
THE WESTERN SAHARA DISPUTE: A CAUTIONARY TALE FOR PEACEBUILDERS

CHARLES DUNBAR AND
KATHLEEN MALLEY-MORRISON

Abstract

This paper analyses the consequences of the United Nations' failure to resolve the Western Sahara dispute.¹ The UN Secretariat's lack of transparency in its early effort to get the conflicting parties to agree to hold a referendum to decide the territory's future strengthened the persistent distrust of the UN. Also, the comparatively low human cost of the conflict has made it easier for the Security Council to allow a self-perpetuating peace process to continue rather than to force the parties to make the hard choices needed to resolve the dispute. Moreover, despite its large investments in Western Sahara, the Moroccan government's oppressive occupation policies and its exploitation of the territory's phosphates and fisheries for the primary benefit of non-Sahrawi Morocco mean that Western Sahara's political and economic development has been stunted by the ongoing stalemate. As a response to the stymied development engendered by the long deadlock, the international community could foster educational and perhaps employment opportunities for the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria as long-term alternatives to their unproductive lives in their desert camps. To aid development further, the Moroccan government could be urged to provide more job opportunities in Morocco for Sahrawis seeking to return there.

Introduction

The United Nations is far from achieving its goal of saving the world 'from the scourge of war' (UN 1945). Although the number of battlefield deaths has declined steeply throughout the world since the end of the Cold War, the 'indirect' costs of late 20th and early 21st century armed conflicts, which are increasingly internal rather than international, are horrific. Despite considerable involvement of the international community there, 'Africa remains the world's most conflict-prone continent' (Human Security Centre 2005:4).

There is growing recognition that alternative approaches to traditional conflict-resolution efforts need to be developed (Brouneus 2003), and that conflict does not end with the formal termination of fighting through negotiation or other means. Although views on the subject differ, Call and Cousens estimate that negotiated settlements fail three times more often than they succeed. They also comment that peacebuilding requires 'sustained political attention from actors with resources, yet this attention – whether that of the UN Security Council, key capitals, or international institutions – is generally short-lived, crisis-driven, and prone to weaken when it is needed the most' (Call & Cousens 208:11). The experience of UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the oldest of the UN's 'complex' peace operations,² bears out the points made by these authors. Its mission is 'to monitor the ceasefire and to conduct a referendum which would allow the people of Western Sahara to decide the Territory's future status' (UNSC 2000). MINURSO

has helped maintain the ceasefire between Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro, or Polisario, the indigenous Sahrawi guerrilla movement which in the 1970s emerged as the only effective opponent of Morocco's annexation of the territory. The UN and MINURSO, however, have succeeded neither in conducting a referendum nor in fostering a negotiated solution to the problem. Indeed, the Secretariat and the Security Council missed two chances to suspend what has become a self-perpetuating 'peace process'; if they had taken advantage of these opportunities and suspended negotiations, the parties would have had to rethink their positions and perhaps entered into more serious negotiations aimed at reaching some sort of compromise.

The Western Sahara problem has not reached a 'hurting stalemate' in which the pain of continued deadlock becomes greater for the parties than the pain of making the concessions needed to achieve a settlement.³ For the Moroccan government, its inability to gain international acceptance of its occupation of Western Sahara is preferable by far to the

The Western Sahara problem has not reached a 'hurting stalemate' in which the pain of continued deadlock becomes greater for the parties than the pain of making the concessions needed to achieve a settlement.

potential loss of some control over the territory through a serious peace negotiation. For the Polisario, it is better to continue a fruitless negotiation than to resume a conventional war it cannot win or resort to what might be regarded as terrorist tactics to gain attention for its cause, risking the loss of its support in Spain and Europe. For the UN and the

Security Council, the human costs for the Sahrawis of Morocco's occupation and exploitation of the territory's resources are insignificant when compared with the price being paid by civilian populations in countries that are truly torn by war; the temptation to take the path of least resistance by allowing the 'peace process' to continue has proven irresistible

Why did the UN propose a referendum in the mid-1980s only to allow a peace process that was leading nowhere to persist for the next quarter of a century? The article draws on Security Council records, personal memoirs and the experience of the first author as the Secretary General's Special Representative in charge of MINURSO in 1998 and early 1999 to analyse the question. It uses the few available statistics and secondary-source analysis to explain how, despite substantial Moroccan investment, Western Sahara's status as an occupied territory has impeded its economic, human, and political development. It indicates how problems identified by Fukuda-Parr and her co-authors as risk factors for 'new wars'—i.e. chronic poverty, overdependence on natural resources, and spillovers of refugees into neighbouring countries—characterise the Western Sahara case, despite the maintenance of a ceasefire. The case of the Western Sahara illustrates the peacebuilding argument that an end to armed conflict does not automatically provide the conditions for development. In its conclusion, the essay suggests that transparency is usually the best policy, that suspending a failed negotiation is sometimes the wisest course, and that humanitarian concerns—in this case the plight of the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria—can and should be addressed creatively.

