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BUREAU OF
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THE MOROCCAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE WESTERN SAHARA

The Moroccan leadership views the annexation of Morocco's portion of the former Spanish Sahara as a matter of vital national interest. The annexation, supported by all segments of the country's population, has a deep historical and religious basis with fundamental implications for the political stability of the regime. It is also linked directly to Morocco's ability to face its primary geopolitical competitor, Algeria. As a result, it is inconceivable at this time that King Hassan can afford to back down on the issue of Morocco's sovereignty over its Saharan territory. If he were to do so, he would risk a loss of legitimacy.

Morocco's Claims to the Western Sahara

To understand the strength of Morocco's fixation on the Western Sahara, it is important to examine the situation there from the Moroccan perspective, particularly in view of the legal case that has been formulated against the manner in which Morocco and Mauritania have annexed the territory. To interpret Moroccan policy as a land grab motivated by the need to assure Morocco's domination of the international phosphate market is inaccurate. Rather, Morocco's claim extends deeply into the nation's history.

Prior to the colonial period, Moroccan rulers exercised varying degrees of control over much of northwest Africa. From the 10th through the 17th centuries, Moroccan influence penetrated the Western Sahara, Mauritania, southwest Algeria, and even Mali. Since independence Morocco has argued, with some validity, that during the colonial period it was stripped of large tracts of its rightful patrimony. It was not until 1970 that Rabat abandoned its claims to all of Mauritania and not until 1972 that it negotiated

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a treaty (not yet ratified) with Algeria defining Morocco's southeastern border with that country. Despite the occasional resurfacing of irredentist sentiment for a "Greater Morocco," a majority of Moroccans have accepted the loss of much of Morocco's pre-colonial territory as a fait accompli. The Western Sahara, however, is the notable exception: since the early 1970's, a powerful current of irredentism has focused on the former Spanish Sahara, seen by Morocco as its last chance to recover some of its "despoiled" territory.

Morocco's claim to the Sahara is not based on a Western definition of sovereignty. (An October 1975 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice determined that the ties of allegiance between the area's various tribes and Morocco and Mauritania at the time of Spanish colonization in 1885 were insufficient to establish territorial sovereignty.) Rather, Morocco's claims are of a historical and cultural nature deeply rooted in Islamic concepts of a population's sworn allegiance to the sovereign and are linked to Morocco's fluctuating pre-colonial control over the region. The more modern concepts of nationalism and national "honor" have reinforced these historical claims. As a result, virtually all segments of the Moroccan population, modern and traditional, have overwhelmingly supported the justness of Morocco's Saharan policy.

The Western Sahara issue has also had deep implications for Moroccan political stability. The campaign to reclaim the "despoiled" provinces began with a deeply divided Morocco unsure of King Hassan's leadership. By seizing the lead in the drive for the Sahara, however, the King defused the opposition on this issue and co-opted the opponents into the government's service. Leaders of all parties--from the traditional nationalist Istiqlal to the Communists (the Party of Unity and Progress)--traveled the world to solicit support for Morocco's claims. The old sense of malaise, which had characterized Moroccan politics since the mid-1960's, evaporated as the country seemed to regain a sense of national purpose, as witnessed by the mobilization during the November 1975 Green March. National support for the King's Saharan policy has remained remarkably high despite heavy costs and an increasing number of military casualties.

The Sahara question thus is viewed by the Moroccan leadership as crucial from a domestic political standpoint. Should Hassan attempt to back down on Morocco's Saharan claims, he would face a loss of legitimacy. Potentially

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serious internal challenges could open the way for another coup attempt by the military. Though it is impossible to predict whether this would cost King Hassan his throne, the resulting tension could result in the termination of Morocco's political liberalization and its promising experiment in democracy.

Geopolitical Stakes in the Sahara: Morocco vs. Algeria

The Sahara issue has also become a vital element in Morocco's geopolitical competition with Algeria. President Boumediene, who apparently acquiesced to any Moroccan and Mauritanian agreement on the Western Sahara at the Arab summit held in Rabat in 1974, reassessed Algeria's position in 1975. In the wake of the Moroccan and Mauritanian takeover of the Sahara, Algeria turned on its neighbors and has since waged an effective proxy war, using the Saharan nationalist movement as a tool of its policy.

