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SUBJECT: The Western Sahara Conflict: The Stalemate  
Continues [ ]

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NESA M#86-20168

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

17 November 1986

The Western Sahara Conflict: The Stalemate Continues 

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## Summary

The dispute over the Western Sahara shows no sign of a diplomatic or military solution. Although Morocco, Algeria, and the Algerian-backed Polisario guerrillas all publicly support a negotiated settlement, none are ready to make the compromises necessary to end the war. During the past two years Morocco has improved its military position, but Algeria continues to hold the upper hand diplomatically. Domestic factors alone probably are not enough to encourage Morocco or Algeria to intensify the fighting. The most immediate danger to both is that the other will seek outside help, or attempt to include Mauritania in the battle zone, in order to break the deadlock. Such developments would heighten the risks of direct conflict between Algeria and Morocco and complicate efforts by Washington to expand ties with both countries.

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Eleven years of combat between Moroccan troops and Algerian-backed Polisario insurgents for control of the Western Sahara has produced a stalemate. We believe military activity is at the lowest level in years. The primary reason for the reduced activity is that Rabat has completed the seventh portion of an earthen berm. The berm has helped King Hassan to consolidate his hold on two-thirds of the former Spanish colony, including all of the economically-useful territory. The berms give Moroccan troops a shield for static defense. The guerrillas have engaged

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This memorandum was prepared by   
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 Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of  
 17 November 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and  
 comments should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division,

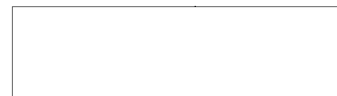
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[redacted]

in only periodic, small-scale raids, which have cost both sides only a handful of casualties and no change in territorial position. [redacted]

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We believe that Morocco's strategy has enabled it to control the region, but not to pursue an all-out military victory. Although King Hassan fields about 80,000 troops in the region against the Polisario's 3,000 combatants, we believe that the Polisario, with Algerian support, is capable of maintaining or expanding the current level of fighting. Algeria provides sanctuary and economic aid for Polisario troops, the Sahrawi refugees aiding the insurgents, and the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic (SDAR)--the Polisario government-in-exile. Algiers also gives the insurgents an impressive array of weapons. [redacted]

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The dispute also is at a political impasse. No major diplomatic initiative has been launched by either side in nearly two years. In early 1985, Algeria made a proposal that would give Morocco sovereignty over the territory, but allow the SDAR a high degree of autonomy. Earlier this year, UN mediators engaged Moroccan and SDAR diplomats in "proximity talks" in New York. They based their initiative on a call by King Hassan last fall for a unilateral ceasefire and a renewed commitment to a referendum that would decide the status of the Western Sahara.

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[redacted]

[redacted] The talks have foundered, however, primarily because the two sides cannot agree upon the terms of the ceasefire and a political solution. [redacted]

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## The Goals of the Adversaries

### Morocco

We believe that the driving force behind King Hassan's prosecution of the war is a strong national commitment to the cause. Most Moroccans support the King's goal of incorporating the region. According to the US Consul in Casablanca, Moroccans believe the war is an attempt by Algeria to dominate the Western Sahara, as well as extend its influence in the Maghreb, and that King Hassan should pursue the conflict until Rabat's goals are achieved. The war also imposes relatively limited burdens for Morocco. We believe the war probably costs at least a half-million dollars each day, a price the regime has sustained without deterioration in urban living standards. Although the desert conditions impose hardships on the troops, pay differentials and other benefits have precluded widespread military dissatisfaction with their assignment. [redacted]

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## Algeria

Algiers, for its part, believes that Hassan's control over the territory would mean Moroccan dominance of the Maghreb. Algeria originally supported total independence for the Western Sahara, but President Bendjedid has revised Algiers' official position because of Moroccan military gains, the decline in Algerian oil revenues, and the burden of supporting Polisario refugees. His new objective--as suggested in his 1985 initiative--appears to be a face-saving formula involving a semi-independent Western Saharan state under a Moroccan flag.

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## The Polisario Front

The Polisario lacks the military strength to attain independence. Bendjedid's publicly announced willingness to accept less than total independence for the Western Sahara and his limits on Polisario military activity have created tension within the anti-Moroccan alliance. The Polisario hope to regain the military initiative by adopting more aggressive tactics, including use of armor in engagements, commando raids behind the lines, and even terrorism against Moroccan interests.

