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Intelligence**

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Western Sahara: Ramifications of Mauritanian Withdrawal and Moroccan Expansion

Interagency Intelligence Memorandum

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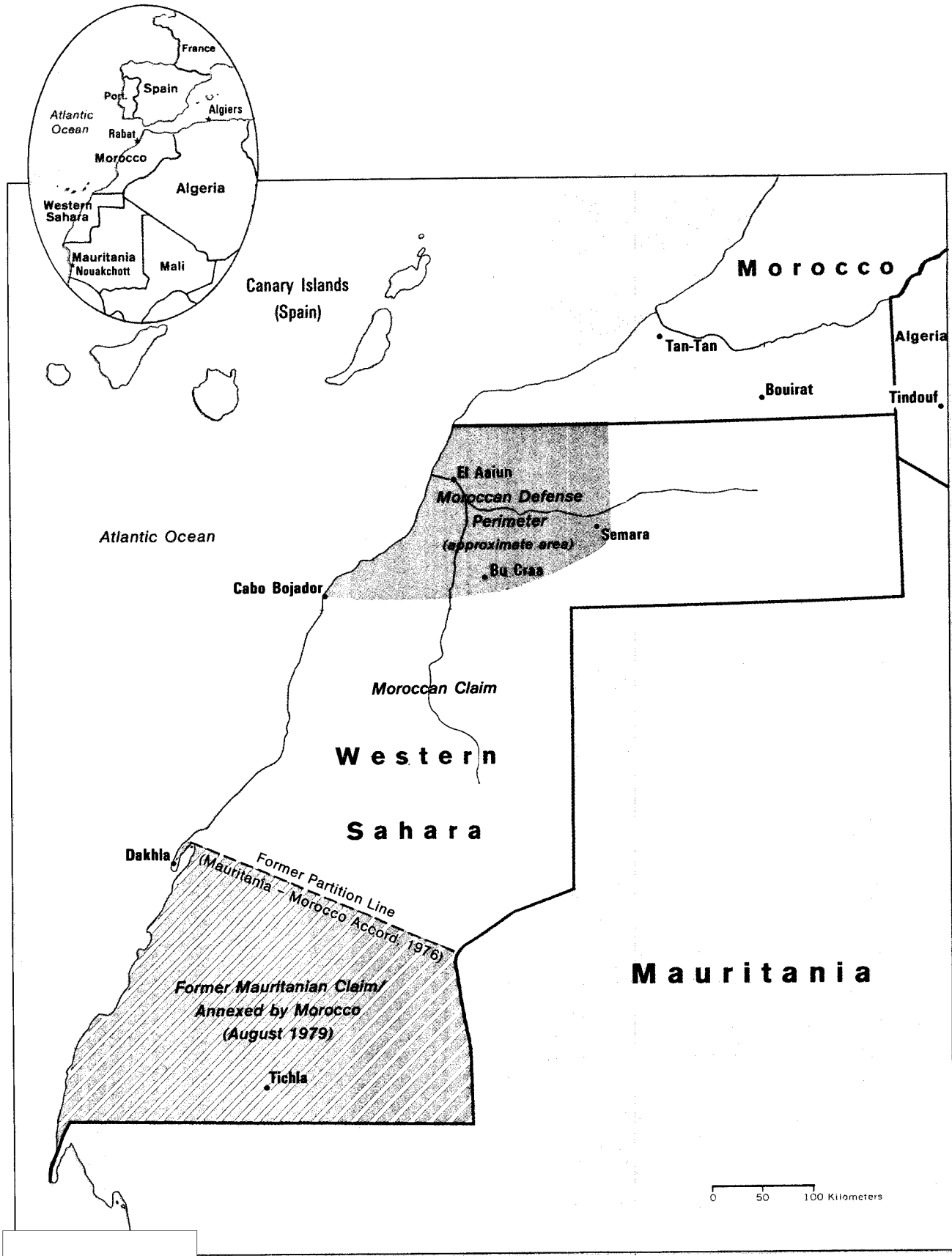
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WESTERN SAHARA:
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Information as of 30 August 1979
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Recent Developments

