



EUROPEAN STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE
AND SECURITY CENTER (ESISC)

THE POLISARIO FRONT

**CREDIBLE NEGOTIATIONS PARTNER
OR AFTER-EFFECT OF THE COLD WAR AND OBSTACLE
TO A POLITICAL SOLUTION IN WESTERN SAHARA?**

Under the leadership of Claude MONIQUET, ESISC President

November 2005

METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A) SUMMARY

Thirty years after the departure of the Spanish colonizer, the Western Sahara conflict remains, at this time, unresolved. The Security Council has just, at the end of October 2005, extended the mandate of the MINURSO (*United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara*) by six months, even if it is clear that the referendum (awaited since 1991) is impracticable.

The three parties in question, **Morocco**, **Algeria** (which shelters and supports the Polisario Front) and the **Polisario Front** are entrenched in their positions. **Although the independence of Western Sahara is as ever unacceptable for the Rabat government and for Moroccan society, the Polisario Front, for its part, wants to hear of no other solution.** For regional geostrategic reasons, it is sustained in its intransigence by the Algerian government. This support, together with strong diplomatic pressures, has led a few dozen States to recognize a **Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)**, which is purely fictitious. One can only wonder, furthermore, about the viability of “Micro States” in this globalization era.

Morocco, on its side, seems ready to find a political solution that would involve broad Saharawi independence within the Moroccan national territory. It is clear moreover that, despite its intransigence, the **Polisario Front represents only a fraction of the “Saharawi people”.**

As the United Nations and Europe have shown themselves to be incapable of solving the conflict, many eyes are now turning to the **United States which, in the context of the “war against terrorism” and their plan to democratize the Arabo-Muslim world, has every interest in stabilizing the Maghreb, but which must, at the same time, reconcile the interests of its two allies within the region, Algeria and Morocco.**

The Polisario Front embarked last summer upon a vast diplomatic operation by finally releasing (following the intervention of top-level American personalities) several hundreds of Moroccan prisoners of war, some of whom had been detained for more than thirty years and who would seem to have suffered, in addition to a **detention period that is unjustifiable in international law, massive and repeated maltreatment.** The Front undoubtedly intended thus to reclaim its virginity and to bury the various charges that have often been levied against it in the last twenty years.

It still remains that the treatment undergone by these prisoners of war (and by Moroccan civilian detainees) should be brought before the international authorities.

Furthermore, **the Polisario, led by the same group for three decades, has remained in deficit of internal democracy.** It is accused of keeping, against their will, thousands of Saharawis in the camps of Tindouf, in Algeria, with the complicity of the Algiers authorities. In the past, many charges of ill treatment of these Saharawi populations have been made against the leadership of the Polisario Front. The same leadership has been regularly accused of diverting the humanitarian aid intended for refugees.

Today, **the way the Polisario is evolving is giving rise to new fears: those of seeing some of its combatants and leaders turn to terrorism, radical Islamism or international crime. This development would threaten the stability of the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa and therefore the security of several African states and, in the long run, of Europe as well.**

In any event, the Polisario Front does not seem, for lack of in-depth reform, to be able to play a part in any possible negotiated political solution. Only a regenerated organization, which has settled its accounts with the past and assumed its responsibilities, could be involved in such a solution.

B) RECOMMENDATIONS

► Concerning the status of Western Sahara

- 1) The international community and the UN should have the courage and the lucidity to recognize that the independence solution is not viable and is, in any case, impossible, given the ferocious opposition of one of the parties. They should therefore impel the parties involved to take the path of a negotiated political solution, possibly supervised by the international community.
- 2) Algeria should refrain from interfering in a problem that concerns Morocco and the Saharawi population, and in which it is not a stakeholder
- 3) The States that have recognized the SADR should realize that this entity, with no real existence or future, is more of an obstacle to any political solution than a genuine emerging State.
- 4) The United States should use its regional influence to support a negotiated solution and to give to each party - including, if necessary, Algeria – guarantees that their fundamental interests would be respected.

► Concerning the former Moroccan prisoners of war

- 5) An independent international inquiry should be conducted to study the detention conditions of the Polisario's Moroccan detainees, civilian and military.
- 6) These former detainees need to be recognized as victims and treated like such, and they receive reparation for the wrongs undergone.

- 7) Those possibly responsible for the ill treatment must be identified and brought before the courts.

► **Concerning the Polisario Front**

- 8) The Polisario Front should accept the opening of the camps of Tindouf, so that any person or family eager to return to the territory of Western Sahara is free to do so.
- 9) The Polisario Front should accept the fact that any solution can only be political and negotiated. It should, consequently, renounce the armed struggle definitively and disarm and dismantle its troops.
- 10) To prevent the Polisario veterans from turning to crime or terrorism, the international community should take their relocation and reintegration upon itself.
- 11) The Polisario leadership should agree to operate democratically and, therefore, to submit to true elections. It should account for its stewardship of the last thirty years.
- 12) Those responsible for the crimes and embezzlement committed under cover of the Polisario Front should be identified and brought before the courts.
- 13) In their contacts with the Polisario Front, foreign political leaders and NGOs should insist that the Front conforms to the above recommendations.

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I

INTRODUCTION

During the summer and at the beginning of the autumn 2005, a thirty-year-old old post-colonial conflict was abruptly brought to the memory of a world that had forgotten it: at the time of some media manipulations around a so-called Saharawi *Intifada*, of a very high level American visit to Algeria and Morocco, and of the release of those who had started to be called “the oldest world war prisoners”, the question of Western Sahara, again, briefly, took centre stage. It then became once again what it has been for more than ten years: a low-intensity conflict in which a war of words and slogans has replaced the use of arms since the cease-fire at the beginning of the Nineties. But the Western Sahara conflict is also and especially an unresolved conflict, which remains a stumbling bloc in the relations between Algeria and Morocco and risks, potentially, destabilizing the entire region.

At the end of the spring, some riots and demonstrations in Laâyoune, Dakhla and Smara (the region designated “*Western Sahara*” by the UN, Algeria and the **Polisario Front** and “*Southern Provinces*” by the Kingdom of Morocco), of which a part of the population, young adolescents in particular, had been skilfully manipulated by independentist propaganda, were presented as a virtual insurrection. We will see what became of it later in this report.

During the summer of 2005, **Mr. Mohammed Abdelaziz**, Secretary-General of the **Polisario Front** and President of the **Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)**, self-proclaimed but recognized by a few dozen States), announced in an interview with the French *Le Monde* and the Spanish *El Pais* newspapers¹, the “imminent” release of more than 400 Moroccan prisoners of war, detained, often for more than twenty years, by its organization.

Their fingers burnt by the multiple announcements about the fate of these prisoners for more than ten years, and especially by the “salami technique” that had characterized the previous releases, the media and the experts of the region were unconvinced, for the most part, of the seriousness of this umpteenth promise. All however recognized that a new factor was perhaps making it more credible: the involvement of Washington. In May 2005, indeed, a delegation of former **Polisario** prisoners had gone to the United States where it had met several high level politicians, including the Republican Senator **John McCain**, himself a former prisoner of war in Vietnam². **Mr. McCain** had promised to use his personal influence to obtain the release of the last prisoners.

Furthermore, it was known that the Maghreb and the Sub-Saharan area were, for several years, a matter of major concern for the American administration, which has

¹ *Le Monde* and *El Pais*, 13 July 2005

² See, in particular, the magazine *Jeune Afrique-L'intelligent*, 24 July 2005.

wanted to stabilize the region and especially to reconcile the enemy Algerian and Moroccan brothers in order to bloc the rise of radical Islamism and to shore up the insecurity that is undermining the region.

In mid-August, Senator **Richard Lugar**, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee and Special Envoy of President George Bush, started a lightning tour of Algiers and Rabat, where he held talks with President **Abdelaziz Bouteflika** and **King Mohammed VI**. On 18 August 2005 at half past seven in the evening, finally, a plane especially chartered by the American government landed on the tarmac of El-Massira Airport, in Agadir. On board, the last 404 Moroccan prisoners of the **Polisario Front**.

These releases, an essential stage in any conflict of the Saharan conflict, do not however provide the sufficient condition, as the positions of the various parties concerned remain so distant from each other. One can therefore think that American diplomacy will continue, in the coming months, to strive to find an honourable, and universally acceptable, way out of the crisis.

On 28 October 2005, in any case, the UN Security Council decided, unanimously, to extend the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 30 April 2006³. An automatic and virtually ritualistic vote that, every six months for a number years, has taken a few moments of the Council's time. The Secretary-General, however, believed that "*the lack of progress moreover was worsened by the generally tense political climate in the region*" and that "*the situation could further deteriorate in the absence of a solution*"⁴.

It is in this context that it seemed to us interesting - and even essential - to take an interest in the **Polisario Front**, this independentist organization born during the last phase of the decolonization of the Maghreb and during the Cold War - it is a pure product of those two phenomena - which survives after a fashion in the South of Algeria.

In the course of the summer and the autumn, we have therefore multiplied our meetings and the research undertaken in Morocco, the Sahara and Europe, in order to get a better picture of the past and present realities of the **Polisario Front** and to determine if it could be a player in the solution of the conflict or whether it was, on the contrary, an obstacle to it.

This report is the product of that research, of the dozens of meetings that we have had during this summer and of the study of hundreds of documents and testimonies. **It is not a question of a study into the Western Sahara question**, to which many publications have already been devoted in recent years - we intend however to return to this problem in the following months in order to try to determine the conditions which would enable a "no winner or loser" solution to be concluded and the region to be stabilized - **but rather an X-ray of an organization that remains, even**

³ The Security Council's communiqué can be found at the following address:
<http://www.un.org/apps/newsFr/storyF.asp?NewsID=11318&Cr=Sahara&Cr1=conseil>

⁴ Idem.

though much mediatized at certain times, little known in Europe and in the United States.

II

A CONFLICT'S HISTORICAL ROOTS

Before coming to the genesis of the **Polisario Front** and its evolution, we need (even if, at the risk of repeating it, there is no question here of considering the problems of Western Sahara as a whole) briefly to remind ourselves of the conflict's geographical and historical roots.

II.1. Geographical Context

Western Sahara (we will employ this internationally recognized designation to indicate this disputed territory) extends over an area of approximately 265,000 km² of desert territory encompassing the regions of Saguiet Al-Hamra in the North and Oued Al-Dahad (formerly Rio de Oro) in the South.

Its main towns are: Laâyoune (Al-Ayun), Dakhla and Smara. The population is difficult to quantify with any degree of accuracy, the figures varying according to the particular source referred to. It must however be in the region of 300,000 souls. The local population, historically, has consisted of tribes of Berber origin, of which the largest are *R' Gueïbat*, *Ouled Delim* and *Ouled Bou Sba*. These tribes are organized into fractions, sub-fractions and clans. The local languages are Arabic and the *Hassani* dialect (or *Hassaniya*), which is also spoken in Mauritania.

Western Sahara is deprived of industry but is rich in natural resources - phosphate, copper, iron - and fishing resources accessible from some 1,400 kilometres of coast. In addition, oil prospection is ever-present in the region.

II.2. Historical Context

The Saharawis were organized into nomadic shepherd tribes moving over a vast area that exceeds the now internationally recognized borders. A tribal assembly, the *djemaâ*, allowed the chiefs of the fractions to act in concert with the Sheik at the head of each tribe. The majority of the tribes paid allegiance to the Sultans of Morocco.

In 1884, during the partial colonization of the Maghreb, Western Sahara saw itself occupied by the Spanish, who disembarked their troops at Dakhla (renamed Villa Cisneros). The region then experienced several decades of agitation until 1934, date of its final pacification. The Spanish colonization was however relatively discrete and was limited to coastal control (at the time, Madrid was only interested in the fishing resources). Administratively, the Spanish Sahara was divided into an area under military occupation (Saguiet Al-Hamra, in the North) and a colonized area (Rio de Oro, in the South). The borders were to be established by Madrid and Paris in 1886 and 1934. The Spanish colonization was characterized by the desire to push towards the North (occupation of Tarfaya, in 1919) and for complete coastal control (installation of a military detachment in Laâyoune in 1935). This period was marked by various exoduses

to Morocco, certain tribes or fractions seeking to flee the occupying power and to place themselves under the protection of the sultans.

Shortly before the Spanish colonization, Morocco had already lost part of the Eastern fringe of this area to France. After the capture of Algiers by the French troops, in 1830, the **Sultan Moulay Abd Al-Rahman** had indeed undertaken to support the **Emir Abd el-Kader**, who was resisting the invader. After some fifteen years of skirmishes with the troops of **Abd el-Khader** that had found refuge in Morocco, France declared war on the kingdom of the sheriffs and, on 14 August 1844, the **Burgeaud General** demolished the Moroccan troops commanded by **Moulay Muhammad** (son of the Sultan) on the *Isly Oued*. The Moroccan defeat opened the way to a review of the borders, concretized by the **Treaty of Lalla Maghnia**, which, on 18 March 1845, annexed Tindouf, Touat, Saoura and Tidikelt to French Algeria.

Parallel to this development in the Saharan region, the end of the nineteenth century was marked by a distinct weakening of the sultans' power. Debt, uninterrupted penetration of European merchants, famine and epidemic undermined the traditional power and social base of the *Makhzen* (*Makhzen* or *Maghzen* indicates the complicated political system based on the oath of allegiance of the tribal chiefs to the sultan). For lack of a strong and well-run army and sound finances, Rabat could no longer continue to resist the French colonial pressure. The last act of the **Algeciras Conference**, signed on 07 April 1906, placed the Kingdom of Morocco in an international protectorate. Six years later, give or take a few weeks, on 30 March 1912, the **Treaty of Fès** replaced the international protectorate with a purely French protectorate, with a "Resident-General" assuming the realities of power.

During the second part of the twentieth century, thousands of Saharawis took part in Morocco's struggle – in particular within the southern wing of Jaïch At-Tahrir, the **National Liberation Army**, (*below NLA-South*) to recover its independence and, as soon as this was acquired, on 03 March 1956, the King of Morocco, **Mohammed V**, availed himself of his historical rights and claimed the return of the territories under Spanish control in the *Makhzen*. In 1963, it was therefore at the request of Morocco that the UN's Special Decolonization Committee was to include the Spanish Sahara in the list of territories to be decolonized. But in 1958, the **NLA-South**, which was harassing the Spanish forces, especially around Tarfaya, had been destroyed by a combined Franco-Spanish offensive, the *Clean Sweep Operation*. The crushing of the **NLA-South** provoked a new Saharawi exodus to the North.

From the end of the Fifties, however, Spain, subjected to increasingly intense pressure from the international community, started to relinquish its occupied territories in Morocco:

- **1956:** Relinquishment of the North Region (Tétouan, Nador).
- **1958:** Relinquishment of the Tan Tan and Tarfaya region.
- **1969:** Relinquishment of Sidi Ifni.

In 1974, following a debate within the UN General Assembly, Mauritania joined Morocco in complaining to the International Court of Justice of The Hague (Algeria and Tunisia supported this proceedings) and it handed down a judgment recognizing that bonds of allegiance had existed between the tribes of the Sahara and the sultans of Morocco. To get out of a decolonization impasse that was prevailing, **King**

Hassan II launched, in October 1974, the *Green Walk*, a peaceful gathering of 350,000 people that was to hasten the Spanish withdrawal, which finished in February 1976: in 1975, the colonial power left Sakia El-Hamra (Laâyoune, Smara) then Oued-Eddahab (Dakhla), initially annexed to Mauritania before returning to Morocco in 1979.

The UN, however, refused to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, which an independentist faction, supported by the communist and the non-aligned blocs, intended to transform into a sovereign state.

There you have the raw facts. They still have to be interpreted. Our purpose, at the risk of repetition, is not to delve into an exhaustive study of the Western Sahara question, but to trace the general context in which the **Polisario Front** was born and developed. Two arguments are, in general, put forward by the Front and its supporters to justify the independentist claim: that of the existence of a "Saharawi Nation" and, *a contrario*, of the inexistence in the past of a "Kingdom of Morocco" which would have had some power over the region

We will not here, resolve these two questions, but we will content ourselves with emphasizing that these assertions are, at the very least, open to discussion. Thus, as regards the "Saharawi Nation", the economist **Anthony Hodges**, who has worked for twenty years on the problems of development and minorities in Africa, is of the view that: "*Western Sahara was never a nation before its colonization and the current nationalism is an entirely recent phenomenon, which appeared only at the last moments of the Spanish colonial period*⁵".

Furthermore, it will be noticed that if the "Saharawi Nation" indeed exists, being a nation consisting of nomadic tribes, the question of its "self-determination" cannot be settled within the narrow context of Western Sahara alone but should be so by taking account of the entire traditional nomadic area of the tribes concerned. To be precise, a Saharawi State should, consequently, include part of Southern Morocco, Northern Mauritania and South-western Algeria. In short, all the borders of the region should be reviewed, which seems at the very least difficult to imagine.

As for "the inexistence of Morocco as a constituted State", this argument is regularly put forward by the **Polisario Front** and its allies. Thus, on 22 July 2002, **Mrs. Martine de Froberville**, Chair of the French Committee on Western Sahara, wrote: "*Furthermore, all Africanists and politicians know perfectly well that Morocco did not exist as a State before colonization...*⁶".

However, even if the exact nature of the Moroccan State, its power and the real extent of the power of the sultans remain the subject of studies, the reality is the exact

⁵ Anthony Hodges: *The Origins of Saharawi Nationalism*, in Richard Lawless and Laila Monahan's *War and Refugees, The Western Sahara Conflict*, Pinter, London, 1987, Page 31.

⁶ In: *Le Rapport Lalumière sur le Sahara occidental, une réécriture de l'histoire dénuée de tous scrupules*. This document can be downloaded from the following address:

http://sahara_opinions.site.voila.fr/Frob22002.htm

contrary of this peremptory assertion: Morocco has existed as a State, in various forms and under various dynasties since the Middle Ages, and the Alaouite dynasty to which the current sovereign, **Mohammed VI**, belongs, has reigned over Morocco since the seventeenth century. The very name of Morocco (Maroc) “*appears, it would seem, under the Saâdians, dynasty reigning from 1554 to 1659. It is thought to be the result of the contraction of the name of the town of Marrakech, the principal capital among their capitals. Previously, to indicate Morocco, one spoke about the Maghreb Al-Aqça or Extreme Maghreb*”⁷.

General Lyautey, the first French Resident-General in Rabat, was furthermore to write: “*In Morocco, we were faced with an historic, independent empire, extremely jealous of its independence and rebellious against all constraints which, until recent years, had the appearance of a constituted State, with its hierarchy of civil servants, its representations abroad...*”⁸ »

The late **Albert Hourani**, a British specialist recognized throughout the Arab world, who spent his entire career as an Oxford Professor, agreed with this informed opinion. In a chapter of his *History of the Arab Peoples*, devoted to the extension of the Ottoman Empire, he wrote: “*At the Western end of the Maghreb, beyond the borders of the Empire, a State of an entirely different kind had been in existence for a very long time: the Moroccan Empire*”⁹. And **Hourani** stressed that this empire, even if it had experienced periods of disorganization, had indeed all the attributes of a State: a Court, ministers, an army, and so on.

Another undeniable attribute of the sovereignty of States, Morocco had, as **Lyautey** had noticed, diplomatic representations. We will take just one example. The Sultan of Morocco had recognized the United States of America in 1777, and formal diplomatic relations between the two States were opened in 1787, when a friendship and peace treaty was negotiated: “*Renegotiated in 1836, this treaty remains in force and constitutes the oldest treaty of international relations in American history. Testimony of the particular nature of the relations between the United States and Morocco, Tangier shelters the oldest American diplomatic property in the world. And the only building on foreign soil listed in America’s national register of historical places: the American legation in Tanger*”¹⁰.

But if a Moroccan State existed, did it encompass the region now known as Western Sahara? As seen above, in 1974, the International Court of Justice of The Hague recognized the existence of bonds of allegiance established between Saharawi tribal chiefs and sultans of Morocco. Professor Bernard Lugan, teaching the contemporary

⁷ Fiche *Histoire du Maroc, des origines à nos jours*, French Embassy in Morocco, <http://www.ambafrance-ma.org/maroc/histoire.cfm?print=1>

⁸ Quoted by Georges Vancher, *Sous les cèdres d’Ifrane*.

