Blood on the Sahara

America is fighting King Hassan's war

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No roads cross the empty lands of Western Sahara, only faint tracks that cut across the desert in winding, zigzag patterns. In this war-torn land, even the villages offer scant relief from the miles of seeming emptiness; many of them are as deserted now as the surrounding lands that display the low, mound graves and the sometimes unburied bodies of the victims of the war. It takes a firm knowledge of the desert to cross this country safely. Among those who know it best are the people of Western Sahara's nationalist movement, the Polisario Front.

I had been traveling for nearly a week with several Polisario guerrillas, jolting in captured Land Rovers, through the heart of lands said to be controlled by Morocco, one party to the war in the Western Sahara. Already, I had seen some of the costs of Moroccan "control": the tent camps near Tindouf, Algeria, where thousands of Saharans now live as refugees; the town of Amgala, where Moroccan underground fortifications were overrun by the Polisario; the city of Semara, still being shelled.

Now, traveling inland from the Atlantic Ocean, we came to the crushed wreckage of a jet fighter downed in the desert. The pilot, I was told, was Moroccan, a high official in that country's air force. He had parachuted to safety and was taken prisoner by the Polisario. But the torn, twisted pieces of metal scattered about bore the markings of still another country: the United States. Again that day I was reminded, as I had already been reminded many times earlier that week, of the role that the United States has played in the violence in the Western Sahara.

Ever since Spain relinquished control of the former Spanish Sahara in February 1976, arbitrarily giving the northern two-thirds of its colony to Morocco and the southern third to Mauritania, the region has been torn by struggle. Mauritania bowed out of the conflict sixteen months ago, but the fighting has continued, with the Polisario Front waging guerrilla warfare against occupying Moroccan troops.

My journey in May 1979 across Western Sahara was part of a fact-finding mission of several weeks. I returned in November for a second trip with the Polisario. I traveled from the Tindouf area to what had been the town of Mahbes, long since abandoned by its residents. Mahbes was the last town in the whole eastern region of the country that the Moroccans had been able to hold, and it fell to Polisario forces just three weeks before my visit. The unburied bodies of Moroccan soldiers were silent testimony to the recent battle.

While I had been sympathetic to the Polisario cause before embarking on these two journeys, my convictions were deepened by what I saw. My visits showed me how far the movement has come since 1973, when it was first organized to oppose Spanish colonialism.

In a real sense, the Polisario has fulfilled the meaning of its name—an acronym for Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro, the two parts of the old Spanish colony. In 1976, it established the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, an independent government now recognized by forty-four nations worldwide, including twenty-six nations in Africa.

I found some of the most impressive results of the Polisario's democratic government in the refugee tent camps in Algeria. There, each Saharan participates on one of the five committees—health, education, handicrafts, distribution, and justice—around which community life is organized. Many of the health problems are treated in the camps, and illiteracy has almost been wiped out. In addition to the twenty-three refugee camps, there are hospitals and schools, including one school organized solely for the training of women; bringing their children with them, they came in groups of 700 at a time for nine-month training sessions in history, culture, organization, and military studies.

I have visited many refugee camps in Africa over the years, but never have I seen a group of people more self-reliant, or better organized. Indeed, I found it almost impossible to think of them as refugees. They have turned to other countries for food and clothing, to be sure, but politically they are independent of outside control. Their camps are not administered by Algerians, the United Nations, or technicians from other countries—the people have organized themselves according...
to their own way of life. In the camps, I had the feeling I was visiting a nation in exile.

I came away from Western Sahara convinced that Morocco cannot win its struggle against the Polisario, which has almost universal support from the Saharan people. Continued U.S. military assistance to Morocco is bound to put our country in the embarrassing position not only of backing a loser, but of running counter to the position of virtually all African countries.

What is all the fuss about in Western Sahara? To the Saharan people, it is a struggle for nationhood and identity. Theirs is a small country, about the size of Colorado, with population estimates ranging from 100,000 to more than 700,000. The people were scattered first by the long years of colonial domination, and since 1976 by the ravages of the occupation and bombing by Morocco; furthermore, they are nomadic and do not lend themselves easily to a census.

In economic terms, their country is noted for phosphate resources reported to be the fourth richest in the world. Uranium, titanium, zinc, iron, copper, gold, natural gas, and oil have also been found, but are largely undeveloped. Fishing off the 600-mile coastline is excellent.

In 1975, with Spain's Generalissimo Francisco Franco on his deathbed, a politically divided Spain signed the tripartite Madrid Agreement that split the small country and its undeveloped wealth. The people's views of the territorial claims of Morocco and Mauritania were not considered, although by mid-1975 it was clear that if a plebiscite had been held Morocco would have lost any such opinion poll. A United Nations mission to the area in May 1975 had dramatized this fact, reporting that "at every place visited, the Mission was met by mass political demonstrations and had numerous private meetings with representatives of every section of the Saharan community. From all of these, it became evident to the Mission that there was an overwhelming consensus among the Saharans within the territory in favor of independence and opposing integration with any neighboring country."

The mission, which consisted of Iran, Ivory Coast, and Cuba, unanimously concluded that the people were "categorically for independence and against the territorial claims of Morocco and Mauritania." The mission also found that the Polisario was the dominant political force. Ironically, two of those countries (Iran under the Shah, and Ivory Coast) had almost always been aligned with Morocco on international issues.