In August 1979 Morocco unilaterally annexed the southern portion of Western Sahara—the portion formerly claimed by Mauritania—and strengthened its military presence in the area.¹ These actions by Morocco followed Mauritania's signature on 5 August of a separate peace with the Algerian-backed Polisario Front and the vote against Morocco at the Organization of African Unity summit in mid-July. These political developments left the dispute more than ever a direct conflict between the two regional powers, Algeria and Morocco. The events also seriously undercut Morocco's diplomatic position, thus increasing the pressure on King Hassan to abandon his policy of temporizing in favor of more risky political or military strategies aimed at resolving the nearly four-year-old conflict.

Many Moroccans now believe that the Saharan war is responsible for their country's domestic difficulties²—inflation, heavy taxes, rising unemployment, and inadequate social spending—and a growing number are said to favor a confrontation with Algeria as a way to bring all parties to the negotiating table. Only King Hassan would make such a decision, and he is unlikely to be swayed by popular sentiment. Consideration by Moroccans of this relatively desperate strategy reflects their growing awareness that the tide of war in the Sahara has turned against Morocco as the Polisario's military successes and political strength have mounted. The Moroccans—who have roughly half of their more than 100,000-man military force dedicated to the Saharan problem—early this year withdrew the bulk of their forces to a defensive perimeter in the northwest of Western Sahara (see accompanying map), with the result that the Polisario Front—a total force estimated at 10,000 to 12,000—operates freely in large areas of the sparsely populated territory. The guerrillas in 1979 began for the first time to stage concentrated attacks on towns inside Morocco, and the frequency and intensity of these

Note: This memorandum was coordinated in substance at the working level by representatives of the NFIB agencies. It was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia.

¹ Morocco formally claimed sovereignty over the northern portion in April 1976.

attacks have increased since they first occurred in January. This has strained the Moroccan Army's defensive capabilities and intensified the deterioration of its military position. (See accompanying table for a comparison of Moroccan, Algerian, and Polisario military forces.)

Near-Term Possibilities

Several potential developments (or lack of developments) unwelcome to the United States are possible over the next six months:

- As part of Hassan's move to claim the former Mauritanian—southern—sector, Morocco may introduce a much larger military force into the area (so far, Moroccan troops are believed to be present only in Dakhla, the provincial capital, and in one or two other population centers). A large force would be able to secure the few towns and establish bases but—without a fundamental change in how they operate—the Moroccans would not be able to ensure effective Moroccan control over most of the area or defeat the guerrillas. The Moroccan occupation of the southern portion of Western Sahara has proved popular initially among Moroccans because it caters to Moroccan nationalism. However, if Morocco is unable quickly to gain the initiative, which seems unlikely, it will tax military resources and undermine military morale. It will also weaken Morocco's diplomatic and political position, because it gives the impression of Moroccan territorial hegemony and disregard for the call for self-determination. Hassan may hope to use his occupation of the territory as a bargaining chip during any negotiations, but the Polisario has repeatedly insisted it must control the entire Western Sahara.
- Hassan could provoke a military incident along Morocco's border with Algeria or initiate guerrilla-style operations inside Algeria itself—against Polisario and/or Algerian targets—as a way of forcing negotiations. Morocco has reportedly been training for several months a small force of Saharans to stage attacks on Algerian installations and personnel in reprisal for Polisario raids. Hassan would presumably hope that third-party mediation would follow such clashes and provide him a face-saving way to negotiate and make unpalatable concessions. This strategy

25X1

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Comparison of Military Forces

	Morocco	Algeria	Polisario Front
Personnel			
Army	95,000	90,000	10,000-12,000
Navy	4,200	4,000	0
Air Force (pilots/jet qualified)	7,000 (160/50)	10,000 (275/165)	0
Selected Armaments			
Medium tanks			0
Light tanks			0
Armored personnel carriers			0
Reconnaissance vehicles			Unknown
Artillery and mortars (over 100-mm)			Unknown
Antitank guided missile launchers			Unknown
Air defense artillery pieces			Unknown
Surface-to-air missiles			Unknown number of SA-7s
Jet fighters			0
Light bombers			0
Transports			0
Missile patrol boats			0
Attack helicopters			0
Foreign Military Advisers ²			
French			0
Soviet			0

² Not reflected in these figures is the presence of a Cuban medical unit and possibly a few Cuban advisers with the Polisario Front.

