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**THE OCCUPATION OF WESTERN SAHARA  
BY MOROCCO AND MAURITANIA**

With the myriad of post-colonial conflicts that have and continue to afflict the African continent, it is seldom known that the longest running of these is that between Morocco and the Polisario Front on Western Sahara. The objective of this article to examine the roots of the conflict and provide some information about the occupation of Western-Sahara in 1975.

The crisis over Western Sahara started in the early 1970s when Spain was forced to announce plans to withdraw from the territory it had effectively occupied since 1934.

Both Morocco and Mauritania lodged claims to those parts of the territory they had occupied, considering them to have been part of their countries well before the Spanish occupation. To these two countries therefore, their move was one of ‘recovery’ rather than ‘occupation’.<sup>1</sup>

The main causes of the conflict in Western Sahara may be encapsulated broadly in three interrelated categories: politics, economy and geopolitics.

The political aspect relates to the Moroccan ideology of “Greater Morocco” which in the early 1960s, in defiance of the principle of *uti possidetis juris* (inviolability or sanctity of the borders inherited from the colonial era), espoused the idea of a greater pre-colonial Morocco extending over the territory of the Spanish Sahara, parts of present-day Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Senegal.<sup>2</sup> Mauritania’s involvement in the conflict was precisely due to the fear of its government that, after occupying Western Sahara, Morocco would continue its march southwards and eventually annex Mauritania as well.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Brownlie, Ian R. Burns: African boundaries a legal and diplomatic encyclopaedia p. 443

<sup>2</sup> Virginia McLean Thompson–Richard Adloff: The Western Saharans. Background to Conflict. p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Brownlie, Ian R. Burns: African boundaries a legal and diplomatic encyclopaedia p. 147

The second theme (the economic one) relates to the abundant natural resources of the Western Sahara. In particular, the discovery of significant phosphate deposits in the Bucraa region in the early 1940s triggered heightened interest in the territory from both Spain and then Morocco. Equally important are the rich fishing grounds off the Western Saharan coast, which were exploited illegally first by Spain (until its accession to the European Community (EC) in 1986) and then by the European Union.

It is also thought that the Territory has great potential in terms of commercial oil and gas reserves. Moroccan dealings in these resources led the United Nations Security Council in 2002 to request a legal opinion on the issue. In its opinion, UN legal counsel affirmed that any further exploration or exploitation of these resources would be illegal if it proceeded in disregard of the interests and wishes of the Sahrawi people and without consultation with their legitimate representative, the Polisario Front.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, mention should be made of the international context at the time, particularly the Cold War, when the US and France joined hands to prevent the emergence of an independent state in Western Sahara. To this end, they exerted pressure on Spain, at a time when the Generalissimo Franco was on his deathbed, to hand over the Territory to Morocco.<sup>5</sup> It is pertinent to recall, in this context, the position adopted by former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who, in a recently declassified document of the State Department of 11 November 1975, revealed that he was afraid that “Hassan [King of Morocco] may be overthrown if he does not get a success” in Western Sahara.<sup>6</sup> In effect, the stability of the friendly Alaouite monarchy in Morocco – which is structurally weak in the absence of real political legitimacy – constituted the Western powers’ main reason for defending and supporting the indefensible *fait accompli* – Morocco’s illegal annexation of Western Sahara.

At the request of the UN General Assembly, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a legal opinion on Western Sahara on 16 October 1975 in which it clearly established that:

The materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity.<sup>7</sup> Thus the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of General Assembly resolution

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<sup>4</sup> Bernan Press: Yearbook of The United Nations 2002, p. 209-210

<sup>5</sup> C. R. Pennel Morocco since 1830 a history p. 338

<sup>6</sup> Gerald J. Bender, James Smoot Coleman, Richard L. Sklar: African crisis areas and U.S. foreign policy p. 263

<sup>7</sup> Ian Brownlie, Ian R. Burns: African boundaries a legal and diplomatic encyclopaedia p. 157-158

1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory. Shortly after the release of this opinion, King Hassan II of Morocco ordered the so-called “Green March” to invade the territory of Spanish Sahara. This march was finally set in motion on 6 November 1975 after Moroccan armed forces had already advanced and penetrated the northern part of the Territory on 31 October. In response, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 380 (1975) of 6 November 1975, in which it “deplored” the holding of the march and called upon Morocco “to withdraw from the Territory of Western Sahara and all the participants in the march”.

On 14 November 1975, a secret deal (also known as the Madrid Tripartite Agreement) was signed in Madrid between the governments of Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, whereby Spain agreed to institute a temporary tripartite administration in the Territory, including representatives of Morocco, Mauritania and Spain. The agreement was evidently null and void, in terms of Article 53 of the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, as it violated the United Nations Charter and various resolutions of the UN Security Council and General Assembly. To persist in their defiance of international law, Morocco and Mauritania signed an agreement on 14 April 1976 in which they partitioned and annexed Western Sahara – the northern part going to Morocco and the southern part to Mauritania.

