



**THE POLISARIO FRONT:
A DESTABILISING FORCE IN THE REGION
THAT IS STILL ACTIVE**

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Introduction

More than thirty years after the departure of the last Spanish administrators, the conflict which disturbs the Western Sahara still has not been resolved. Despite mediation efforts, particularly under the aegis of the United Nations, the various parties have not succeeded in reaching an agreement concerning this territory which is more than 80% Moroccan controlled and administered.

As the central actor of this conflict in which Rabat and Algiers are rivals, the Polisario Front today is in a state of advanced disintegration which in fact poses a serious threat to the stability of the region.

Officially created on 10 May 1973 for the purpose of putting an end to the Spanish occupation of the Western Sahara, the Polisario launched an armed struggle to oppose the attachment of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania. It also created the Sahwari Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) which was recognised at the time by many African countries including Algeria and Libya, as well as Cuba, states supported by the Soviet Union.

After having forced Mauritania to renounce its claims to the Western Sahara in 1979 through a bloody armed struggle, the Polisario concentrated its military efforts against Morocco. The cease-fire signed in 1991 under the aegis of the United Nations made it possible to launch a process of negotiations which, to this day, has not produced concrete progress despite the hopes that were born from the overture to the Manhasset negotiations which were sponsored by the United Nations.

In its thirty-five years of existence, the Polisario Front has given rise to various abuses, particularly as regards respect for human rights, for which it has been criticised by specialised international organisations. The excesses have been widely documented in many works and reports. We ourselves published in the last three years two substantiated reports on these bad habits.

Thus, this new study does not propose to be an examination of the historic character of the Polisario's past. Rather, it will offer a current vision of a movement that is in complete decay and now, more than ever, seems to us to be a threat to regional stability. In the course of our research, we relied on many interviews with witnesses and actors on the ground – former or present-day members of the Polisario Front, officers in the intelligence services who have an interest in the Sahel-Saharan area, humanitarians and members of NGOs who are present in the South of Algeria and in sub-Saharan Africa. These contacts were made possible by the fundamental work on the Polisario Front we have conducted since 2005. We also went painstakingly through many open sources – articles from the regional and international press, reports from NGOs and international organisations – in order to offer an objective examination of the evolution of the main directions in which the pro-independence movement for Sahwari has drifted over these last two years.

Some of these directions are not new and were already mentioned and criticised in our previous reports; we can only confirm that they continue. Others, on the contrary, have only recently appeared. That is the case, for example, of the rapprochement of some elements of the Polisario with Islamist terrorism.

1. Risks of some elements of the Polisario drifting towards Islamist terrorism

Due to its geographic location, the Western Sahara occupies an important place in the framework of the fight against Islamist terrorism. This is also one of the reasons why the United States has gotten involved in trying to resolve the conflict that so disturbs the region. In 2005, the personal involvement of Senator John McCain, the present candidate of the Republican Party for the presidency of the United States, highlighted the security issues represented by the territory claimed by the Polisario Front.¹

North Africa in fact became one of the principal fiefdoms of the al-Qaeda movement when the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) officially joined the organisation of Osama Ben Laden, becoming *al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM) - *Tanzim al-Qaida Bibilad Al Maghrib Al Islami* – in January 2007. Established in Algeria, where it has committed large-scale attacks on the Algerian government and the United Nations, AQIM is present and active in the whole region and, in particular, is has become extremely virulent in Mauritania, a fragile country which has a 1,561 km long border with the Western Sahara.

1.1. A weakened movement permeated with Salafist ideology

The question of an Islamist trend in the Polisario has been mentioned repeatedly by many experts. **The development of the Salafist ideology in the region, symbolised by AQIM, and the wear and tear of more than thirty years of a vain struggle facilitated the rapprochement of the youngest fringe of the Polisario with radical movements.**

In 2005, **Hametti Rabani**, one of the former leaders of the movement, made a severe but credible assessment of the status of the movement. *‘The Polisario is in a situation of failure. The majority of the former fighters has left and has gone back into Mauritanian affairs. Many historic leaders also left. Quite a few young people remain. What can the leadership say to them? What hope can it give them? None. The movement is at an impasse, and some, in order not to lose all hope, are turning to religion, to God. They no longer expect anything from the chiefs of the Polisario but look for everything from God. God fills the void left by the backward looking leadership of the Polisario.’*²

This radicalisation of the youngest fringe of the movement goes back further than one might think and can be traced to **the 1980s**. A former member of the Polisario, **Mustapha Bouh**, mentions the origins of this rapprochement by a part of the militants in his movement with radical Islamist currents: *‘Everything began at the end of the 1980s. Some students coming from the camps of Tindouf and present in the universities of Algiers or other cities of the North met there with members of the FIS [Islamic Salvation Front] which held sway in the university departments of that time. They caught the contagion and returned inspired by Islamist ideology.’*³

¹ Claude Moniquet (dir.), *The Polisario Front : Credible partner for negotiations or sequel of the Cold War and obstacle to a political solution in the Western Sahara ?*, European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center (ESISC), November 2005, p.8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

This rapprochement between a fringe of the Polisario and Islamist ideology was unfortunately given concrete form by contacts between the members of the movement and terrorists from the GIA (Islamic Armed Group) from Algeria. These relations even took the form of support when in 1994 arms provided by the Algerian Army to the Polisario were found by these same Algerian security services in the hands of GIA militants.⁴ Although the exact conditions in which these arms were found in the possession of Algerian terrorists remain unknown, the contacts between the two organisations illustrate the **proximity between the Polisario Front and the Islamist terrorist groups.**