⁹ In *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 1991, republished in 2002, Faber and Faber, London, Page 243.

¹⁰ In *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Background Note: Morocco* (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm>) updated in July 2005.

history of Africa and author, on Morocco, of a an authoritative body of work¹¹, wrote eighteen months ago: “*In 1200 years of history [the influence of Morocco] was exerted in three directions: [...] To the South, in the direction of the African West, or Bilad Al-Sudan (literally “Land of the Blacks”), Moroccan sovereignty was effective when the State was powerful. It was illustrated by the periodic levying of tax and by the nomination of administrative authorities (overlords, pashas and governors). It was limited on the other hand to a religious, economic and cultural influence when the sultans’ power was weakened. However, at no time did the regions composing Western Sahara cease to belong belonging to the Moroccan State*¹²

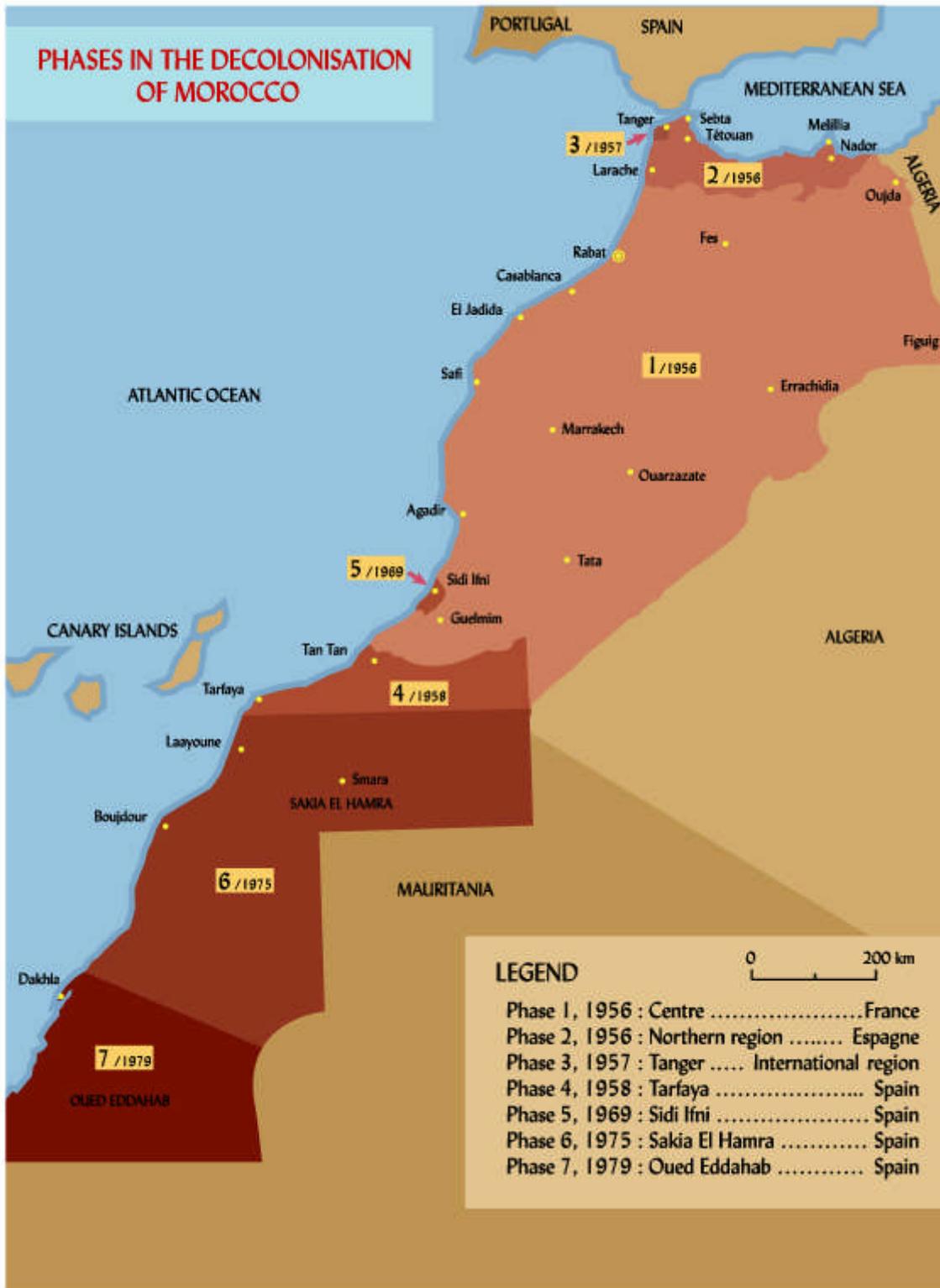
The same author also remarked “*Last but not least proof within the Moroccan constitutional system, the Friday prayer was said in the name of the Sultan of Morocco*¹³ .”

¹¹ Bernard Lugan, *Histoire du Maroc des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Éditions Perrin, 2000.

¹² Bernard Lugan, *La Marocanité du Sahara Occidental*, communication in the conference Is Western Sahara Ready For A Political Solution? 03 May 2004, New York.

¹³ Idem.

PHASES IN THE DECOLONISATION OF MOROCCO



LEGEND

- Phase 1, 1956 : Centre France
- Phase 2, 1956 : Northern region Espagne
- Phase 3, 1957 : Tanger International region
- Phase 4, 1958 : Tarfaya Spain
- Phase 5, 1969 : Sidi Ifni Spain
- Phase 6, 1975 : Sakia El Hamra Spain
- Phase 7, 1979 : Oued Eddahab Spain



III

GENESIS AND IDEOLOGY OF THE POLISARIO FRONT

Some of the leaders of the **National Liberation Army** (Southern Branch) had been seduced by the Algerian socialist model. It is from this mobility, or rather from the action of the sons of its members, that a small left-wing independentist organization was to be born, at the beginning of the Seventies, which, at the time of a congress held in Nouakchott (Mauritania), on 10 May 1973, took, the name of **Frente Popular de Liberación del Sagía el Hamra y Río del Oro**, or **Frente Polisario**. At the time of the second congress of the **Front**, **Mustapha Sayed Ouali** became its Secretary-General and the **Front** obtained an armed branch, the **SPLA (Saharawi Popular Liberation Army)**. For a better understanding of the genesis of the **Polisario**, it is important to delve into the atmosphere of those Seventies once again. One cannot, indeed, completely grasp what the **Polisario** was at its birth if the geopolitical, regional and ideological contexts of the time are not taken into account.

III.1. An Ideological Global Confrontation Player

At the geopolitical level, the world was then cut in two by the Cold War, with each camp striving hard to undermine the opponent's positions by all possible means. The Soviets and their objective allies of the bloc known as "non-aligned" (in the ranks of which there appeared several socialist countries more or less close to Moscow) were not the least active in this planetary confrontation, which regularly led to the Cold War's "hotting up" in the Third World. To incite or, at the very least, to support the "national liberation movements" which were going to create, they thought, so many "focal points for grievance" intended to exhaust the "Western camp", was part of the Soviet strategy.

At the ideological level, the youth was stirred up, and, when it could, on the heel's of the great political crisis that had shaken a part of planet at the end of the Sixties and at the beginning of the Seventies, it was organized into radical movements or joined, in droves, the ranks of the organizations fighting for a "new world". Its generosity and its blindness were largely exploited by the "Soviet bloc" and its allies, which found, mainly in Europe, some very useful logistical relays and propaganda in the extreme left-wing organizations.

At the regional level, the Maghreb was crossed by the deaf conflict between Algeria and Morocco, which had given rise, in 1963, to a short war that has remained in the history under the name of *the War of the Sands*¹⁴. For several years, Algiers, which had been vanquished and humiliated by Rabat, had been waiting for an opportunity to avenge itself on its Moroccan rival. Ideologically, the two adversaries were entrenched in diametrically opposite positions, which only helped to increase their antagonism.

¹⁴ On the *War of the Sands*, see the first Appendix to this report.

Algeria, which ten years earlier had come out of a bloody war of liberation, was still totally glorified by the prestige of the resistance fighters and the fight of the FLN. It embodied the Third World on the move, lined up against Western “imperialism”. Morocco, for its part, was proud to belong to the “Free World” and wanted to be a loyal ally of the United States and France. For the Soviets, as for the Algerians, it represented the quintessence of “the enemy” at the centre of the Maghreb, which could, with the investment of a little energy and some means, be switched entirely into the “progressist camp”.

We should also add, for a more accurate description of the landscape, two other regional factors. Firstly, the Libyan factor. On 01 September 1969, a committee of twelve “Free Officers” had, under the control of **Colonel Muammar Al-Gadaffi**, overthrown King **Idriss** and established in Tripoli the “Libyan Arab Republic”, strongly inspired by the example of **Gamal Abdel Nasser** in Egypt. In 1973, **Colonel Gadaffi** started a “Cultural Revolution”, seeking to accelerate the reforms. The State was henceforth subjected to the authority of “Popular Committees”, present at all levels of society. Quickly, **Gadaffi** then approached the Soviet Union, which, only too pleased to have a second ally in the region, massively armed his regime, which, in March 1977, was to become the **Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya** (“State of the Masses”). For more than a decade, Libya was going to strive hard to destabilize the region and Africa, targeting in particular the “reactionary” States, which included Morocco.

There was, finally, a not-insignificant international factor: **Cuba’s** support for the **Polisario**, which was never denied. The interest of the Castro regime for this Western Sahara question may be surprising, but that would be to forget that Cuba had been busy, for more than two decades, destabilizing Africa and supporting the Marxists regimes and movements there. The Soviet bloc found its interest there by letting its small Caribbean ally develop guerrilla and insurrection hotspots that were so many thorns in the feet of the Western powers and their local allies. However, as it was said, Morocco was, in North Africa, the Western bloc’s only solid ally. The Cubans had already been present in Algeria since 1963. They had dispatched there an armoured battalion equipped with Soviet T33 tanks, military advisers and members of their intelligence services. Inter alia, these “advisers” assisted the independentist organizations that were starting to agitate in the Spanish Sahara.

It is then that in 1965, Mehdi Ben Barka, declared opponent of King Hassan II, disappeared. On the consequences of this disappearance and the assistance brought by Cuba to the Polisario Front, there is, a first-hand testimony, that of Juan Vivés, a former high-level manager of the Cuban intelligence services who had taken refuge in France for more than twenty years. Juan Vivés was present in Algeria at the time. In a recently published book of memoirs, he writes: “*In any case, following this assassination, Fidel was seized by one of those fits of angers of which he alone knew the secret, and he swore that Morocco would be a land of vengeance*¹⁵ “. It is at that time that the decision was made to arm and supervise the group that was, a few years

¹⁵ Juan Vivés, *El Magnifico, 20 ans au service secret de Castro*, Paris, Éditions Hugo Doc, 2005, Page 153.

later, to take the name of **Polisario Front**: “*History will thus recall*”, wrote Vivés, “*that the two oldest armed organizations of the planet, ETA and the Polisario, were developed by Cuba, and the second, in particular, by Che in person*”¹⁶ “.

The last factor to be taken into account was purely Moroccan: the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies had been marked by a few black years for Rabat. The regime of King **Hassan II** had drifted into authoritarianism¹⁷ and parliament was dissolved. As written by **Mostapha Bouaziz**, professor and researcher at the Hassan II University (Casablanca): “*The 1965-1975 decade was specific in many respects. It covered an exceptional set of circumstances, a closing of the political field against a background of major change at the sociological and the political cultural levels*”¹⁸». The youth with schooling (primarily high-school pupils) was going to become the spearhead of the revolt of a minority of Moroccan youth. At the pinnacle of power, although the King had furthermore tried to eliminate corruption, some believed that their time had come. In July 1971, a few dozen officers and a thousand or so cadets of the Ahermoumou military academy broke into the summer Palace of Shkirat, not far from Rabat, while the King was celebrating his 42nd birthday there. It was a massacre: about a hundred guests were killed and two hundred others wounded. Second attempt, 16 August 1972: the King’s Boeing, returning from a state visit to France, was raked by fighter planes. Hassan II’s right-hand man, **General Oufkir**, was to pay for the failure of his plot with his life¹⁹. The political climate was thus particularly murky in the Kingdom of Morocco at the beginning of the Seventies.

It was in this context of tension that the **Polisario Front** was born in May 1973.

III.2. An Independentist Extreme Left Organization, Partly Led By Adolescents

Right from the start, the **Polisario Front** clearly positioned itself as an organization of the extreme left, recruiting its leaders among the youth and often those still at school, the high-school pupil being perceived, as attested by several historians and sociologists taking an interest at that time, as “*the organic intellectual of the Moroccan Revolution*”. We have assembled several testimonies of former members and leaders of the **Polisario** that confirm the importance of youth for the Front. To avoid any redundancy, we will mention only two of them: that of **Hametti Rabani** who, later, was to be Minister for Justice and the Cults of the Saharawi Arab

¹⁶ Idem, Page 154.

¹⁷ The Equity and Reconciliation Authority, wanted by King Mohammed VI to throw light on these troubled years, was installed on 07 January 2004: www.ier.ma/fr_sommaire.php

¹⁸ See the article by Mostapha Bouaziz, « Les années de braise », in the special edition “1905-2005: A Moroccan Century” of the *Le Journal* magazine, 30 July 2005.

¹⁹ On this troubled period, see also Ignace Dalle, *Les Trois Rois, la monarchie marocaine de l’indépendance à nos jours*, Fayard, Paris, 2004.

Democratic Republic and that of **Mustapha Bouh**, who was to become the army's "Political Commissar".

Hametti Rabani: *"My father was a Dakhla VIP. He had written several books and was a well-known intellectual. At high school, I was already enrolled in the Polisario, which had just been born. In 1974 [he was 19 years old at the time], I stopped my studies to assume the responsibility for clandestine political work in Dakhla. I remained there for a year and was exiled in 1975. Arrived in Algeria, I began my political work in the refugee camps. I was, inter alia, in charge of education. Then, very quickly, I was elected to leadership positions, during one of these basic congresses that we organized in the camps on the model of the Libyan revolution of the masses. One year after my election, the leadership of the Front called upon me to take responsibility for teaching. I assumed those duties from 1976 to 1986...²⁰."* It was therefore to a young 21-year-old, whatever his undeniable intellectual qualities, with no experience other than that of militancy and who had hardly finished school, that the **Polisario** entrusted the hyper-sensitive task of taking care of the education of the thousands of children and teenagers who populated the camps. Lacking teachers, **Hametti Rabani** and the **Polisario** leadership were to decide to send the first generation of exiled Saharawi young people to study not only in the Algerian high schools, but also in Libya or Cuba.

Mustapha Bouh: *"I was among the first to join the Polisario, in 1974. I was 18 years old. I belonged to the first "Military Cohort" of the organization, trained in Algeria, and to which the then Secretary-General of the movement also belonged [Mohammed Abdelaziz], and in 1976, I was appointed "Political Commissar" of the First Military Region. I was then assigned to Algiers where I was in charge of propaganda. I ran the Polisario's newspaper and radio station. In 1977, I was appointed Foreign Relations Commissar, then, in 1978, I was elected to the Politburo and appointed Political Commissar of the army...²¹ "* A meteoric career: Political Commissar at the age of 20, in charge of the Foreign Relations at 21, and responsible for political training in the army at 22.

It seems to us interesting to dwell a little on the extreme youth of some of the leaders of the **Polisario** because it partly explains, in our view, the radicalism and the deviations that were to characterize the movement. The revolt of the Saharawi youth was certainly a revolt against the sway of Rabat, but it was also (especially) a "generational" revolt. The Belgian sociologist, **William Racimora**, who has worked, for the last ten years, on many questions concerning Maghrebian youth, believes that it was *"about a revolt against any authority, it was the youth movement that intended to emancipate itself from any authority – including that, particularly onerous, of the tribe, the fraction, the clan and the family. This revolt was very similar to the one that was going on at the same time in other areas of the world, including Europe; the young were seeking to shake off adult control and, quite simply, to exist. The Moroccan and Saharawi contexts being what they were at the time, this revolt took a violent turn and led to the creation or the reinforcement of a separatist organization. It was undoubted proof that the Saharawi youth was cut*

²⁰ Interview with Hametti Rabbani, Rabat, 04 August 2005.

²¹ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

off from reality, as was the extremist fringe of European youth and as was the Moroccan youth of the extreme left. These young people were generous and idealistic, but they took no account of the real world in which they lived. Only the local context made it that their influence had been more important and decisive on the population in which they lived than had been the influence of the European and Moroccan leftists in their respective companies...²² ».

Furthermore, it seems clear that the first target of this revolt of youth was Spain, the colonial power whose presence in the region was over, more than Morocco.

Was the **Polisario** of the first years extremist, ideologically speaking? To assure ourselves of it, let's return at the first years of the Front and listen to **Mustapha Bouh**: *“Becoming adolescents or young adults at the time when the Spanish colonizer was finally withdrawing from the Sahara, the sons of the members of the NLA-South had been brought up not only in the memory of the glorious period of their fathers but also with the memory of their crushing defeat and failure. A failure that they attributed, inter alia, to the “treason” of Morocco, which had refused to open a military front with Spain for the liberation of the Sahara. So they wanted to take their revenge on history, and some thought of creating an independentist organization. A movement started to take shape. In 1972, demonstrations were organized in the South of Morocco, inter alia in Tan Tan, approximately 120 km to the north of the limit of the Spanish Sahara.*

Several tens of thousands of Saharawis had taken refuge in the area, after Operation Clean Sweep and the crushing of the NLA-South in 1958. It is there that a many children of the rebels had grown up and gone to school. Those demonstrations were harshly repressed by Oufkir. People were killed. Many young people took refuge in Mauritania. Colonel Gadaffi then made a tour of the country to propagate his third-worldist and “revolutionary” concepts. His discourse seduced the young and the first contacts were made. The first arms arrived in 1974, via the Libyan Embassy in Nouakchott. It was on the basis of this experience, its contacts, this easy access to sophisticated weaponry and a somewhat confused but very leftist ideology that the Polisario was built. At the beginning, it was a real madhouse where the entire panoply of left and far left ideologies were to be found: Moscow Marxist tendencies, Castroists, Marxist-Leninists, partisans of the Libyan way, subscribers to Algerian socialism, and interventionist Arab nationalists of the Nasserian tendency. Our points in common were our youth and our will to succeed where our fathers had failed...²³ ».

²² Interview with William Racimora, Brussels , 07 September 2005.

²³ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

III.3. A Communist Kind Of Organizational Mode, An Obsession With Security

This “leftist” ideology, of course, was to have a powerful influence on the way in which the **Polisario** was to be organized.

In 1976, the **Polisario Front** bestowed upon itself a structure that was to remain unchanged. It was run by its Secretary-General assisted of an executive of nine members, themselves belonging to a “Politburo” of 21 members of whom three were more particularly charged with the “mass organizations” encompassing three “categories” of Saharawis: workers, peasants and women. With 19 elected officials of the “Basic People’s Committees”, the members of the Politburo formed the “National People’s Council”. Basically, each group of ten people was organized into a cell and each camp had its own military and political hierarchy.

It was a question therefore of the most classical kind of Marxist pyramid structure, almost a caricature of one. It hardly mattered that there was no plethora of “workers” in the Saharawi ranks or that the “peasants” were really an under-represented class among this hardly villagized people of nomadic shepherds, as the Marxist-Leninist vulgate demanded that revolution could only be accomplished by the working class reinforced by the poor peasantry, the **Polisario** was to bestow the one or the other upon itself by simple decree. What was important was to believe in it and to look good to the States sponsoring the cause (mainly, at the time, on the left) and to the sympathizers who were starting to appear in Europe.