25X1

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would risk full-scale war with Algeria. We have at this time no evidence that Hassan has made preparations for a military incident, that he seeks wider hostilities with Algeria, or even that he is preparing to implement his oft-repeated threats of hot pursuit of the guerrillas into Algeria. Hassan has in fact recently adopted a conciliatory posture toward Algeria, even promising not to stage attacks on Polisario sanctuaries inside Algeria.

— Increased Moroccan pressures against Mauritania are likely. The Moroccans have signaled that they would like to see the Polisario resolve its claims at the expense of Mauritania. Moroccan efforts to encourage pro-Moroccan elements to destabilize the regime in Nouakchott may be under way, and it seems likely that the Algerians and perhaps Libyans will take countermeasures to support the present Mauritanian regime. Both the Polisario and the Moroccans seem likely to use Mauritanian territory in their ongoing struggle, and Morocco especially may decide to invoke its long-declared "right of pursuit" by making incursions into Mauritania.

— The Polisario Front is likely to mount progressively more frequent assaults on Moroccan forces inside Morocco, as the guerrillas, bolstered by the conviction that time and events are on their side and having made peace with Mauritania, concentrate on the Moroccan target. Although designed primarily to keep the military initiative, the Polisario attacks will also further undermine Moroccan military morale and probably force Hassan in time to abandon his present conciliation of Algeria.

— A negotiated settlement is very unlikely unless Hassan makes major concessions and until Algeria becomes more receptive than heretofore in searching for areas of compromise. There is no evidence that the Polisario or Algeria will soften their fundamental demands, and it is uncertain just how far Hassan will go in offering concessions. He has thus far limited his public moves to bilateral gestures toward Algeria. The King's present unwillingness to make substantial concessions is based primarily on his calculation that such a move could fatally undermine his authority at home; our assessment is that these risks are

SECRET

grave, but are now at least equally balanced by the serious risks of failing to disengage from the Sahara. Either way, his throne is in jeopardy.

- The outlook for effective mediation in the near term by outside parties—such as the Organization of African Unity, France, Spain, Saudi Arabia, or Senegal—is not promising. The European parties continually work behind the scenes to protect their own positions, and have expressed willingness in principle to become publicly involved, but not unless Morocco or Algeria or both moderate their demands. The Saudis and the Senegalese have been more active recently in exploring the possibilities for a negotiated settlement, but thus far without result. The United States has always eschewed such a role on the grounds that the likelihood of failure would only worsen its relations with the contenders and also to avoid introducing a superpower element into the equation. These concerns remain valid. In any event, Algeria and Morocco have always been in contact whenever either had anything to say; so substance rather than communication remains the issue.
- Hassan may continue to seek stopgap solutions despite the seeming need to act boldly and choose between the only two real alternatives that might buy him a significant amount of time—vigorous military operations or a successful peace effort. Once the temporary domestic political gains realized by the occupation of the southern zone pass, Hassan's temporizing will fuel domestic criticism and increase the possibility of a popular backlash as Polisario attacks on Morocco continue. A backlash will be especially likely with the normal increase in student and labor unrest in the fall and with the diplomatic setbacks expected at the nonaligned and UN General Assembly meetings.
- A military coup is possible in Morocco. A number of Moroccan military officers at junior and middle levels already are reported to be upset with alleged incompetence in the military leadership and to favor abandoning the war even if it means ceding Morocco's claim to the Polisario. On the other hand, those "hawks" at all levels of the military who favor more vigorous action against Algeria are also unhappy as a result of the restraints Hassan has placed on the military—restraints imposed and maintained as protection against coup attempts such as occurred in the

early 1970s. These restraints imposed by the King have been in the form of structural reorganization of the armed forces that militates against operational flexibility and individual initiative.