1.2. *A large pool of recruitment for AQIM*

Although the contamination of one part of the Polisario by Salafist ideology does not mean an Islamisation of the movement as a whole, the Polisario nonetheless has become **one of the principal pools of recruitment by AQIM.** The North African press as a whole has remarked on this **tendency which was greatly accentuated during the summer of 2008.**

The Algerian daily *ElKhabar* cited in an article of **July 2008** some local security sources who believed **a certain number of individuals coming from the Western Sahara were in AQIM training camps near the frontier with Mali.**⁵

In August 2008, a Moroccan daily revealed that some members of AQIM were scouring the camps of the Polisario – and, in particular, the camp at Tindouf – in order to recruit new Jihadists with experience in techniques of combat in the desert. According to the article, around **265 former members of the Polisario have already joined the ranks of the terrorist organisation.**⁶

Demobilisation and the contagion with Salafist ideology among part of the Polisario troops in fact constitute a godsend for an organisation like AQIM, which has great need to recruit new fights due to numerous arrests which have weakened it and the phenomenon of attrition due to death in operations of a significant part of its personnel.

1.3. *Can the Polisario become a branch of al-Qaeda?*

The question of the Islamisation of the Polisario Front deserves to be posed in view of the **complementarity which exists between the movement of the Western Sahara and AQIM.** A transnational group like al-Qaeda in fact has need of local support and has every interest to rely on active elements of the Polisario. The latter could also profit from financial support and from the ideological renewal brought by radical Islamism, thereby enabling it to remobilise a base left behind by thirty-five years of promises not kept.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵ 'Some terrorists from Touareg and the Western Sahara in the fiefdoms of Al Qaeda in the South,' *ElKhabar*, 15 July 2008.

⁶ 'The al-Qaeda organisation recruits Sahrawis in the Tindouf camps,' *Al-ahdath Almaghribia*, issue 3468, 6 August 2008.

Moreover, **the two organisations share a certain number of objectives and, above all, the same enemies. The desire to destabilise Morocco is common to al-Qaeda and the Polisario. The two groups have also made Mauritania one of their principal targets in the region and a logistical base which is all the more important given that this country is at the gates of sub-Saharan Africa.** Al-Qaeda has already conducted large-scale activities in Mauritania and regularly threatens this country.

These presumptions were confirmed in December 2003, when Mauritanian security services arrested **Baba Ould Mohamed Bakhili**, an active member of the Polisario when he was in the act of stealing large quantities of explosives from the warehouses of the National Mauritanian Company of the Mining Industry. **They found that the 153 bottles of inflammable substances and the approximately 12 kilometres of wire used for remote control explosions that he obtained were not part of the materiel usually used by the guerillas but instead matched those used by terrorist organisations wishing to manufacture bombs.**⁷ Hence, one may wonder whether **the objective of this operation was for the Front to perpetrate attacks or if it wished to sell these products to the Islamist radical groups present in the Sahara.**

On 4 June 2005, the attack of the GSPC on the Mauritanian barracks at **Lamghiti** during which 15 persons died, strengthened existing doubts over a collaboration between some members of the Front and radical Islamist groups. Indeed, **some vehicules from the Polisario participated in the attack led by the GSPC and, according to witnesses, some of the assailants spoke Hassani, a dialect spoken in Mauritania and in the Western Sahara.**⁸

We may add that starting in the month of April 2004, the Mauritanian authorities dismantled a network for bringing ex-GSPC volunteers to the North from Mali. This network was overseen by a member of the Polisario Front who was killed later in Ménée (Algeria) in the course of an action by the GSPC which cost the lives of 13 Algerian customs officials.

One year later, in April 2005, the arrest of eight Mauritanian ‘volunteers’ for the Jihad shed light on the role of a young member of the Polisario in their recruitment.

Finally, in November 2007, an AQIM entity was dismantled in Mali which had maintained close links with certain inhabitants of the Tindouf camps.

The structural weakening of the Polisario has undoubtedly been **a factor used by Islamist groups to develop their activities.** Though one cannot exclude wide scale collaboration between the Polisario and radical regional groups like AQIM if the conflict in the Sahara is not resolved, **the more immediate risk concerns efforts at recruitment by AQIM in the Polisario camps.** This tendency, which was accentuated last year, remains the most serious short-term threat. Moreover, one

⁷ Claude Moniquet, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

should remain extremely attentive to the changes in strategy of the Front and to its effects on the popular base. The disintegration of that base could prompt the adoption of the ideology and the methods of groups like AQIM.

2. Risks of drift to large-scale banditry

Another risk directly linked to the loss of speed and to the ideological bankruptcy of the Polisario is the conversion of a significant part of its personnel towards banditry and organised transborder crime.

2.1. *Propitious soil for the development of organised crime*

The **extreme poverty** that reigns in the camps of the Front is the principal factor having precipitated the move of a number of members of the group towards criminality. While it is rare for the salaries of officials to be paid before many months if not years, in certain cases, the soldiers are hardly treated any better. A former member of the Polisario explained in 2001 that *'the officers receive between 12 and 17 dollars twice a year and this situation forces them to find other income, (...) such as trafficking.'*⁹

In addition, the **decline in popular membership** of this separatist movement has favoured the development of criminality. **Aymeric Chauprade**, professor of geopolitics at the Sorbonne, explains that **in order to make up for the drop in its popularity, the Polisario has had to 'buy more and more on its own.'** And to do this, the movement must resort to various forms of trafficking and participates actively in *'the channels of clandestine immigration.'*¹⁰

Time and again over the last few years, members of the Polisario have been implicated in cases of trafficking people who are transiting via Morocco to reach Europe. These concerns linked to traffic in humans figure in many reports of the Secretary General of the **United Nations**.¹¹ Moreover, many Sahrawis linked to the separatist movement have been subject to arrest for acts linked to trading arms, petrol, smuggling cigarettes or spare parts of cars.¹²

Apart from the factors within the Polisario, **the impunity which exists in the sub-Sahara area has favoured the development of illicit trade of every variety in the same way that it has contributed to the spread of terrorism in the region.**

2.2. *Prospects*

Recent elements allow one to think that the shift of some of the members of the Polisario Front towards criminality and banditry is likely to continue and may even grow worse.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁰ Aymeric Chauprade, 'Sahara, the risk of 'gray zones,' *L'Economiste*, December 2006.