However, the “worker” temptation or, at the very least, the exploitation of the myth of a “Saharawi working class” remains entrenched among the leadership of the **Polisario**. It will be noticed, in this respect, that at the end of October 2005, the **Polisario Front** tried to force its way into the world trade-union community, by taking part in an international trade union conference held in Rome at the request of three Italian organizations, the CGIL, the CISL and the UIL (the last two were to withdraw from the organization shortly before the work, leaving in harness only the CGIL, of communist persuasion). The **Front** had delegated its “trade union” to it, the Sario.UGT. This Conference of Solidarity with the Saharawi Workers and People however stalled when several important trade unions (including Workforce and the CFDT for France, the UGTP for Tunisia etc) decided not to take part in it. The Moroccan trade-union representatives (UMT, UGTM, FDT, UNMT) will make the point that it is difficult to speak about a “trade union” in the camps of the **Polisario**, given that there are “*no manufacturing units, companies or of freedom of association*”²⁴ “.

Logical consequence of this form of organization - initiatives can only come from the top of the pyramid. The **Polisario** precludes any initiative from its members, and no decision can be made if it has not been ratified at the higher level concerned. This strongly hierarchical structure was coupled with a veritable obsession with security,

²⁴ The meeting was held in Rome on 28 and 29 October 2005, and was in particular reported in an article by Mohammed Boudarham in the daily newspaper *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, 31 October, 2005.

which is no surprise in an extreme left organization, as all those that we have been able to study in recent years are tarred with the same brush. The leadership of the **Front** was therefore quite naturally on the lookout for any dispute, and the expression of any somewhat dissenting opinion could only be the result of a plot aiming to undermine the authority of the leaders or a manipulation by enemy “services”. To secure itself from them, the organization is protected by “the army” and, especially, by Military Security (MS), trained and supervised by the Algerian MS. The surveillance of the MS – which has approximately 3.000 members - is permanent and is exerted particularly on foreigners and Saharawis living in the areas controlled by the **Polisario** who are in contact with them. The surveillance of foreigners is done inter alia via the “Protocol Service”, all of whose civil servants would be more or less related to the security services.

To assure themselves of the good behaviour and loyalty of the people who were allowed to leave these zones, no member of the **Front** can leave the camps with all the members of his family. Here also, the method is of pure Soviet inspiration.

This oppressive atmosphere was to result in particular in several purges, the main objective of which being to call the members of minority tribes to order: repression of the “Tekhna Network” in 1974, the “Rguibat El Foula Network” in 1977, the “Chabaka” in 1982. These tensions were to lead to a veritable uprising in the camps, in 1988, which was harshly repressed by a leadership that refused any dialog. These four great waves of internal repression were to cause hundreds of deaths and the arrest and detention of several hundreds of other Saharawis, many of whom were to be subjected to torture²⁵. These abuses were to cause reactions right to the top of the **Polisario**. **Hametti Rabani**: *“In 1988, I was Minister for Justice. In the Front of repression, I refused to be silent and I belonged to a group of ten leaders who visited Mohammed Abdelaziz [the President of the SADR and Secretary-General of the Polisario Front] to ask him to change his methods. I was punished and discharged from my duties. From Minister for Justice, I became Political Commissar of the fourth military area. But our manoeuvre finally bore fruit. About two years later, I was recalled and asked to take charge of a think tank on the forms and structures that the Polisario should have, and in 1995, I am became Minister for Justice again ...²⁶ .”*

²⁵ Testimonies, already quoted, of Hametti Rabani and Mustapha Bouh; testimony of Sidati El Ghallaoui, former ambassador of the Polisario, Rabat, 04 August 2005; many anonymous testimonies of former members of the Polisario Front, collected in Rabat and Paris, July and August 2005.

²⁶ Interview with Hametti Rabani, Rabat, 04 August 2005.

IV

THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS (1974-1991): FROM VICTORIES TO STAGNATION

The first years of the **Polisario** were to be the ones that would see it achieving some military victories and many diplomatic successes.

On the heels of the creation of the **Polisario**, or almost, the birth of the **Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic** (SADR) was proclaimed, on 26 February 1976, at a press conference close to **Tindouf**²⁷, in Algeria. In reality, the structures of the **SADR** dovetail, more or less, with those of the **Polisario** and its existence is exclusively theoretical: the authority of the **SADR's** government extends only over a few square kilometres, in Algeria, around Tindouf, where the refugee camps and the principal infrastructures of the **SADR/Polisario** are gathered. But this virtual existence was to give another dimension to the fight of the **Polisario Front**.

IV.1. Undeniable Political and Diplomatic Successes, but of Limited Scope

From the start, the **Polisario** and the **SADR** were to enjoy sharp success among the intelligentsia of the European left. Just about everywhere, committees of support or solidarity were created and the “pilgrimage” to Tindouf became a *must* for the anti-imperialist left.

At the diplomatic level, the **SADR** was to lose no time in garnering successes. In March 1976, that is to say just a few days after its proclamation, indeed the very day after, several States recognized the brand new Republic. It was a question **Madagascar** (28/02/76), **Burundi** (01/03/76), Mozambique (01/03/76), Algeria (06/03/76), **Angola** (11/03/76), **Benin** (11/03/76), Guinea **Bissau** (15/03/76), **North Korea** (16/03/76) and **Rwanda** (01/04/76). In the years to follow, other states would follow in these precursors' footsteps. To such an extent that, at the peak of its “popularity”, the SADR was to be recognized by 79 States. In 1976, it was admitted to the Organization of African Unity (OAU), as its 51st member, a movement that was, eight years later, to result in Morocco's withdrawal from the Pan African co-operation organization. At the Addis-Ababa Summit, the first in which the **SADR** delegates took part.

27 The communiqué of the communication can be found at the following address:
<http://www.arso.org/03-1f.htm>

Diplomatic successes²⁸, therefore, but when all is said and done, of limited scope. With just a few exceptions (**India, Iran, Mexico, Peru**), outside of Africa, no large country recognized the **SADR**. Same disappointment on the side of the socialist countries. Apart from the “non-aligned” **Yugoslavia**, the only Marxist-regime countries to recognize the **SADR** – despite its avowed ideology – were the poor relations of the socialist camp: From third world countries to sometimes fairly unfrequentable leaders (**Afghanistan, North Korea, Cuba**, Mengistu’s **Ethiopia**, the *Frelimo*’s Mozambique, Sandinista’s **Nicaragua, Vietnam, South Yemen**). And what should be said of the Arab and Muslim world? In addition to Afghanistan, Khomeini’s Iran and Yemen, already mentioned the only Arabo-Muslim countries to recognize the **SADR** were **Algeria** (of course), **Libya, Mauritania** (in 1984) and **Syria**.

No European country and, especially, no country of the socialist bloc, officially recognized the new Republic, even though certain States of the Eastern bloc were clandestinely supporting it. Let’s listen to **Mustapha Bouh**: “*We must be clear, even though the number was impressive – nearly 80 States had recognized us – this diplomatic campaign was a relative failure. In the Arab world and in the Middle East, their natural geopolitical space, the Polisario and the SADR were very weak. Not even Yasser Arafat’s PLO wanted to have relations with us. Same observation with the socialist camp: no country of the Soviet bloc recognized us, nor did China...*”²⁹ “.

In fact, if we exclude those that we already quoted, in addition to countries far removed from the conflict and perhaps rather badly informed of its ins and outs (one thinks in particular of the states of Latin America and the Pacific Area) or others without much political weight (Lesotho, Cap Verde, Papua New Guinea, and so on), the majority of the capitals that were to be opening diplomatic relations with the **SADR** were doing so under the friendly but insistent pressure of Algeria.

Two decades later, furthermore, 26 States that had recognized the **SADR** will have broken off or frozen their relations with it.³⁰

Nevertheless, the **Front** and its phantom Republic of Sands benefited from this wave of recognition and the sympathy that it created for the Saharawi cause in order to advance on the political chessboard, obliging the UN to take account of its existence and its claim for independence.

Tens of thousands of Saharawis having left the region after the *Green Walk* organized by **King Hassan II** and falling back on Algeria are to be found in the area of Tindouf, where the principal base of the **Polisario** is established and which was later

²⁸ The list of States that recognized Polisario can be found at the following address: <http://www.arso.org/03-2.htm> .

²⁹ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

³⁰ These defections were only rarely be compensated by rallyings, two most important being, without any doubt the most recent, that of South Africa, 15 September 2004, and that of Kenya, 25 June 2005. As at 01 September 2005, 54 States were recognizing the SADR.

to become the provisional “capital” of the **SADR**. It was from these camps that the **Polisario** was to deploy its military activities.

IV.2. Promising Military Beginnings

But in the first years, the **Polisario**, while it encountered some diplomatic successes, above all accumulated victories on the operational front. From this point of view, the **Polisario’s** military history can be broken down into five phases: First, the application, with brilliance, of the guerrilla strategy (1974-1976); then, after 1976, a supremacy due to the same strategy but reinforced by the contribution and use of sophisticated armaments (1976-1980); then a period of counter-flow and delaying combats vis-à-vis the new Moroccan strategy (1981-1987); then a phase of reorganization (1987-1992) and, finally, from 1992 to the present day, a phase of weakening and decomposition of the military apparatus.

➤ **IV.2.1. From 1974 to 1980: Victorious Offensives**

After a few successful punches, the **Polisario**, in the second half of the Seventies, was to intensify the armed struggle.

The SPLA (Saharawi People’s Liberation Army) then applied with accuracy and determination the strategy of the *war of the weak against the strong* and made the guerrilla its main weapon. It could count on the support of Algiers, which was training and supervising its troops, and on several thousands of combatants. Lightly armed, benefiting from an exceptional knowledge of the terrain and its tracks and exploiting them as well as possible, very mobile, moving in small units or in columns of cross-country vehicles, the **Polisario** would appear where it was not expected. Its strikes were fast and furious and it disappeared before the enemy could reorganize and move to the counter-attack. Its two targets were Mauritania, which was occupying the southern third of the former Spanish Sahara (the Dakhla region) and, of course, Morocco, which was occupying the other two thirds to the north of them.

The emblematic combatant of the time was **Commander Lahbib Ayoub**, whom the press was to call *Giap Sahraoui*, in reference to the Vietnamese strategist who drove the Americans out of Indo-China. **Lahbib Ayoub** was born in 1951, in Tifariti, to the South-east of Smara. At the end of the Sixties, although he was not yet twenty years old, this son of a camel breeder was a member of the **Harakat Tharir**, an organization created by **Mohammed Bassiri** that was fighting for the liberation of **Rio de Oro**. In June 1971, he was arrested while his friend **Bassiri** was being tortured to death by the Spanish. He spent a year in prison. Barely released, he joined the entourage of **el-Ouali Mustapha Sayed** and took part, less than a year later, in the meeting, which, on 10 May 1973, saw the birth of the **Polisario Front**.

On 30 September 1973, he led a daring raid on a small Spanish outpost. This self-educated soldier found himself, the next day, a regional military commander and member of the staff of the **Front**. At the beginning of 1975, he belonged to the first cohort of combatants of the **Polisario** to receive rapid military training given by the Algerian army not far from Béchar. After a few operations against the Moroccan troops which were starting to deploy in the north of Western Sahara, **Ayoub** took charge of the war against Mauritania, the weak link of “anti-Polisario” alliance and

flew, with its *kataëb* (units), from success to success: “*The Mauritanian army was better than us in number and in logistics*”, he explained in the first interview he granted after his rallying in Morocco in 2002, “*but it was inferior in fighting spirit and in organisation*”³¹ “.

As from 1976, **Polisario** started to diversify its armament suppliers which, up to that point, had been limited to Libya and, especially, to Algeria, and turned, inter alia, to North Korea³². From then on, and especially from 1978, the Saharawi combatants were to be able to count on **cannons without recoil, 14.5mm ZPU, mortars of 120, multiple rocket launchers** (“*Stalin’s organs*”), **portable SAM 7 missiles, RPG 7 anti-tank weapons**, etc. Soon were to come **T 55 tanks, rocket-propelled Gainful SAM 6 anti-aircraft missiles**, and **armoured BMP and BTR troop transporters**. In 1976, certain artillery pieces mounted on pick-ups were to increase the **Front’s** strike force.

In July 1976, **Lahbib Ayoub** – who owed much of his natural authority not only to his personal charisma but also to the fact that his family constitutes the most influential clan of the **R’ Guibat lebouihat** fraction – demonstrated the correct use of this equipment. To avenge **el-Ouali**, killed in front of Nouakchott on 06 June 1976, he operated a raid of 400 kilometres in the desert, went down from Nouadhibou and briefly occupied the suburbs of the Mauritanian capital, from where his cannons without recoil shelled the presidency. During the year 1977, he multiplied the attacks against the armoured bulk-ore trains of the **SNIM** (National Mining Industry Company) which, all the way along a 700-kilometer-long railway line from Zouérate to Nouadhibou, transported the iron ore extracted within the country to the Atlantic coast and constituted the main life-line of the Mauritanian economy. In May 1977, he directly attacked the mining town of Zouérate, where several hundreds of French co-operators were living with their families. A garrison of 1,500 men was defending it, but with less than 300 combatants, he drove the lines of defense from the field, crossed trenches and anti-tank ditches, occupied the airport and the town centre and crushed the Mauritanian soldiers. Two Frenchmen were killed, six others taken hostage.

It was partly because of the inspiration provided by the Algerian military advisers led by Colonel **Liamine Zéroual** (who was to become President of the Algerian Republic on 31 January 1994) that **Ayoub** attempted the adventure: “*It was they who insisted that I should carry out the operation on Zouérate and so that I could take French hostages. Afterwards, I told them how the battle had gone*”³³ “. The Algerians very seldom got directly involved in the fighting. They made an exception only in January 1976, with the *Battle of Amgala*, during which Algerian and Moroccan troops were to confront each other directly.

³¹ Interview with Lahbib Ayoub by François Sudan, *Jeune Afrique-L’Intelligent*, 21 October 2002. Below, “Ayoub Interview”.

³² Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, August 5, 2005; interview with a senior officer of the French Army, Paris, 25 July, 2005.

³³ Interview with Ayoub, already mentioned.

The harassment by **Ayoub's** men finally paid off. In August 1979, Mauritania laid down its arms and withdrew from the conflict. It evacuated Dakhla and the Oued-Eddahab. On 11 August, the **Royal Armed Forces of Morocco** (RAF) occupied the city. In fact, the **RAF** controlled only a few population clusters: Boujdour, Dakhla, Laâyoune, Boucraa and Smara. In the desert, the **Polisario** did more or less as it pleased. In January 1979, **Lahbib Ayoub** will treat himself even to the luxury of an attack on Morocco within its internationally recognized borders, by attacking Lemseid then by occupying the town of Tan Tan, which he occupied for a few hours with several hundreds of men. In 1980, in Ras el-Khanfra and Djebel Ouarkziz, he directly attacked three armoured columns sent to the north to secure the area and inflicted heavy losses on them.

“Until 1980, the superiority of the SPLA was undeniable”, a senior officer of the RAF explained to us, “the strategy applied, the superiority of the Saharawis’ armaments and their knowledge and use of the terrain caused us major losses. It was at that moment that we changed our own strategy. Rather than disperses our forces by trying to protect each town and to exhaust ourselves by pursuing the kataëb of the SPLA in the desert, we decided to impose the choice of battlefield on the enemy. We built a wall of defense...³⁴”.

➤ **IV.2.2. From 1981 to 1987: Attachment and Reflux**

The choice of the construction of the wall of defense – in fact, raised sand that could reach three meters in height connecting fortified positions and the “*sonnettes*” (observation positions), two to three 3 kilometres apart from each other, and traversed by patrols – resulted from the observation of a major strategic rule: namely that the adversary who manages to impose on the other the choice of the battlefield has a considerable advantage. On this occasion, this advantage would be double. In a context of unconventional war between a traditional army and a light and mobile guerrilla force, the advantage is with the guerrilla. Admittedly, the latter can seldom claim victory, but its ceaseless and often unforeseen strikes demoralize the adversary and weaken it by the addition of relatively unimportant losses, which, by cumulative effect, become significant (attrition).

Incapable, as we have seen, of protecting the towns and the population clusters and of securing their lines of communication, the **RAF** was therefore going to adopt another approach: that of making Western Sahara “watertight” by surrounding it with a line of defense that would obstruct then prevent the incursions of the enemy *kataëb*. No longer able to harass the Moroccan troops, the **SPLA** would be reduced to trying to penetrate the wall, which would require the concentration of important human, mechanical and artillery means, an option contrary to the guerrilla’s rules. Thus the **RAF** benefited not only from the choice of battlefield but also from the form that the battle would take: a traditional war of position in which the advantage would be with the larger and better-supported force (artillery and aviation).

Started in January 1980, the construction of the “wall” was to continue in six sections that stretched from 1980 to 1987. Once completed, in 1987, the “wall” was to extend

³⁴ Discussion with a senior Moroccan officer, Rabat, 08 August 2005.

from **M'hamid El Ghizlane** (90 km to the South of Zagora, within the internationally recognized borders of Morocco) to **Guergarat**, on the Atlantic coast. Over some 2,200 km, it skirted the border of Algeria then that of Mauritania at a distance that could vary from a few hundred meters to several dozen kilometres, and thus defined two zones: a Western Sahara “of the interior”, secured by the “wall”, and a narrow strip of ground of several tens of thousands of square kilometres constituting a de facto *No Man's Land* where the **Polisario's** troops could move as they pleased. One will note however that the latter, to go from North to South, could do no other than to pass, sometimes rather lengthily, through Mauritanian territory. To avoid being confronted by the Algerian army or violating the Mauritanian borders, the Moroccan army would accompany the construction then the guard of the “wall” with a new doctrine, voluntarily limiting its right of pursuit in the event of **SPLA** attacks.

The **Polisario** and Algeria had evidently understood, in 1980, that the construction of the “wall” was going to upset the local strategic hand, and the former was to do its utmost to delay the work or even to oppose it. In May 1980, the **SPLA** units attempted to cross certain portions of the “wall” that were under construction, killed or abducted the soldiers doing the work or protecting it, and laid mines to obstruct their movements when they retreated.

In March 1981, in Guelta Zemmour, the batteries of **SAM 6 Gainful** rocket-propelled anti-aircraft missiles, with which certain *kataëb* commanded by **Lahbib Ayoub** were from then on equipped, brought down a large *C-130* transport aircraft, two *F-5* fighter bombers (called *Freedom Fighter* because the United States was at the time equipped their allies with them) and a combat helicopter. From 1982 to 1984, the **SPLA** was to launch attacks on the breaches separating the various sections of the “wall”, but was to be unable to prevent it from being completed. “*We did everything we could to win decisive victories which would have made the area so insecure that the construction of the wall could not have been completed, and then we tried to ensure that light harassment and sabotage units could cross it. The Algerians continued to push us, and we really had the impression that, through us, they wanted to avenge their defeat of the “War of the Sands”, twenty years earlier. But in the end we had to accept the evidence: the wall was imposed another kind of war on us. The Moroccans had adapted their strategy and, in our turn, we had to follow suit*”, Mustapha Bouh recalled³⁵.

➤ **IV.2.3. From 1987 to 1991: Reorganization, Last-Ditch Struggle and Cease-Fire**

After 1987, only some very rare incursions behind the “wall of defense” were still to succeed. The **SPLA** then changed its strategy and came, as the **RAF** wanted, to a kind of war for which it was not cut out: it tried to attack the Moroccan fortifications directly by concentrating important forces.