During the period of “Madrid negotiations” the units of the Spanish Foreign Legion, the Spanish Naval Infantry, Airborne, and Police units in the city of El Aaiun surrounded the districts where locals lived and started collecting weapons and arrested those who demanded independence. Local soldiers serving the Spanish (Troopas Nomadas, Policia Territorial and members of the Spanish Legion) were disarmed and disbanded. The Governor of the territory took discriminatory measures against the local people, e.g. he prohibited petrol stations from selling petrol to the local people. The Spanish military leadership set down immediately to work out the Golondrina evacuation plan of the civil population then they reinforced the defence of phosphate mines, important buildings and they started evacuating the garrisons in the desert.<sup>8</sup>

By 8<sup>th</sup> November more than 12,000 civilians had been evacuated from the territory by sea and air to the Canary Islands. Spanish merchants sold their shops with stocks and state-run schools were closed down because of the lack of teachers. The Spanish even transported their animals from the zoo to Almeria, exhumed their relatives buried in local cemeteries and transported the remains to the Canary Islands, where they reburied them. So by the time the parties

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Hodges; *The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrance Hill & Company, 1983.) p. 218.

announced the Madrid Accords, there had been no Spanish citizens in the Territory of once Spanish Sahara except for the armed forces and civil servants.

On 12<sup>th</sup> November leader of Polisario Front El-Vali announced that the Madrid Accords are considered null (15<sup>th</sup> November), while independently of this King Hassan II announced on 15<sup>th</sup> November that he had closed the Western Sahara file and appointed Ahmed Bensouda Governor of the territory in El-Aaiun. As for Polisario the King stated that their leaders were unable to pull together the almost 60,000 Saharawians and they could stage actions only with the help of mercenaries who were unable to fight a desert war against the well-trained Moroccans. This is why the organisation itself did not pose any threat to the state of Morocco. He made this statement being aware of the fact that the approximately 2,500 local troops and policemen previously hired by the Spanish joined Polisario with their weapons.<sup>9</sup>

In the UN camp in Megarities Mehdi, one of the cooks who had been member of the Territorial Police in El-Aaiun joined the rebels together with the others after the retreat of the Spanish. According to him the Spanish let them down and he would have still served them if they had not retreated.

Many more of the soldiers like him serving now in Polisario units but who used to serve with the Spanish Legion, with the Saharan nomad troops or the local police before, applied for a rent of merit to the Spanish Government. In accordance with the current negotiations the Spanish government would pay service rent to all those who had served at least 10 years in any of the armed units established and led by Spain.

Subsequently, the Moroccan military started their entry into Western Sahara and Spain announced that in a couple of months they would end civil administration on the territory. (only Franco could have protested because of the Moroccan occupation but he died on 20<sup>th</sup> November) The situation was further complicated by the fact that on 28<sup>th</sup> November in Guelta the Jemma dissolved itself in spite of the fact that according to the three-party agreement the council was intended to play a significant role in settling the situation.<sup>10</sup>

A delegation of people living in former Spanish Sahara held a press conference organised by Polisario in Algiers on 6<sup>th</sup> December. The Deputy President of Jemma together with 56 other representatives were also part of the delegation (three of them were also members of the Spanish Parliament, the Cortes). The Secretary General of Jemma declared their joint proclamation on the dissolution of the Council and the establishment of the 41-strong Saharawian

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<sup>9</sup> Tony Hodges; *The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrance Hill & Company, 1983.) p. 230.

<sup>10</sup> UN Document S/11902, December 10, 1975.

Interim National Council. The statement was signed by the 67 members of Jemma as well as by several tribal leaders.<sup>11</sup>

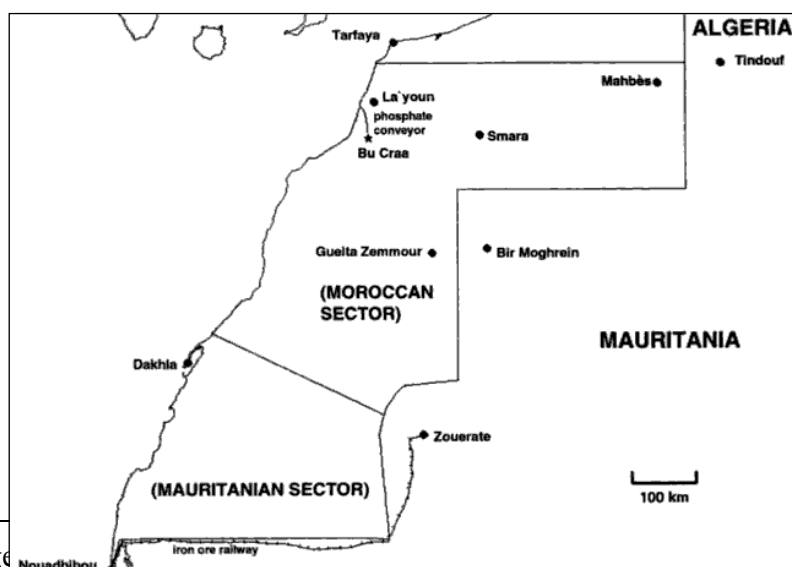
Since the Madrid Accords recognized Jemma as the official representative of the Saharawians, by dissolving the Council the Saharawians deprived Morocco of the possibility to use the organization for its own purposes and the other signatories of the Accords were also put into an embarrassing situation.