¹¹ Kofi Annan, *Report of the Secretary General on the situation concerning the Western Sahara*, S/2004/827, 20 October 2004.

<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No4/555/85/PDF/No455585.pdf?OpenElement>

¹² Claude Moniquet, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

In June 2008, **Jan Egeland**, Special Advisor to the Secretary General of the United Nations, mentioned the **considerable development of drugs trafficking**. According to Mr. Egeland, **the Columbian drug traffickers are setting themselves up in the region** and *'are fighting to get control of the trans-Sahara routes that would allow them to move their drugs to Europe and as far as the Gulf.'*¹³ Although collusion between the Front and these traffickers has not been proven up till now, **it is hard to imagine that the Sahrawi independence movement is not associated in one way or another with the use of the Sahara for the transit of Columbian drugs**. An organisation like the Polisario would in fact have need of the *'boundless funds'* attributed to the South American traffickers by the Special Advisor to Ban Ki-moon.

Otherwise, **Said Djinnit**, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for West Africa warns about the **links between criminality and Islamisation**. *'The rise of tensions in the Sahel region results from a combination of factors. There are old rebellions onto which new phenomena have grafted themselves: terrorism, which is present in the region, but above all the drugs traffic and organised crime, which have developed in a very significant manner,'*¹⁴ he explains.

It is difficult not to think of the Polisario Front when reading the point made by Mr. Djinnit. **This link between illicit commerce and Islamisation is in fact a true threat which weighs over the Polisario and which could, if there is no progress in the process of negotiations, cause its base to lean towards one or another of the options, with disastrous consequences for the stability of the region.**

3. Continued misappropriation of international assistance

For many years, the Polisario Front has been regularly accused of misappropriating humanitarian, financial and material assistance provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as by international organisations.

3.1. A heavy liability of embezzlement

Apart from the accusations of former members of the Polisario,¹⁵ the international press has reported many examples of misappropriation. In March 1999, the Spanish daily ***El País*** revealed that assistance amounting to 64 million pesetas (around 385,000 Euros) sent by the Spanish Red Cross to the Polisario to purchase 430 female camels in order to improve the nutritional conditions of Sahrawi children had disappeared. This was even implicitly confirmed by Embarek Malainine, the responsible manager of international cooperation within the separatist movement, who did not deny the basis of these accusations by candidly admitting that this misappropriation had nonetheless not contributed to his *'personal enrichment.'*¹⁶

¹³ Nadja Bouchira, 'How to dismantle the bomb of the Sahel?' *El Watan*, 15 June 2008, <http://www.elwatan.com/Terrorisme-trafics-et-conflit>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Claude Moniquet, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁶ Ignacio Cembrero, 'CRE investigó el desvío por el Polisario de ayudas para comprar 430 camellas,' *El País*, 7 March 1999.

Moreover, the **differential between the real number of Sahrawi refugees and the numbers put forward by the Polisario constitutes the basis for embezzlement of food aid** sent by the international organisations. This problem is not new and has been repeatedly criticised. Whereas at the end of the 1990s the Front estimated that the number of refugees in the region of Tindouf was **between 155,000 and 170,000**, Norwegian and American NGOs put the numbers at around **80,000 persons**.¹⁷

The volume of assistance is calculated according to the number of persons officially declared by Polisario, and this gap clearly indicates that **the misappropriation of food aid and materiel was endorsed at the top level** and does not result from individual initiatives, as the Front says.

Such embezzlement is all more simple and widespread given that, according to the European Commission, **the programmes of certain NGOs concerning aid to Sahrawi refugees are ‘devoid of any rigour and of a minimum of structure or of the required system of evaluation.’**¹⁸ The European Union (EU) is, for its part, not spared, since part of its humanitarian aid was found on sale in the markets of Mauritania. The European Commission was nonetheless unable to establish *‘that this misappropriation was really the work of an organised network.’*¹⁹

3.2. *An abuse that is likely to continue*

The continued **breakdown of the structure of the Polisario Front** observed over these past several years has not made it possible to curb the tendency towards embezzlement of international assistance; indeed the contrary is true. In addition, **the fact that the Polisario has not always authorised the United Nations Higher Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) to come to the Tindouf camp or to even take a census does not augur well for a positive change** with respect to this practice of misappropriation.²⁰ Moreover, absent any reform in the procedures for allocating assistance by the NGOs and the international organisations, this trend is evidently going to continue.

