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Western Sahara: the stalemate of the issue and the continuation of the state of no war and no peace

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Abstract. This article attempts to provide insight into the long-standing subject of Western Sahara through analysis and criticism. In comparison, all international and regional efforts failed to resolve this situation. That has remained constant since 1975. As a result, this paper will explore the magnitude of this issue, its roots, and the reasons for its decades-long stagnation. On this premise, we have split the subject into four essential elements, which are as follows: The Western Sahara issue is a zero-sum strategy game between the conflicting parties. The involvement of major powers in the issue's impasse will then focus on the United States of America, France, and Russia as new regional actors. Then we try to concentrate on the Guerguerat crisis as a new station for the Western Sahara issue's stalemate. Finally, we will attempt to discuss the deadlock of this issue within the framework of the United Nations, which has likewise failed to find a solution.

Keywords. Western Sahara, the United Nations, crisis, Algeria, Morocco

Introduction

Western Sahara's conflict, in its current form, is a relic of contemporary Africa's colonization. It is among the most complicated issues in the world. Moreover, it is the rock upon which efforts to build the Maghreb have collapsed. Since the Western Sahara issue emerged in 1975, there have been numerous attempts to resolve it, whether through an international framework or through regional groups such as the African Union or the Arab League. In addition to the initiatives that some governments offer from time to time to overcome the obstacles to resolving this long-standing issue. Despite these efforts and measures, a solution to the Western Sahara issue has remained elusive and is becoming increasingly complex. As soon as Spain evacuated its forces from the Saguia el-Hamra and Oued Eddahab regions, the territory became a source of contention for various sides, most notably Morocco and the POLISARIO Front, the conflict's main parties.

The complexity of the Western Sahara issue and its multiplicity of regional and international extensions made it a "zero game." The Kingdom of Morocco considers it a national issue that cannot be waived. The Moroccan regime considers it one of the essential sources from which it gains legitimacy. The POLISARIO Front represents the Sahrawi people and demands independence from Morocco. Algeria does not consider itself a party to the conflict, but it is

directly affected by its consequences and repercussions. In addition, the major powers, especially France and the United States to a lesser degree, had a very negative role in sustaining this conflict and maintaining the status quo because it is the beneficiary of it, investing them in the event of disagreement between the main conflict parties and playing on the strategic balance between them. Within this perspective, this article will examine the reasons for the decades-long stalemate in the Western Sahara issue.

This article aims to unveil one of the world's oldest conflicts, the Western Sahara issue, which some consider the last colony in Africa. Moreover, analyze the roots of this issue, its development paths, and its regional and international extensions to try and critique the positions of the various parties involved to explain its actual goals and interests. This is for a deeper understanding of the deadlock.

The first axis: is the issue of Western Sahara as a strategic zero-sum game between the parties to the conflict.

The parties to the conflict in Western Sahara are multiple. There are direct parties, namely, the Polisario Front and Morocco. Moreover, indirect parties take the status of observers, namely Mauritania and Algeria. These parties could not find points of agreement to reach a solution that satisfies everyone. This is because the Western Sahara issue falls within the framework of the so-called "zero games", especially between the Polisario, which it considers an issue of decolonization, and Morocco, which considers Western Sahara a national issue cannot be waived. As for Algeria and Mauritania, their positions differ regarding the conflict in the desert region. While Algeria has maintained its position in support of the position of the Polisario, calling for the organization of a referendum for self-determination and the establishment of an independent state. The Algerian official discourse confirms that its position is principled. The Mauritanian position fluctuated between being sometimes neutral and supportive of one of the parties. In what follows, we will try to analyze the positions of the various parties to show how the divergence of these countries' options, interests, and objectives made the conflict stagnate and intractable.

First: is the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front.

Due to historical considerations, Morocco estimates that Western Sahara's territory is integral to the Moroccan territorial estate. (1) although international law no longer recognizes the historical reasons for the annexation of lands but instead grants peoples the right to self-determination. Morocco argues that political ties developed in the past between some tribal leaders in the desert region and the Makhzen. However, the criticism directed at these arguments is that these political ties are relations of submission by force imposed by the monarchy on these regions. In addition, Morocco imagines that there are human relations and a geographical and natural extension of the desert regions and Morocco. (2) Modern Western colonialism has systematically dismantled these ties. Facing the difficulty of persuading Morocco to the international community with its theses and in the face of the Sahrawis' adherence to their right to self-determination, the King released Moroccan Mohammed VI in 2007 initiative "Extended autonomy for the Sahrawis within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty." This initiative is called the third path. The Polisario Front utterly rejected this initiative. The Moroccan King affirmed that his country would not negotiate again with the Sahrawis outside the framework of this initiative, especially after securing the support of Washington and Paris. (3)