- Libya almost certainly will continue its recent efforts to expand its limited role in the dispute. Although Libya will not supplant Algeria as the principal backer of the Polisario, its involvement is likely to continue to increase the flow of arms to the guerrillas, reinforce their reluctance to negotiate, and further strain relations between pro-Algerian and pro-Libyan elements of the group's leadership.

Political Problems for the United States

Recent developments in the Western Sahara conflict and most foreseeable subsequent scenarios virtually ensure increased difficulty for the US Government in preserving good relations with all parties to the dispute. The most immediate difficulty for the United States is likely to arise in protecting its relations with Morocco as the King begins to seek scapegoats for his declining fortunes in Western Sahara. The provision of additional US arms to Rabat will become more important to the Moroccans as they experience escalated guerrilla attacks on their positions in Western Sahara and in Morocco itself, and as they become more anxious about possible conflict with Algeria. This issue will transcend the purely Saharan context and become for the Moroccans an even more important test of the degree of support the United States will give an ally. We see no evidence that either the provision or the withholding of US arms will be the determining factor in any decision by Hassan to make significant concessions in negotiations or to seek a military solution to the conflict.³ Perceptions of US willingness to support Hassan would strengthen his position internally, although for how long is uncertain. Such support would not sustain the King indefinitely if the war wore on. The question of third-country perceptions of US support for a friend is also a factor. While most African countries would be opposed to stepped-up military support, the Saudis and the French, as well as the Senegalese, recently have strongly urged Washington to provide arms to Hassan.

Any successor regime in Morocco probably would not be as pro-Western and responsive to US interests as

³ Moreover, we continue to believe that no amount of additional military equipment without significant decentralization and reorganization of the armed forces will reverse the decline in Morocco's ability to control or defeat the Polisario militarily.

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Hassan's, and almost certainly would move toward a nonaligned foreign policy. A new Moroccan government might well step up the country's already expanding economic contacts with the USSR, and perhaps consider seriously a renewed military supply relationship with the Soviets. Under foreseeable circumstances, the Soviets over the next six months are unlikely to alter their own policy of avoiding direct involvement in the dispute, not wishing to jeopardize their economic stake in good relations with Morocco.

The United States, as it tries to remain neutral in the dispute while preventing further strains in ties with Morocco, will also find it difficult to avoid jeopardizing its relations with Algeria and ultimately with any independent Saharan state that might emerge. Algerian President Bendjedid is apparently no less determined to pursue the Saharan conflict than his predecessor. Although he appears more flexible and pragmatic in some other areas and seeks improved relations with the United States, there is not likely to be progress toward closer ties if Algeria perceives increased US identification with Moroccan aims in Western Sahara, especially through expanded arms sales. Moreover, the sale of controversial items—OV-

10 armed reconnaissance aircraft and Cobra helicopters—would introduce new strains in US-Algerian relations.

Pressure will increase on the United States to deal more directly with the Polisario Front as that group wins increased Arab, African, and other international backing. Failure of the United States to match growing European willingness to deal with the Polisario risks prejudicing future US relations with that group and denying Washington the opportunity to influence its orientation. Any US move toward recognizing or dealing with the Polisario, of course, will further encumber US-Moroccan relations.

Relations between the United States and Mauritania are unlikely to be adversely affected by Mauritania's withdrawal from the Saharan conflict. Although in theory the withdrawal would seem to promote the principal US interest in Mauritania—the country's stability and territorial integrity—over the longer term, regional tensions arising out of the Saharan dispute, continued Moroccan-Polisario fighting, and expanded Polisario territorial claims will continue to threaten Mauritania.

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