> Hodges, *op. cit.* p. 348. <sup>50</sup> Interview, 7 June 1991.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The Western Saharans: background to conflict* (London, 1980), p. 302.

civil war in Angola started about the same time as the armed struggle in the Western Sahara, and despite the peace agreements signed in the last three years (the most recent in November 1994), there are continuing doubts that the cease-fire will hold. By way of contrast, the civil war in Ethiopia ended when Mengistu Haile Mariam was ousted in 1991 and the referendum which granted Eritrea independence took place, together with Soviet withdrawals of support for the régime in Addis Ababa.

The United States and the former Soviet Union appear to have disengaged from all proxy wars: the former because it no longer faces a threat from Moscow, and the latter because the Russian Federation cannot afford to abet revolutionary movements. Certainly it can be asserted that few disputes will be internationalised in the same way as during the cold war. Most countries will continue to eschew entanglement in nationalist disputes because of the norm of non-interference and the costs involved. Yet irredentist conflicts are not wholly domestic affairs: their very definition connotes the involvement of more than one state (or quasi-state). Despite their bilateral nature, the international community attempts to treat them as if they were merely internal struggles.