After failing to achieve a breakthrough in favor of its approach, whether at the United Nations or the level of the African Union, Morocco resorted to an alternative strategy to impose

a fait accompli. By making the Saharan region at the heart of the economic movement and commercial activity between Morocco, West Africa, and even between Africa and Europe. As well as through diplomatic work by activating the so-called "consulate diplomacy" to achieve media and political gains. (4)

The position of the Polisario is to the contrary, as it considers Western Sahara an issue of decolonization and does not see an alternative to the referendum option for self-determination. However, it has shown some leniency in its position since 2007 regarding the Moroccan third solution initiative. So that the Front committed itself that if the Saharawi region gains its independence, it will grant Morocco desirable privileges on all economic, cultural, and security fronts. However, it refuses to remain under Moroccan sovereignty. (4) This position of the Polisario receives support from Algeria in particular and within the framework of the United Nations and the African Union. However, the position of the Polisario Front has recently returned to a hardening, especially after the Guerguerat crisis and the United States' recognition of the Moroccanness of Western Sahara, which the Front saw as an existential threat to it and, therefore, it returned to militarizing its relations with the Kingdom of Morocco.

Second: The Moroccan-Algerian dispute is a regional rivalry that goes beyond the issue of Western Sahara

The Western Sahara issue has been the leading cause of persistent tension in relations between Algeria and Morocco. Algeria strongly supports the position of the Polisario Front on all diplomatic, logistical and strategic levels. The Algerian official discourse confirms that its position on the Saharan file is in line with international legitimacy, that is, with United Nations resolutions, primarily Resolution No. 15 issued in 1966 (6), and supports the mission of MINURSO to hold a referendum to decide the fate of the Saharawi people. This was confirmed by the newly elected Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in A speech he gave in October 2020: "For Algeria, its people, its army, and its institutions, the issue of Western Sahara is an issue of colonialism, and there is no solution to the issue except through a referendum for the Saharawi people." (7) He always stresses that this position stems from a principled perception. A major popular revolution must support the right of colonial peoples to self-determination and independence. At the same time, some believe that the Algerian support for the Polisario Front falls within the context of the bilateral conflict with Morocco, which has often shown expansionist ambitions at the expense of Algeria within the framework of Rabat's dream of establishing the kingdom of the Great Moroccan. (*) Algeria wants to keep Morocco preoccupied with the Saharan issue rather than turn to it, lest the appetite for ambitious expansion return to it.

Morocco considers Algeria's support for the Sahrawis not innocent and has strategic goals and agendas. It weakens Morocco regionally, but the reality confirms that Algeria is one of the most affected by this conflict, financially and diplomatically. Also, Rabat always repeats the same accusation that Algeria is looking for an outlet on the Atlantic Ocean. However, the objective truth is that Algeria is a semi-continent with vast borders and outlets on several fronts, and it does not need new outlets. On the contrary, it suffers from the vastness of its area and its inability to monitor fully and effectively by security.

Despite its centrality in Algerian-Moroccan relations, the Western Sahara issue is not the only determinant of these relations. There are historical differences between Algeria and the Kingdom of Morocco on many issues and files; It is generally recorded in the context of regional competition between the two countries in the Maghreb and Africa. Algeria considers itself a regional power with its resources and massive defense expenditures, allowing it to assume

leadership in the Maghreb and the African coast and play a leading role in the western Mediterranean. Morocco, for its part, has the same ambition. However, what the kingdom lacks in resources, is trying to compensate with what we can call "soft influence" through cultural and religious ties and creating a network of trade exchanges with the countries of the region. (8) On top of these contentious issues between Algeria and Morocco, the so-called border file; is a dispute inherited from the colonial era. As soon as Algeria gained independence, the Kingdom of Morocco initiated to submission of territorial claims that included essential parts of the Algerian lands, whose liberation cost it a lot. (9) The Algerian thesis adheres to the principle of not touching the borders inherited from colonialism (10). This sparked a war between the two neighboring countries that lasted for several days, known as the "Sand War ". This incident constituted a pivotal point in the relations between the two countries. In 1994, Algeria closed its land borders with Morocco completely after the latter imposed a visa on Algerians, following Morocco's accusation of Algerians of involvement in a terrorist attack targeting the city of Rabat.