Western Sahara: A Brief History ⁴

Western Sahara lies south of Morocco and west of Algeria and Mauritania on the coast of northwest Africa. Slightly larger than Great Britain, and with a population estimated at nearly 400,000, it is almost entirely desert. It has rich fisheries off its coast, large phosphate rock deposits and the possibility of oil both on and offshore, although no discoveries have been made. Most of its population lives in the capital city of Laayoune and three other towns. From 1884 to 1975, the territory was a colony of Spain and known as Spanish Sahara. The manner of Spain's relinquishing its Saharan colony in 1975 was contested between Morocco

and Algeria. Morocco opposed the Spanish government's announced plan to hold a referendum on the territory's future because the vote would likely have led to an independent Western Sahara; instead, Morocco's King Hassan II sought an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that he hoped would confirm the territory's ties to Morocco prior to Spanish colonisation. Algeria opposed Morocco's acquisition of the colony and supported both the proposed referendum and the Polisario, which had emerged as the principal contender for leading an independent Western Sahara. Following the ICJ's finding that the Moroccan monarchy had had ties of allegiance with, but not sovereignty over, the territory, the Moroccan government organised a march of 350,000 Moroccan civilians into the territory in early November 1975. On November 14, Spain cancelled the planned referendum and instead reached an agreement with Morocco and Mauritania, which also claimed the colony, to partition it between them. A substantial percentage of the territory's people, then numbering 73,500, fled to Algeria and became refugees.

For the next 13 years, Algeria supported the Polisario with money, arms and diplomacy in its military and political struggle against Morocco and Mauritania; it continues to be the

Algeria supported the Polisario with money, arms and diplomacy in its military and political struggle against Morocco and Mauritania; it continues to be the principal opponent of the Moroccan occupation.

principal opponent of the Moroccan occupation. Mauritania withdrew from its portion of Western Sahara in 1979 and recognised the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Polisario's government in exile. The SADR gradually established diplomatic relations with many states in Asia, Latin America and Africa. In 1985, the

Organisation of African Unity (now the African Union) recognised the SADR as Western Sahara's legitimate government. In recent years, 35 governments have either frozen or broken relations with the SADR, while 49 still recognise it.

In the late 1980s, first Morocco and later the Polisario agreed in principle to the holding of a UN-managed referendum over whether Western Sahara should be independent or become a part of Morocco *de jure*. Two lengthy reports by the Secretary General to the Security Council, known together as the 'settlement plan', became the basis for MINURSO's deployment in September 1991 into Morocco and the Polisario-run refugee camps in Algeria in order to conduct the referendum within a year (UNSC 1990, 1991). The process of identifying eligible voters did not begin until 1994 and stalled two years later. In early 1997, the new Secretary General, Kofi Annan, appointed former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker as his personal envoy for Western Sahara. Baker held four face-to-face meetings with the parties and brokered a series of agreements ('the Houston accords'). Voter identification resumed, and by 1999 MINURSO had identified 86,381 eligible voters while rejecting something less than twice that number, almost all of whom had been presented by Morocco (Dunbar 2000). When Morocco announced that it would appeal MINURSO's rejection of 133,000 of its applicants, the Secretary General signalled to the Security Council in February 2000 his unwillingness to continue the referendum process (UNSC 2000).

Since then, Morocco's position has hardened into its present insistence that there can be no referendum in which independence for Western Sahara is an option. Between 2000 and his resignation in 2004, Baker sought without success to bring the parties to accept an interim solution involving a period of enhanced autonomy for Western Sahara. His successor, former Dutch diplomat Peter Van Walsum, presided over four unproductive meetings between Moroccan and Polisario representatives in Manhasset, New York, in 2007 and 2008. In 2007, Morocco proposed that the parties meet to negotiate within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, a proposal that the U.S. viewed

as constructive but the Security Council stopped short of endorsing. Meanwhile, MINURSO has taken the lead in organising confidence-building measures between the territory and the refugee camps, notably a series of family reunion visits.

Van Walsum's mandate ended in August 2008, and Christopher Ross, a retired U.S. ambassador, replaced him in January 2009. Ambassador Ross convened a two-day meeting of the parties in Durnstein, Austria from 10-11 August 2009, and the parties agreed to meet again on a date to be determined. This development followed a reported indication by President Obama that the U.S. is returning to its previous policy of supporting the UN's call for Morocco and the Polisario to negotiate without preconditions.