Algerian Aspirations. Although Algeria's ostensible reason for supporting the Polisario is the principle of self-determination, its historical competition with Morocco for predominance in northwest Africa is its primary motivation. Algeria's objective in the dispute is the establishment of an independent Saharan republic, in which it expects to have a predominant influence. This would deny to Morocco the territory's significant economic resources and stymie Moroccan efforts to restrict future Algerian access to the Atlantic. Boumediene, in short, opposes Moroccan assimilation of the Western Sahara because it would challenge Algeria's aspirations to dominance in North Africa.

Moroccan Strategic Perceptions. The Sahara is viewed by the Moroccans as strategically crucial. The creation of an Algerian puppet state in the Sahara and the toppling of the pro-Moroccan regime in Mauritania would, from the Moroccan standpoint, permanently tip the balance of power in North Africa in favor of Algeria. It would also, the Moroccans believe, threaten the existence of their regime. In more specific terms, Moroccans feel they cannot afford to abandon their Saharan claims for the following reasons:

--The creation of an Algerian-dominated mini-state would place a noose around Morocco, cutting it off from its Mauritanian ally and the rest of Africa.

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--A radical Saharan republic would serve as a subversive base for revolutionary Moroccan groups, some of which may already have established links with the Polisario Front.

--The loss of the Sahara would cost Morocco the area's vast phosphate wealth, the country's principal means over the longer run of keeping pace with Algeria's natural gas earnings.

The struggle between Morocco and Algeria has strong ideological overtones. Statements by Moroccan leaders have viewed the confrontation as a competition between two widely divergent political systems: the open, pluralist, moderate Moroccan form of government pitted against the "repressive," radical, authoritarian regime in Algeria. The Moroccans also view the struggle in the context of the ongoing attempts to radicalize the African Continent by Cuba, Libya, and Algeria, all armed by the Soviet Union. Morocco's commitment to resist this radicalization goes beyond rhetoric, as witnessed in its intervention on behalf of Zaire. While Moroccan allegations of grandiose Soviet schemes in Africa may be overdrawn for the benefit of the US, Moroccan leaders do perceive the ongoing radicalization, as exemplified by Algeria's Saharan policy, as a threat to Morocco and all of the moderate regimes on the continent.

The Outlook for Morocco's Saharan Policy

Morocco will not give up its claims to sovereignty over the Western Sahara. The combination of factors noted above--the "righteousness" of Morocco's historic/religious claims to the region, the negative implications for domestic policy, and Morocco's geopolitical competition with Algeria--have made the Sahara issue a vital national interest, one that has virtually become a national obsession. Morocco, therefore, will be most unlikely to agree to any settlement formula that jeopardizes its claims to sovereignty over the Sahara, although it is likely to be flexible concerning other aspects of a possible settlement (joint exploitation of the Sahara's resources, guaranteed access to the Atlantic for Algeria, amnesty for Polisario guerrillas, etc.).

Morocco is fully prepared to ignore diplomatic and political pressures from the international community calling for Saharan self-determination. Morocco is also prepared to resist US pressures for a settlement that risks compro-

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*Coopting phosphate
part of gas profits
↓
give on some autonomy
allow pipeline
↓
best end of deal
perhaps*

Improved bilateral relations less Soviet threat?

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missing Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara. Over the short run (18 months or so), the Moroccan leadership will probably adopt the following strategy:

- It will order the Moroccan military to dig in its heels in the Sahara, accepting continued heavy losses if necessary.
- It will support Mauritania to the extent possible, including the dispatch of additional military units and the encouragement of a more active French role in the defense of its ally.
- It will continue and, whenever possible, accelerate its arms modernization program.

Continued French cooperation and Saudi financial support, which appear assured, are necessary for the success of Morocco's short-term plans.

Over the longer run, one cannot rule out a more aggressive Moroccan military posture with respect to Algeria--which Morocco's decided inferiority in military equipment has thus far precluded. Though it seems unlikely that Morocco would initiate a full-scale war against Algeria (which would undermine strong Arab backing Morocco has striven to maintain), the pressures on the Moroccan leadership for some form of punitive operation against the Polisario on Algerian territory will grow, especially if the military's Saharan losses continue at their present heavy rate. While it is unlikely that Morocco would "win" a war against Algeria, the mood in Morocco is such that military risks might eventually be taken to make Algeria pay for its "treacherous games" in the Sahara.

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