The ongoing tension between Algeria and Morocco has created negative perceptions among decision-makers in both countries, as each perceives the other as a direct threat. This was evident in the size of the military spending, which made some observers describe it as an "arms race". A frantic race is taking place between Morocco and Algeria for military armaments, confirmed by recent statistics from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which reveal that Algeria has maintained the lead in military spending in Africa at around \$10 billion annually since 2012, followed by Morocco with a spending rate of more than \$3.5 billion annually since 2012 as well. (11) As the researcher Luis Martinez notes, with every oil boom that Algeria is experiencing, it works to improve and renew its military arsenals; Morocco feels the threat and, on its part, hastened to raise its arms budget. (12)

Third: Mauritania's position: Positive neutrality and playing the balance between Algeria and Morocco.

Mauritania's preoccupation with the issue of the Western Sahara is natural. However, what links Nouakchott with the Saharan region goes beyond political, strategic, and security requirements to anthropological considerations. That region is called the "white space" or the "Hassani space". Mauritania's first direct involvement in the Sahrawi cause was through the Nouadhibou conference, which brought it together with Algeria and Morocco. To discuss the territory's future (13) After the International Court of Justice decision was issued on October 15, 1974, Mauritania agreed to share Western Sahara with Morocco after Algeria confirmed that it had no claims. However, many were astonished by Morocco's acceptance of the division of lands that it claims and says belong to it!

However, after the losses that Mauritania received as a result of the war against the Polisario Front, it withdrew and lifted its hand from the region and adopted what it calls a positive, neutral stance; that is, it worked to provide the appropriate conditions for negotiation between Morocco and the Polisario Front. However, a careful observer can reveal that Nouakchott has exploited the Algerian-Moroccan conflict to its advantage, as it has been approaching and moving away from the two parties according to circumstances and needs. (14) Each party is trying to lure Mauritania to its side, especially in diplomatic battles, by offering each country economic privileges and temptations. This gave Nouakchott a wide margin for maneuvering, but rather for the two countries to bargain. However, what frightens Mauritania is the outbreak of war on its borders because the region that knows armed conflicts between the Moroccan army and the Polisario Front is of great economic importance for Mauritania. The

600 km long railway is located along the disputed areas and the port of Nouadhibou, from which iron and most of the fisheries are exported, which is only a few kilometers away from the Guerguerat crossing.

The second axis: the regional balance policies of the major powers and their role in the stagnation of the Western Sahara issue.

The major powers' harmful interference in the Western Sahara issue increased its aggravation and stagnation. It is as if these forces want to perpetuate and prolong this conflict and even cut off any attempt to resolve or settle it. This is because this dispute over the desert region gives these prominent international actors the ability to penetrate the Maghreb and the African coast and achieve more significant gains. France and the United States of America are the most critical international actors interfering in the Saharan issue. In addition to the entry of a new actor on the line, namely Russia, which has a foothold in the region and a role in the desert conflict.

First: The United States of America: What comes after recognizing the Moroccanness of the Sahara?

We must first recognize that the Maghreb region is marginal in US foreign policy. Hence, the American decision maker does not attach great importance to the Saharan conflict. Although America officially affirms that Morocco is a strategic ally, in practice, it does not show a clear and explicit inclination to the Moroccan position. It is trying to maintain balanced relations between Rabat and Algeria. The American position on the Saharan issue has known a kind of consistency; With the outbreak of the crisis in 1975, Washington adopted a position of neutrality. During the Reagan era, America increased its dependence on Morocco as its ally. It classified the conflict over the Western Sahara region as a proxy war waged by Morocco against the Polisario, an ally of the Soviet Union in the framework of the Cold War. However, despite this, the United States did not deviate from the principle of neutrality regarding the Saharan issue. Even with the tremendous Moroccan support for America in its war on Iraq after the latter invaded Kuwait in 1991, Morocco's goal was to influence the United States to change its neutral stance in favor of the Moroccan thesis. Nevertheless, all this did not convince the Americans to change their position despite Rabat's subsequent attempts to change the American position. By aligning with it in its war on terrorism and its attempts to include the Polisario on the list of terrorist organizations. (15) However, all of its endeavors failed.