*"The views of the Saharan population, expressed through Jemma, will be respected."* Article 3 (18)

It was under these circumstances that on 10<sup>th</sup> December the UN passed two resolutions that partly contradicted each other.<sup>12</sup>

The first Resolution (3458/A) reiterated the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara already present in previous resolutions, which stated that Spain and the UN are responsible for decolonizing the territory.<sup>13</sup> The resolution was passed with 86 votes for, 41 abstentions and no votes against.

The second Resolution (3458/B) acknowledged the three party Madrid Accords and called on the signatories to ensure respect for the freely expressed aspirations of the Saharan population. At the same time it requested the Secretary General to appoint a representative who would supervise the free referendum.<sup>14</sup> The situation in this case was not as clear as in the previous one because 56 countries voted for the resolution, 42 against it and 34 abstained. By the time the resolutions were passed, a significant part of Western Sahara was occupied by the Moroccans.



<sup>11</sup> Tony Hodges (1983.) p. 234-235.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Hodges; *The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrance Hill & Company, 1983.) p. 235-237.

<sup>13</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 3458A (XXX), in *Yearbook of the United Nations*, Vol. 28, 1975, p. 188-189.

<sup>14</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 3458A (XXX), in *Yearbook of the United Nations*, Vol. 28, 1975, p. 189-190.

*Source: C. R. Pennel: Morocco since 1830 a history, p. 341*

On the map you can see the territory divided between the Moroccan and Mauritanian governments in the Madrid Accords.

A part of the Sahara territories was occupied by the end of November 1975 by the Moroccan army.<sup>15</sup> The invasion forces in cooperation with the withdrawing Spanish army started the occupation of the area from two separate directions.

The objective of the units advancing along the coast line was to capture El-Aaiun and the phosphate mines at Bou Craa. According to the first official reports the Moroccan forces penetrated Western Sahara 100 kilometres deep and on 28<sup>th</sup> November the second largest settlement, Smara was also taken.<sup>16</sup>

In less than a month a 25,000-strong contingent, that is one third of the Moroccan Army, was stationed in the occupied Sahara territories. 15,000 troops deployed in the Saguia El-Hamra garrisons (Farsia, Jdiriya, Haousa, Smara), 5,000 men in El-Aaiun, and another 5,000 soldiers were stationed near the southern borders of former Spanish Sahara. The offensive went simultaneously with a mass migration of the population.<sup>17</sup>

On 11<sup>th</sup> December Moroccan units captured El-Aaiun (there was Polisario resistance only in a few places although on 12<sup>th</sup> December a minor unit attacked the Moroccan troops in the town), while Mauritanian forces, launching their offensive occupied La Guerra, then Tichla.

By the end of December the Spanish forces had gradually withdrawn from the town, on 28<sup>th</sup> December the airfield was handed over, then on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1976 the last of their soldiers left former Spanish Sahara when Villa Cisneros was abandoned.

Afterwards there were only 150 Spanish civil servants in El-Aaiun in order to implement and supervise the smooth handover of the public administration of the area. The last Spanish citizen who left the town in late February 1976 was Colonel Rafael de Veldes Iglesias and thus the Kingdom of Spain ceased to be a factor in Western Sahara.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> David J. Dean: *The Air Force Role in Low-intensity Conflict*. p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Lawles–Laila Monahan: *War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict*. p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 229-230.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 230.

Local soldiers made redundant from Spanish military service joined their previous enemy, Polisario, and established Sahara Liberation Army for fighting Moroccan troops (SLA).<sup>19</sup> In spite of the fact that ill-armed Western Saharans tried mostly to defend (and evacuate civil population), one of their minor units attacked the Mauritanian town of Zuerat as early as 29 December. The town, also a mining centre, is located in 400 kilometres from the capital deep in the desert. During the attack the infrastructure of the mine was damaged but the town itself was not occupied although it was defended only by 60 Mauritanian troops. At that time the Mauritanian army had merely some 3,000 trained soldiers, 2,000 gendarmes, and a few obsolete fighter planes, which made its units an easy target for Saharawian guerrillas, constantly harassing them. Former foreign legion fortress famous Ait Ben Tili, surrounded by Saharawian units, was also defended by Mauritanian forces. In order to help out defenders in dire straits President Ould Daddah requested combat planes from the Moroccan Air Force.

However, not even the Air Force was able to bring relief to the fortress; moreover one of the Moroccan Northrop F-5s was downed by the guerrillas. Finally, the fortress was captured by Polisario troops on 21<sup>st</sup> January.<sup>20</sup>

In the following days insurgents attacked the towns of Bir Moghreïn and Inal but despite the huge damage inflicted they were unable to capture them because of the concerted counterattacks of the Mauritanian army.