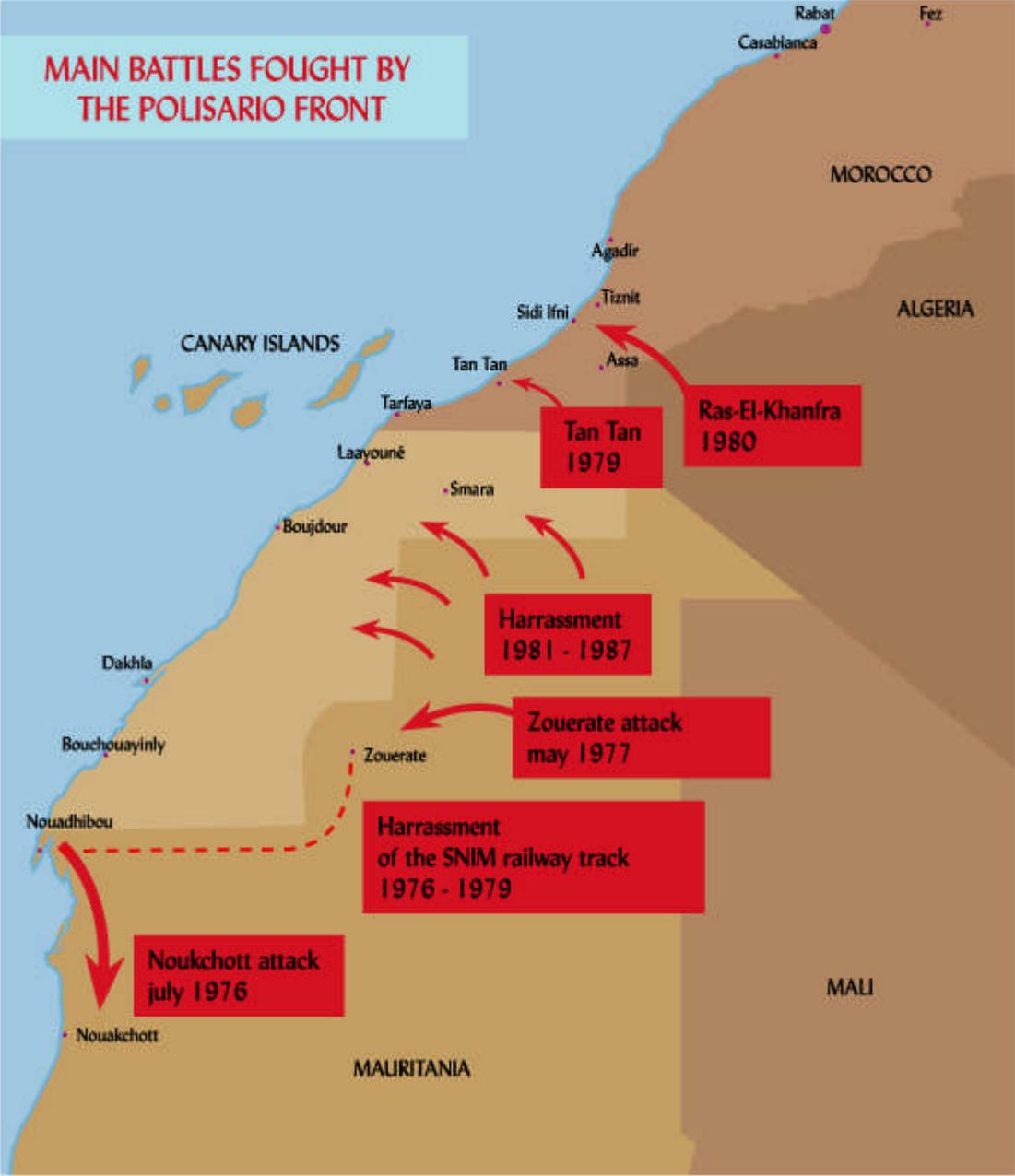
³⁵ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

The army of the **Polisario** had ten thousands of combatants at the time and was organized into seven military regions, three in the North, three in the South and one in Tindouf. In the North, there was the 5th Region (close to At Bir Lahlou) and the 4th region (close to Meres) supported, in the centre, by the 2nd “reinforced” and mechanized Region of Tifariti. In the South, there were the 3rd Region (Mijeh) and the 1st (Zoug), supported in the centre by the 7th “reinforced” and mechanized region of Sellâourich. Near Tindouf, finally, the **Polisario’s** 6th Military Region included the command and general logistics³⁶.

The night attacks (made possible by infra-red means) and accompanied by mine-laying, were followed by some spectacular operations that had something of the appearance of a last-ditch struggle for the **SPLA**. Relying on the leadership of young officers trained at the military academy of Cherchell, in Algeria, but also in Yugoslavia and Cuba, the **Polisario** tried to adapt to the conventional war that Morocco was from then on imposing on it. The last great battle of the Commander **Ayoub** was to take place at Guelta Zemmour, in October and November 1989: with several dozen tanks, he attacked the “wall”, penetrated it but had to retreat in the Front of the counter-attacks of the Moroccan air force.

On 06 September 1991, finally, the cease-fire came about in application of the peace agreement negotiated in 1988 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General.

³⁶Interview with a senior officer of the French Army, Paris, 25 July 2005 and with a senior Moroccan officer, Rabat, 08 August 2005.



V

CONSEQUENCES OF THE CEASE-FIRE FOR THE POLISARIO FRONT

For as long as it was subject to the tension of fighting, the **Polisario Front** could maintain a certain unity, at least on the surface, even if, as we have seen it had been shaken by internal dissidence and had been mishandled by purges. The period was however favourable for it. By existing in a military arena, the **Front** had become an unavoidable regional player. That was, furthermore, its objective: “*We never believed that we could defeat the Moroccan army militarily*”, indicated **Lahbib Layoub**. “*It is a combative army, with great leaders. But without the fighting, we would not have existed within the diplomatic arena*³⁷ “. The end of it was to have important consequences for the **Polisario Front** and its cohesion.

At the beginning of the Nineties, in any event, the military and civilian observers of the **MINURSO** (*Mission of the United Nations for the Referendum in the Western Sahara*) were deployed in the disputed area.

V.1. At the Military Level: Partial Demobilization and Reorganization of the Combatants

Since 1987 and the completion of the construction of the “wall of defense”, the morale of the troops within the **SPLA** had been declining. Exhausted by more than ten years of war, the combatants well understood what the “wall” meant for them and that their glory days were over. The total absence of any prospect of a political settlement certainly did nothing to comfort them. Admittedly, the armed struggle had served to popularize their cause, but there was no sign of any settlement in sight. Those who had left the Spanish Sahara, between 1973 and 1976, were still stagnating in the camps of the Tindouf region and, as far as they knew, they could continue to stagnate there for several years.

Other factors aggravated this disillusionment. The **Polisario’s** soldiers had fought well, that was undeniable, and they now aspired to “the peace of the valiant” and to a taste of the fruits of their efforts. But the wounded and the maimed had not been rewarded. As for the families of the dead, they existed in destitution. Worse: the volunteers saw the arrears of payment of their pay accumulating. But they also saw, on the other hand, that the **Polisario’s** bigwigs, for their part, were living well. And many started to wonder whether all those sacrifices had not been vain or, worse, to allow a clique of bigwigs to strut about in international conferences and foreign

³⁷ Interview with Ayoub, already mentioned.

capitals, ceaselessly elaborating on a Saharawi Republic which, with the help of the “wall”, was becoming a little less real every day³⁸.

A notable part of the combatants were then to choose, rather than to return to the camps where the political atmosphere, as has been seen, was hard to breathe, to fall back on Mauritania. Some were to get married there and create families, while the majority devoted itself to trade. Admittedly, these departures were not desertions. Discussions took place with the leadership, and those who preferred a “farewell to arms” promised to return to the colours if the situation were to justify a new mobilization. The leadership, for its part, preferred to close its eyes: on the one hand, the new situation born of the cease-fire did not require the maintenance under arms of 10,000 combatants and, on the other, the fact that they chose definitively to break ranks considerably reduced the financial weight of the **SPLA**'s maintenance. It is estimated that nearly 60% of the **SPLA**'s strength, i.e. 6,000 men, chose to fall back on Mauritania at that time. Less than ten years later, in 2000, when the leadership sounded the alarm and called for general mobilization to oppose to the transit of the Paris-Dakar rally via Western Sahara, less than 50% of those who had left after 1991 were to respond³⁹.

But it was necessary nevertheless to compensate some of these voluntary departures, if only so that the “Military Regions” could seemingly exist and be equipped with the minimal strength enabling them to function. The **SPLA** leadership therefore started to recruit virtually untrained young people with no experience of combat.

The exact force of the **SPLA**, at the military level, remains a secret at this time, well kept by the **Polisario**'s leadership. According to certain estimates, the **Front**'s army, which had at least 10,000 men – and perhaps, according to certain sources, nearly 20,000 at its hour of glory - would be reduced today to a few thousands combatants. Certain estimates report of 2,000 to 4,000 men⁴⁰. **Mustapha Bouh** insisted that *“In 1980, a company of the SPLA was rather close to the standards in force in the French Army and therefore had between 100 and 120 combatants. Today, according to my information, the same company has sometimes only 32 men. According to the same sources, there must be less than 500 men per military region...”*⁴¹ ».

³⁸ These impressions were collected in the course of interviews with ex-serviceman of the Polisario, in Morocco and in Europe, during the summer of 2005.

³⁹ These figures result from estimates that were communicated to us by French soldiers familiar with the questions of the Maghreb.

⁴⁰ Figures collected from European and American military experts familiar with the situation in the Maghreb.

⁴¹ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

THE MOROCCON WALL OF DEFENSE AND THE MILITARY REGIONS OF THE POLISARIO FRONT



V.2. At the Diplomatic Level: Stagnation of the International Settlement Attempts

Politically, an important stage seemed to have been reached when Morocco and the **Polisario** had both ratified the principle of a settlement of their disagreement under the aegis of the UN, the agreement that had led to the cease-fire of 1991. But the situation was quickly to stagnate into endless polemics. Thus, although the two parties agreed to accept the idea of a referendum, they diverged completely on the intermediate stages leading up to it and, especially, on the number of people to be consulted. Everything hinged on the question “Who is Saharawi?” and, therefore, “Who can vote?”

Somehow or other, it was agreed that five categories of voter could be accepted:

- 1) People mentioned in the Spanish census of 1974 (which comprised 74,000 names, increased to 80,000 by the meticulous work of the **MINURSO**).
- 2) People not counted in 1974 but having had identity papers issued by the colonial authority.
- 3) Parents and children of the first two categories.
- 4) People who could prove that their father had been born on the territory.
- 5) Any person who could prove that he or she had lived on the territory before 1974 for six consecutive years or for twelve years intermittently.

The establishment of these criteria, then the manner of applying them, were to give rise to interminable discussions and disputes, and various appeals, between Rabat and the **Polisario**.

In fact, from the start, the **Polisario** wanted to see taking part in the referendum only the people registered on the 1974 lists drawn up by the Spanish at the end of their presence. However, the conditions under which the census of 1974 had taken place were extremely debatable: it had been implemented, on the orders of Colonel Emilio Cuevas, by some forty civil servants with twenty or so vehicles, who devoted only three weeks to the assignment. In addition to the fact that the original lists were most probably incomplete, one could justifiably wonder whether it is politically possible, in 2005 or 2006, to hold a referendum on the basis of an electoral list established thirty years earlier! In addition, it being a question of the future of a territory on which not only Saharawis but also non-Saharawis were living, one can wonder whether it is normal to decide its future without asking the opinion of those of the latter who had been living there for a certain period of time.

Another point deserves to be raised here. One cannot reasonably expect to settle the question of the future of Western Sahara by a “European-style” referendum that would end up, for example, with a majority of 2% or 3% in one direction or the other. The tribal nature of the Saharawi society and its lack of experience of democracy clearly indicate that it is necessary, for any settlement that would emanate from a referendum, to have a huge majority not also within the whole of the population but

also within each tribe. Without that, there would be a very real risk of seeing one tribe or another purely and simply rejecting the result of the consultation and refusing to abide by it. These realities have moreover brought more and more experts, including some who have for a long time worked on the preparation of the referendum, such as Erik Jensen, one of the former persons in charge of the MINURSO, to question the validity of this solution (we will tackle this question in the conclusion of this study).

In 1997, the UN Secretary-General, **Kofi Annan**, appointed a “Special Personal Envoy” for the search of a negotiated settlement in Western Sahara in the person of the former American Secretary of State, **James Baker**. In June 2001, Mr. Baker proposed his settlement plan (***Baker Plan I***), which envisaged an intermediary five-year period with internal autonomy for the Sahara within the framework of the Kingdom of Morocco, and then a referendum. Algiers and the **Polisario** rejected this proposal, endorsed however by Mr. Annan, which had the disadvantage, in their eyes, of including the Sahara de facto in Morocco.

Two and a half years later, in January 2003, **James Baker** proposed a second settlement plan (***Baker Plan II***): for five years, the Sahara would be managed by an ***Western Sahara Authority*** (WSA) responsible for keeping order, trade, transport, etc, but Rabat would keep its sovereignty over the territory and would maintain its responsibilities relating to National Defense and the Foreign Relations. New blocking, on the Rabat side this time, which considered that the proposed plan was inapplicable and propitious for the destabilization of the entire region. On 11 June 2004, **James Baker**, noting that unanimity no longer existed, offered his resignation.

In short, since 1988, the advance towards a negotiated settlement under international auspices did not progress by a single iota and the two ***Baker Plans*** led to a pure and simple return to “Square One”, with each camp entrenched within irreconcilable positions.

Certain experts (still extremely discrete for the time being) therefore started to explore other ways. And to pose the question that still seemed completely taboo ten years ago: does respect of the Saharawis rights obligatorily involve the creation of an independent state? This was in particular the case of **Olivier Pierre Louveaux**, lawyer and former expert with the parliamentary assembly of the **Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe** (OSCE). *“There are options other than independence for achieving the freedom to which any people legitimately aspires. These would include, for example, strong or less strong regional autonomy, the distribution of responsibilities in order to manage what properly concerns a people, a minority... It is furthermore towards that that the international organizations such as the UN or the OSCE are tending in order not to head towards a simplification of such conflicts. That [the simplification] could lead to the idea that a single territory could accommodate only a single people or nation, and vice versa. This often brings difficulties such as, for example, the creation of new minorities within these new States. The concept of the Nation-State furthermore is particularly*

*unsuitable in the Mediterranean area where, since time immemorial, various ethnic groups have closely coexisted*⁴² “.

It will be noted, in any case, that this way seems to be, for a few years now, the one that the Kingdom of Morocco would like to take. In September 1999, **King Hassan II** set up a “Royal Commission for Monitoring Saharan Affairs”, in which various personalities of the Sahara took part. In addition, since the Eighties, huge development programs for the “Provinces of the South” (to use the current terminology in Rabat) were launched and several billion dollars were invested in the construction of an airport at Laâyoune and some fishing ports, and in the creation of a road network comprising 1,650 kilometres, thousands of homes, dozens of schools and two hospitals.

V.3. At the Organizational Level: Progressive Sclerosis of a Rigid Movement Disinclined to Evolve

At the political and social levels, the **Polisario** has suffered enormously from those years when it was witnessing the concretization of its national project becoming more distant. Today, it is hardly doing any better than its army.

Democracy, as we have seen, has never been the **Polisario's** strong point. But the years of war then those of stagnation would seem, according to all the players and observers with whom we have been able to converse, to have worsened the isolation and rigidity of the **Polisario/SADR** leadership.

Pierre Olivier Louveaux observed “the *Polisario Front*, weakening with time and losing its hold over the refugees, must act and quickly find a solution to the Saharawi problem. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the support of friendly countries and the ideological motivation within the camps have weakened. The current situation has strongly deteriorated. The movement is now controlled by a few people who put their personal interests first in the conclusion of the conflict...⁴³ “.

And further on, observing that, apart from defections, the movement's leadership seemed irremovable, in the best tradition of the defunct Eastern bloc, he adds: “*The Polisario leaders periodically exchange the various positions of responsibility between themselves. It is difficult to know whether there exist, within the leadership, different political tendencies or conflicting interests. It seems that the leaders, in total or only in part, are hugely benefiting from the current situation to consolidate their political, social and economic power. The fact that they consider themselves as*

⁴² Report by Olivier Pierre Louveaux, *Western Sahara Today*, which can be found at the following address: <http://medea.be/print.html?page=&lang=fr&doc=1568> Hereinafter referred to as the “Louveaux Report”. See also, by the same author, *Self Determination and Autonomy: A Contradiction?* in the *Third Collection of Essays on Mediterranean Security*, Rhodes Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of the SOEC, 2004.

⁴³ “Louveaux Report”, already mentioned, Page 3.

leaders of a State with territory and population, and at the same time as refugees needing humanitarian aid to survive reveals a duality that they skilfully exploit⁴⁴.

The former leaders of the **Polisario Front**, now in Morocco, make the same observation. **Hametti Rabani**, former Minister of Justice: *“Despite the semblance of dialog between the rank and file and the leadership, which is concretized through the existence of people’s delegates, power continues to be exercised without transparency. Small groups, without real dialog, make the vital decisions. Mohammed Abdelaziz, irremovable president since 1976, now almost thirty years ago, decides by surrounding himself with cronies and taking advice or orders from Algiers. Those who challenge them are set aside or subjected to “security investigations”. Admittedly, the time of the great abuses, like the murder or the systematic torture of opponents, seems to be over, but power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, who have no intention of letting go of it...⁴⁵”*.

Sidati El Ghallaoui, former diplomat of the **SADR**, which he represented, inter alia, in Rome and Malta: *“This solitary exercise of power by a leadership confined in its villas and of which certain members no longer even put a toe in the refugee camps, has induced great mistrust within the population of those camps. Today, there are few true opponents as people continue to be afraid. But they are no longer expecting anything from their leadership. We are witnessing a true divorce between the top and the rank and file...⁴⁶”*.

Mustapha Bouh, former Political Commissar of the armies⁴⁷, believes that this divorce and the dissensions within the leadership started once the construction of the “wall of protection” had ended: *“It was from that moment on, when the wall was completed, in 1987, that the divergences really started to develop. Some of us noted that we were in a dead end because we had lost our strike force and we understood that that would similarly decrease by as much the pressure that we could exert, at the international level, with a view to a negotiated political settlement. On the other hand, on the Moroccan side, the situation was becoming less tense. There were openings on the part of Hassan II and some of us were starting to think that there could be a solution within the Moroccan institutions, with fairly extensive autonomy for the Sahara. Moreover, the Cold War was over and our ideological references, those that had governed the Polisario's foundation, were further crumbling from day to day. In 1988, there were serious troubles in the camps, which were repressed with brutality. Things had to come to an end...⁴⁸”*.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, Page 4.

⁴⁵ Interview with Hametti Rabani., Rabat, 04 August 2005.

⁴⁶ Interview with Sidati El Ghallaoui, Rabat, 04 August 2005.

⁴⁷ He held, from 1976 to 1991, many other positions that placed him in the heart of the power within the Polisario and the SADR: director of the national radio station, governor of the refugee camps, director of protocol, manager of the “Front’s” organization of Saharawis, workers, etc .

⁴⁸ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

Nevertheless, the **Polisario** was doing everything it could to convince sympathizers, backers and political supporters that it still had things well in hand and that everything that was happening in the camps was for the best. Even if it meant manipulating visitors. Thus **Mustapha Bouh** recalled: *“When I was responsible for protocol, in 1989, I was in charge of the visits of official delegations. It happened, on certain lucky days, that I had to conduct two or three different ones. To Communists, I showed women undergoing military training, to humanitarian organization delegates, dignified women trying to raise their children in the utmost destitution. Social Democrats were allowed to see women involved in social work, and when it came to the turn of the Iranian delegation, I showed them veiled and submissive women. In fact, they were the same women who changed their roles as required. We had built a “fool the eye” organization, ready to show the person what he or she wanted to see. It was an absolute moral swindle, but it was representative of what the Polisario had become ...⁴⁹ “.*

Lying and opacity, such was also the conclusion of **Commander Lahbib Ayoub**: *“Abdelaziz distrusts everybody. He lives surrounded by a Praetorian Guard of forty people and counts only on his intelligence services and on a gendarmerie for its devotion. The national secretariat meets only every six months to ratify the decisions taken by the President. Never, since Abdelaziz has been in power, has the question of the Polisario’s funding appeared on the agenda. The money, that’s his secret, the taboo of taboos⁵⁰ “.*

V.4. At the Civil Level: Life in the Refugee Camps of Tindouf

Whereas the leadership of the **Polisario** is concentrated in the camp of **Rabouny**, 23 km to the Southeast of **Tindouf**, the refugees, for their part, are sheltered in four camps, each approximately 20 to 25 km away from Rabouny and renamed after the towns of Western Sahara. From North to South, these are the camps of **Al-Aayun**, **Aousserd**, **Smara** and **Dakhla**.