The UN's Handling of Western Sahara

In 1985, two years after the OAU had called for a UN-sponsored referendum in Western Sahara, Secretary General Perez de Cuellar committed the organisation to starting a referendum process and pursued the objective single-mindedly until MINURSO's deployment in 1991. The Secretary General had evidently taken note of King Hassan's apparent acceptance of a referendum in response to a 1981 General Assembly call for Sahrawi self-determination (Perez de Cuellar 1997:336). By 1985, however, the OAU had

In 1985, Secretary General Perez de Cuellar committed the organisation to starting a referendum process and pursued the objective single-mindedly until MINURSO's deployment in 1991.

made the Polisario's SADR an OAU member and Morocco had withdrawn from the organisation in protest. Undaunted, Perez de Cuellar pressed ahead; by the end of his term in 1991, he had visited Morocco six times, Algeria three times, Tindouf (Polisario headquarters in Algeria) twice and Mauritania once. He had 132 meetings with

representatives of Morocco, 33 with the Polisario, and 52 with OAU representatives during this four-year period, all devoted to Western Sahara (Perez de Cuellar 1997:141).

Between the 1985 OAU summit meeting and MINURSO's deployment in September 1991, the UN Secretariat took the lead in initiating the referendum process and encountered obstruction and hostility at every turn. In 1985, the Polisario insisted that responsibility for administering the territory should be transferred to the UN, which with the OAU would run the referendum. This idea was anathema to Morocco. Fearful of Moroccan influence, the Polisario resisted for two years before agreeing to a technical visit to the Sahara by UN officials seeking to develop a plan for the referendum. As for who should vote in the referendum, the Polisario held that only those identified in a 1974 Spanish census of the Sahara and their close relatives should be eligible. Morocco insisted that a much larger group of persons with various ties to the Sahara should also be allowed to vote.

During the three years before MINURSO's deployment in September 1991, the Secretariat's efforts to prepare the way for the start of the process were intense. A task force formed by the Secretary General struggled to deal with the parties' mounting anger at the Secretariat's failure to address their concerns about the settlement proposals, notably those of King Hassan as to who could vote in the referendum and those of the Polisario over the Moroccan troop presence in the territory. The Security Council nonetheless approved the settlement plan in 1990 and 1991 and accepted the Secretary General's recommendation that two new criteria for voter eligibility, which seemed to favour Morocco's cause, be added to the settlement plan. MINURSO then deployed and voter identification proceeded in fits and starts until it ground to a halt in 1999.

Responsibility and opacity

Faced with these difficulties, Perez de Cuellar seems to have opted for a policy of pressing ahead while hiding the extent of the Secretariat's difficulties from the parties themselves, from the Security Council and even from members of his staff. In September 1988, for example, he informed the Security Council that the parties had accepted his proposals 'while making substantial remarks and comments', but he opted to share neither the text of his proposals nor the parties' 'remarks and comments' with the Council. In his memoir, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, he recognised that keeping the Council in the dark about the parties' reservations was risky, but noted that he was trying to maintain progress towards the referendum that both sides said they wanted (Perez de Cuellar 1997:343). The Council chose not to ask questions; instead it approved the proposals in principle and authorised the appointment of the first of eight special representatives of the Secretary General to oversee the referendum process (Perez de Cuellar 1997:342-343).

According to former Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations Marrack Goulding, Perez de Cuellar and Issa Diallo, a special counsellor in Perez de Cuellar's office, were equally unforthcoming in their dealings with senior UN staff, including Goulding himself. In his own memoir, *Peacemonger*, Goulding notes that Diallo refused to show him a 12-page letter King Hassan had sent the Secretary General in 1990 objecting to the UN's referendum plan; this refusal is remarkable given that Goulding was then chairman of the Secretary General's referendum task force. As difficulties mounted, the Secretary General seemed to fall back on his inner circle, notably Diallo, and to exclude others who questioned his tactics. Perez de Cuellar's own words about the need to press forward and to keep the problems he was encountering secret suggest that he may have tried to marginalise those whom he perceived as opposing his strategy (Goulding 2003:203-204).

While noting that most Sahrawis were nomads with little sense of nationalism or national borders, Perez de Cuellar said that self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, as demanded by the General Assembly, was his 'point of reference in all the actions I took in seeking to facilitate a settlement of the Western Sahara problem' (1997:333). His view that independence was a viable option for the small population of West Sahara and his conviction that if the referendum were held at the time he was writing, Morocco would win (Perez de Cuellar 1997:333, 337, 352), did not change until MINURSO's process of identifying eligible voters was well under way in 1998. The addition to the settlement plan of the so-called 'Moroccan criteria', allowing those with patrilineal connections to or extended periods of residence in the Sahara to vote, may have been necessary to gain Moroccan acceptance of the plan. It was also Perez de Cuellar's parting gift to Morocco before his term as Secretary General ended.