The stability of the American position on the issue of Western Sahara since 1975 can be explained by the fact that the United States wants to maintain a balance in its relations between Morocco and Algeria. It views the issue in its regional dimension rather than as a crisis between Morocco and the Polisario Front. If America has interests in Morocco, it also has interests in Algeria, even if its nature is different. Morocco is a geo-strategic gateway to America in southern Europe and Africa and its mediator between Israel and the Arab world. On the other hand, Algeria is a strategic ally of Washington in the fight against terrorism in the Maghreb and the African coast. The United States has designated Algeria as a pivotal country in the region. Therefore, any threat to Algeria leads to a state of regional instability, which will harm America's interests in the region. Since the mid-nineties, America has developed economic relations with Algeria through the Eisenstat project, where trade exchanges have witnessed a remarkable development, and American investments in Algeria have increased, especially in the energy field. Then Algeria turned into one of the sources of American energy security. In

addition, Washington considers Algeria one of the essential arenas for its battle-defined Trade and strategy against other international actors, especially China, Russia, and France.

On the other hand, the position of Congress is not unified on the issue of Western Sahara; There are supporters of the Moroccan point of view who see the kingdom as a reliable ally for the considerations we just mentioned, and these supportive members have fallen under the influence of the active Moroccan lobby in Washington. Morocco has had public relations companies and a lobby since the rise of King Mohammed VI. Morocco has somewhat managed to obscure the issue of Western Sahara in Congress. However, other members oppose the Moroccan position and support international legitimacy and the principle of self-determination. (16) Especially with the reports of international organizations regarding Moroccan human rights violations in the Saharan region. This contradiction in positions within Congress contributed to strengthening the position of the US administration's firmness on the Western Sahara file.

The United States maintained the principle of neutrality until the last days of Donald Trump's presidential term when he came out with a surprising decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the territory of Western Sahara. This violates the principle of "sacred" in US foreign policy towards the Maghreb region, which is neutrality. America's recognition of the Moroccanness of Western Sahara was and is expected. Throughout 2020, there were indications for such a decision, especially with the report of the American Axios website, which reported that Israel is seeking to persuade Trump to recognize the Moroccanness of the Sahara so that Morocco normalizes its relations with it. (17) It was a "deal" Between the United States and the Kingdom of Morocco; the primary beneficiary was Israel.

Although Morocco achieved a diplomatic victory in gaining American recognition, the matter may have negative repercussions on the kingdom. This means the militarization of the conflict. Rabat's attempt to impose a *fait accompli* will make the Polisario Front more intransigent and resort to a military solution as the only way to resolve the conflict. Moreover, Washington's recognition of the Moroccan Sahara means the termination of any international or African peace settlements. On the other hand, the Moroccan regime's normalization of its relations with Israel may turn against the people, who consider this a departure from one of the basic sanctities of the Moroccan people, which is the Palestinian cause, a just Arab cause.

However, observers believe that Trump's recognition of the Moroccanness of the Sahara cannot last long, and the newly elected US President Biden will soon undo it. John Bolton identifies three main reasons for this in an article he published in the *Journal of Foreign Policy*. First, Trump's position serves the interests of Israel exclusively and does not serve the interests of the United States in anything. Secondly, this decision comes at a time of the collapse of the cease-fire between the parties to the conflict, signed 29 years ago, and the return of armed conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front. for the conflict. Third, most notably, Morocco's presence in the desert territory is illegal, a ruling that has long been confirmed by the United Nations and numerous international court decisions. Therefore, recognizing the Moroccanness of the Sahara would lead Washington to a contradiction, as it supports the position of the United Nations in settling the conflict peacefully on the one hand and recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara on the other! (18)

Second: France and the Western Sahara issue: Preserving the status quo

France generally considers the Maghribi region as a traditional sphere of influence, and it rents out its relations with the region's countries in a way that preserves its position. Hence, the French position on the issue of Western Sahara falls within this framework. It usually establishes a balance in its relations with both Algeria and Morocco, although it appears to some

extent close to the Moroccan position. France accepts the so-called third solution proposed by the Kingdom of Morocco to grant Western Sahara expanded autonomy within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty. However, it does not adopt practical measures to support this position. In other words, this support is limited to the level of official discourse only, as France does not seriously defend the Moroccan option (the third solution), in international forums, especially at the United Nations. The main reason for this is its desire to maintain the stalemate on the issue, which allows it to achieve greater penetration into the Maghreb region by influencing the two leading countries in the region, Algeria and Morocco.