Yet after the release of the U.N. mission report, Morocco supported the supposedly peaceful "Green March" that sent hundreds of thousands of people into the Western Sahara. In reality, the Green March was backed by Moroccan armed troops. As Moroccan armies followed in early 1976, thousands of Saharawi fled to the refugee camps in Algeria. As many as 100,000 Saharans may have fled, or perhaps only half that number; it is difficult to get an accurate count. But in a sense it doesn't matter: The fact is, tens of thousands of Saharan people were forced out of their homes in Western Sahara by bombing attacks and the occupation forces of Morocco and Mauritania.

After years of fighting, Mauritania reached an agreement with the Polisario and gave up all claims to Western Sahara. Morocco contends that ties between the Sultans of Morocco and certain Saharan tribes entitle it to a share of Western Sahara. That claim was rejected in 1975 by the International Court of Justice in an advisory opinion requested by the United Nations. The court found that "the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sov-
ereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco."

Further, a basic principle of decolonization in Africa is respect for colonial borders, regardless of pre-colonial divisions. Indeed, were this not the case, most African countries could claim parts of others on the basis of pre-colonial ties. Spain colonized Western Sahara in 1884, and its mandate was recognized by the Congress of Berlin within the next year. Thus there is no reason why colonial borders should not be retained in Western Sahara as well.

To give more weapons will not solve the problem

African legal precedents and the Court of Justice ruling notwithstanding, the United States has tilted toward the Moroccan side in the struggle for control of Western Sahara. The U.S. position was dramatized a year ago, when the Carter Administration announced plans to sell counter-insurgency aircraft and helicopter gunships to Morocco.

While the United States has sold Morocco weapons before, most have come under a bilateral agreement set up in 1960, stating that American weapons supplied to Morocco can only be used in the defense of Morocco itself, not in the Western Sahara. In the past, however, Morocco has consistently ignored this condition and used U.S.-supplied weapons in the Sahara.

In 1979 alone, the United States provided six helicopters, $2.4 million worth of spare parts for fighter and transport planes, and $3 million worth of aircraft ammunition, including bombs and rockets. The made-in-America jet fighters are not meant to be used in Western Sahara, but the twisted wreckage that I saw a year-and-a-half ago, along with other captured arms of United States manufacture, were signs that the 1960 agreement has been ignored.

The counterinsurgency aircraft and helicopter gunships that the United States agreed this year to sell to Morocco would carry the problem farther still, for they are specifically not covered by the 1960 agreement. The new planes are some of the most sophisticated counterinsurgency aircraft available, much more so than any other aircraft we have sold so far to Morocco.

But most military experts agree that these weapons will not win the war for Morocco's King Hassan, although they could increase the casualties significantly. "U.S. intelligence has rarely been so united on a question such as this," one State Department official told The Christian Science Monitor in October 1979. "The consensus in the intelligence community is that King Hassan and his army are in deep trouble. To give more weapons will not solve the problem."

The Moroccans have some 50,000 to 60,000 troops in the Western Sahara, but they are limited to a few occupied towns, which have in essence become military garrisons. Trips outside these towns are infrequent and made only in large groups. Morale is low among both soldiers and civilians, according to the London Financial Times: "Soldiers returning from the Sahara speak of a growing malaise about appalling conditions... The men complain about the difficulty of fighting fast-moving Polisario columns from fixed positions, of not being given leave (most have been there for four years) and the boredom they feel in the inhospitable terrain where there is no entertainment and no drink.

"Most Moroccans still pay lip service to the official line... But complaints about the cost of living and deteriorating social conditions are growing. 'Life is exorbitant because of the Sahara' is a refrain heard everywhere."

The U.S. plans to arm Morocco seem to have little to do with the public position on human rights, nor with any hope that the action will save King Hassan or assist the Moroccan cause. It has been put forth that Polisario attacks into Morocco proper justify this sale, but the Polisario responds that they did not begin the fighting; Morocco invaded Western Sahara. Some have speculated that the U.S. sale of sophisticated military equipment was more closely related to the U.S. Presidential elections. The action may prolong the war, but it also gave the appearance that the Carter Administration was supporting its ally abroad. Carter did not want another Nicaragua or Iran just before the election.

While this sale is only the latest in a long history of weapons sales to Morocco, the size and sophistication of the weapons set it apart from the others. And Morocco lobbied hard for the sale, especially in Congress, where it could have been voted down. Late in 1978, Morocco hired the public relations firm of DGA International to promote its cause in the United States, paying almost $900,000 for six months of lobbying. Morocco also hired the New York firm of Hill & Knowlton for $100,000 per year. Congress did block an arms sale to Morocco in 1977. Morocco did not want that to happen again.

This time Congress did not interfere with the arms sale, but sent a letter to President Carter calling for "good faith" negotiations including all parties. Morocco has consistently refused to consider the Polisario a valid party, and has rejected the call of the Organization of African Unity, comprising most nations of Africa, for an internationally sponsored referendum to determine the will of the Saharawi people.

In the end, arms sales to Morocco can only hurt the United States. They make a mockery of our expressed neutrality in the conflict in Western Sahara; they provide unmistakable support for Morocco's expansionist policy. Continued arms sales to Morocco, despite our proclaimed position of neutrality, can only further erode U.S. credibility both in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Their use by Morocco makes the United States party to the systematic and violent suppression of the human rights of the people of Western Sahara.