In 2003, the EU **decided to reinforce the system of controls over its humanitarian aid but it ‘encountered resistance on the part of the Polisario in carrying out its mission.’**²¹ Many European deputies have otherwise demanded that OLAF (the European Anti-Fraud Office) make public its report accusing the members of the leadership of the Polisario Front.

http://www.elpais.com/articulo/sociedad/ESPANA/SAHARA_OCCIDENTAL/SAHARA_OCCIDENTAL/FRENTE_POLISARIO/_RASD/CRUZ_ROJA/CRE/investigativo/desvio/Polisario/ayudas/comprar/430/camellas/elpepisoc/19990307elpepisoc_5/Tes

¹⁷ Claude Moniquet, *op. cit.*, p. 53

¹⁸ Denis Ducarme, *Report of the Independent Investigative Commission into Allegations of Violations of Human Rights, Crimes, Abuses and Various Misappropriations Brought Against the Polisario Front*, Brussels/New York, October 2006, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁰ *World Refugee Survey – Algeria*, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), 2008. <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?id=2116>

²¹ Denis Ducarme, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

In January 2008, a joint evaluation mission from the UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) came out in favour of a more transparent system of distribution and called for responsibility. Two months later, the NGO ***Interfaith International***, which has consultative status at the United Nations, stated before the UN Human Rights Council that the **Polisario is misappropriating and reselling humanitarian aid and ‘is spending enormous sums of money for military parades.’**²²

Meanwhile, **the food crisis that is now affecting the developing countries, principally in Africa, may accentuate the phenomena of theft of international assistance.** According to the WFP, ‘*Mauritania imports 70% of its food requirements and is now facing the combined effects of the rise in the price of petrol, basic commodities and food products, plus the reorganisation of the main maritime commercial routes and the weakening of the dollar.*’²³ In these conditions, it is very likely that the activity of the parallel markets will increase, all the more so as the WFP has envisaged more free distribution. There are thus strong chances that the Polisario will seek to profit from this situation and that the goods supplied by the NGOs and international organisations will appear on the Mauritanian markets.

4. A troubling situation as regards human rights

The question of respect for human rights by the Polisario Front remains a source of concern for many international observers. For many years this question has been the object of a large number of reports by international organisations.

4.1. A mediocre record on human rights

In fact, the Polisario Front has one of the most mediocre records in the area of respect for human rights. It has been widely recognised that the Polisario’s treatment of its prisoners goes against all the standards established by international agreements. The works of an independent commission reveal that ‘***in the 1970s and 1980s, right up to the 1990s, torture was systematically used by the Polisario’s security services in order to get persons held to admit that they were in fact foreign agents or that they participated in plots.***’²⁴ The report of this commission, over which the Belgian deputy Denis Ducarme presided in 2006, presents a detailed list of the various allegations of crimes and abuses lodged against the Polisario Front.

Since 1981, an organisation like ***Amnesty International*** has also expressed ‘*its concern over the matter of abuses committed in the refugee camps under the responsibility of authorities of the Polisario in the region of Tindouf, in the South of Algeria.*’²⁵ And it adds that these violations ‘***included arbitrary prolonged detention, torture and the assassination of opponents or persons held***

²² *World Refugee Survey – Algeria, op. cit.*

²³ *Monthly report of the situation*, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Regional Office for West Africa, 31 March 2008.

²⁴ Denis Ducarme, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁵ Report of *Amnesty International* dated 18 April 1996 devoted to violations of human rights in the Western Sahara, cited in Claude Moniquet, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

suspect.’ The organisation notes improvements since 1988 but mentions the existence of ‘*reports concerning torture and ill treatment of prisoners up to 1992.*’

The belated liberation of the ‘oldest prisoners of war of the world’ was a positive sign but nonetheless it did not manage to conceal the difficulties which remain in the Polisario camps. In 2005, **Amnesty International** reported that ‘*the authors of offences to human rights committed in the past in these camps have continued to enjoy impunity. Those who were there still have not been turned over by the Polisario to Algerian authorities to be brought to justice.*’²⁶.

4.2. *Insufficient progress*

Although it seems that the darkest hours of the Polisario with respect to human rights belong to the past, **the situation in the camps remains a source of concern for international observers and defenders of human rights.**

An independent commission of enquiry in 2006 believed that the Polisario Front ‘*continued to be characterised by the absence of any judicial system guaranteeing people’s elementary rights.*’²⁷ The educational system also was criticised for its non-conformity with the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.²⁸

Moreover, the press continues to make revelations on what appear to be patent violations of human rights. Indeed, an investigation by the NGO **SOS Esclave** made it possible to expose slavery at the Tindouf camps. According to the Spanish daily **El Pais**, Soltana, a young 14-year-old black girl, was **employed as a slave by a Sahrawi family.**²⁹ The Spanish adoptive mother of Soltana, President of the association **Friends of the Sahrawi People**, said to be close to the Polisario, filed a **formal complaint against the separatist movement.**

Brahim Ghali, representative of the Polisario in Madrid, was thus called upon to appear before a Spanish court on a complaint of slavery.³⁰

On the question of women’s rights in June 2008, three militants attacked the Council of Human Rights (CDH) in Geneva on the matter of the ‘***persistence of violations of women’s rights in the Polisario camps at Tindouf.***’ Confirming the ‘existence of a **women’s detention centre**, they asked the CDH to ‘***shed light on the abuses committed inside this centre, where the women held are victims of rape, violence and systematic humiliation by their jailers.***’³¹

In the 2008 edition of its report, **Amnesty International** reminds us that the ‘***Polisario Front has not taken any measures to put an end to the impunity enjoyed by two who were accused of having committed***

²⁶ *Report 2005: the state of the world’s human rights*, Amnesty International, 2005. <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/POL10/001/2005/fr/dom-POL100012005fr.html>

²⁷ Denis Ducarme, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁹ Tono Calleja, « Soltana no quiere ser esclava », *El Pais*, 13 March 2007. <http://www.elpais.com/articulo/sociedad/Saltana/quiere/ser/esclava/elpepisc/20070312elpepisc/3/Tes>

³⁰ M’Hamed Hamrouch, ‘The representative of the Polisario in Madrid called upon to appear before a Spanish court for slavery,’ *Aujourd’hui le Maroc*, 7 December 2007.