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## Outlook

### Diplomatic Initiatives

In our view, the chances of a negotiated settlement in the next 3-5 years are dim. Only a major change in players in Rabat would cause us to revise this judgment. There are no indications that King Hassan and President Bendjedid are prepared to hold a summit or even authorize low-level meetings. As long as King Hassan has the upper hand militarily, he will not agree readily to substantive discussions with Algeria, let alone with the Polisario. Third party mediation by the UN also has proven feckless, and this organization is not likely to come up with a solution amenable to both sides any time soon.

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### Military Initiatives

Both sides want to avoid a situation in which Algeria will become a full participant in the war. King Hassan is likely to continue his current strategy, since it has proven successful. We do not see any domestic problems in the short term that would require him to reconsider his tactics. Nevertheless, there are several potential developments which could lead the King to become more aggressive:

--If outsiders, such as Libya, were becoming involved, particularly if linked to the Polisario's devising tactics of penetrating the berms;

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--A sharp decline in the Moroccan economy, prompting Rabat to beat the war drums to head off any widespread unrest over declining living standards; and

--A sustained campaign of Polisario commando or terrorist raids deep inside Moroccan territory.

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Algeria is likely to continue supporting the war at its current level because of shortages of funds due to declining oil revenues and uncertainty over military strategy in confronting the berm. Nonetheless, Bendjedid also may have little choice but to take a more aggressive posture if:

--Algerian frustrations build over the lack of progress toward a negotiated settlement;

--Elements opposed to Bendjedid's policy of "moderation" gain greater influence in the Algerian military or ruling party; and

--A domestic and international perception develops that Morocco, through the war, was gaining the upper hand in the Maghreb.

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#### Foreign Intervention

The absence of progress toward a negotiated settlement increases the potential for foreign intervention as a means to break the stalemate. Although we have no firm evidence that Morocco and Algeria are seeking foreign assistance, the breakup of the Moroccan-Libyan union raises the possibility of renewed Libyan involvement in the conflict.

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In our view, Algeria probably will allow Libya to resume aid to the Polisario because of Algiers' own economic problems and the burden of supporting the conflict. Although the Polisario could press Algeria to accept increased military aid from Libya, Algiers would not allow Tripoli to impose military and diplomatic strategy on the Polisario. Libya probably will be willing to accommodate Algiers, in hope of building closer ties with Algeria. Tripoli's support to the Polisario also would signal Qadhafi's displeasure over Hassan's abrogation of the Moroccan-Libyan union. Nevertheless, because of his own financial problems and interest in maintaining ties with Morocco, Qadhafi is likely to provide less sophisticated weapons than the armor and SAM equipment he sent to the Polisario in the early phases of the war.

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Morocco almost certainly would use resumed Libyan support to the Polisario involvement to pressure France and the United States to join in the fray. If Hassan is dissatisfied with the response from Paris and Washington, he might look to

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Israel. Algeria already believes--erroneously in our judgment--that the Israelis are supporting Morocco militarily in the Western Sahara as a result of the meeting between Hassan and former Prime Minister Peres last summer. [ ]

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Morocco and Algeria may also attempt to change the status quo by expanding the geographic scope of the war into Mauritania. That country represents the "soft underbelly" of the Western Sahara war, given lack of control by Nouakchott over its northern frontier. Both countries could try to bring Mauritania, which currently is neutral, into its sphere of influence. Algeria and the Polisario see northern Mauritania as a convenient base of operations for expanded attacks on Moroccan forces. For Algiers, such an option would avoid the danger of Moroccan "hot pursuit" into Algerian territory and a major military clash. At the same time, Hassan could use hot pursuit into Mauritania to satisfy demands within his own military to respond aggressively to Polisario assaults. [ ]

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A less likely possibility is an attempt by Bendjedid to influence President Taya in Nouakchott to allow the Polisario to base its forces in northern Mauritania. If Hassan perceived that Bendjedid was following this course, he too might attempt to undermine Taya's regime. Rabat's reluctance to go this route would be based on the likelihood of Algerian intervention. Hassan almost certainly is aware that Algiers would justify such a move under the joint defense provisions of its Treaty of Fraternity and Concord with Mauritania. [ ]

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#### Prospects for US Interests

Continuation of the current stalemate allows Washington the breathing room necessary to expand ties with Algeria and develop a more balanced relationship with the principal players in the Maghreb. Hassan would like to have the full support of the United States for its position in the dispute, but he probably will be satisfied with Washington's neutrality. Hassan nonetheless wants further US military aid, in particular armor and trucks. In the unlikely event that Algerian intervention in the conflict turned the tide of war against Morocco, Hassan almost certainly would increase his pressure on Washington for more sophisticated weapons, such as the F-16 fighter aircraft. Moroccan acquisition of the F-16 would have a limited effect on the war, however, because of Algeria's overwhelming superiority in the air. To the extent that Washington is not responsive to Moroccan needs, Hassan would turn to France. [ ]