Several humanitarian observers and workers or **Polisario Front** sympathizers who have been able to visit these camps on a regular basis for about fifteen years have told us that they were struck by the military discipline that reigned, the visible or invisible presence of the security services and the atmosphere of resignation or even despair that was palpable there.

Some have also observed screaming inequalities. According to **Pierre Olivier Louveaux**, who went to the camps under cover of a humanitarian mission, and who confirms the difference in treatment between refugees, the **Polisario** has set up a *“system of clientelism that enables the leaders to keep a strong hold over the population. People have very few established rights. Everyone has to beg for the favours of the leaders. These favours can consist, for example, of a medical*

⁴⁹ Ditto.

⁵⁰ Interview with Ayoub, already mentioned.

operation abroad, studies, a job within the Polisario Front, the right to go out of the camps and, probably economic favours as well. ⁵¹

One would consequently distinguish, according to **Louveaux**, two kinds of people within the camps of Tindouf: *“Some of those close to the power have access to a more or less comfortable life and can on occasion leave the Algerian zone. They have in particular satellite television; many have a four-wheel-drive car and a certain comfort of life that it is surprising to meet in refugee camps. If freedom for some is limited to trading with Mauritania, others have been able to put all their children into boarding schools in Switzerland. The other category lives in a very rudimentary fashion and is entitled to almost nothing. Their real conditions of life are difficult to estimate. The Polisario Front limits to the maximum the contacts that foreigners could have with this category of the population, the real victim of this conflict, hostage of the Polisario Front”*⁵² “.

Passing foreigners, let’s remember, were under close supervision, even if they are not always aware of it and might think that they were moving about with a certain freedom, by the Front’s security services as well as by the Algerian Military Security. This supervision was carried out via the Protocol Service. And this, with all the more of facilities because, as **Louveaux** emphasized: *“Given the general situation of paranoia following their conflict with Morocco, certain zones or certain movements were regarded as “national security”. The Polisario Front skilfully handled this concept of crisis in order to avoid clarifying certain points or justifying some of their controls or monitoring”*⁵³ “.

Evoking this control, the **Human Rights Watch** (HRW) noted in 1995: *“There are Polisario control points around the camp and Algerian checkpoints guarding the entrance to Tindouf, which is located in an Algerian military zone. Although the HRW representative was encouraged by the members of the Polisario to move freely in the camps and to speak to whoever she wished, the isolation of the camps, the hostile desert and the absence of means of transport made any visitor dependent on the Polisario for his or her movements”*⁵⁴ “.

The absence of fundamental political freedoms had been noted by several specialist organizations over the years and was underlined, in 2000, by the **American State Department**: *“During the year, Amnesty International and articles in the Moroccan press underlined the deterioration of the situation in the Polisario’s camps close to Tindouf... where freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association and movement remained extremely limited”*⁵⁵ “.

⁵¹ “Louveaux Report”, already mentioned, Page 5.

⁵² Ditto.

⁵³ *Idem*, page 4.

⁵⁴ This report can be consulted at the following address: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/wsahara.htm>

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practice, Western Sahara, 23 February 2001. This report can be found at the following address: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/nea/825.htm>

Same observation in the 2002 report: *“The Polisario might have limited freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association and movements in its camps close to Tindouf. In June, members of two NGO representing the Saharawis who had left the Polisario’s camps met foreign diplomats, in Laâyoune, and provided them with photographs of victims of torture and documents alleging that abuses had been committed in the area of Tindouf*⁵⁶ “.

An assertion repeated in the 2004 Report (made public on 28 February 2005) of the **U.S. Department of State, Office of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor**⁵⁷.

V.5. Defection and Rallying

The politically oppressive climate that has been developing for twenty years in the camps of Tindouf and even within of the leadership of the **Polisario** and the **SADR**, the absence of democracy and the lack of future prospects have, since the beginning of the Nineties and the end of the military adventure, led to numerous defections. All the more so as, at the end of the Eighties, **King Hassan II** launched a *“call to our misplaced brothers to return to the lenient and merciful fatherland”*.

Even among the leaders, the call was heard, more or less quickly. One of the first to return was to be the former Political Commissar for the armies, **Mustapha Bouh**: *“I was asking myself questions, I thought that what we were doing was no longer in line with the reality of the moment and that we were letting slip our chance of really getting things to move in the right direction for the Saharawis, and I no longer accepted the lack of freedom. When Hassan II declared that all who would return to the country and accept the sovereignty of Morocco could play a part, I made my mind up. In 1991, I returned to Morocco...⁵⁸ ».*

Others took more time to grasp the hand that was tended to them, such as **Hametti Rabani**: *“I had lost confidence in the movement and in Mohammed Abdelaziz at the end of the Nineties, I reflected for two or three years and I finally came to a terrifying realization. For the last thirteen years, we, the Polisario, we had run the everyday lives of a number of people who, in reality, were only a little more than 10% of all Saharawis. Security was ensured by a friendly country, Algeria. Food was provided by humanitarian organizations, teaching was done abroad or was ensured by other humanitarian organization, and our health depended, it too, on other countries. We controlled an area, which, at its widest point, was no more than 150 km, and we were unable to bring the food and water that we received at the right time and place to everybody that needed it. Worse: freed from all the management concerns of a true State – since others looked after them for us – we*

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practice, Western Sahara, 2002, made public on 31 March 2003:

⁵⁷ Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Western Sahara. This report can be found at the following address: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41735.htm>

⁵⁸Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

had been incapable of bringing democracy to our people and of getting them to live under normal conditions. Lastly, we were divided by tribal and clannish rivalry that was sometimes violent. I therefore came to a terrible conclusion that called into question my commitment of the last thirty years. If we had been unable to do what was necessary for a few tens of thousands of refugees, how could we claim to be effective in the running an immense territory populated by hundreds of thousands of people? We could only bring misfortune to our own people. If there had been a referendum on independence, at that particular moment, in my heart and soul, I would have voted “No”. So, I decided to put an end to my participation in this dangerous Utopia and I went home...⁵⁹ ».

Since the end of the fighting, for one reason or another, thousands of Saharawi refugees have decided to leave Tindouf and to return to Morocco or, for a minority of them, to go off into exile abroad. Among them, hundreds of officers of all levels and dozens of leaders and managers in view.

Included among the latter (this list is not exhaustive):

- **Ahmed Moulay M’Hamed**, known as Ahmed Cherif, former Head of the Security Services.
- **Commander Ayoub Lahbib**, founder member of the Polisario.
- **Baba Mustapha Sayed**, representative of the Polisario in Canada.
- **Bahir Dkill**, founder member of the Polisario, former representative of the organization in several countries.
- **Brahim Hakim**, former minister and representative of the Polisario in North America.
- **Ghaouta Mohamed Ahmed Baba**, one of the census officials.
- **Ghoulam Najem Mouichame**, representative in Germany.
- **Guajmoula Bent Ebbi**, former member of the Politburo, and today Moroccan MP.
- **Mohamed Salem Khatri**, former member of the Polisario’s national leadership.
- **Hametti Rabani**, former Minister for Justice and Cults
- **Mustapha Bouh**, former Political Commissar for the army.
- **Keltoum Khayati**, formerly in charge of the organization of women.
- **Omar Hadrami**, founder member of the Front and member of the Politburo.
- **Sidati El Ghallaoui**, former representative of the Polisario in Rome and Malta.

⁵⁹ Interview with Hametti Rabani,, Rabat, 04 August 2005.

VI

THE POLISARIO FRONT GOING DOWNHILL: A COLD WAR ORPHAN BESET WITH DECOMPOSITION

This rapid profile of the **Polisario Front**, as we have just traced it, from its birth to the cease-fire of 1991 and its withdrawal from the field of military operations, defines the context in which the organization will evolve during the last decade of the 20th century and during the first years of the 21st. This evolution was marked by serious charges and allegations against the **Front** that we now will review and examine in detail. To do so, our investigators availed themselves of a wide collection of documents and testimonies that were subjected to analysis. This has shown that while certain reproaches addressed to the **Polisario** obviously has no solid basis – and were sometimes obviously unfounded – the general evolution of this organization has been a cause for concern.

VI.1. Was the Polisario Front a Simple Cover for Algerian Regional Ambitions?

Regularly, for thirty years, the **Polisario Front** has been presented by its detractors as being purely and simply a puppet of **Algiers** used or even created for the single purpose of undermine the positions of **Morocco** and of ensuring the pre-eminence of **Algeria** at the regional level and in **Africa**

Mr. **Ahmed Lahlimi**, then the Moroccan Deputy Prime Minister and in charge of the Government's General Affairs, declared on 23 November 1999, when receiving a delegation of French Members of Parliament: *“Algeria would like to have access to the Atlantic and is preoccupied by the major part that it would like to play in Africa. The country could exceed this vision by the introduction of democracy and economic liberalism, but unfortunately the Algerian system has trained only technocrats and then fundamentalists while Morocco has entrepreneurs...⁶⁰”*.

Even if the words can seem overly concise and not very moderate, several elements come to support this thesis:

⁶⁰ Extract of the Information Paper presented following the mission carried out in Morocco from 19 to 24 November 1999 by a delegation of the France/Morocco Friendship Group, National, Assembly Eleventh legislature.

- The strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco as development models for Africa is a reality, as we recalled at the beginning of this study.
- Since the *War of the Sands* (see Appendix I), Algiers has an account to settle with Rabat.
- If it wants to amplify its role in Africa, in particular from the regional security point of view, Algeria can believe itself to be limited by the only access that it has to a “closed” sea, the Mediterranean, and could wish to have access to the Atlantic Ocean.
- The same access to the Atlantic would enable Algiers to secure its gas and oil exports, extracted from the Saharan sub-soil. At the present time, these exports depend entirely on access to the Mediterranean and are therefore at the mercy of civil disorders comparable with those that the country experienced in the Nineties and which were localized in the Northern part of Algeria, in the cities and the Maquis of the East, but did not touch the South or “useful Algeria”.
- Algeria, which has hardly extracted itself from the years of lead that, for it, constituted the last decade of the 20th century, is still the object of security tensions and acute internal policies (terrorism known as “residual” but which remains active, social tensions brought about by the ill-advised apportionment of the oil revenue, political rivalries at the pinnacle of power, absence of any real democratization) which can lead it to try to force national unity at the price of an external crisis.
- The unconditional support for the Polisario that Algiers has demonstrated since 1975.

The last point that we would evoke is undeniable and, moreover, regularly recalled by the **Polisario’s leadership**: the camps of Tindouf are located in Algeria, and that country has armed, trained and financed the **Polisario** without interruption for more than thirty years. It has allowed that more than two thousand Moroccan prisoners of war to be detained on its soil in the **Polisario’s** camps, most of them for twenty years. In the opinion even of the UN Secretary-General, **Mr. Kofi Annan**, Algeria is a stakeholder in this thirty-year-old conflict, contrary to the allegations of its leaders who want to be simple defenders of the rights of nations to self-determination. It does not seem however possible to us to define the **Polisario** exclusively as an organization in the service of Algerian politics. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the birth and the growth of the **Polisario** in the Seventies are explained by peculiar historical and sociological factors.

It remains no less the case that, closely dependant on Algerian assistance for its survival, the **Polisario Front** does not have today (and this has been true fore many years) any room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Algiers.

In addition to the unconditional support that we have just mentioned and the permanent involvement of the Algerian “advisers” in the military operations before 1991, many testimonies and other elements ascribe the use of the Saharawi map by

Algiers to political ends that are its own and have nothing to do with the fate of the populations concerned.

Thus it was, after the death of **el-Ouali Mustapha Sayed**, with the appointment of **Mohammed Abdelaziz** as Secretary-General of the **Polisario** and President of **SADR**, whereas he did not belong to the very closed circle of the organization's founders. **Lahbib Ayoub** explained: “The Algerians had chosen him and we could refuse them nothing: they were giving us everything, or almost everything. He always considered himself to be their man⁶¹ “ And not without reason, from the tribal point of view, **Mohammed Abdelaziz** belonging to the minority fraction of the **R' Guibat Fokra**, the **Algerian R' Guibat**.

Another element of reflection: noting the blocking resulting from the rejection of the **Baker Plan**, Algiers proposed, at the beginning of 2003, the pure and simple partition of Western Sahara between Morocco and Algeria. The Saharawi cause was forgotten. **Lahbib Ayoub**, received, a few months before this proposal, a conciliatory visit from Mohammed Abdelaziz: “Without ever clearly mentioning the project of partitioning the Sahara that Me Hamed Khaddad, his representative at the MINURSO, had just however approved, he gave me to understand that such was the will of the Algerians and that we could nothing about it... On that particular day, I knew that I was going to return to Morocco⁶² “.

The unity of view does not seem, however, to be total at the top of the Algerian power. In an explosive interview granted to the Moroccan daily newspaper, *La Gazette du Maroc*, in March 2003, **General Khaled Nezzar**, former Chief of Staff and former Algerian Minister for Defense, declared, mentioning the Saharawi question: “I believe that this affair should no longer separate the two brother countries. Especially with the existence of the large regional blocs where there is no longer any room for the weak. Europe is opposite us, which implies the need for creating, no matter the cost, our own Maghrebian area⁶³ “.

The General then evoked a “no winner no loser” solution, enabling “the Saharawis to be integrated””, allowing them “to return to the country within the framework of an agreement”, Algeria having “not yet any need of a new State at its borders⁶⁴ ”.

To judge by the recent statements of President **Bouteflika**⁶⁵ on the question, and by reading the Algerian press, the vision of **Khaled Nezzar** would seem however to be a minority one, even if it shared by President **Mohammed Boudiaf** to which his

⁶¹ Interview with Ayoub, already mentioned.

⁶² Idem.

⁶³ Interview with General Khaled Nezzar by Samir Sobh, *La Gazette du Maroc*, 10 March 10 2003. Below, “Interview with Khaled Nezzar”.

⁶⁴ Interview with Khaled Nezzar, already mentioned.

⁶⁵ On 22 May 2005, on the occasion of the 32nd anniversary of the Front Polisario, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika reiterated his total support for the independence of Western Sahara.

assassination did not leave time for him to harness himself to the resolution of this problem that was dear to his heart. Thus, it is hardly any doubt for the European chancelleries that it is **Algeria** that has worked in recent last years to push **Nigeria**, **South Africa** and **Kenya** to recognize the **SADR**⁶⁶.

In the context of the tensions that continue to undermine the relations between Rabat and Algiers, it is relatively worrying to note that Algeria, whose economy is stimulated by the rising oil price, became one of the biggest arms buyers of the world and the first buyer on the whole of the African continent. If part of the equipment bought is compatible with the sedentary concerns for Algiers vis-à-vis the persistence of the terrorist threat (night vision equipment and detection systems), the remainder seems more intended for external operations: South-African tanks, **FROG 7** rocket launchers (with a range of 65 km), **SCUD-C** missiles (with a range of 600 km) and **No-Dong 1** missiles (1,000 km) bought from North Korea. **Sukhoï 24 fighters**, **SU-24MK fighter-bombers**, **multi-task Mig 29MT fighters**, etc. As Algeria has no enemy ready to attack it, one can hardly see what real use it will make of this equipment

On this subject, we will quote Dr. William Zartman, director of the *Management of Conflicts* program in the *Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies* of the *John Hopkins University* (Washington), who believes that “*the question of the Sahara [...] is probably also an existential question for the Algerian army, more than it is for the Moroccan army. One must wondered by which enemy Algeria is confronted to justify all this heavy armament, and it is only by cultivating this idea of the Moroccan enemy that the Algerian army can obtain it*⁶⁷ “.

In conclusion, even if the creation of the Polisario does not seem to us to have been wanted or caused by Algiers, all of testimonies which we have collected and the documentation that we have compiled allow us to conclude that the Polisario does not today enjoy any political independence from Algiers and that only the support of Algeria explains the survival of this organization.

VI.2. The Situation of Women and Charges of “Forced Procreation”

It has been said on several occasions, for years, that the **Polisario Front** pursued an policy of “forced procreation”, imposing on women a multiplication of pregnancies with the obvious aim of a significant increase in the population of the camps under its control in relation to the population remaining in Western Sahara. The expression “reproductive cows” was even used by certain media to describe the Saharawi women who, according to them, were the victims of this policy.

⁶⁶ This interpretation has been confirmed to us by several European diplomats dealing with African questions, in the course of the summer of 2005.

⁶⁷ Speech of Doctor William Zartman, 03 May 2004 during the conference on “Is the Sahara ready for a political solution? ”, in New York.

That would be a formidable regression for the Saharawi woman: the Saharawi tribes have for a long time been organized on a matriarchal mode, and the woman continues to play a central part in the traditional social organization. The Saharawi woman has always had something to say in the choice of her husband and in the event of divorce, she keeps all the goods given by her father as well as those given by her husband. Furthermore, divorce would give rise to a party, which, according to the anthropologist Mohammed Naïmi, symbolizes the acquisition of total freedom: “*When she marries, the woman passes from the control of her father to that of her husband. Once divorced, she becomes free. It is precisely that which is celebrated*”⁶⁸ ». As for polygamy, it is non-existent, the marriage contract of Saharawis including for decades a clause stipulating that “*the sabiqa wa the lahiqa, wa Ida tamma dalika F amrouha biyadiha*” (roughly: “Neither preceding, nor following, and if it comes to pass, it is for the woman to decide on her fate”).

The “evidence” of the policy of forced procreation – painful subject that it is - is difficult to obtain. We have discussed, in Europe and in Morocco, with several women of all ages who had lived in the camps of the area of Tindouf and with humanitarian workers who had attended those camps⁶⁹. Nothing in their statements or their testimonies has enabled us to conclude that this policy is continuing today.

We recall however that a report of the **Human Rights Watch** (HRW) organization of 1995 stressed that: “*The women questioned on birth control in the camps answered: “No birth control is officially available in the camps. There is a kind of policy wanting it to be good to have children. That was especially true in the first years. Now, many people go abroad to study or for other reasons. They bring back birth control products and, in reality, many people use them. But it’s true that the Polisario doesn’t give us any...*”⁷⁰ “.

Mrs. Keltoum Khayati, formerly in charge of the Polisario’s Women’s Association, explained that a few years ago the girls “*were obliged to marry as young as possible and to see themselves being refused any access to means of modern contraception*”. The required goal being to increase the demography in the camps, the leadership “*obliges women to accept polygamy*”. In October 1996, Mrs. Gamoula Bent Ebbi, former member of the Polisario Front’s Politburo, noted⁷¹:

, “*Women are exploited by the Polisario, they are not respected and have no rights. The Polisario projects a positive image of the woman to the outside world in order to obtain aid [but] women have no control over their families, and the children are the property of the organization. At the age of 13 or 15, they are sent off to the army.*

⁶⁸Quoted in the magazine *Tel Quel*, 01 November 2005.

⁶⁹Interviews carried out in July and August 2005.

⁷⁰ *Western Sahara Keeping It Secret, The United Nations Operation in Western Sahara*, HRW, October 1995, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/wsahara.htm>

⁷¹ On the occasion of a meeting of the UN’s Special Political and Decolonization Fourth Committee, 10 October 1996.

The women have been transformed into reproductive machines manufacturing boys for the war.”

In conclusion, our research establishes that the continuation of a policy of “forced procreation” was certainly a fact of the Polisario in the past but that it is possible that this orientation has been attenuated in recent years.

VI.3. The Situation Of Children Sent “To Study” Abroad And “Forced To Work Or To Prostitute Themselves”

It was said on several occasions for years that Saharawi children born or growing up in the camps of the Tindouf area and who had been sent to **Cuba** to continue their schooling there were, in fact, victims of forced labour, or even of sexual exploitation. Young (and sometimes very young) boys would be employed in the sugar cane and tobacco plantations while teenagers would be forced into prostitution.

More than 5,800 Saharawi children and adolescents could currently be living in Cuba, often in spite of the will of their parents, and under the pretext of “schooling”. Some of them, in addition, would be subject to political enrolment and obligatory military training in spite of their tender age. The former Cuban Secret Agent, Juan Vivés, already quoted, remembered that “... *that did not prevent hundreds of Saharawis from flying off to Cuba in order to receiving training there as political leaders, others as students, and even children who were torn from their families to pursue their schooling on the island of youth (formerly the island of pines). I don’t know if the remedy was not worse than the disease*”⁷² “.