With French assistance the Mauritanian forces were reorganised and in the third week of December launched a counteroffensive near the border with Western Sahara. After a short but bloody battle they took the town of La Guerra and started to push back Polisario fighters and their civil supporters from the area (19<sup>th</sup> December).<sup>21</sup> On the next day Tichla fell but Argoub, a small town near Villa Cisneros was captured only on 11<sup>th</sup> January after a two-week-long siege. The roughly 200 soldiers and civilians defending the town fought until the very last bullet and the Mauritians managed to take only a few prisoners – seriously wounded soldiers – as the majority of defenders had gotten killed during the battle. Since that time Saharawians had had only one option – to flee.<sup>22</sup>

The refugees went first to the northern area of Western Sahara bordering Mauritania (Amgala, Guelta-Zemmour, Oum Dreïga, Tifariti, etc.), then they were evacuated to Algeria with the assistance of the Algerian Army.<sup>23</sup> Besides

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<sup>19</sup> John Damis: Conflict in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Dispute. p. 70-71.

<sup>20</sup> Tony Hodges: The Roots of a Desert War. p. 230-231.

<sup>21</sup> John Mercer: The Sahrawis of Western Sahara. p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Hodges: The Roots of a Desert War. p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> John Damis: Conflict in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Dispute. p. 42.

providing transportation to the refugees Algeria also supplied weapons, food, drinking water, and medicine to Saharawian soldiers.<sup>24</sup>

As early as that time the first cracks in the Moroccan-Mauritanian Alliance appeared because the Moroccans were worried that the Mauritanian troops could not take Villa Cisneros on time and entered the town under the command of Colonel Dlimi. A Moroccan garrison was established there in spite of the fact that in accordance with the Madrid Agreement the town would be controlled by the Mauritians. Although a Mauritanian administrative centre was set up in the town the real power was represented by Morocco.<sup>25</sup>

On 27<sup>th</sup> January 1976 Moroccan military units attacked an Algerian convoy at Amgala (first Amgala battle) and the Algerian troops withdrew after a several days battle, as they had suffered heavy casualties.<sup>26</sup>

Thanks to its significant water supply Amgala is a very important place in the Saguia el-Hamra valley, where a Polisario logistic base was established with Algerian support. Refugees were provided with food and medicaments from this place and they were also further transported to safe havens in Algerian territories. The unexpected Moroccan attack inflicted heavy damage to the Algerians and 99 of their soldiers were captured.<sup>27</sup> The furious Algerian High Command demanded an immediate retaliation and the breakout of a war between the two countries were prevented by the bold and decisive action of Algerian President Boumedien. From that time the Algerian leadership increased its material support to the rebels but held back its troops from further clashes.<sup>28</sup>

The retaliation came fairly soon – between 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> February Polisario units defeated Moroccan troops in the second Amgala battle.

As for the balance of power Moroccan and Mauritanian troops had superiority although the combat worthiness of the Mauritanian units equipped with French weapons and trained by French specialists was rather low.<sup>29</sup> The rebel forces consisted of a few thousand volunteers equipped with small arms, mortars, and some antitank missiles and SAMs from the Algerian and Libyan armies.<sup>30</sup> As the performance of the Moroccan troops in the desert was far from what King Hassan II had expected from them the Moroccan Air Force raided the refugee camps in order to put an end to war as soon as possible. From 22<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Norrie Macqueen: *United Nations Peacekeeping in Africa Since 1960*. p. 237.

<sup>25</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 231.

<sup>26</sup> Toby Shelley: *Endgame in the Western Sahara*. p. 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Lawles–Laila Monahan: *War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict*. p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> David J. Dean: *The Air Force Role in Low-intensity Conflict*. p. 35-36.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Lawles–Laila Monahan: *War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict*. p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman: *A Tragedy of Arms, Military and Security Developments in the Maghreb*. p. 59.



February several air raids were launched against refugee camps Guelta-Zemmour, Tifariti, and Oum Dreiga. The bombings were approved by Colonel Dlimi and it was also him who approved the use of napalm bombs which are more efficient than conventional ones.<sup>31</sup> However, those bombing raids were nearly inefficient from military aspect as their victims were mostly children, women, and elderly people.<sup>32</sup>

The Royal Moroccan troops also applied methods that had already been used by the Spanish before: poisoning wells, machine-gunning herds, looting civilian population, tortures, and even public executions.<sup>33</sup> As a result of such events and atrocities the mass migration of civil population accelerated. By the end of February the number of people, mostly children, women, and elderly people living in refugee camps in Algeria had increased to more than 100,000.<sup>34</sup>

The Spanish troops were supposed to withdraw by 28<sup>th</sup> February 1976 but had left the area earlier, thus abandoning its population.

Although the UNHCR realised the desperate situation of refugees in camps he could not respond immediately therefore he called on those sympathising with the Saharawians to help.

The Algerian Government was not prepared to receive and supply so many refugees either, which led to critical medical and hygienic situation in the camps soon.

On the actual situation in the camps a report was written by the members of a Swiss group of medical doctors, who had arrived into the region with the help on the International Red Cross in order to help the refugees.<sup>35</sup> This is how the members of the group – Dr. Elio Canevaschini, Dr. Emmanuel Martinoli, Dr. Marie-Claire Martinoli and Dr. Marc Oltramare – tell about their experience:

*„We have the sensation that both the Algerian Government and the Red Cross are able to provide only limited assistance to the refugees therefore we regard the rapid international cooperation and immediate help to refugees of extreme importance.*

*The number of refugees is growing by the day due to newcomers and the majority of the mass of people is comprised by women, children, and elderly people.*

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<sup>31</sup> Erik Jensen: Western Sahara. Anatomy of a Stalemate. p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> John Mercer: The Sahrawis of Western Sahara. p. 10-11.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Lawles–Laila Monahan: War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict. p. 50-151.