³¹ ‘Violations of women’s rights by the Polisario: militant women seize the CDH », MAP, 5 June 2008.

offences against human rights in the camps during the 1970s and 1980s.³²

Finally, this particularly worrisome situation concerning human rights has been confirmed by the **U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants** (USCRI). In its 2008 report devoted to Algeria, the USCRI remarks that **'the authorities of the Polisario have maintained their own police, judicial and penitentiary systems. They apply their own penal code with the consent of Algeria. They are holding more than one hundred refugees in at least two prisons, one at Hamdi Ba Sheikh for the men, located 30 minutes away from the HQ of Rabouni as well as another one for women and children.'**³³ The report also criticises the **arrest at Tindouf of two Australian film-makers** who were making a report on **slavery** by Sahrawis living in the refugee camp.

5. Withdrawal from the Manhasset negotiations

The negotiations at **Manhasset**, in the State of New York, consist, as we know, of a series of discussions between the Moroccan government and representatives of the Polisario launched by Resolution 1754 of the United Nations Security Council adopted on 30 April 2007. Algeria and Mauritania also were represented during these talks, the first since the failure of the plan by former American Secretary of State James Baker in 2004.

5.1. New confirmation of failure at Manhasset

On 19 March, the fourth round of Manhasset talks ended with a **new acknowledgement of failure. The refusal of the Polisario Front to agree to the Moroccan proposal of extensive autonomy (a plan which was greeted as 'significant progress' on the international scene) in fact prevented the negotiations from really beginning.** The Polisario Front otherwise threatened to withdraw from the process as from the end of the meeting, notably due to remarks by the personal envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations, **Peter van Walsum**, according to which **'independence is no longer an option.'**³⁴ Mohammed Khaddad, the coordinator of the Polisario Front at the UN Mission for the organisation of a referendum on the Western Sahara (MINURSO), said back in the month of June in the Spanish press that the personal envoy of the UN Secretary General for the Western Sahara, Peter van Walsum, had **'delivered a death blow'** to the process of negotiations.³⁵

The latter had in fact written in his report to the Security Council in April 2008 that **independence of the territory was 'not a realisable objective.'** *'When I*

³² *Report 2008: the state of the world's human rights*, Amnesty International, 2008, p. 278.

<http://thereport.amnesty.org/document/107>

³³ *World Refugee Survey – Algeria*, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Naoufel Cherkaoui, 'the Polisario is wondering about the effectiveness of the latest talks at Manhasset,' *Magharebia*, 3 July 2008.

<http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/fr/features/awi/features/2008/07/03/feature-01>

³⁵ M'Hamed Hamrouch, 'Algiers is conducting a campaign of defamation against the UN mediator for the Sahara,' *Aujourd'hui le Maroc*, 27 June 2008.

<http://www.aujourd'hui.ma/couverture-details62562.html>

*called for negotiations between the parties in January 2006, my point of departure was that Morocco could never be forced to accept a real referendum and thus, that the choice was either an indefinite prolongation of the impasse or direct negotiations between the parties,' he explained on 24 September in an interview published in the Moroccan magazine *Tel Quel*.³⁶ The Dutch diplomat nonetheless attributes the setback in these talks to the intransigence which both parties have shown. 'It seemed more and more clear to me that the negotiations weren't leading anywhere, because the proposals from Morocco and from the Polisario were mutually exclusive: Morocco rejected a referendum with independence as an option... while the Polisario demanded precisely that,' he declared at the end of the fourth session, adding that he had 'informed the Security Council that the exchanges that had taken place could not be considered to be negotiations. Certainly, there had not been the slightest rapprochement.'³⁷*

One will note that this taking of sides by a neutral observer, in this case the personal envoy of the UN Secretary General, was badly received by the representatives of the Polisario. Some have even come to **question the integrity of so experienced a diplomat as Mr. Walsum.**

The excessiveness of these reactions all by itself gives rise to serious doubts over the real will of the Polisario to get involved in the process of negotiations in a constructive manner in order to find a solution to the conflict of the Western Sahara.

5.2. American determination to continue the negotiations

In her 7 September 2008 visit to Rabat, American Secretary of State **Condoleezza Rice** nonetheless gave assurances that new negotiations would take place with the **active support of Washington**. She in fact suggested that now was the time to find a solution to the conflict and that there were '**some good ideas on the table**, even '*some means of moving forward.*'³⁸ **Since the United States established in February 2007 an American military command for Africa (AFRICOM), it cannot go on seeing a lasting conflict in an area threatened by the terrorists of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).**

In this context, the nomination of **Christopher Ross** to the post of the new personal envoy of the Secretary General makes a lot of sense. A career diplomat and former ambassador to Damascus and to Algiers, **he also held the functions of coordinator of the war on terror** and special advisor of the Department of State for Iraqi affairs. The arrival of this experienced diplomat who is familiar with the problem of terrorism and is a perfect Arab speaker, thus offers concrete **proof of the determination of the American administration to re-launch the negotiations.**

³⁶Exclusive interview with Peter Van Walsum: 'Why Manhasset led to nothing.' Statement taken down by Mehdi Sekkourt Alaoui. *TELQUEL Online* N°337, 24 September 2008.

www.telquel-online.com/337/maroc5_337.shtml

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ « Rice wants a quick settlement of the conflict in the Western Sahara,' *L'Express*, 7 September 2008. <http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/depeches/infojour/reuters.asp?id=78552>

His mission will surely not be made any easier by the **large gap between the proposal of extensive autonomy presented by Morocco and the intransigence of the Polisario, which demands independence.** In addition, even if Christopher Ross's career led him to Algiers, it is not very likely that he can succeed in persuading the government of President Bouteflika to abandon its support for the referendum on self-determination demanded by the Polisario.