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Algerian-US relations are not likely to be affected by the Western Sahara conflict, unless Algiers perceives a significant increase in US military assistance to Rabat is responsible for a more aggressive Moroccan posture. In such a case, Algiers almost certainly would insist that Washington restrain Hassan or risk a

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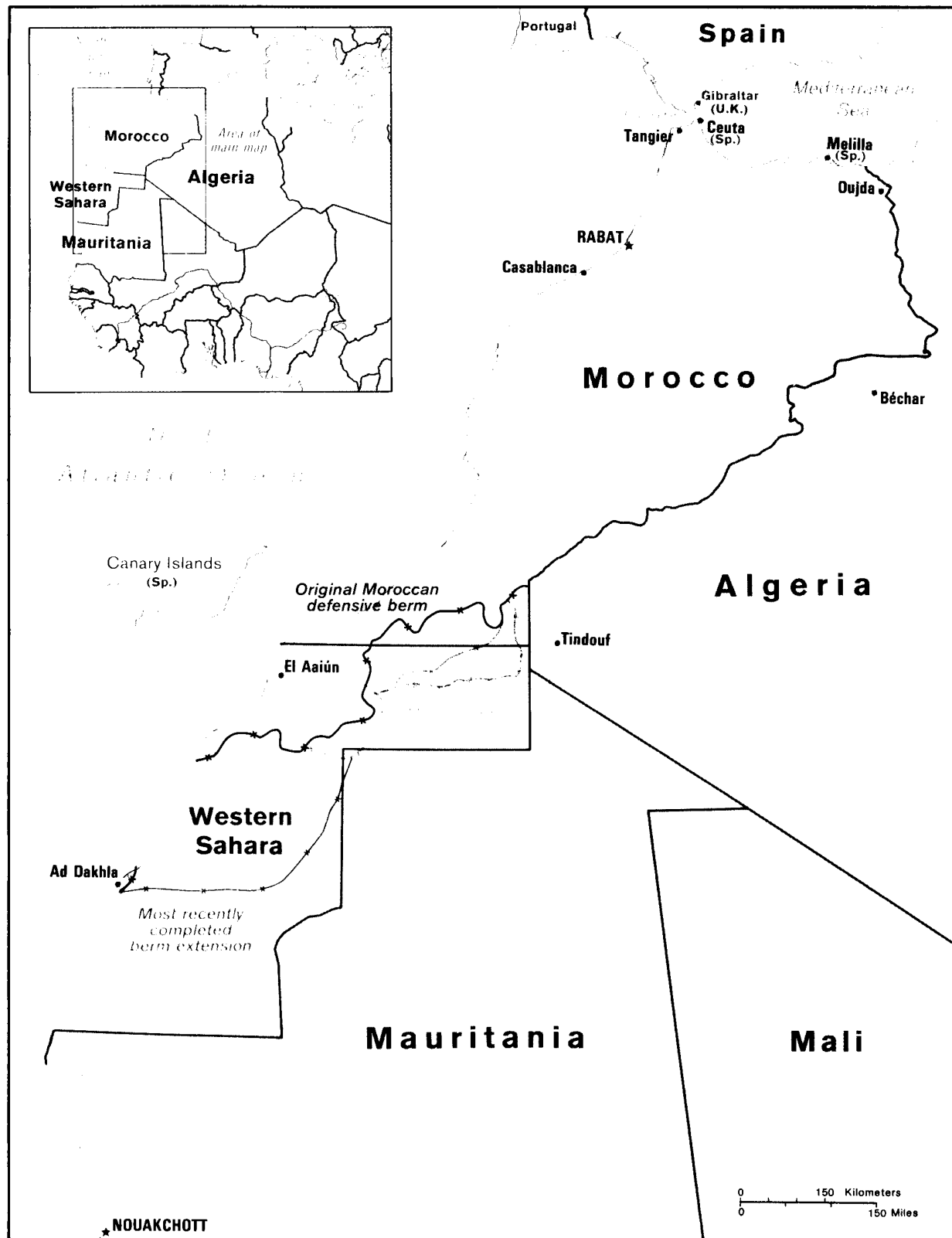
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rupture in US-Algerian cooperation. Algiers could also use increased US support for Morocco as justification for giving the Polisario freer rein to attack Moroccan positions along the berm or civilian targets inside Morocco. 

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