<sup>34</sup> John Damis: Conflict in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Dispute. p. 40-41.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Lawles–Laila Monahan: War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict. p. 100.

*The proportion of children under 15 is 45% and that of babies under 1 year is around 6-7%. The refugees are accommodated in 14 camps and their number is over 70,000. Their accommodation poses a serious problem as 3-4 families share a tent. Due to infections and other diseases there is a grave risk of epidemics.*

*Firewood is another serious problem as these people often have to go 200 kilometres for collecting firewood. Then it is equally divided among the refugees but still there are some who lack firewood.*

*Food supply also presents difficult problems as the monthly supply of a refugee is 6 kg of flour or wheat, 3 kg dried vegetables, 2 kg sugar, 2 kg powdered milk, 3 kg dates and 1 kg of tea.*

*The refugees are living under very bad conditions – many of them are traumatised or suffering from burns from the bombings. They are treated by 3 doctors, 15 assistant doctors, and a few enthusiastic volunteers.”*

On the basis of the mandate provided by the General Assembly in December 1975 UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim sent a special representative to Madrid, Rabat, Algiers and Western Sahara in order to initiate negotiations on the soonest possible implementation of UN Resolutions.<sup>36</sup> His Special Envoy was Swedish UN diplomat Olaf Rydbeck, who started his work on 7<sup>th</sup> February when he visited El-Aaiun, Smara and Dakhla. He was deeply shocked by the news on the events that took place in the territories occupied by the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces (bombing of refugees, escalation of guerrilla war, etc.) and in his report clearly stated that on the basis of what he had seen it was impossible to organise a free referendum in Western Sahara. Thus the tour of duty of the UNSG Special Envoy was unsuccessful and “Morocco could continue the reunification of the territories of Western Sahara to the motherland.”

On 25<sup>th</sup> February the Jemma was summoned (out of its 102 members 57 came to the conference but not all of them supported the Moroccan and Mauritanian territorial demands)<sup>37</sup> thus the vacant seats of those supporting the rebels were handed over to representatives loyal to Morocco. The new Council sworn in to King Hassan II but neither the UN, nor Polisario, nor even Spain accepted the new Jemma as the legal representative body of the Saharawians since the genuine Jemma was dismissed in November 1975. That time Spain submitted a report to the UNSG and declared a withdrawal from the territory.<sup>38</sup>

Responding to the Moroccan measures President of the Sahara Interim National Council Uld Ziou on the main square of a refugee camp in Ait Ben Tili,

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<sup>36</sup> Tony Hodges; *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 235- 237.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Lawles–Laila Monahan: *War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict*. p. 114.

<sup>38</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 234 - 235.

near Bir Lahlou, declared the establishment of Sahara Arab Democratic Republic at midnight 28<sup>th</sup> February.<sup>39</sup>

On 5<sup>th</sup> March 1976 Ahmed Baba Miske introduced the first Government of Western Sahara in Hotel Saint-Georges in Algiers. Madagascar was the first country to recognise the new state and later on another 78 countries followed suit.<sup>40</sup> In spite of the fact that later, due to diplomatic pressure, many of them suspended the relations with the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic, it keeps maintaining some official relations with 54 countries. However, the declaration of independence did not trigger many changes as the Moroccan Army continued to occupy the territory.

On 14<sup>th</sup> April 1976 the allied powers, occupying most of the territories, officially signed the treaty on the division of the area and on drawing a new border line between the two countries.<sup>41</sup> Morocco received the two biggest towns, El-Aaiun and Smara, and the phosphate mines thus increasing its areas by some 35%,<sup>42</sup> while Mauritania was given Villa Cisneros and a long section of the coast line with good fisheries, however, the inland area comprised only desert and nothing else.<sup>43</sup> That is, the treaty on the division of the area clearly favoured Morocco.

### *Escalation of the Conflict*

Once the new state was declared the UN Secretary General decided to delegate the Swedish UN diplomat Olaf Rydbeck to help bring about a possible agreement. In his statement of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1976 the Secretary General detailed the purpose of the delegation: to obtain the opinions of the Moroccan and Mauritanian Governments about Resolution 3458 of the General Assembly. The planned visit elicited strong objection in Moroccan public opinion, and the Swedish diplomat's visit to the refugee camps in the vicinity of Tinduf on 31<sup>st</sup> March led to serious tension between Morocco and the UN.<sup>44</sup>

On 4<sup>th</sup> April 1976 Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Laraki informed the UN Secretary General that the special representative will not be authorised to continue his mission in Rabat.<sup>45</sup> Shortly afterwards the Government of Mauritania also announced, that the diplomat's visit would not be timely. After this the Secretary General himself initiated negotiations with the

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<sup>39</sup> C. R. Pennel Morocco since 1830 a history p. 340

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.arso.org/03-2.htm> (downloaded: 20.12.2008.)