A former leader of the **Polisario, Hametti Rabani**, affirmed to us: “*It was I who initiated the systematic policy of sending Saharawi children to Libya or Cuba to pursue studies there when I was responsible for teaching in the camps, at the end of the Seventies. This decision was justified at the time by the inexistence of adequate structures within the camps*”⁷³ “.

According to **Mr. Rabani**, the children were sent to Cuba in “*groups of 500, since 1976*” and “*there would be permanently 2,000 of them on the spot*”⁷⁴ ». He believes it “certain” that a number of these children were exploited in the plantations, is more reserved about the charges of prostitution but admits “*that certain facts which could make me think that some very young Saharawi girls in Cuba had had to prostitute themselves*”⁷⁵ “ had been reported to him.

⁷² Juan Vivés, op. cit., Page 153.

⁷³ Interview with Hametti Rabani, Rabat, 4 August 2005.

⁷⁴ *Idem.*

⁷⁵ *Idem.*

We met, in Morocco, several young women who had lived in the **Polisario's** camps and had been sent to Cuba to study there. Three of them told us that they "*had been obliged to prostitute themselves*"⁷⁶ , one at the age of 14, the two others at 17.

We also met parents who, living in the camps of Tindouf, had been "*deprived of their children for more than fifteen years, those having been sent to Cuba from the age of 7 to continue their studies there*". These parents did not report any labour or sexual exploitation of their children but affirmed that the situation "*was, in any event, extremely hard to bear*". They stressed that those children "*being unable to be accompanied by an adult member of their family, grew up alone and without family ties or points of reference*" and estimate that the pursued objective was double: "*to be able to indoctrinate those children far from the family circle in order to make future combatants of them*" but also "*to oblige the parents to remain in the camps even if they didn't want to*"⁷⁷ .

In conclusion, the testimonies that we have gathered confirm the idea that the Saharawi children sent to Cuba were economically and sexually exploited. It is however impossible to quantify this practice. The forced separation of children from their parents for long periods seems to us to be related to hostage taking, in which the Cuban authorities were accomplices.

VI.4. Accusations of Forced Labour

It has been said on several occasions that the leadership of the **Polisario Front** obliged the refugees to work for the organization or for the **SADR** for nothing.

The **Human Rights Watch** organization commented on this subject in 1995: "*The situation in the camps is described by the Saharawis in utopian terms, with each one working freely "for the cause". In fact, the refugees' freedom is subject to certain restrictions. For example, the labour force of the camps, schools, hospitals and "governmental" structures comes from the camps, but nobody gets paid. Instead, they receive payments in kind, through food, shelter and other forms of assistance that are gotten for each refugee*"⁷⁸ .

The refugees questioned by the **HRW** explained that "*the Polisario doesn't have any money and that they are volunteers*". The **HRW** believes that: "*There is no proof of forced labour but, questioned about whether it were possible not to work, a representative of the Polisario answered: "Everyone wants to work*"⁷⁹ .

⁷⁶ Testimonies collected at Rabat, at the beginning of July 2005.

⁷⁷ Testimonies collected at Rabat enters on 02 and 10 August 2005.

⁷⁸ *Human Rights Watch, 1995 Report*, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/wsahara.htm>, Page 28.

⁷⁹ *Idem*.

We have collected testimonies of similar fashion. They do not enable us to conclude that the **Polisario Front** practices “forced labour” but they do give evidence of “*a very strong incentive to work, work being regarded as an enhancing standard and a proof of commitment giving right certain advantages*⁸⁰ “.

In conclusion, we are of the view that even if there is no evidence that the Polisario practices forced labour, the fact of “ paying” refugees for their work in allotting them food and everyday consumer goods, which themselves are provided to the leadership of the camps by humanitarian organizations and the international community by way of humanitarian aid, is a manifest abuse and constitutes a violation of the refugees’ elementary rights.

VI.5. Accusations of Systematic Diversion of International Aid

It has been said for several years that the Polisario Front was systematically diverting international aid on a large scale. These accusations relate not only to the diversion of funds and means allocated to humanitarian programs by independent NGOs, but also to the diversion of food and equipment gotten by International Aid Organizations for the refugees.

➤ VI.5.1. Diversion of NGO Aid

Thus, the Moroccan press has on several occasions alluded to serious accusations brought by several top-notch NGOs, the organizations most often quoted, sometimes with a great wealth of detail, such as the Swedish NGO ***Rädda Barnen (Save the Children Sweden)*** and the French organization, ***Refugee Children of the World***. In the course of our research, we contacted these two organizations. Both denied ever having complained about diversions by the **Polisario** and affirmed “*having been deliberately misquoted in a lying manner*⁸¹ “. We take note of it.

However, we cannot overlook the testimony of **Ghoulam Najem Mouichame**, former representative of the **Polisario** in Bremen (Germany) where he was tasked to supervise the German donations to the Saharawi refugees: “*During all my activity in Germany, I was brought to note that an important quantity of the humanitarian aid sent to the populations of the camps of Tindouf by the German donors was systematically diverted by the members of will of the Polisario, who proceed to sell*

⁸⁰ Testimonies of former inmates of the camps of Tindouf collected in Morocco and Europe during the summer of 2005.

⁸¹ Telephone conversation with Mrs. Nicole Dagnino, Director of *Refugee Children of the World*, 31 August 2005; conversation and exchange of e-mails with Mrs. Ulrika Persson, Program Officer, Middle East, *Rädda Barnen*, 01 September 2005.

*it in the south of Algeria and the north of Mauritania*⁸² “.

Similarly, in March 1999, the Spanish daily newspaper *El Pais* reported that “humanitarian aid of 64 million pesetas given by the **Spanish Red Cross** to the Polisario to buy 430 female camels had disappeared⁸³”, and the leaders of the **Front** would then have “bought” the camels that already belonged to them. *El Pais* remarked: “The person in charge of international co-operation for the Polisario, **Embarek Malainine**, “has not denied it⁸⁴ “. This money, the equivalent of €385,000, came inter alia from collections from the public, but also from the Spanish ministries concerned. The objective pursued by this operation was to improve the milk and meat diet of the Saharawi women and children.

By the same token, on 01 October 2000, the **Popular Front for the Independence of the Canaries (FREPIC AWANAC)**, published an official communiqué blaming the town council of **Gran Canaria**, which was thought to have acquired a villa in Arucas for the benefit of **Mohammed Abdelaziz**, President of the **SADR**, for an amount of 52 million pesetas (€312,000). The funds came, according to the **FREPIC**, from the aid budgets intended for the Saharawi refugees.

➤ VI.5.2. Diversion of International Organization Aid

The supposed diversion of the aid in food and everyday consumer goods was based on the differential that is thought to exist between the real number of refugees sheltered in the camps of Tindouf and their officially declared number, on the basis of which the total volume of the assistance needed and conveyed to the scene would be calculated. The question is not new and has been worrying the humanitarian world for several years.

Polisario has declared for years the presence of 155,000 to 170,000 refugees in the area of Tindouf, but independent organizations and neutral observers estimate that, in their view, the real number of refugees would fall be somewhere around 70,000 to 90,000 people. Certain objective indications, coming from independent sources, tend to confirm this range. Thus, the Scandinavian NGO **Norwegian People's Aid** undertook a programme of making all of the Saharawi refugees aware of the danger of anti*personnel mines between April 1998 and May 2000, “*informing about 90,000 refugees*⁸⁵ “.

⁸² Quoted in the document “Diversion of Humanitarian Aid by the Polisario, Phenomenon and Testimonies”, document of the Moroccan government, which can be found at the address:

http://www.mincom.gov.ma/french/reg_vil/regions/sahara/maintien_des_r%C3%A9fugi%C3%A9s_sahraouis_.htm

⁸³ *El Pais*, 7 March 1999.

⁸⁴ *Idem*.

⁸⁵ Figure quoted in the 2000 Report of *Landmine Monitor*, « *Sahara occidental, Développements majeurs depuis mars 1999* »:
<http://www.icbl.org/lm/2000/country/sahara/index.php3>

For several years, the **U.S. Committee for Refugee and Immigrants**⁸⁶ (below, the Committee) has consistently estimated, in the chapters of its annual reports devoted to Western Sahara, that the total number of Saharawi refugees was 11,000 “including some 80,000 in Algeria, approximately 25,000 in Mauritania and roughly 5,000 in other countries”.

In its 2003 Report, the **Committee** noted: “As in previous years, the real number of Saharawi refugees remains a matter of debate. The Algerian authorities and the leaders of the refugees continue to affirm that 165,000 refugees live in the camps of the area of Tindouf, but, for political reasons, they have prevented the UNHCR from conducting a census to check this figure. The leaders of the refugees, associated with the movement for the independence of the Western Sahara, have for a long time been running these camps in a military fashion. The U.S. Committee for Refugees considered that the number real of Saharawi refugees in Algeria is about of half of the officially declared number⁸⁷ “.

In its 2004 Report, the **Committee** lines up however with the official figure of 165,000, but it points out: “The USCR is readjusting this figure to reflect the number of beneficiaries served by the international humanitarian agencies⁸⁸ “. Which did not imply that their number had been independently checked.

But in his last report to date, that of the beginning of 2005, the **Committee** returns to an estimate closer to those that it was making before: “The [Algerian] government authorized the rebels Polisario group to consign [to confine] a hundred thousand Western Saharan refugees in four camps around the military area of Tindouf, close to the Moroccan border, “for political and military rather than humane reasons ” according to an observer “. And the **Committee** continues: “According to Amnesty International, “this group of refugees of the right to freedom of movement in Algeria... these refugees who manage to leave the refugee camps without permission to do so are often stopped by the Algerian army and are delivered to the authorities of the Polisario with whom it cooperates with regard to security⁸⁹ “.

The difference between the real figures of refugees and the figure announced by the **Polisario** has been confirmed to us by **Mustapha Bouh**: “The camps receive aid calculated on the basis of 165,000 refugees, but curiously, the Polisario recognizes only approximately 75,000 people in those camps who would have voting rights in

⁸⁶ www.refugees.org

⁸⁷ U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2003 Report, <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?VIEWSTATE=dDwxMTA1oTA4M>

⁸⁸ *Idem*, 2004 Report: <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?VIEWSTATE=dDwxMTA1oTA4M>

⁸⁹ *Idem*, 2005 Report: <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?area=investigate&subm=19&ssm=29&c>

the event of a referendum. In fact, as far as I know, today, the real number of refugees must be somewhere between 35,000 and 50,000 people. We're a long way off the count...⁹⁰ “.

Important quantities of diverted food are thought thus to have been found on the markets in Algeria and Mauritania, but also in Mali and Niger, some still in their original packaging. Part of these diversions is perhaps individual, as the leadership of the **Polisario** affirms, but if it is proved that the figures are being manipulated as well, it is clear that it could only be organized or ratified at the top. The sums recovered would be used, on this assumption, to finance the movement but also, undoubtedly, its leaders' way of life.

These diversions, of course, are not without consequence for the health of the refugees. **The US Committee for Refugees** announced, in its 2000 Report: *“Humanitarian workers have reported that more than 30% of the children from 5 to 12 years old were underfed, more than 70% of the children of less than 5 years old suffered from anaemia and 1,000 of refugee women were anaemic⁹¹ “.* In its 2001 Report, the **Committee** announced: *“More than 15,000 children are in need of shoes⁹² “.* And finally, in its 2003 Report: *“Some donors, in private, have asked for a control of the distribution of food to make sure that the political and military leaders were not diverting the aid⁹³ ”.*

In conclusion, the information that we have collected and the documents that we have consulted allow us to establish that partial diversion of the humanitarian aid intended for the Saharawi refugees is indeed a reality. This stage, it is impossible however to consider the exact extent of this diversion or to judge the share of responsibility for the leaders of the Polisario Front and the SADR.

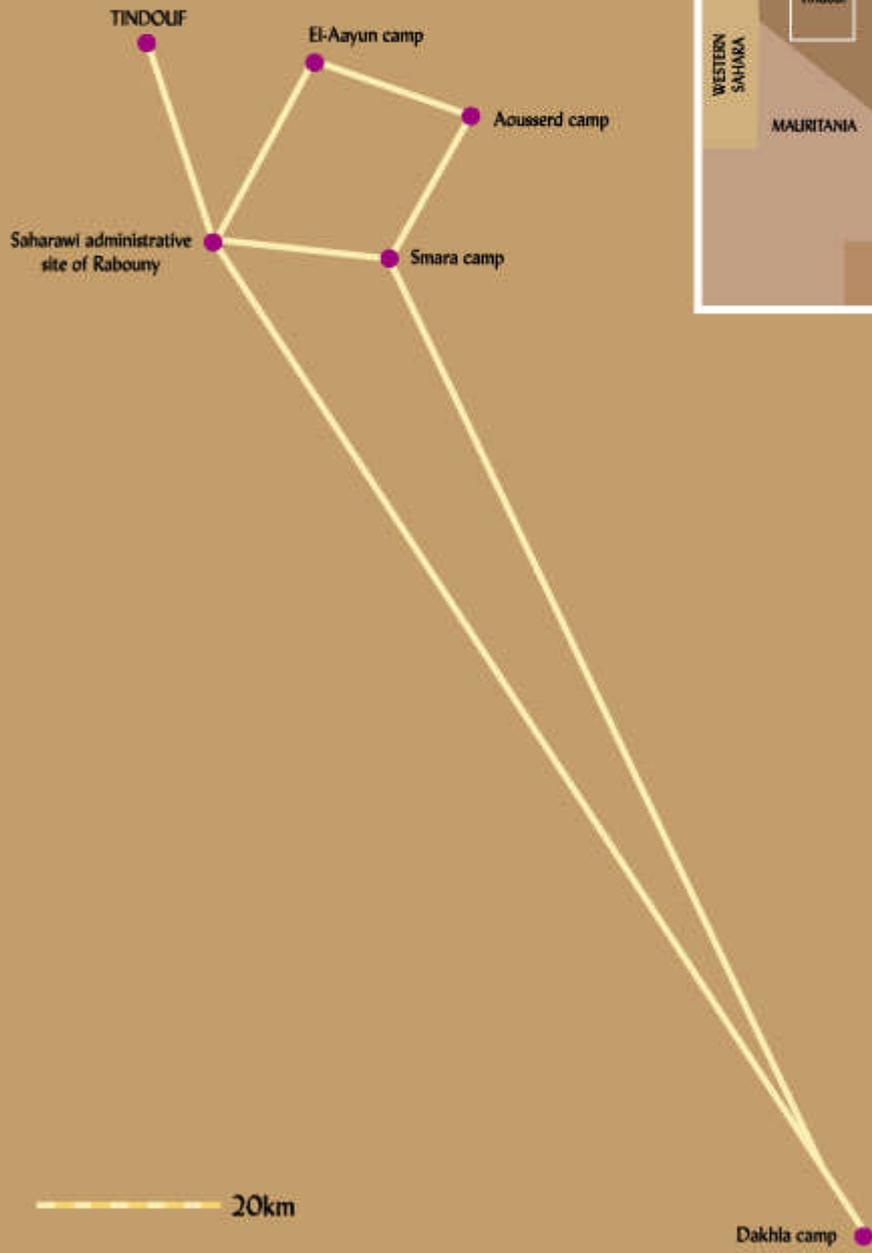
⁹⁰ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

⁹¹ <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx? VIEWSTATE=dDwxMTA10A4M>

⁹² <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx? VIEWSTATE=dDwxMTA10TA4M>

⁹³ <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx? VIEWSTATE=dDwxMTA10TA4M>

MAP OF THE REFUGEE CAMPS



VII

THE MOROCCAN PRISONER OF WAR FILE

On 18 August 2005, undoubtedly “*to get back into the saddle*” at the international level and to remake its virginity when the various accusations that we have just reviewed had rather seriously impaired its reputation, the **Polisario Front** released the last 404 Moroccan prisoners of war that it was holding. It was a question also – and it was not the least of the motives of this act that was no longer expected – to get into the good books of the United States, which was trying to stabilize the Maghreb. At little cost, the **Polisario Front** and Algeria were buying themselves credit in Washington.

However, even though the **Polisario** and its sympathizers did everything they could to present this release as an act of great humanitarianism, one cannot forget that the file of the Moroccan prisoners of war of Tindouf is certainly one of the greatest violation of human rights scandals in the Maghreb of the thirty last years.

Between 1976 and 1991, year of the cease-fire, the **Polisario** had captured approximately 2,200 Moroccan soldiers, some in combat, others after operations of deep penetration into the Spanish Sahara intended to harass and demoralize the enemy. In addition to those soldiers there were dozens of civilians, abducted with the passing of years.

VII.1. Non-Observance of the 3rd Geneva Convention by the Polisario (and Algeria)

The law of war is governed by the **Geneva Conventions** and their *Additional Protocols*⁹⁴, and fate of prisoners of war by the **3rd Convention**. At Article 118, Subparagraph 1, it stipulates: “*Prisoners of war shall be released and repatriated without delay after the end of the hostilities.*”. The Moroccan prisoners of war of the **Polisario Front** would thus have had to be released as from the cease-fire of 1991. Not at all... The releases, in fact, proceeded drip-by-drip according to the **Polisario’s** political interests and the advantages that it was counting on obtaining by showing

⁹⁴ For recall, the Conventions are four in number. The 1st Convention relates to the improvement of the fate of the wounded and ill in the armed forces on land; the 2nd Convention is interested in the improvement of the fate of the wounded, the ill and the shipwrecked of the armed forces at sea; the 3rd Convention relates to the treatment of prisoners of war, and the 4th Convention relates to the problems of the protection of the civilians in time of war. The two “Additional Protocols” were adopted in 1977. The First concerns the protection of victims of international armed conflicts and the Second, the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts.

“leniency”. From “Prisoners of War”, the Moroccans held by the **Front** had become veritable hostages.

Twelve years after the cease-fire, in 2003, the **Polisario** was still holding 1,157 prisoners, several of them abducted civilians. Of the 1,144 military:

- 3 had been held for more than 27 years;
- 4 had been held for more than 26 years;
- 3 had been held for more than 25 years;
- 280 had been held for more than 24 years;
- 224 had been held for more than 23 years;
- 187 had been held for more than 22 years;
- 2 had been held for more than 21 years;
- 2 had been held for more than 20 years;
- 6 had been held for more than 19 years;
- 15 had been held for more than 18 years;
- 7 had been held for more than 17 years;
- 288 had been held for more than 16 years;
- 61 had been held for more than 15 years;
- 60 had been held for more than 14 years;
- 2 had been held for more than 12 years;

In general, the most long-standing prisoners were officers, fewer to have profited from partial releases⁹⁵.

In flagrant violation of the provisions of the Third Convention evoked above, the United Nations’ peace plan envisaged the release of all prisoners of war after the completion of the referendary identification process. And the **Polisario Front** considered itself bound by the Peace Plan but not by the Geneva Conventions. However, by means of a letter of 1975 to the **Swiss Federal Council**⁹⁶, the **Polisario** sent the “*Declaration of Application of the Geneva Conventions of 1949*”, a procedure replacing the ratification for non-official structures such as liberation movements.

Moreover, Article 6 of the 3rd Convention III stipulates that: “*No special agreement shall be able to prejudice the situation of the prisoners as regulated by the present convention nor to restrict the rights that the latter grants them*”. But the United Nations Security Council will consider it useful to invite the parties explicitly to conform to the Conventions and to release the prisoners of war only on 29 June 2001, via its Resolution 1359.

⁹⁵This quantified data is extracted from the Report of the international mission of investigation into the conditions of detention of the Moroccan prisoners of war held in Tindouf (Algeria) from 11 April to 25 April 2003, France Liberté, Danielle Mitterrand Foundation. Below, France Liberté.

⁹⁶The Swiss Confederation is a depositary of the Geneva Conventions, which confers on it the particular responsibility of ensuring their proper application.