Finally, even if the White House never officially recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, President Bush has said that he understood the '*sensitivity of the Moroccan people*' on this problem,³⁹ and greeted the Moroccan initiative on enlarged autonomy. Despite the announced determination '*not to impose a solution*' and offers of rapprochement brought to Algiers by Condoleezza Rice, notably in the matter of the war on terror, an American diplomat still risks being perceived as an ally of Morocco.

6. A cruel lack of internal democracy

The failure of the negotiations at Manhasset has made it possible to show once again the lack of internal democracy from which the Sahrawi movement suffers. Many opposition groups have indeed expressed their criticism of the lack of legitimacy on the part of the leadership of the Polisario, thus revealing the internal contradictions in the Front.

6.1. Anger following the suspension of the negotiations

The Sahrawi delegation, which is completely composed of members of the radical wing of the Polisario Front, presented a **united and intransigent face during the negotiations at Manhasset.** In addition, the non-renewal of the mandate of Peter van Walsum appeared to offer a diplomatic victory to the Polisario and to Algeria.

Nearly 33 years after the proclamation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the absence of a final agreement on the status of the Western Sahara and the deterioration of living conditions of the Sahrawis in the camps of Tindouf have continued to favour the emergence of an internal opposition within the Polisario.

The living conditions and the successive waves of repression experienced in these camps have led some Sahrawi NGOs to demand the opening of international inquiries into the kidnapping of members of the opposition that were ordered by the leadership of the Polisario. The Sahrawi Association for the Defence of Human Rights has thus asked Spanish courts to order the arrest of **Brahim Ghali**, the former 'Minister of Defence' and 'ambassador' to Madrid of the Polisario Front.⁴⁰

³⁹ Carol Migdalovitz, *Western Sahara : Status of Settlement Efforts*, CRS Report for Congress, Washington D.C., 29 September 2006, p.5. <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS20962.pdf>

⁴⁰ « Una asociación saharauí pide a Garzón que detenga a un representante del Polisario que acudirá a unos debates en Sevilla », *EcoDiario*, 25 September 2008. <http://ecodiario.economista.es/legislacion/noticias/770533/09/08/Una-asociacion-saharai-pide-a-Garzon-que-detenga-a-un-representante-del-Polisario-que-acudira-a-unos-debates-en-Sevilla.html>

*'The Polisario has for more than 33 years taken the path of confrontation without arriving at its goal and without succeeding in attracting the support of a single world power. Why does it still refuse to try the path of dialogue,'*⁴¹ asked a Sahrawi student during a meeting organised by the public universities of Madrid in the presence of leaders of the SADR.

'Morocco is called upon to stop all negotiations with the Polisario, because it does not represent the Sahrawis of Tindouf,' Abderrahim Berdji, president of an NGO based in Seville declared for his part.⁴² ***'There are many currents and movements of Sahrawis which refuse to be represented by the junta which is running the Polisario and which also demand a voice and a place at the negotiating table to find a solution to this conflict which has lasted too long,'***⁴³ he went on to say.

6.2. Challenge to the legitimacy of the Polisario Front

Aside from the feeling of the population and of NGOs, **organised opposition groups also criticise the legitimacy and the strategy of the Polisario during the negotiations at Manhasset.** *'The present leadership of the Polisario Front is illegitimate, since the 12th Congress was not democratic and legitimate. This leadership has no legitimacy to negotiate in the name of the Sahrawi people with the Moroccan government over our future,'*⁴⁴ said ***Khatt Achahid*** in a communiqué ('The Path of the Martyr') on behalf of a dissident faction of the Polisario which has many leaders based in Spain and which criticizes the **anti-democratic nature of the present Sahrawi leadership.** *'This corrupt leadership continues to act ruthlessly, without any change, all of which confirms that Mohamed Abdelaziz distrusts our people and thumbs his nose at these repeated calls for change, for justice and democracy within Polisario,'*⁴⁵ the text goes on to say.

The group also criticises the systematic alignment of the leadership of the Polisario with its Algerian ally. *'If Algeria wants the Sahrawis to remain forever in the camps of Tindouf, they should at least improve the living conditions,'* said **Mahjoub Salek**, one of the leaders of the movement in Spain during the meeting in Madrid.⁴⁶

Finally, **some former leaders of the Polisario have called on it to change its attitude to the Moroccan proposals.** Sidati Ghallaoui, Abadila Semlali and Asaad El Moussaoui published a communiqué in June supporting the Moroccan plan of autonomy and inviting the parties to the conflict to *'respond favourably to resolution 1813 of the UN Security Council,'*⁴⁷ which asks *'the parties and the States*

⁴¹ 'Existence of opposition movements in the Polisario », *Le Matin*, 30 May 2008.