<sup>41</sup> Martin Ira Glassner: The United Nations at Work. p. 268.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman: A Tragedy of Arms, Military and Security Developments in the Maghreb. p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> David J. Dean: The Air Force Role in Low-intensity Conflict. p. 36.

<sup>44</sup> Igaz Levente: Egy elfelejtett válság politikai háttere: Nyugat-Szahara. p. 91.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Lawles and Laila Monahan: War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict. p. 109.

UN ambassadors of the involved countries, but could not achieve any significant results.

Polisario reopened hostilities. The series of attacks known as the May 20 Offensive commenced in earnest on 11<sup>th</sup> May, when coordinated assaults were launched against El-Aaiun, Smara, Bou Kra, Bir Moghreïn and Chinguetti, and damaged the phosphate-carrying conveyor-belt system.<sup>46</sup>

Before launching the offensive the Saharawians warned the foreign citizens working in the phosphate mines and the Mauritanian iron-ore mines that if they do not leave the area they would be treated as enemies. At that time over 280 highly trained French experts, employees of COMINOR (Comptoir Minier du Nord) worked in the Mauritanian iron-ore mines. The Mauritians were supposed to guarantee their safety. The warning was labelled as a terrorist threat, and those affected did not take it seriously, so the attack against Mauritania's capital, Nouakchott, by Polisario units on 8 June 1976 was a serious surprise.<sup>47</sup>

The fact that a military unit of about 600 men was able to march unnoticed more than 1,000 km through enemy territory indicated a thorough knowledge of the terrain, and support of the local population. The attack lasted nearly one hour, the selected targets (including the presidential palace) were subjected to mortar and machine gun fire. Some of the local units fled, but the Saharawians were not able to exploit their success because their leader, El-Vali Mustafa Sayed was also killed during the attack.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time Polisario also attacked Tan-Tan, Jdiria and Guelta-Zemmour in the northern areas. At that time the Saharawians had already changed their tactics: they had realised, that in the face of mechanised and well-equipped Moroccan units they could not successfully defend the population centres still in their possession, and reverted to guerrilla warfare with which they were already familiar, and which had brought them greater success.

Since tribes related to the Saharawians lived throughout Mauritania and southern Morocco, they could count on support from a part of the population during nearly all of their attacks. Polisario units, consisting of several hundred men could move with relative ease not only through the occupied territories, but on the territory of enemy states as well.

The Moroccans firmly held the towns and forts handed over by the Spain, but their supply lines were under constant attack.

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<sup>46</sup> David J. Dean: *The Air Force Role in Low-intensity Conflict*. p. 42.

<sup>47</sup> John Damis: *Conflict in Northwest Africa—The Western Sahara Dispute*. p. 84.

<sup>48</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 244.

Mauritania, beset by economic and ethnic tensions, was the weaker of the two countries, therefore Polisario was more active in the territories occupied by it than in those occupied by Morocco.<sup>49</sup>

### *War with Mauritania*

On 15<sup>th</sup> January 1976 President Oud Daddah appointed a trusted veteran politician, Hamoud Ould Abdel-Wedoud as Governor of the territories occupied by Mauritania.<sup>50</sup> The new governor initiated an administrative reorganization of the territory and turned it into a separate region called Tiris el-Gharbia, with Dakhla as its capital.<sup>51</sup> The new region was subdivided into four districts (Dakhla, Awsard, Tichla és Argoub).

They created three military districts in order to establish firmer control of the occupied territories. The headquarters of the first district was established in the town of Awsard; its commander was Colonel Viah Ould Mayouf, who had prepared the territory's occupation and directed the war against the Polisario. The headquarters of the second district was deployed in Zouerat; its commander was Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif, who was responsible for Mauritania's north-eastern territories. Bir Moghreïn and Ain Ben Tili were under him also. The headquarters of the third district was established in Dakhla, Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Salem Ould Sidi was assigned to command it.<sup>52</sup>

About this time the task of settling the refugees in camps was completed, and the Saharawian could begin the systematic destruction of the two occupying countries' economic institutions.

In the spirit of the Sahara Arab traditions - and due to low standards of training and a shortage of heavy weapons - Polisario organised guerrilla operations (ghazzi). Their units (kataeb), equipped with Land Rovers and light personal weapons, would cover several hundred kilometres, deliver a quick raid, then disappear.<sup>53</sup> Since the Mauritanian desert is nearly twice the size of France, the military and law enforcement forces available to the local authorities were insufficient to keep the territory under control.

Insurgent attacks made transportation of phosphate mined in the Bou Craa mines impossible (between 1976 and 1979 the Fosbucraa company lost 1.722 billion Pesetas due to the attacks). The rail line connecting the Mauritanian iron-

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<sup>49</sup> Neil Clough: *Western Saharan Conflict: Prolonged Conflict and Prospects for the Future*. p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 241.

<sup>51</sup> Virginia McLean Thompson–Richard Adloff: *The Western Saharans. Background to Conflict*. pp. 269-272.

<sup>52</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 242.