It will be noticed that the position of **Algeria** is somewhat problematical. Despite the evidence, **Algiers** has always claimed not to be party to the Western Sahara conflict. But the prisoners of **Tindouf** were indeed held on Algerian soil and, if the country had accommodated the **Polisario** and the authorities of the **SADR**, it would indeed appear that at no time did Algiers renounce exercising its privilege of sovereignty over any part of its territory whatsoever. In other words, even if, virtually, the installations close to Tindouf depended on the authority of the **SADR**, Tindouf was still located in Algeria (and, what's more, it is a question of a military zone...). The authority that was exercised was therefore that of the Military Region Commander (Algerian) for everything that related to Defense, and of the Prefect of *Willaya* for all civil matters. In Tindouf, the sovereign power therefore remained Algeria, Algerian law was applied and Algiers was responsible for the respect of international law (including humanitarian law) by its hosts. Algeria was therefore accessory to a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

VII.2. Observations of the International Committee of the Red Cross

In 1995, the **international Committee of the Red Cross** (ICRC) had listed 2,155 Moroccan prisoners of war (POW) in the various camps of the **Polisario** and estimated that there were 200 more of them to which it had not had access out of an approximate total of 2,400 prisoners for the two sides. The **Polisario** therefore was holding about 2,355 of them, and Morocco a few dozen⁹⁷. It will be stressed that the observations of the ICRC could only be partial since its access was limited to four prison camps, the **Polisario** moving the POWs who were in inaccessible camps so that they could be visited.

VII.3. Observations of the Human Rights Watch

The **HRW** also visited the prison camps to examine the fate of the POWs more closely. Despite the promises of the **Polisario** which undertaken to allow the HRW delegates access to all the sites where POWs were held, the organization only had access to two detention centres: the **Mohammed Lasyad Center** and the **Hamdi Aba Sheikh Center**. *“According to a prisoner who had been moved between various camps for 15 years, “these are the only centres that they show to foreigners. You shouldn't believe that the conditions are the same in the other camps⁹⁸ ».*

The delegate noted: *“Some of the POWs seemed afraid to speak to the HRW representative, whereas others were simply not interested. According to a camp visitor, that could be due to the fact that “so many journalists and others have*

⁹⁷ These details are quoted in the report of the *Human Rights Watch* (HRW): *Western Sahara, Keeping it Secret, The United Nations Operations in Western Sahara*. This report can be downloaded from the following address: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/wsahara.htm> page 30. Below: “HRW”

⁹⁸ HRW, Page 30.

*visited the POWs in the last twenty years without being able to help them to regain their freedom, that they have lost all interest in these contacts*⁹⁹ “.

As for the detention conditions: *“It is obligatory for the prisoners to work outside the camps in areas under the Polisario’s control, being employed in construction or mechanics, or as tailors. They are not paid for their work, in violation of international regulations*^{100 101} “.

The duration of the work and its tediousness are also underlined: *“We start work at 06.00 or 07.00 and we stop at 03.00. It’s very difficult in the heat. Beforehand, it was even harder. Until 1987, we did what we called forced labour and we were obliged to work longer, sometimes all through the night*¹⁰² “. The quantities of food allocated to the POWs were smaller than those of the refugees and insufficient, they have to steal to survive^{103 104}.

The observations of the **ICRC** confirm this problem of food and the accusations of forced labour, since the State Department was to note *“in April and November 2000, the ICRC determined that all of the POWs were in very bad health. There have also been credible reports that the Polisario was using them for forced labour*¹⁰⁵ ».

In 2001, the **State Department** remarked: “The Polisario leadership continuous to refuse to conform to the repeated requests to release all the POWs on a humanitarian basis, despite the fact that most of them have been in detention for more than 20 years and that their health has seriously deteriorated because of the poor conditions in which they were held¹⁰⁶ “.

⁹⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰⁰ *Idem.*

¹⁰¹Articles 54 and 62 of the 3rd Geneva Convention stipulate that a work allowance shall be due to the prisoners and that it “shall never be lower than a quarter of a Swiss franc per whole day’s work”.

¹⁰² HRW, Page 31.

¹⁰³ *Idem.*

¹⁰⁴ Article 26 of the 3rd Geneva Convention stipulates that: “The basic daily ration shall be sufficient in quantity, quality and variety to maintain the prisoners in good health and to prevent weight loss or deficiency disorders ... The detaining power shall provide the prisoners of war who work with the extra food necessary for the achievement of the work for which they are employed”.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practice, Western Sahara, 23.02.01. This report can be consulted at the following address: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/nea/825.htm>

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practice, Western Sahara, 2001 Report, 04/03/02 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/nea/8281.htm> .

VII.4. The “France Liberté” Report

The most damning document to date on the detention conditions of the Moroccan prisoners of war in the hands of the **Polisario** is certainly the report drawn up in 2003 by the **Fondation France Liberté** of Mrs. Danielle Mitterrand. It is all the more difficult to refute for the **Polisario** as it comes from a left-wing organization that has always shown great sympathy for the Saharawi cause and concluded many programs in the camps of Tindouf. This text of a few score pages draws up a veritable catalogue of horror.

Virtually every possible kind of battering or maltreatment is featured in it.

➤ Torture

“Practically all the prisoners were tortured at the time of the interrogation that followed their capture. One of the torturers was Ahmed Moulay Chrif Filali known as Ait Chrif... In 1982, Lieutenant Abderahmane, who refused to give military information, was burnt alive with kerosene by Ait Chrif. And Mohammed Salem, called Filipi, then finished off¹⁰⁷ “.

“In 1981, Sergeant Zebda was executed for stealing cigarettes, and the prisoner Abdellatif Marakchi tortured and executed for stealing some jam¹⁰⁸ “.

The tortures listed by **France Liberté** included¹⁰⁹:

- Confinement in a barrack box of 1.20m by 0.80m 23 hours per day for periods that could be as long as one year.
- Whipping administered with an electric cable.
- Beating up
- Suspension by the feet for periods of several hours.
- Water torture (head plunged into a basin until suffocation).
- Confinement in a container in full sunlight.

¹⁰⁷ France Liberté, Page 20.

¹⁰⁸ France Liberté, Page 21.

¹⁰⁹ France Liberté, Pages 21 and 23.

➤ **Participation of the Algerian Military in the Ill-Treatment**

“Virtually all the prisoners had been interrogated by Algerian officers in Rabouni¹¹⁰ “.

“460 prisoners were thought to have been held in Algerian prisons until August 1994, in Boufarik, the camp of Jelfa (300 km to the south of Algiers), and in Ksar el Boughari (150 km to the south of Algiers). It was not a question here of the prisoners of Amgala [Moroccans POWs captured during the only direct confrontation between Moroccan and Algerian soldiers. Their presence in an Algerian gaol would therefore have been justified...]. They would have undergone ill treatment and malnutrition¹¹¹ “.

➤ **Murder of Prisoners**

France Liberté counted 14 documented cases of POWs being murdered, sometimes to prevent them from talking to the ICRC. One of the murdered prisoners, **Brahim Tébia**, had lost his mind because of the maltreatment. He was killed in 1983.¹¹²

Twenty-six other POWs were killed or tortured to death following failed attempts to escape¹¹³. Escape was punished by torture or death, and even the simple preparation of an escape was punishable by death.¹¹⁴

Eight POWs died following accidents while working.¹¹⁵

➤ **Exposure of Prisoners of War to Public Curiosity**

The POWs were exhibited and exposed to public curiosity, or even used in propaganda shows during which they were forced to criticize or insult the State of Morocco (in contravention of Article 13 of the 3rd Geneva Convention): *“These serious attacks on their dignity are still visible. Most of them resent the visitors, or the “tourists” as they call them, i.e. the representatives of certain associations of international solidarity who saw them and sometimes even photographed them¹¹⁶ “.*

¹¹⁰ France Liberté, Page 28.

¹¹¹ *Idem.*

¹¹² France Liberté, Pages 20 and 21.

¹¹³ France Liberté, Pages 23 and 24.

¹¹⁴ France Liberté, Page 23.

¹¹⁵ France Liberté, Page 35.

¹¹⁶ France Liberté, Page 22.

➤ **Malnutrition**

“The prisoners had two meals a day: a plate of lentils that looked more like a kind of soup or a plate of rice or pasta. They made their bread themselves. Consequently, they had no animal or vegetable protein in their diet. Certain prisoners supplemented their food by working for private Saharawi individuals in return for food¹¹⁷.

➤ **Deprivation of Clothing and Lack of Housing**

“Until the eighties, the prisoners had no shoes and no other clothing but trousers. They slept in containers or trenches by groups of 10 with one blanket for 3. The mission met dozens of prisoners who, still today, have no shelter and sleep outside. It is mainly a question of the prisoners who are subjected to forced labour in the military regions and in the military posts around Rabouni¹¹⁸ “.

➤ **Forced Labour**

France Liberté established a list of the work entrusted to the prisoners: manufacture of bricks and infrastructure constructions, each worker having to manufacture at least 120 bricks per day.

The building sites employed from 20 to 300 POWs, depending on their size: *“They were woken up at four in the morning and assembled. At 05.00, they were divided into several groups for work. They could only relieve themselves once a day at reveille, if not, for the rest of the day, they were constrained to do so on their person. They could not even stop for a drink. Those who were caught drinking the soiled water that they used to make bricks on the ground were whipped. They would stop to eat a little rice or lentils that were provided for them in a building site wheelbarrow. The prisoners then resumed work until nightfall. Chahid El Hadad is a detention centre of to the south of Tindouf that was built in 45 days by the Moroccan prisoners in 1982, 200 people worked day and night there...¹¹⁹*

But there was worse: in violation of Article 50 of the 3rd Geneva Convention (which prohibits the employment of prisoners for tasks of a military nature), the POWs were assigned to work on sites relating to the army: they dug trenches in the area of Ouargziz, transported ammunition, etc.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ France Liberté, Page 25.

¹¹⁸ Idem.

¹¹⁹ France Liberté, Page 31.

¹²⁰ France Liberté, Page 33.

VII.5. The Polisario Front's Response to France Liberté

This long catalogue of maltreatment was to provoke only a rather weak response from the **Polisario Front**: it came in a document published in September 2003¹²¹.

The organization, in the preamble to this defense plea, considered the **France Liberté** report was “*partial, unbalanced and dishonest*»¹²² and reproached the association “*for having taken action on allegations having Moroccan prisoners of war as their only source, soldiers captured during hand-to-hand armed engagements*¹²³”, a curious argument.

The **Front** then, rather laboriously, endeavoured to refute **France Liberté** point by point, but the least that can be said is that it was hardly convincing.

If one indeed can point out approximations and contradictions in **France Liberté's** work, it still remains the case that the **Polisario's** rebuttals demand to be accepted just as they are, without discussion. Thus, as regards the accidental deaths, the **Front** is restricted to disputing the causes of death or their dates¹²⁴.

Tackling the problem of the prisoners supposedly executed after an attempted escape, the **Front** claimed not to know some of the names put forward by the French association, and affirmed that some of the people mentioned were still alive, but nevertheless recognized a dozen or so deaths attributed to “*exchanges of shots*” or to “*hunger, exhaustion and thirst*”¹²⁵.

Still more disconcerting is the refutation of the cases of torture resulting in death: again, certain names were unknown but a good number of others indeed died... but following “*brawls*” or “*disease*”, or through “*heart failure*”¹²⁶.

As regards the forced labour, the **Polisario Front** affirmed “*that they obtain material goods and compensations in exchange of the services that they provide*”¹²⁷. As for the fact of attributing “*all existing constructions*” exclusively to the work of

¹²¹ “Response to the report published by the Fondation France Liberté on the detention conditions of the Moroccan prisoners of war in the hands of the Polisario Front”, below: “Polisario Response”.

¹²² Polisario Response, Page 1.

¹²³ Polisario Response, Page 2.

¹²⁴ Polisario Response, Page 6.

¹²⁵ Polisario Response, Pages 10 to 13.

¹²⁶ Polisario Response, Pages 14 to 16.

¹²⁷ Polisario Response, Page 21.

prisoners, that was “*more than exaggerated*¹²⁸ “, which indeed indicates, if words have any meaning, that it is not false.

¹²⁸ Polisario Response, Page 21.

VIII

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE POLISARIO?

Taking into consideration the past of this organization, the question that is posed today is: What is the **Polisario's** future?

A few days after the release of the Moroccan prisoners of war, in August 2005, **Mohammed Abdelaziz**, Secretary-General of the **Polisario** and President of the **SADR**, had affirmed his expectation of “*greater involvement of the United States in the settlement of the conflict*”¹²⁹. To the Algerian daily newspaper, *L'Expression*, it confided, not without cynicism: “*The decision [to release] was made last May, meanwhile, and in particular since May 21, peaceful demonstrations have been organized in the occupied cities and territories and even in certain cities of the Moroccan south and in the Moroccan universities, where there are Saharawi students. The Moroccan government applied the most brutal force and repression against those peaceful demonstrations. This approach of the Moroccan authorities has, to some extent, delayed the release of those prisoners... I congratulate, in the name of my people, the government and the Polisario, the Moroccan families for their joy of having finally found once again those soldiers detained for acts of war. Through these families, I congratulate the Moroccan people at the time of the release of the Moroccan soldiers and officers detained, generally, for many long years*”¹³⁰.

The torturer congratulating his victim and his family for escaping his clutches - it has to be admitted that that is not banal.

The **Polisario** therefore indeed intended to benefit from the new political hand created by the aftermath of 11 September 2001 and the *War Against Terrorism*. As the **United States** wanted to stabilize and secure the **Maghreb** and was unable to do so without Algeria, and the latter was continuing more than ever to support the aspirations of the **Polisario** and the **SADR**, everything could be hoped for. But the room for manoeuvre of the separatist organization was nevertheless narrow. Because if Algeria was essential for any regional balance, the same applied to the Kingdom of Morocco, and Washington could not cold-shoulder it, by even admitting that, on the banks of the Potomac, anybody was seriously thinking of running up head on against the very Morocco with which America had maintained friendly and harmonious relations for more than two centuries.

¹²⁹ *Associated Press Dispatch*, 23 August 2005, 16.07.

¹³⁰ *L'Expression*, 23 August 2005.

It remained to know whether, *in fine*, the American administration could succeed where the UN had failed since 1991 and, if so, whether the **Polisario** would accept a possible solution.

Because, as we have seen, the genesis, ideology, operating mode and practices of the **Polisario Front** enabled serious doubts to be entertained about the movement's ability to be a force of stabilization and peace able to take part in the projection of Greater Maghreb towards democracy, the establishment and reinforcement of which in the Arab world was for Washington the cornerstone of its anti-terrorist strategy under this second mandate of **George W. Bush**.

VIII.1. An Assessment That Remains Poor In Terms Of Human Rights

Admittedly, the release – even extremely belated – of the “oldest prisoners of the world war” – was going in the right direction, and, furthermore, it would seem that the most serious violations of human rights were a thing of the past for the **Polisario**, even though the organization was far from reaching acceptable standards of governance and democracy.

But its assessment remains poor in terms of human rights. In its *2005 Annual Report*, the **Amnesty International** organization (**AI**) writes: “The *perpetrators of human rights infringements made in the past in these camps [those of the Polisario] were continuing [in 2004] to enjoy impunity. Those who are still in them have still not been handed over to the Algerian authorities by the Polisario in order to be brought before the courts*¹³¹ “.

AI was thus only continuing on the path that it had been pursuing for many years. In a report of April 1996, the organization wrote indeed: “*Since 1981, Amnesty International has also expressed its concern about the abuses made in the refugee camps under the responsibility of the authorities of the Polisario in the area of Tindouf, in the south of Algeria. The violations of human rights in the refugee camps... included the prolonged arbitrary detention, torture and deliberate murder of known or suspected opponents of the Polisario Front. Many people have been detained and accused of plotting against the authorities of the Polisario on behalf of enemy countries, especially in the Seventies and at the beginning of the Eighties. Many of those who had been arbitrarily detained, often for several years, were released after violent protests, in 1988, against the political repression in the camps. The prisoners had often been tortured and maltreated and were not allowed to have contact with their families. Although the human rights situation seems to have improved after the events of 1988, AI was receiving reports concerning the torture and ill treatment of prisoners until 1992. These prisoners of the end of the Eighties included Khalif Laroussi Zaougai, who was detained in 1987 after his arrival in the camps, and Salama Khbaou, who was detained at the end of 1989, three months after arriving there. They were both thought to have been detained until mid-1991. Certain detainees died in prison, apparently as the result of torture and*

¹³¹ Amnesty International, 2005 Report:
<http://www.amnestyinternational.be/doc/artivles5505.html>

maltreatment. Among them, El Mehdi Othman Souayah, who was detained in 1976 and who is thought to have died in detention at the end of 1977, and Mohammed Moussa ould Mokhtar, who is thought to have been arrested at the beginning of 1983 and to have died in prison in the following years. To date, the Polisario authorities have failed to provide any specific information about the detentions, the torture, the maltreatment or the deaths in detention. Since the beginning of the Nineties, the Polisario authorities have recognized that abuses of human rights had occurred in the past. They have affirmed that all the victims of human rights violations had been recognized as “victims of war” and were entitled to the same reparation, and that measures had been taken to prevent any further violation of the human rights. In response to some specific cases raised by Amnesty International, the Polisario authorities declared that some of the people concerned had never been detained, and that others had died in combat or as a result of disease. They have not, therefore, provided all the details on these cases or on the cases of other victims of human rights violations, nor taken steps to inquire into those abuses and to ensure that they would not recur...¹³² “.

VIII.2. A Patent Absence of Any Desire For Dialog

One of the totalitarian stigmata that continues to weigh against the **Polisario** and augurs ill for its capacity to take part in the search for political solutions – an approach that obviously requires a certain flexibility and an aptitude for compromise – is the absence of any real desire for dialog. Totalitarian organization (the very fact that Mohammed Abdelaziz has been at its head without interruption for nearly thirty years is proof), the **Polisario** reacts to criticism as any totalitarian structure traditionally does: by insult and excommunication, and the refusal of discussion.

In November 2003, a delegation of Saharawi tribal chiefs supporting the Moroccan contentions had visited France. It obviously had been strongly decried by the friends of the **Polisario**, but why would the Saharawi leaders close to Rabat be any less the representatives of the Saharawi people than the **Polisario Front**?

In this logic of “all or nothing” and “us against the others” rather representative of Stalinist thought, everyone who is opposed to the **Polisario** must therefore be attacked, vilified and, if possible, destroyed. Thus, when the European Member of Parliament, **Catherine Lalumière** – a former socialist minister furthermore – dared to write a report that did not espouse the contentions of **Polisario** and its sycophants, the French sympathizers of the **Front** expressed their rejection of an “*unscrupulous rewriting of history*”, condemning “*the manifest sign of a will to misinform*”¹³³ “.

As for **Fadel Ismail**, Head of the Western Sahara mission (Polisario) in the United Kingdom, he was to write, on 12 April 2001, that “*the Catherine Lalumière report*

¹³² Amnesty International, report dated 18 April 1996 devoted to the “Violations of Human Rights in Western Sahara”.

¹³³ Communiqué downloadable from the following address:
<http://www.saharawi.it/documenti/2002/3.htm>

*blindly espouses the Moroccan expansionist contentions and endorses the attempted political genocide of the Saharawi people*¹³⁴ “.

When a professor at the Paris school of war, **Aymeric Chauprade**, tried, in his turn, to avail himself of any researcher’s “right of inventory”, and there came **Mohammed Sidati**, delegated Minister for the **SADR** and member of its Delegation for Europe, taking the bit between his teeth, affirming that Mr. **Chauprade**, “*from phony conferences to fake declarations to the Moroccan press is causing problems all over the place. Paid to do the dirty work, the latter has no hesitation in issuing the most incredible and the most whimsical contentions. Should it be recalled that this mercenary of the pen [is the] teacher of the most sinister ideologies?*”¹³⁵ “.

As for the turncoats and other defectors, they were, of course, “traitors”. To dialog and questioning of these ideological certainties, the **Polisario Front** seemed to prefer insult and excommunication.

VIII.3. A Still Active Force For Destabilization

To achieve its ends – the destabilization of Morocco in the Western Sahara - the **Polisario Front** had no hesitation in using the weapon of misinformation. Thus, in the spring of 2005, of some demonstrations in **Laâyoune** and in some other cities of the area, it was to make, by the magic of words, the beginning of a small revolution. Being an academic case, it would be interesting to linger a little on this affair.