<http://www.lematin.ma/Actualite/express/Article.asp?id=92091>

⁴² Hiwar em prol do desenvolvimento, da solidariedade e do dialogo

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Sahara: the dissidents of Khat Achahid criticise the illegitimacy of the Polisario, Maghreboo – Agences, 26 December 2007. <http://www.maghreboo.com/politique/sahara-les-dissidents-de-khatt-achahid-denonce-l-illegitimite-de-la-direction-du-polisario.html>

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ 'Algeria and the Polisario are called upon to subscribe to a spirit of realism,' *Le Matin*, 3 June 2008. <http://www.lematin.ma/Actualite/Express/Article.asp?id=92307>

of the region to continue to fully cooperate with the United Nations Organisation and for both to put an end to the present impasse and go forward towards a political solution.’⁴⁸ They also criticised the links which unite the Polisario Front with Algeria, accusing the latter of **‘causing the status quo to endure by maintaining an intransigent position which no longer conceals its hegemonic visions on the region.’**⁴⁹ Sidati El Ghallaoui, former representative of the Polisario in Rome, has accused Algiers of being *‘the first party responsible for the violations of the rights of the Sahrawi populations in the camps of Tindouf, where they are deprived of their most elementary rights.’*⁵⁰

6.3. *Is there a credible alternative to the Polisario?*

Many positions thus co-exist within the Sahrawi movement, giving rise to **possible alternatives to the present leadership of the Polisario.** This opposition is manifest on the ground, where **the calls for an Intifada launched in 2005 and reiterated in September 2008 by Mohamed Abdelaziz⁵¹ did not receive any resonance on the part of the civilian population. Only some minor incidents broke out in some districts, involving young unemployed persons already known to the courts for acts in common law.** At the same time, the possibility mentioned at the 12th Congress of taking up armed struggle seems to have more similarity with gesticulation than with a true threat, since most of the Polisario fighters were demobilised long ago.

Although the radical leadership of the Polisario thus seems to have lost influence, **it is nonetheless not certain that the taking of power by one or another of the components would have an impact on the continuation of the Manhasset process.** While he criticises the anti-democratic nature and the submission to Algeria of the present Polisario leadership, **Khatt Achahid** does not espouse the Moroccan positions, even if the independent Sahrawi group, founded in February in the Canary Isles by dissidents of the Polisario has set as its objective *‘active search for a peaceful solution’* to the conflict.⁵² Finally, **we may fear that some dissident groups will conduct violent actions to discredit the Polisario and find an audience that is today not available to them.** The loss of authority of the historic leadership of the Sahrawi movement may **favour its break-up and the appearance of armed criminal groups.** All the same, **it is not very likely that an opposition group could effectively overturn the present leadership so long as they continue to enjoy Algerian support.**

⁴⁸ UN Security Council, resolution 1813(2008), 30 April 2008.

<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No8/325/47/PDF/No832547.pdf?OpenElement>

⁴⁹ ‘Populations of the camps at Tindouf: The defenders of human rights sound the alert,’ *Le rénovateur quotidien*, 11 June 2008.

http://www.cridem.org/index.php?id=82&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=18329&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=36&cHash=1f979eefod

⁵⁰ http://www.emarrakech.info/Ancien-responsable-du-polisario-L-Algerie-est-le-premier-responsable-des-violations-des-droits-de-l-homme-dans-les-camps_a16090.html

⁵¹ Ghada Hamrouche, ‘Promoting resistance by the occupied territories, President Sarahoui calls upon the people to continue its intifada,’ *La tribune*, 19 September 2008. <http://www.latribune-online.com/divers/5343.html>

⁵² ‘Creation in Tenerife of the ‘Independent Sahrawi Group’ to search for peaceful solution to the conflict of the Sahara,’ 6 September 2008. <http://www.avmaroc.com/actualite/creation-tenerife-a119929.html>

7. Relations between the Polisario and Algeria

The relations of the Polisario with the state which is its most relied upon support, Algeria, goes back to the creation of the Sahrawi separatist movement. Algiers has known how to use the conflict in the Western Sahara to seek to destabilise Morocco, its regional rival.

7.1. *Historic support for the Polisario*

Ever since its creation in 1972, the Polisario Front has always enjoyed **support from Algeria**, which backs its pro-independence demands for reasons that are both ideological and geopolitical.

Born itself out of a war of national liberation, the Algerian state has naturally become involved in the Sahwari question. That is how **the diplomatic activism of Algiers has enabled the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic to get recognition from thirty or so African states and from the African Union**, from which Morocco withdrew in 1984. The career of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a former member of the National Liberation Army (ALN) and former minister of President Ahmed Ben Bella, also no doubt contributed to consolidating the Algerian position. President Bouteflika, who sees the question of the Western Sahara as one of the last conflicts of decolonisation,⁵³ has repeatedly reconfirmed Algeria's support for *'this cause and all the others in accordance with the UN charter and with a view to assisting the Sahrawi people as well as all peoples to recover their liberty and independence.'*⁵⁴

While it is thus consistent with the ideological foundations of the state, **Algerian support for the Polisario also corresponds to the strategic objectives of Algiers in the Maghreb**. Morocco indeed accuses Algeria of having 'used' the Polisario as a tool to counter its policy and to gain advantage in the competition for first place in North Africa. In addition, the creation of an independent state in the Western Sahara within Algeria's orbit would provide it with **access to the Atlantic Ocean**.

7.2. *A relationship that hinders the process of negotiations*

Morocco has accused Algeria of having played a major role in the failure of the fourth round in Manhasset. Indeed, it was **the Algerian authorities who orchestrated the greatest part of the media campaign that led to the departure of Peter van Walsum**, who was considered to be too close to the Moroccan positions.⁵⁵ Over the past several years, Algeria has faced many diplomatic setbacks,⁵⁶ and the country has made major efforts to turn around international opinion on the Sahrawi question.