<sup>53</sup> David J. Dean: *The Air Force Role in Low-intensity Conflict*. p. 42.

ore mines to the seaport was regularly damaged which caused serious problems to Mauritania, whose main source of earnings was iron-ore.<sup>54</sup> The Mauritanian political leadership was shaken by the attacks, but they thought that the situation could be salvaged by some quick changes in the armed forces leadership.

Thus, the Chief of Staff was immediately dismissed. Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif, commander of the second military district replaced him.

This was the first time the Mauritanian leadership criticised the activities of the Moroccan army, since they had been expecting the Moroccans to start a counteroffensive against Polisario. However, the Moroccans settled into defensive positions and did not pursue the Saharawians retreating into the Sahara. As a result, Polisario fighters launched attacks against the Mauritanian towns of Nema and Tisitt from territories occupied by Morocco.

Due to the escalating attacks the Mauritanian army's strength was increased to 17,000 men (of these 10,000 officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers belonged to the black minority; this would eventually generate serious tensions within the army and lead to several mutinies), and purchased modern weapons.<sup>55</sup> Training of the new recruits was accelerated in the training centre established with French assistance in the town of Atar. However, none of these measures brought any significant success.<sup>56</sup>

In this auspicious military situation the III. Polisario Congress was held on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1976. In addition to the press, several official government delegations (Benin, Algeria, Bissau-Guinea, Libia, and some others) also attended. Members of the former Jemma and the Deputy Secretary General of PUNS (Sahara National Unity Party) also attended. During the Congress the first Constitution of the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was approved, which meant final ratification of the draft the Sahara Provisional National Council had published in February.

That was the time when new Polisario leader Mohamed Abdelaziz was elected Head of the Council of Ministers. Although the delegates agreed to continue the armed struggle they also decided to commence a diplomatic offensive in order to inform the world on the real situation. As a result, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic Hakim Brahim even participated in the Geneva congress of the Socialist International as an observer. Since every diplomatic contact was extremely important for the new state it tried to establish contacts with every country, regardless of its political leanings, in order to gain the broadest possible recognition.

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<sup>54</sup> Tony Hodges; *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 243-244.

<sup>55</sup> Toby Shelley; *Endgame in the Western Sahara*. p. 43-44.

<sup>56</sup> Tony Hodges; *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 246.

SADR representatives participated as an official delegation in the XIII. Summit of the Organisation of African Unity in Port Louis (Mauritius), where 29 African countries voted for the Western Saharawian's right to self determination, independence, and territorial integrity. As a consequence of the voting, Morocco announced suspension of its activities in the organisation. The diplomatic offensive, launched with the assistance of Algeria, brought some success, since by the first half of 1977 the Western-Sahara state was recognised by nine African countries (Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burundi, Bissau-Guinea, Madagascar, Mozambique, Ruanda and Togo).<sup>57</sup>

Naturally, as a result of this they also tried to increase the effectiveness of military operations thus on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1977 the insurgents launched another attack against Zuerat in Mauritania. The town was defended by a garrison of nearly 1,000 men as well as a 60 km barrier of 3 to 5 m deep ditches reinforced with barbed wire.

There were nearly 250 French miners (among them military advisers), employees of SNIM (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière) and their families in the town. Although the expert responsible for their safety, Jean-Charles Eudeline had repeatedly recommended evacuation of the families his recommendations had been overruled. The guerrillas opened their attack at 05:00 hours with a coordinated mortar barrage. The attack lasted about four hours, during which the power station, the fuel tanks and the mining equipment were so heavily damaged, that production had to be suspended for a while. During the battle two French experts were killed, and six others were taken prisoner by the attackers. After this most French personnel and their dependents (altogether 449 persons) were evacuated to France.<sup>58</sup>

The suspension of production caused serious damage to the Mauritanian economy. At that time Mauritania was able to handle its problems stemming from the situation in Western Sahara only through military assistance from Morocco (as a result of the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1977 military agreement some 10,000 well-trained and equipped Moroccan soldiers were stationed in Mauritanian territory), and financial assistance from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of the freshly arrived Moroccan troops, Polisario units launched another attack against Nouakchott then after the successful operation they withdrew without losses.

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<sup>57</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 307-308.

<sup>58</sup> John Mercer: *The Sahrawis of Western Sahara*. p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Lawles–Laila Monahan: *War and Refugees. The Western Sahara Conflict*. p. 101.

The attacks generated protests from France. French Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis de Guiringaud accused Algeria of organising the attacks, and demanded the release of Frenchmen taken prisoner. The Algerian leadership rejected the French accusation in an official communiqué.

France then sent a 200-men military unit to secure the capital, and from the end of November strengthened the defence of the larger Mauritanian population centres with Jaguar strike aircraft from Dakar airbase (Operation Lamantin).<sup>60</sup>

The Mauritanian situation worried France because the country was a former French colony and belonged in their military and economic spheres of interest. Mauritania had emphasised separation from France after gaining independence (introduction of its own currency, Ouguiya, and nationalization of the iron-ore mines), yet a thousand ties linked it to the former colonial power. When even the capital came under Polisario attack, the frightened President turned to the French leadership and requested their urgent assistance. A new military assistance and cooperation agreement was soon signed, and France sent fifteen military instructors to the Atar military academy, to assist in training Mauritanian officers.