In the last analysis, it is hard to know why Perez de Cuellar decided to make the UN responsible for holding a referendum in Western Sahara and to pave the way for it in the way he did. He faced little pressure to conduct the referendum either from the parties themselves or from major powers; the United States and France had initially tilted towards Morocco by voting for the pro-Moroccan General Assembly resolution on the Sahara adopted in early 1976 and abstaining on a pro-Polisario rival draft passed by the Assembly at the same time (A/Res/3548-A of 1975). Neither, however, was heavily committed to a referendum process. Allegations that the Secretary General may have been motivated by partiality to Morocco remain to be proved. Some see his last-minute addition of the two 'Moroccan criteria' for voter eligibility as evidence that he was not an impartial arbiter; moreover, his memoirs make clear his admiration for King Hassan and contempt for the Polisario Secretary General. Also, by his own account, he believed that Morocco would

win a referendum if one were held. His memoir and Marrack Goulding also suggest that the Secretary General gave offence to both parties. What is clearer is that Perez de Cuellar's

Perez de Cuellar's efforts to paper over major differences between Morocco and the Polisario as to how the referendum should be held came back to haunt MINURSO throughout the voter identification process and beyond.

efforts to paper over major differences between Morocco and the Polisario as to how the referendum should be held came back to haunt MINURSO throughout the voter identification process and beyond. By throwing his diplomat's caution to the winds and moving ahead without fully informing the parties and the Security Council of where matters stood, he created misunderstandings

and eventually animosity that led to lengthy delays. By the time the voter identification process failed for the last time, the parties and the Security Council had grown accustomed to an endless process.

Perpetuity

Since the settlement plan's shelving in early 2002, two constraints on progress have endured: first, the Secretary General's view that the Western Sahara dispute could only be solved via a negotiated settlement; and second, Morocco's decision to turn its back on the referendum. In April 2001, following fruitless face-to-face talks between the parties, Baker presented them with a draft 'framework agreement'. It gave Sahrawis 'exclusive competence' over local government administration, left foreign affairs and national security to Morocco, and mandated a referendum, whose options Baker left unspecified, after five years. After Morocco had accepted and the Polisario had rejected this plan, the Secretary General, at Baker's suggestion, asked the Security Council to choose among four options: first, carry out the settlement plan without the concurrence of the parties; second, develop a revision of the plan that addressed the concerns of those who opposed it and then carry it out without further negotiation with the parties; third, explore partitioning the territory between Morocco and the Polisario; and fourth, admit failure by closing MINURSO (UNSC 2002).

After the Security Council avoided the choice, Baker presented a new plan. It spelt out more specifically powers to be given to a Sahrawi-elected administration and to Morocco and provided for a referendum in which the number of voters would be expanded to include people who had lived in Western Sahara since December 30, 2009, but who had not been found eligible to vote by MINURSO. The plan also raised the possibility of offering voters a choice other than independence or integration into Morocco (UNSC 2003a). This time, the Polisario and Algeria accepted the plan, but Morocco rejected it. The Secretary General reported these facts to the Security Council and said that Baker believed the Council should either close MINURSO or ask the parties to negotiate a political settlement (UNSC 2004a). The Council refused once more to make a choice (Security Council Resolution 1441 of 2004), and in June 2004, Baker resigned. The Moroccan Foreign Ministry hailed his departure as 'a triumph for Moroccan diplomacy' (Theofilopoulou 2006:13).

In the succeeding five years, the 'peace process' has continued without progress. Four unsuccessful meetings between the parties were brokered in 2007 and 2008 in Manhasset, New York, by Baker's successor, Peter Van Walsum. In 2007, the Moroccan government proposed that the parties begin a negotiation on autonomy for the territory, but within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty, national unity, and territorial integrity (Theofilopoulou 2006:2). The U.S. administration termed the proposal constructive, but the Security Council stuck to its position that the parties should negotiate without preconditions (Security Council Resolution 1754 of 30 April 2007). In July 2009, the media reported that President

Obama had written a letter to King Mohammed VI in which he noted his support for the UN negotiating process as the best way to bring an end to the conflict.

When Baker resigned, the Secretariat and the Security Council could have agreed not to appoint a new personal envoy. They could have decided instead that, having done all they could to end the conflict, they should limit MINURSO's mission to continued monitoring of the ceasefire and provision of aid to the migrants from sub-Saharan Africa who are sometimes stranded in the territory on their way north to the Mediterranean or west to the Canary Islands. Suspension of the UN's political involvement in the problem might have forced the parties to rethink their positions and perhaps arrive at an accommodation. Neither a reduction in MINURSO's status nor suspending the special envoy's mission is likely. In the first place, the Polisario's one remaining political trump card, Algeria, is not prepared to concede the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, even if it were made more palatable by the sort of token autonomy the Moroccan government might offer. For many years, the policy of the Algerian government seems to have been that some sort of a 'process' should be ongoing in the Sahara so that King Hassan's gamble in 1975 will not be seen to have fully paid off. In a January 2008 meeting with Charles Dunbar, a senior Algerian

Foreign Ministry official made it clear that Algeria would not accept Morocco's *fait accompli* in the Sahara.