⁵³ Carol Migdalovitz, *op.cit.*

⁵⁴ <http://www.algerie-dz.com/article2928.html>

⁵⁵ M'Hamed Hamrouch, *op.cit.*, 27 June 2008.

⁵⁶ Hommage rendered to the Moroccan initiative by the United States, the UN Security Council, the British Parliament, etc.

It thus developed a new strategy of **lobbying to obtain the support of Western parliaments**. A parliamentary group of 'solidarity with the Sahrawi people' was set up in July within the British Parliament, bringing together Labour and Conservative deputies. The Conservative deputy John Bercow, who is a member of this group, questioned the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Meg Munn, over '*the absence of a government reaction to the violations of human rights carried out by Morocco in the Western Sahara.*'⁵⁷

Moreover, Rabat still accuses the Polisario and Algeria of trying to profit from the cease-fire accords concluded on 6 October 1991 thanks to the presence of MINURSO in order to **reoccupy the buffer zone** evacuated by the Moroccan Armed Forces. According to Moroccan sources, **some 'military elements' from Algeria and from the Polisario have in fact started to establish new camps at Tifirati and at Mijik.**

According to Mohamed Talib, a member of the royal consultative Council for Saharan Affairs, '*this movement, which marks a new escalation in the conflict over the Sahara, is an expression of the will of Algiers, which is already exasperated by the existence of the Sahrawi population in the camps of Tindouf.*'⁵⁸ It fits into the objective of repopulating the buffer zone set out at the 12th Congress of the Polisario. Moreover, Rabat has also accused Algeria of lending **financial support to destabilising operations** in the part of the Western Sahara under Moroccan administration.

7.3. *Ambiguities in the position of Algiers*

The Moroccan press has recently mentioned **a document declassified by the CIA which reveals an offer made by former Algerian President Chadli Benjedid to King Hassan II in 1988, dealing with a plan for autonomy of the Western Sahara in the framework of Moroccan sovereignty.** The text states that President Benjedid was at the time '*frustrated by the inability of the Polisario to bring off a military victory.*'⁵⁹ This proposal, which was broadly similar to the Moroccan plan for autonomy rejected at Manhasset, demonstrates that **many currents on the subject of the Sahwari problem have co-existed in Algiers since this period.**

Today we see a confrontation at the summit of Algerian power between the clan of the military men and that of the pragmatic technocrats who are more open to a negotiated solution with Morocco. It is this faction which has led to the rapprochement put in place over the past few years between Algeria and the United States, France and Spain, motivated by the need to restore the economy and the country's international image after the events of the 1990s. In addition, the need to improve the anti-terrorism fight in North Africa has led to a new cooperation with the Moroccan authorities.

⁵⁷ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo061017/text/61017w0022.htm>

⁵⁸ 'The separatists are setting up camps at Tifirati and at Mijik with the support of the Algerian Army,' *Aujourd'hui le Maroc*, 14 February 2008. <http://www.aujourd'hui.ma/couverture-detail59837.HTML>

⁵⁹ 'A CIA document reveals that Algeria proposed autonomy in 1988,' *Aujourd'hui le Maroc*, 28 May 2008. http://www.aujourd'hui.ma/la_une/la_une_1680.pdf

The Army, which is the principal support of the Polisario Front, nevertheless continues to apply its influence in the entourage of President Bouteflika to maintain the Algerian position on the Western Sahara. Together with the anti-terrorist fight, the possibility of military conflict with Morocco over the Sahwari question provides one of the principal justifications for the massive programme of modernisation of the Army undertaken since 1999 which has turned Algeria, a country that has no declared external enemy, into the main buyer of heavy weapons and of sophisticated weapons systems in the African camp.

Moreover, **the maintenance of a situation of conflict permits the Army to preserve a predominant role in Algerian affairs.** Furthermore, each clan tries to position itself now that people begin to wonder about the succession of Abdelaziz Bouteflika to the presidency of the republic and Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, who is close to the military men, appears to be favoured. In this context, domestic political problems will influence more than ever the positioning of Algeria on the question of the Sahara, provoking, as a consequence, new uncertainty over the future development of the process of settling the conflict.

Conclusions

More than thirty years after its creation, the Polisario Front is a movement that is losing speed, which no longer has the support of its base, and whose refusal to negotiate is continuing to accentuate its isolation on the international scene as we see from the recent withdrawal of recognition of the SADR by Malawi.⁶⁰

This difficult context for the pro-independence Sahwari movement is not inclined to permit any improvement concerning the various abuses which, for more than thirty years, have tarnished its reputation. The ideological sclerosis of the movement, together with internal and external difficulties, could even prompt a radicalisation of at least part of its members. This hypothesis, corroborated by many international experts, should be envisaged in the most serious way.

Apart from the absence of significant progress on the question of human rights and the continued misappropriation of international assistance, the links with terrorist groups close to the Salafist movement and the increased participation in regional criminality are the two most disturbing aspects of the direction that the movement has followed for many years.

In the present state of affairs, the conditions have not come together in a way that would cause the Polisario Front to reverse a trend that goes back to the origins of the movement. In addition, the lack of internal democracy in the movement is not likely to favour the emergence of a

⁶⁰ 'Malawi withdraws its recognition of the SADR,' APA, 16 September 2008.
http://www.apanews.net/apa.php?page=show_article&id_article=75511

new leadership that is more responsible and capable of seriously committing itself to a process of negotiations.

Hence, we believe that the internal situation of the movement and its further development in the regional context may facilitate a continuation, even, in certain cases, an accentuation of the abuses of the Polisario to the detriment of the Sahrawi population, on the one hand, and of regional stability, on the other hand.