At the origin of it all, there was a little gangster imprisoned in **Laâyoune**, **Haddi Hamed Mahmoud Ben Mohammed Ben Ali**, 28 years old, an inveterate criminal and violent multi-recidivist with a record of theft, grievous bodily harm and fraud. In December 2003, he was condemned to seven years of detention for drug trafficking. Become the “lord” of the **Laâyoune** prison, where he tried to impose his own law, the young man discovered independentist ideas and, mid-2004, he returned his identity papers to the prosecution service, demanded to be stripped of Moroccan nationality and proclaimed himself a “political prisoner”. The **Polisario** liaison people, always on the lookout for things that ignite the gunpowder in the “territories”, commandeered his case and tried to make him a martyr of the repression. Faced with a developing situation, the Ministry for Justice decided to have the troublemaker transferred 400 km further north to calm things down.

On 21 May 2005, the day programmed for his transfer, several dozen members of his family blocked the accesses to the prison. Blows were exchanged between those demonstrators and the police, but there was nothing really serious. The following evening, sympathizers of the **Polisario** gathered a small crowd of two hundred people who demonstrated in front of the prisoner’s house to cries of “*Moroccans out!*”. The police intervened and dispersed the gathering without violence. Two days

¹³⁴ <http://www.arso.org/FPUK210402.htm>

¹³⁵ Communiqué of the SADR office in Brussels, 19 April 2004.

later, a hundred young people and sometimes children defied the police, threw stones and burned tires in the centre of Laâyoune. The following day, riot squads “cleaned” the rebellious district. As wrote the French magazine *Jeune Afrique-L’intelligent*, renowned for its cover of current affairs in North Africa: “*The demonstrators threw Molotov cocktails and even bottles of gas that didn’t explode. Two Moroccan flags were burned in public – never seen in the Sahara – and that of Polisario was brandished... Drubbings and muscular arraignments. Thirty-five Saharawis were arrested and around fifty wounded, most of them lightly. Not a single shot had been fired*¹³⁶ “.

In **Dakhla**, **Smara** and **Assa**, small demonstrations of solidarity were to take place, organized by local cells of the **Polisario**. It was the same in the North, where Saharawis students were to demonstrate in certain universities. Admittedly, these not very spontaneous demonstrations were openly independentist, but they barely attracted a few hundred people. This agitation was to be presented, by **Polisario** propaganda that was to denounce the “*genocide*” and the “*slaughter*” (remember: not a single shot fire, not one death...) as the beginning of a “*Saharawi Intifada*”.

VIII.4. Is the Polisario Threatened by an Islamist Drift?

Certain observers have believed that they could discern, over the last two years, an “Islamist” drift of the **Polisario** and especially of a fringe of its youth. In the context of the Maghreb and especially of sub-Saharan Africa, such a development would obviously be particularly worrying.

Some former leaders of the **Polisario** with whom we have been able to converse in the context of our research recognized the existence of the problem but without exaggerating it. **Thus, for Hametti Rabani**: “*The Polisario is in a state of failure. The majority of former combatants has left it and has gone back into business in Mauritania. Many historical leaders have also left. Quite a lot of young people have stayed. What can the leadership tell them? What hope can it give them? None; the movement is at a dead end, so some, to avoid despair, turn to religion, to God. They no longer expect anything from the Polisario bosses, but everything from God. God fills the vacuum left by the backward-looking ideology of the Polisario leadership*¹³⁷ “.

Mustapha Bouh was more precise on the genesis of this Islamization: “*It all started at the end of the Eighties. Students coming from the camps of Tindouf and present in the universities of Algiers or other cities of the North met members of the ISF there who at that time ruled the roost in the faculties. They had been “contaminated” and returned inspired by Islamist ideology...*¹³⁸ “.

¹³⁶ *Jeune Afrique-L’Intelligent*, 12 June 2005.

¹³⁷ Interview with Hametti Rabani, Rabat, 4 August 2005.

¹³⁸ Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

There were, at the time, some escalations into violence. Thus, according to a senior Moroccan officer familiar with the file: *“In 1994, the Algerian Security Services had seized, in the hands of terrorists of the AIG, some weapons whose serial numbers taught them that they had been supplied by their own army to... the Polisario. We have never known whether those weapons had been sold in the context of trafficking or had been supplied to the terrorists by sympathizers within the camps of Tindouf. What is certain, on the other hand, it is that Algerian Military Security demanded explanations of the Polisario and very seriously tightened its control over the Islamists belonging to the Front...¹³⁹”*.

Given the total hold exerted by the Algerian Security Services over the **Polisario** on the one hand and, on the other, the peculiar culture and sociology of the Saharawis, the majority of the military experts that we met considered it fairly improbable that there was a massive Islamist drift within the **Polisario Front**. Nevertheless, some of them stress that as the **SPLA** was now forced to recruit in the North of **Mali** or **Mauritania** to maintain the level of its forces, an “infiltration” of the **Front** by non-Saharawi elements of sub-Saharan origin won over by Islamist ideology could be a possible assumption. But the same ones pointed out that this trend would probably remain marginal, not only because of the Algerian seizure but also because Islamism remains confined, in the camps of **Tindouf**, to a youthful fringe. The one notable exception: the Minister of Defense, **Mohammed Lamine Ould L’Bouhali**, who was said to have been won over to fundamentalist ideology¹⁴⁰.

VIII.5. Is a Terrorist Drift of the Polisario Possible?

At the beginning of December 2003, 153 bottles of a highly explosive product and 12 kilometres of electric wire usually used to connect the remote control of a commercial blasting explosive were stolen from the warehouses of the **SNIM** in **Mauritania**. We have seen, in the Seventies, that the **SNIM** had been the target of many attacks by the **Polisario**. There was therefore considerable concern and a mixed team of Mauritanian and American investigators was set up to find the perpetrators of the theft¹⁴¹.

The brain of the entire affair was quickly identified: it was **Baba Ould Mohammed Bakhili**, a known officer of the **Polisario**. His lieutenants, **Mohamed El Hussein Oul M’Kheitir**, **Mohamed Ould Ahmed Ould M’Kheitir** and **Mohamed Ould Khatri**, all Mauritanians, were also known for their sympathy for the **Polisario**. The suspects were to be stopped and of the explosives were to be found in **Zérouate**, one of the Mauritanian towns where the **Polisario** could count on the most sympathizers.

¹³⁹Interview with a Superior Moroccan Officer, Rabat, 08 August 2005.

¹⁴⁰ This fact was confirmed to us by Hametti Rabani and Mustapha Bouh.

¹⁴¹ For the details of the affair, please refer to the weekly magazine *Maroc Hebdo* of 23 January 2004.

The exact motives of this group are not known. Were they acting on behalf of the **Polisario**, and, if so, did that mean that the movement's leadership was planning to use the weapon of terrorism? Were they on a mission for another organization? But if so, which one? Or were they hoping, quite simply, to sell their spoils to the highest bidder?

The terrorist risk must, in any event, be taken seriously in the **area that goes from the South Morocco and Algeria to the North of Chad and the borders of Mali, Niger and Mauritania**. It is furthermore the risk of destabilization of this area, inter alia under the influence of former elements of the Algerian IAG and GSPC coming down from the North, which is impelling the United States and Europe to take a very close interest in the area's security. It has been excessive to make of it, as certain media have been saying or writing for approximately a year, a "*new Afghanistan*", where the terrorist organizations would be "*at home*" and where even *Al-Qaeda* would have deployed "*operational headquarters*" intended to propagate its ideology and its combat in Africa and to strike the Maghreb and Europe.

But nevertheless this entire area is fragile: the weakness of the authority of the States due to the distance of the central governments, the vastness of the desert, the tribal and ethnic rivalries, the poverty and the illiteracy are as many dangerous factors that could foster the dissemination of radical ideologies and, especially, the creation of a zone of non-law, one of these "grey areas" that worry the Western intelligence staffs and services

Could the **Polisario** be one of the vectors of the transformation of this area into a "grey area" and take part in the irruption of terrorism in the sub-Saharan space? **Mustapha Bouh** doesn't think so: "*In 1975, we had planned to create a specialist hijacking unit, we even selected its members and I even personally met Abou Nidal in Baghdad to see whether we could learn anything useful from him. Then we dropped the idea. We had understood, on the one hand, that it would do us more harm than good and, on the other, that it was far too technical for the Bedouins that we are and who, culturally, are more accustomed to wars of raids. That the Polisario or a part of it should evolve as an armed band which delivering guerrilla harassment for private ends, it is very possible, but that it was transformed into a terrorist organization, I hardly think so. With my opinion, sociologically, culturally and psychologically, that would be beyond what a Bedouin could do...*¹⁴²".

Certain elements, however, give cause for thought on the organization's development. At the beginning of 2001, the **Polisario** had threatened to attack the **Paris-Dakar Rally** if it passed through Western Sahara. A senior Algerian official had even had to travel to Tindouf to calm people's minds: in the second half of 2000, there had been held three **SPLA** operations, weapons had been distributed and the military ensemble factories were working flat out¹⁴³.

¹⁴²Interview with Mustapha Bouh, Rabat, 05 August 2005.

¹⁴³ See *Jeune Afrique-L'Intelligent*, 16 January 2001:
http://www.jeuneafrique.com/articleImp.asp?art_cle=LIN160131les1eesirceo

Another signal to be taken into account, the attack on the Mauritanian barracks of **Lemgheity**, in the spring of 2005. On 04 June 2005, a group of 150 men, strongly armed, attacked the barracks of Lemgheity, 75 km beyond the Mauritanian border. The action caused 15 dead and 17 wounded and was claimed by the **GSPC**, which could have acted under the leadership of **Mokhtar Belmokhtar**. The latter, installed in the North of Mali, at Mount Sibita, was thought to have specialized in contraband activities (fuel, cigarettes and arms) and to have led a small phalanx of combatants, **Al Moulatoum**. According to certain witnesses, **Polisario** vehicles had taken part in the attack, and the attackers, or at least some of them, spoke Hassani, the dialect spoken in Mauritania and Western Sahara. Had men of the **Polisario**, on a purely individual basis, lent a hand to this attack? Several of our interviewees, both among the former officers of the movement and within the Western Intelligence Services, did not reject this assumption.

VIII.6. The Gangrene of Organized Crime

The most current threat stemming from the destructuring of the **Polisario** and the bankruptcy of its ideology is the conversion of a number of its members into trans-border organized crime. This is explained, inter alia, by the poverty that is prevalent in the camps and by the example of the corruption coming “from the top”. In 2001, Foudel Mohammed Bella, an officer of the Polisario’s reconnaissance forces, returned to Morocco after spending 26 years in the camps. It testified to the fact that “the wages of the civil servants [of the Polisario] had not been paid for years” and that “the officers received between 12 and 17 dollars twice a year, a situation that forces them to find other income, such trade or trafficking, in order to feed their families¹⁴⁴”.

On several occasions, in recent years, certain elements of the **Polisario Front** have been arrested during cases of human trafficking, routed to Morocco and from there, trying to get to Europe. In the context of these affairs, the proof was provided that the people investigated had passed hundreds of “clandestines” to Mauritania or Morocco.

Arrests of Saharawis related to the movement were also carried out in cases of the trafficking of gasoline, arms, contraband cigarettes or automobile spare parts.

The massive involvement of elements of the Polisario Front in the organized crime and arms trafficking that proliferated in a less and less controlled sub-Saharan area could have a destabilizing effect on the entire region. With its thousands of combatants under arms and its tens of thousands of refugees parked in the camps and living in misery, the **Polisario Front** today represents one of the main forces that has to be taken into account in the region. The distancing of any prospect of participation for the organization in a settlement of the Western Sahara question and the despair which it causes among the misfits of the camps are likely to transform the latter into desperados who, now with nothing to lose, could turn to violence, be it political or criminal. It is the entire sub-Saharan area that would then be threatened, a threat that would not be long in becoming preoccupying for Europe.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted by AranicNews.com, 24 June 2001: Polisario Military Officer Flees Camps Back To Morocco.

VIII

IN CONCLUSION

The **Polisario**, which was, yesterday, a very structured organization, powerful and inspired by a hybrid ideology of a crossbred Marxist-Leninist kind of nationalism, is today seeking its landmarks. Considerably weakened by the defections that have followed one another at a sustained pace since 1991, the iron-grip leadership around **Mohammed Abdelaziz**, is trying to take a hand again in the game being played around Western Sahara but its chances of participating in a political solution would seem to be null and void for as long as it fails to renounce its claim of independence. It is clear that while Morocco is today ready to discuss a status of broad autonomy for the Sahara, Rabat will only accept a solution within the Moroccan context. This attitude can be deplored or condemned, but it is a fact.

Many experts involved, in recent years, in the UN attempts to settle the Saharawi question have furthermore come to the same conclusion. **Mr. Erik Jensen**, former official for the census operations with a view to the referendum said nothing else, in June 2005. Believing that *“micro-States are unlikely to survive in an era of the globalization that represents a challenge that only regional alliances can confront”*, he concluded: *“Broad autonomy of the Sahara within Morocco would be the most realistic solution for solving the conflict”*¹⁴⁵.

A large part of the Shrouds virtually held hostage for nearly thirty years in the camps of Tindouf probably think the same thing. **Commander Lahbib Ayoub**, that legendary combatant of the **SPLA**, confided in 2002: *“Down there, in the camps, there remains a minority of convinced people, determined, who still believe in independence. But the true Saharawis, those who, like me, come from Western Sahara, are at the end of their tether: they want to be done with it and internal autonomy constitutes an un hoped-for opportunity”*¹⁴⁶.

Morocco has been giving thought to this political solution for years, and seems today ready to work on it, in the context of an ambitious regionalization policy that would encompass the entire country. But can the Polisario take that route? From our contacts with the Moroccan authorities, we have gained the impression that the **Polisario Front** could be recipient to a solution. But it seems clear to us that to have a chance of sitting down at the negotiation table and participating in a ‘peace of the valiant’, the organization would have, in the long term (but perhaps during the negotiations...) to meet four conditions:

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in ArabicNews.com, Autonomy within Morocco “Realistic Solution” to Sahara Conflict, Erik Jensen, 06 June 2005.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Ayoub.

- The total, definitive renunciation of the way of arms and the disbandment of the troops.
- The renunciation of the claim to independence and the disappearance of the SADR.
- The opening of the camps in such a way as to allow those who so desire to return to Western Sahara.
- Real internal democratization.

The total absence of democracy in the movement's operation unfortunately prohibits any real debate on the orientations of the **Polisario** and **one can hardly see the current leadership giving up either its independentist dream or its privileges.**

Consequently, what could it become? A return to the way of arms seems excluded, because one can hardly see how the **United States** could agree to see a renewed conflict that would risk, at one time or another, turning into open war between its two main regional allies, **Morocco** and **Algeria**. The risk is therefore that a pointless **Polisario**, orphaned both from its original leftist ideology and from its unrealistic national project, would slowly decompose. But a **Polisario** in the process of being reduced to beggary and implosion would not fail, as we have seen, to distinctly increase the level of threat – either of organized crime or of terrorism – in an area which, we have sufficiently said it, is particularly fragile and sensitive.

In addition to a political solution to the Sahara question, it is therefore necessary, from now on, to find a way of extracting the **Polisario** from the impasse in which it is trapped. But the current leadership would seem to be a major obstacle to such a possibility.

Evoking **Mohammed Abdelaziz**, did **Commander Ayoub** not say, in 2002: *“If there's only one of them left, it'll be he...”*?

APPENDIX

To the Roots of the Antagonism Between Algiers and Rabat: *the War of the Sands*

Relations between Algeria and Morocco have never been set fair, far from it. The rivalry between the two countries is at the same time territorial and ideological. In the years that followed Algeria's independence, the "progressist" regime of the **FLN** incarnated, particularly after the seizure of power by **Houari Boumediène**, the model of "left-wing" decolonization, which saw the national claim doubling as a revolutionary war.

For the emergent socialist Algeria, close to the USSR but also at a peak of the movement of so-called "non-aligned" States, Morocco was a model to be resisted: that of a country allied with the West and representing a bridgehead of the free world in the north of the African continent. In Algiers, one often heard it said, until 1978, that the "Revolution" would fail if it stopped at the Western border. Furthermore, this was nothing new: the Algerian revolutionary elite had always believed that it was an agent of an independence and development project for the whole of the Maghreb and the ancestor of the **FLN**, the **North-African Star** of **Messali Hadj**, desired the creation of a great Maghrebian State that would include **Tunisia** and **Morocco**. As a corollary, when the protectorates had been swept away, in Tunisia and Morocco, these two countries had been used as a rear base for the combatants of the ALN.

In consequence of which, Algiers consistently supported the Moroccan left, which was seeking, in the Sixties, to topple the monarchy. Thus, the leader of the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP), **Mehdi Ben Barka**, settled in Algiers. On its side, Morocco was going later to accommodate opponents of Colonel Boumediène and, to the highest degree, **Mohammed Boudiaf**.

On two occasions, this veritable cold war of the Maghreb was transformed into open war. The second time that Algerians and Moroccans were to clash directly was to be the **Battle of Amgala** in 1976, right in the middle of the "War of the Sahara". The first open confrontation went back to 1963.

In October 1963, a short armed conflict opposed the Moroccan and Algerian armies: it was the **War of the Sands**. In question, the territories of the Sahara, around Tindouf, that France had annexed to its Algerian colony. After the Battle of Isly from May to August 1844, the review of the borders that had followed the Moroccan defeat with the Treaty of Lalla Maghnia, which, on 18 March 1845, gave Tindouf, Touat, Saoura and Tidikelt to Algeria. Algeria, in the Sixties, bitterly defended the principle of "*the intangibility of the borders inherited from colonization*". But it had not always been the case.

Morocco and Tunisia had promised, vis-à-vis the GPRA (Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic), on 06 July 1961, that they would raise no territorial question

before independence and the GPRA had admitted, on its side, which the colonial borders were not enforceable on its neighbours. A bilateral agreement between Morocco and the GPRA affirmed furthermore *“the agreements which could intervene following Franco-Algerian negotiations could not be enforceable on Morocco in relation to the Algero-Moroccan territorial delimitations...”*

In March 1963, **Ahmed Ben Bella** confirmed this agreement on the occasion of a visit by **Hassan II** to Algiers. In his memoirs, Hassan II writes that Ben Bella had told him: *“I would ask your majesty to leave me the time to set up new institutions in Algeria. When, in September or October, that is done, we will then open the case of the borders together. It goes without saying that the independent Algeria could not inherit the Algerian borders from France”*¹⁴⁷.

Once in power, Ben Bella was to renege on this undertaking and many Moroccans were to be expelled from Algeria. However, the heart of the populations was indeed leaning, it seemed, towards Morocco. In a memorandum of June 1962, *“Colonel Chevalier Chantepie, chief of the intelligence exploitation centre, written on the subject of Tindouf that the Reguibat and Tadjakant populations of that center had already made their choice, which was “incontestably Moroccan”*¹⁴⁸. At the beginning of September, the Algerian press violently attacked Hassan II and described him as a *“puppet”*. On 08 October, it was **Algiers** that started the hostilities: The National Popular Army attacked the Royal Army Forces at **Hassi Beida**. The fighting was to cease on 04 November.

Ignace Dalle, who worked for a long time in the Maghreb as a journalist, believes: *“What is certain, it is that, in this complex case, the quality of the Moroccan arguments and the “fraternal” behaviour of Mohammed V during the war with Algeria - even if it were hardly conceivable that it could be otherwise – deserved a more suitable treatment, less casual and provocative on the part of Algeria”*¹⁴⁹.

The War of the Sands, in any event, was won by Rabat, even if Morocco never recovered the lost territories, and the Treaty of Ifrane of *“Fraternity, Good Neighbourliness And Co-Operation”* signed on 15 January 1969, is thought to have closed the chapter definitively.

¹⁴⁷ Hassan II, *Le défi*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1976, Page 91.

¹⁴⁸ Ignace Dalle, *Les trois Rois, la monarchie marocaine de l'indépendance à nos jours*, Paris, Fayard, 2004, Page 297.

¹⁴⁹ Ignace Dalle, Page 303.

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