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. has reinforced its strong security ties with Morocco and has found the Algerian government interested in supporting its efforts in the 'war on terror', all of which has implications for the resolution of the conflict.

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. has reinforced its strong security ties with Morocco and has found the Algerian government interested in supporting its efforts in the 'war on terror', all of which has implications for the

resolution of the conflict. These relationships are far more important to the U.S. than the Western Sahara dispute. Although Washington during several administrations favoured a solution involving the incorporation of Western Sahara into Morocco, it has resisted jeopardising its relations with either country by becoming more assertive on the issue.

The 'Moroccanisation' of Western Sahara

'Moroccanisation' is the cornerstone of Morocco's policy in Western Sahara. It pursues three broad policies to achieve that objective: Moroccan-oriented economic development; repression of opposition to the occupation; and 'Moroccanisation' of as many Sahrawis as possible. In the course of the occupation, Morocco has done much to develop infrastructure in Western Sahara. An excellent road now runs the length of its coast from Morocco to Mauritania in the south, and Smara, the territory's only interior town, is linked to Laayoune by a serviceable asphalt road. Laayoune has grown from a sleepy garrison town of a few thousand in the mid-1970s to a small city whose population is estimated at some 200,000. It is a bustling town complete with a large main square and grandiose Moroccan-style mosque, at least three large hotels and several apartment complexes to house the burgeoning Moroccan settler population and military personnel assigned to the city. Its port, like those of Dakhla and Boujdour (the Sahara's third port), has been greatly expanded, and Laayoune is now the largest port serving Morocco's fishing industry. Residential construction in the city has been a growth industry. Dakhla, south of Laayoune, and Smara have also grown apace. According to the governor of Laayoune and head of the Moroccan government's southern regional development agency, Morocco spent \$1 billion on infrastructure development in Western Sahara between 1976 and the early part of this century (Shelley 2004:89). The International Crisis Group reports that Moroccan spending on infrastructure in the past 30 years has been \$2.4 billion. (ICG 2007:12)

Phosphates and fish are the mainstays of Western Sahara's economy. The Spanish government originally discovered and began exploiting the Sahara's known exportable reserves of 132 million tons of phosphate rock, and Spain has maintained a 35% share in the Morocco's Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP) since the OCP took over the operation at the start of the Moroccan occupation. In 2000, phosphate exports from Bou Craa were 2.4 million tons out of total Moroccan exports of 10.3 million tons. Bou Craa is believed capable of producing up to 10 million tons, but the OCP is said to have minimised its investments in the facility to avoid this increase. Morocco's earnings from phosphate exports in 2000 were \$4 billion, 17% of its total export earnings that year, and it is likely that Western Sahara's share of Moroccan phosphate exports will continue to increase (Shelley 2004:69-73). Although its unresolved political status limits its development potential, Western Sahara has become at least partly a mainstay of the Moroccan fishing industry. The Sahara accounts for 80% of Morocco's sardine catch, generating some 100,000 jobs on and offshore, 90% of them in the catching and processing of squid. The Moroccan government is eager to attract foreign investors to build canneries and other fish-processing facilities in the territory, but there seems to be little interest in such endeavours until the Sahara's political fate is determined (Shelley 2004:93).

Fukuda-Parr *et al* note, 'Within a given country the population does not always suffer the cost of war equally, and in the aggregate, the economy does not always falter' (2008:9). The same generalisation applies to Western Sahara, where participation of Sahrawis in the Moroccan-sponsored 'flagship' industries has been limited. In 2000, the rate of unemployment in the territory was estimated at 25.2% by the Moroccan government (Shelley 2004:93). Although no Sahrawi-Moroccan settler breakdown has been given, the rate of job creation for Sahrawis, particularly in the fishing industry where they traditionally have not been involved, is said to be low. The Moroccan government has paid subsidies to Moroccans from the north to settle

The Moroccan government has paid subsidies to Moroccans from the north to settle and work in the Sahara, and has continued the Spanish policy of giving management-level positions in the phosphate industry to these settlers and limiting Sahrawis to low-level jobs.

and work in the Sahara, and has continued the Spanish policy of giving management-level positions in the phosphate industry to these settlers and limiting Sahrawis to low-level jobs. The development of the fishing industry seems to have passed Sahrawis by. While some Sahrawi entrepreneurs have benefited from the development that has occurred, the large majority of the Sahara's unemployed are almost certainly indigenous Sahrawis and individuals

from southern Morocco brought into the territory to live in the 'unity camps' and vote in the planned referendum. In Laayoune, a programme is under way to make housing available to 'unity campers' in housing developments created for anyone returning from refugee camps to vote in the referendum.