However, these steps only encouraged the guerrillas, who took two more French mining experts prisoner.

Then French president Giscard d'Estaing immediately created a crisis team in the presidential palace in order to solve the situation as soon as possible.

The crisis team included Minister of Defence Yvon Bourges, Minister for Cooperation between the Armed Services Robert Galley, Chief of Staff of the French army General Guy Méry, and the president's representative Louis de Guiringaud. Calling on experts of the army and the intelligence services, the crisis team began to develop possible plans in the rooms of the headquarters beneath the Elysée palace (COA-Centre Operationnel des Armées).

Due to the high risk factor and difficulties in locating the French hostages, the Chief of Staff rejected the possibility of a commando-style rescue operation. After a short debate his opinion was accepted by the other participants. General Méry then recommended negotiations to free the hostages, and at the same time deploying forces in Mauritania to defend French interests. The participants accepted the general's plan and immediately started to execute it.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Tony Hodges: Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara. p. 151-152.

<sup>61</sup> John Mercer: The Sahrawis of Western Sahara. p. 13.



Some of the French supersonic combat aircraft stationed at Oukkam airbase in Senegal were placed on alert, since they could reach Nouakchott's airspace in less than 50 minutes. The unit of 1,300 French soldiers deployed at the airbase was reinforced by a further 300 troops. During the night of 1<sup>st</sup> November a force composed of rapid response units under the command of General Michael Forget landed at the base in Senegal, then a few days later the General and 60 of his specially trained soldiers redeployed to Atar, in Mauritanian territory.

Command of the Ouakkam base was taken over by Colonel Huret, who was also responsible for the logistic support for Operation Lamantin. On his arrival Forget immediately began to develop communications routes between Ouakkam and the Mauritanian bases. Meanwhile Breguet-Atlantic aircraft of the French Navy carried out reconnaissance patrols over Mauritania. Although these aircraft had originally been used for detecting submarines, they and their trained crews constituted an important element of the Operation. In addition, the French also used long-range Mirage 4 reconnaissance aircraft to map and photograph less well known regions. In accordance with the request of the Oaukkam airbase, the aircraft were launched from Bordeaux, France.

The purpose of the reconnaissance flights was to locate the Polisario units and observe their movements, then inform the Mauritanian military and gendarme units preparing for a counterattack, as well as the French strike aircraft. In order to support the operation, the Moroccans sent a further 600 troops to areas occupied by Mauritania, where soon there were 1,200 Moroccan soldiers, and further units were arriving from Morocco. In January 1978 there were 2,400 soldiers stationed in the area of Zouerat-Nouadhibou, 600 at the Akjouj iron-ore mines, and a further 2,800 men in Tiris el-Gharbia. The Moroccan Air Force deployed three F-5 fighter-bomber aircraft to Nouadhibou airfield, in order to participate in combined operations.<sup>62</sup>

It seemed unlikely that Polisario would challenge such a powerful force, therefore the Mauritanian leadership restarted rail traffic on the Nouadhibou-Zouerat line, which had already been shut down for a month.

However, the Saharawians attacked the first freight train and took the French engineer prisoner, along with the train's Mauritanian military escort.

The French were incensed, and on 25<sup>th</sup> November they transferred a further four Jaguar combat aircraft from their base in Toul to Mauritania, in order to participate in the counterattack against Polisario. This type of combat aircraft was far more modern than the Northrop F-5 used by the Moroccans. The French army commissioned these long-range aircraft in 1971. Each was

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<sup>62</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 251-253.

equipped with two 30 mm cannons and an anti-aircraft missile jammer system. At that time the French had six Jaguars, two KC-135 F, two Breguet-Atlantic and four Noratlas aircraft at Ouakkam airbase.

The Jaguars were first used on 2<sup>nd</sup> December against guerrillas attacking the rail line near Boulanour, then on 12<sup>th</sup> December in the vicinity of Zouerat.<sup>63</sup> As a result of the air strikes Polisario offered to release the French prisoners taken in Mauritania, but the French forces continued their attacks. Polisario commenced talks with then UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim then on 23<sup>rd</sup> December released the French prisoners without any conditions.<sup>64</sup>

The French leadership would have liked to continue the operation, but due to the press-campaign of the SADR and the protests of several human rights organisations they finally instructed the General Staff to withdraw the French forces. After this, although they continued to aid the Mauritanian government, France took no active part in operations against Polisario.<sup>65</sup>

The guerrillas, no longer threatened by French air strikes, immediately renewed their attacks against Mauritanian targets (rail lines, mines, etc). By that time Mauritania was facing serious economic and internal political problems, and these attacks hastened the country's withdrawal soon from the West-Sahara conflict.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> John Mercer: *The Sahrawis of Western Sahara*. p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Tony Hodges: *The Roots of a Desert War*. p. 254-255.

<sup>65</sup> David J. Dean: *The Air Force Role in Low-intensity Conflict*. p. 43.

<sup>66</sup> C. R. Pennel *Morocco since 1830 a history* p. 342