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Background Paper

### The Western Sahara Conflict

The three-year-old conflict over the desolate but mineral-rich Western Sahara has entered a new, political phase. The military coup in Mauritania on 10 July brought to power a government committed to ending its involvement in the dispute. The coup also prompted the two key players, Morocco and Algeria, to reassess their positions, and this may eventually produce a compromise settlement.

Moroccan-Algerian diplomatic contacts--initiated well before the Mauritanian coup--have moved beyond the exploratory stage. Senior Moroccan and Algerian emissaries met in Paris in early August and in Brussels in late September. Mauritania has also established its own contacts with Algeria and the rebel Polisario Front.

Although these contacts are hopeful signs that a dialogue will continue, they do not assure a dramatic breakthrough. Moroccan allegations of Algerian aggression in southern Morocco in early October <sup>and Boumediene's illness</sup> ~~have temporarily soured the atmosphere for talks.~~ <sup>suspended</sup>

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Only protracted negotiations are likely to find a solution to the conflict over Western Sahara, which is part of a larger historic rivalry between Algiers and Rabat for preeminence in northwest Africa.

#### Moroccan Irredentism

Morocco bases its claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara on pre-colonial history, when Moroccan rulers intermittently exercised varying degrees of control over much of the area. The International Court of Justice, in an advisory opinion in October 1975 determined, however, that Moroccan and Mauritanian precolonial links with the area did not establish a tie of sovereignty.

Morocco considers its partition of Western Sahara with Mauritania in April 1976 irreversible. Morocco acquired the northern two-thirds, including the rich phosphate reserves at Bu Craa, and Mauritania gained control of a lucrative fishing industry at Dakhla and unexploited iron ore reserves at Agracha. Algeria considers the partition illegal, demands a referendum on self-determination, and gives substantial material support and sanctuary to the Polisario Front guerrillas.

The lack of internationally supervised consultations to determine the wishes of the territory's inhabitants, as called for in various UN General Assembly resolutions,

remains a contentious issue. Spain still holds that its transfer of administrative control under the Madrid Accords did not resolve the question of sovereignty, a matter that only the Saharan people could decide. Morocco argues that Saharans were consulted in February 1976 via the territorial assembly--a consultative body subservient to Rabat at the time--and again last year when Saharans participated in Moroccan regional elections. While Morocco's annexation and administration of its part of the territory seem to be regarded internationally as a fait accompli, recognition of Moroccan sovereignty there has been withheld.

#### Military Situation

The cease-fire against Mauritanian forces declared by the Polisario Front after the 10 July coup there is still holding. The focus of fighting is now in southern Morocco and the Moroccan portion of Western Sahara. Moroccan casualties have increased substantially above the estimated monthly average of 40 killed before the Mauritanian coup.

In response to alleged Algerian incursions into southern Morocco in late September-early October, King Hassan is said to have ordered retaliation in kind to any future attacks. The

difficulties of mounting such attacks may dissuade Hassan from following through against the Algerians. Moroccan armed forces operations in general continue to be hampered by low morale, logistic problems, and lack of effective air support.

### Negotiating Prospects

Some difficult compromises will be required from all participants if a peace settlement is to be reached. Morocco and Algeria will have to overcome deep-seated distrust of each other's intentions, and this fact alone argues against a quick solution.

Morocco, given its popular irredentist claim, will not compromise on the issue of its sovereignty in the northern two-thirds of Western Sahara or its control of the large reserves of high-grade phosphate rock around Bu Craa. It is highly unlikely to accept an independent Saharan ministate. Morocco has repeatedly stressed that it will not allow itself to be cut off from the rest of Africa by a Saharan state with borders that run from Algeria to the Atlantic.

Morocco might reluctantly agree to a rigged referendum for the Saharan people, but would insist that independence not be an option for its portion of Western Sahara. Morocco probably would accept, after much bargaining, a Saharan homeland in the Mauritanian portion federated with Mauritania.

Mauritania is the only party that can be counted on to be genuinely flexible. The new military-dominated government which recognizes that only a settlement will enable

it to get the economy moving again, gives first priority to an early end of the Saharan conflict. Mauritania is willing to withdraw from its portion of Western Sahara but is restrained from doing so by Morocco. The Mauritians almost certainly would agree to their sector becoming an autonomous Saharan state federated with Mauritania and probably would grant Saharans a proportional role in the central government.

Algeria's negotiating position is less easy to define. Algeria has no territorial claim in Western Sahara, although it has steadfastly maintained that it has political and security interests to protect. Boumediene seems unwilling to accept a Moroccan fait accompli in Western Sahara without some way of salvaging his own prestige. He is, however, a pragmatist and may think his chances of obtaining compromises now are greater than they will be later.

The Algerians might settle for less than an independent Saharan state if a controlled referendum were held that at least laid the basis for creating an autonomous region in the Mauritanian portion of Western Sahara. They would hope eventually to supplant Moroccan influence in such a federation with their own. In return for recognizing Moroccan sovereignty in the territory, Algeria probably would insist on limited local autonomy for the Saharans under Moroccan control.

SECRET

The Polisario Front will have to be dealt with to achieve a lasting settlement. Its militant leaders appear genuinely committed to a Saharan republic, and they will not easily be persuaded to accept anything less than an independent Western Sahara. They could not sustain the present level of military operations, however, without Algerian support.

The Polisario Front has an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 active guerrillas and a shadow government in exile recognized by 15 countries. The guerrillas also control the large Saharan refugee population in southwestern Algeria, which could range as high as 20,000 to 40,000--nearly a third to a half of the estimated population of Western Sahara in 1974.

Some of these exiles may be nomads from surrounding countries, but most probably are from Western Sahara. Three years of Algerian and Polisario indoctrination may have create a sense of national identity that will be difficult to satisfy in the future.

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Next 2 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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