The cornerstone of Morocco's Sahara policy has been repression, complemented during King Hassan's rule with preferential treatment for Sahrawis favourably disposed to the monarchy (Mohsen-Finan 2008). The original beneficiaries of this policy were members of the Tekna group that inhabits a stretch of southern Morocco and northern Western Sahara. Of all the Berber tribes that established themselves in Western Sahara in Roman times, the Tekna is the only one that still speaks Berber, and some of its members historically pledged allegiance to the Moroccan sultan. The Tekna were favoured with valuable traders' licenses and posts in the administration, and were later joined by members of other Sahrawi groups prepared to cooperate with the government to make up a 'co-opted elite' enjoying official favours denied to most Sahrawis. Mohsen Finan (2008) contends that King Mohammed VI has abandoned this policy of overt favouritism to Moroccan loyalists since his accession to the throne in 1999.

Although repression has remained one of its principal elements, Moroccan Western Sahara policy under King Mohammed has been more nuanced than was the case during his father's rule. The new king used Interior Minister Basri's violent response to a demonstration in the fall of 1999 as an excuse to fire the minister, widely regarded as the second most powerful man in the kingdom during King Hassan's rule. Demonstrations and protests have continued, as has their violent repression. Nonetheless, according to Omar Brouksy (2008:5), younger generations of Sahrawis, who now make up 50% of the Sahrawi population, have seen a progressive opening of the political system, including greater freedom given to the press and other civil society institutions.

Although repression has remained one of its principal elements, Moroccan Western Sahara policy under King Mohammed has been more nuanced than was the case during his father's rule.

Most important was King Mohammed's establishment in 2004 of the Equity and Reconciliation Body. This group is mandated to shed light on violations of the rights of opponents of the monarchy from 1956-1999. Although claims by the Sahrawis and Islamists constituted more than 25% of all claims submitted to the Equity and Reconciliation Body, and only 2% of the claims were formally heard, the new king was at least willing to recognise these groups, who also were notable by their absence from the formal hearings. Thus, although young Sahrawis continue to hold demonstrations – there were violent protests in 2001, 2004, 2005 and 2006 (Brouksy 2008:10) – and continue to be arrested for doing so, Brouksy contends that the demonstrators do not openly express support for the Polisario Front. Like young Moroccans with university diplomas who participate in demonstrations demanding jobs, he adds, the young Sahrawis are in effect acting as citizens within the framework of the Moroccan state.

Despite King Mohammed's less heavy-handed style of rule, the policies of the Moroccan government in Western Sahara are unlikely, and perhaps are not intended, to win the active support of Sahrawis for integration into Morocco or autonomy within the kingdom. Moroccan-supported development has not brought benefit for much of the territory's population. On the other hand, support for the Polisario Front is perhaps not as great as the Polisario would like. King Mohammed's style of governing is certainly less harsh than that of his father, and Moroccan society is more open than it was during the leaden years of King Hassan. Nevertheless, there is little reason to suppose that Moroccan policies in Western Sahara will produce support among Sahrawis living there, let alone in the refugee camps in Algeria. With the stalemate still dominating life in the region, it remains, first, to consider the cost of the conflict not only to Morocco and the Polisario but also to the region, and, second, to propose steps that could be taken that could benefit Western Sahrawis and perhaps eventually the leaders who preside over their destiny.

Implications for Development and Next Steps

The lack of statistical information and the subjective nature of many criteria make it impossible to assess with any precision the costs and benefits of the stalemated conflict to the protagonists and to the region as a whole. A 2007 report on the subject by the International Crisis Group recognises this difficulty (ICG 2007). Shelley's analysis provides more statistics, particularly on the benefits to Morocco (Shelley 2004).

Although Western Sahara's potential for development is quite high, the Moroccan government and Moroccan migrants to the territory are likely to be the primary beneficiaries until a settlement enables the current negative peace (absence of armed conflict) to be

replaced by a positive peace (development of social justice). The fishing industry based in the port of Laayoune is highly productive, and employs 95,000 people, very few of whom live in Western Sahara. Similarly, the phosphate industry employs thousands of workers, though mostly in low-paying manual jobs. The Sahrawis complain that they are mostly excluded from this labour force, particularly from any of the higher-paying jobs. In addition, Moroccans are paid lifetime higher salaries and receive subsidies for living and working in the kingdom's 'southern provinces' (ICG 2007:13)

The benefits that flow to the Moroccan government, Moroccan enterprises active in and around the territory, and Moroccan migrants are offset to an extent difficult to determine by the costs to the Moroccan state and macro-economy of maintaining the occupation. A Moroccan economist cited by the International Crisis Group contends that 2-3% of Moroccan GDP has been absorbed by the conflict over 30 years, and the ICG estimates that half of the kingdom's defence budget is spent in Western Sahara, though part may be offset by aid from Persian Gulf states (ICG 2007:13,12). Without linking his statistics specifically to the conflict, Shelley calculates that during the 1980s and 1990s, economic growth slowed in Morocco from an average of 3.9% a year to 2.7% a year, and per capita income growth was negative in the latter half of the 1990s (Shelley 2004:50). Unemployment is high, especially in urban areas, where it reached 21.5% in 2000 (Shelley 2004:52). Morocco's ranking on the UN Human Development Index, not strong to begin with, fell from 111 out of 170 countries in 1994 to 126 out of 177 countries in 2007/2008, with half the Moroccan population illiterate (Shelley 2004: 52).

Failure to resolve the political status of the territory has had a pervasively negative impact on human development there and in the refugee camps as well as on the potential for regional development. While members of tribal elites loyal to Morocco have the potential to fare quite well economically, many Sahrawis are unemployed, impoverished and living under oppressive government control in communities that increasingly take the form of ghettos (ICG 2007:1). Conditions in the Polisario-controlled areas are worse. Moreover, according to the International Crisis Group (2007:1), 'The overall cost of this conflict is also very high for the region as a whole, since it hinders the development of the Arab Maghreb Union [formed among Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia in 1989], generating delays in economic integration, low foreign investment and slower rates of growth'. The costs to Algeria have come largely from its financial support to the Polisario and the thousands of refugees living on its soil – which undoubtedly means some shifting of resources from investment in its country and people.

As noted by Fukuda-Parr *et al*, overdependence on natural resources is a risk factor for war in two ways: groups are willing to fight to gain control over the resources; and once war starts, the resources can become a lifeline for one or more of the competing groups.

If Western Sahara's political future were to be settled satisfactorily, investment from other countries in fishing, phosphates and oil exploration would likely be forthcoming.

Despite the long ceasefire in Western Sahara, this principle still applies to the situation there: Morocco fought for control of the resources and is reluctant to release them. At the same time, if Western Sahara's political future were to be settled satisfactorily, investment from other countries in fishing, phosphates and oil exploration would likely be forthcoming. Such investment would be crucial to replace investment by the Moroccan government, which would be likely to seek some compensation for the enormous investment it has made in the territory.

Among the costs of armed conflict for development cited by Fukuda-Parr *et al* are the disruptions produced by 'massive dislocation of people from their homes, livelihoods and

communities' (2008:8). Such a dislocation has certainly taken place in Western Sahara and has spilled over in the surrounding areas, particularly Algeria. In the face of the deep and enduring stalemate, there are measures being taken that could be enhanced to improve the quality of lives of the Sahrawi refugees. For several years, MINURSO has provided the aircraft and logistics for family visits to the territory by refugees living in Algeria and vice versa. Done on the basis of strict reciprocity, the number of these visits has grown modestly. MINURSO also offers a free telephone service to people in the territory and Algeria to speak with one another. The international community in general and Spain could take more difficult and controversial measures in particular – for example, to provide more and longer-term opportunities for young Sahrawis living in the refugee camps to study abroad. The Polisario has been successful in sharply increasing the literacy rate in the camps through its education programme, and Spain and other countries have given scholarships for higher education to Sahrawis. More such scholarships, and perhaps attendant job opportunities, would offer better lives to young Sahrawis, but offering jobs to the refugees is not something the Spanish government wants to contemplate.

On the other side of the ceasefire line, the Moroccan government could open the doors of its enterprises to Sahrawis and make life in Morocco itself more appealing to refugees who might be prepared to start new lives there. Under King Hassan, the Moroccan government was distrustful of Sahrawis, particularly those from the refugee camps, and did little to encourage them to come to Morocco. The more liberal policies of King Mohammad VI have not included an emphasis on a 'hearts and minds' campaign in the camps. Such a campaign might help offset the sense of alienation and mistreatment that many Sahrawis feel.

An important political lesson to be drawn from the Western Sahara case is that transparency is the best policy. Although secrecy has its place in any negotiation, a point often made about conflict resolution is that it is generally better to be open in a process of negotiation such as the one that Perez de Cuellar, assisted by Diallo, set in motion in 1985-1988. Had they chosen at that time to bring the differences existing between the parties into the open, the flawed peace process might have stalled rather than moving into the deep stalemate that all concerned

An important political lesson to be drawn from the Western Sahara case is that transparency is the best policy.

find it easier to maintain than to try to address seriously. In such a situation, MINURSO might not have deployed or might have done so as a traditional peacekeeping mission to monitor the ceasefire. In this case, the UN would have retained its credibility as a valid future

interlocutor for the parties and interested governments. Retaining this credibility was particularly important because its initiative lacked the strong support of major and regional powers. Also, had the differences been brought into the open at that time, the present deadlock, to which the Security Council is now a party, might not have developed, and all concerned might have been more open to new ideas than is the case today.

AMBASSADOR CHARLES DUNBAR is a Professor of International Relations at Boston University. He was a State Department Foreign Service officer from 1962-1993 and in 1998, served as UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Western Sahara.

KATHLEEN MALLEY-MORRISON is a Professor of Psychology at Boston University. She has done extensive research on international perspectives on family violence and abuse as well as on governmental aggression. She is editor of four volumes of *State Violence and the Right to Peace: An International Survey of the Views of Ordinary People* being published by ABC-Clio in late 2009.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Dunbar presented an earlier version of this paper at the Political Studies Association meeting at Swansea University in April 2008.

² In 'complex' peacekeeping missions, the United Nations manages a process of political reconciliation between states, or between a state and one or more internal opposition groups. Such a process often involves some sort of popular consultation such as an election or a referendum. They differ from 'traditional' missions whose task is to monitor a truce or ceasefire agreed upon between or among the conflicting parties while they seek a permanent settlement of their dispute.

³ William Zartman is often given credit for coining this term. See Footnote #2 of Brahm, E. 2003, 'Hurting Stalemate Stage' in Burgess, G. & Burgess, H. eds, *Beyond Intractability*, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder; available at www.beyondintractability.org/essay/stalemate/, accessed 25 March 2008.

⁴ The following section is an updated and shortened version of a similar section in Dunbar 2000.

References

- Brouksy, O.** 2008, 'Être Jeune au Sahara Occidental', note from l'Institut Français des Relations Internationales, November; available at www.ifri.org/files/Moyen_Orient/Jeune_Sahara_Brouksy.pdf, accessed 9 February 2009:5.
- Brouneus, K.** 2003, 'Reconciliation – Theory and Practice for Development Cooperation', Department for Cooperation with NGOs and Humanitarian Assistance, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Stockholm.
- Call, C. & Cousens, E.** 2008, 'Ending Wars and Building Peace: International Responses to War-torn Societies' in *International Studies Perspectives* 9:1–21.
- Dunbar, C.** 2000, 'Saharan Stasis' in *The Middle East Journal* 54:4:522–545.
- Fukuda-Parr S., Ashwill, M., Chiappa, E. & Messineo, C.** 2008, 'The Conflict-Development Nexus: A Survey of Armed Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa 1980–2005' in the *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 4:1:6–22.
- Goulding, M.** 2003, *Peacemonger*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Human Security Centre** 2005, *Human Security Report 2005*; available at www.humansecurityreport.info, accessed 11 August 2009.
- ICG (International Crisis Group)** 2007, 'Western Sahara: The Cost of The Conflict', Middle East/ North Africa report, 11 June: 65.
- Ministry of Economic Forecasting and Planning** 2000, 'Morocco in Figures', cited in Shelley, T. 2004, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* London: Zed Books: 93.
- Mohsen-Finan, K.** 2008, 'Trente ans de Conflit au Sahara Occidental', note from l'Institut Français des Relations Internationales, January; available at www.ifri.org/files/Moyen Orient/Trente_ans_deconflit_Finan.pdf, accessed 9 February 2009:9–12.
- Perez de Cuellar, J.** 1997, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, New York: St Martin's Press.
- Shelley, T.** 2004, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* London: Zed Books
- Theofilopoulou, A.** 2006, 'The United Nations and Western Sahara: A Never-ending Affair', Special Report 166, July, United States Institute of Peace; available at www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr166.pdf, accessed 21 March 2008.
- United Nations** 1945, Charter of the United Nations, Article 1.

UNSC (United Nations Security Council), 1990, 'Report by the Secretary General: The Situation Concerning Western Sahara', 18 June, UN S/21360; 1991, 'Report by the Secretary General: The Situation Concerning Western Sahara', 19 April, UN S/22464; 2000, 'Report of the Secretary General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara', 17 February, UN S/2000/131; 2002, 'Resolution 1429 Adopted by the Security Council at its 4594th Meeting', 30 July, UN S/RES/1429; 2003a, 'Report of the Secretary General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara, 23 May, UN S/2003/565; 2003b, 'Resolution 1495 Adopted by the Security Council at its 4801st Meeting', 31 July, UN S/RES/1495; 2004a, 'Report of the Secretary General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara, 23 April, UN S/2004/325; 2004b, 'Resolution 1541 Adopted by the Security Council at its 4957th Meeting', 29 April, UN S/RES/1541; 2007, 'Resolution 1783 Adopted by the Security Council at its 5773rd Meeting', 31 October, UN S/RES/1783.

USIP (United States Institute of Peace) 2007, 'Western Sahara: How to Create a Stalemate'; available at www.usip.org/resources/western-sahara-how-create-stalemate, accessed 24 August 2009