France's formal support for the Moroccan conception of the Western Sahara issue also appears from its position on the Guerguerat crisis; Paris called for de-escalation and the need to expedite a political solution. It rejected the military operation launched by Morocco and called for a return to a cease-fire. The Guerguerat crossing crisis expressed France's balanced position between the two neighbors, Algeria and the Kingdom of Morocco. France is well aware of Moroccan-Algerian competition in Africa. Algeria seeks to remedy its delay by opening a passage through Tindouf to export its products to West African countries. (20) Any French support for the Moroccan position regarding the Guerguerat crossing will be interpreted in Algeria as obstructing its interests in Africa. It may act as Algeria hinders French policies in the Maghreb and Africa in general.

Third: Russia: A New Player in the Western Sahara Issue?

Historically, Russia has had little interest in the Maghreb and North Africa, which it primarily considers a French area of influence. However, this did not prevent it from establishing solid relations with Algeria, as these relations were limited to the military field. Russia is the number one source of arms for Algeria. However, in recent years, Russia has shown a noticeable preoccupation with the desert conflict, using it as an entrance to set foot in the region and crowd out the other major powers (France, America, and China) strategically and economically. Russia is seeking to return to playing a geopolitical role that is more assertive of its presence in this regional conflict. (21) Signs of Russia's preoccupation with the Maghreb region began with its intervention in the Libyan conflict. Some see Moscow's intervention in the Saharan issue as a pretext to pressure France regarding the Libyan file. One of the manifestations of Moscow's preoccupation with the Saharan conflict was the invitation of a delegation from the Polisario Front, which the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister received. In addition, members of the Federal Council, the upper chamber of the Federal Assembly, held meetings with Russian experts specialized in the region's affairs. (22)

As part of Moscow's efforts to compete with the United States, Moscow condemned Trump's decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. It affirms support for the position of the United Nations to hold a referendum for the self-determination of the Sahrawi people. According to academic Yahya Zubeir, Russia can play a more significant role in the Western Sahara issue if the United States of America continues its decision to recognize the Moroccanness of Western Sahara. Especially within the framework of the Security Council, as the United States cannot impose any solution in the presence of the Russian veto. (23)

Although this Russian position seems close to the Algerian position, Russia, in turn, does not deviate from the game of regional balance between Morocco and Algeria, as it always sends messages of reassurance to the Kingdom of Morocco that Moscow's support for international legitimacy regarding the desert issue will not be at the expense of Morocco's interests and relations with it. On many occasions, Russian officials at the highest level have expressed their support for the Moroccan vision of solving the issue of Western Sahara. For

example, Moscow criticized the Polisario Front for its method of dealing with the Guerguerat crisis. (24)

The third axis: the Guerguerat crisis, a new chapter in the stagnation of the Western Sahara issue.

The Guerguerat crisis erupted on October 21, 2020, in an area on the border between Morocco and Mauritania, when dozens of people cut off the border road for commercial flights, and the Moroccan army launched military operations to "end the closure of the border crossing" according to the Moroccan narration. (25) The Sahrawi narrative says that Moroccan forces entered the Guerguerat area in violation of the armistice agreement, and therefore the Polisario Front is free from this agreement. (26) This crisis constituted a new episode in the Sahrawi-Moroccan conflict and a general turning point in the Sahrawi cause. This incident caused a violation of the cease-fire signed by Morocco with the Polisario Front under the supervision of the MINURSO mission on September 6, 1991. In this context, fears have increased that this crisis will lead to a re-ignition of war, which will exacerbate instability not only It will affect the entire North African region and the Sahel but also in the war in Libya and the rebellion in Mali. (27)

The Guerguerat estate is strategically and economically important, especially for Morocco's relations with Mauritania and West African countries. Between 2000 and 2017, Morocco's agricultural exports to these countries through Mauritania increased by 57 percent. This translates into the importance of the ECOWAS market for expanding Moroccan exports to the continent. In addition, Moroccan companies have strengthened their cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa in banking, communication, insurance, and manufacturing. According to the African Development Bank, direct investment by the Kingdom of Morocco in sub-Saharan countries in 2018 reached 85%, as the growth of Moroccan-African Trade increased by 68% between 2008 and 2018, and Moroccan exports to West Africa tripled during the same period. (28).

Whatever the case, the military escalation was from the Moroccan and Sahrawi parties. Each has an interest in it; The Guerguerat crossing is strategically and commercially important. It is not entirely under the control of Morocco, and this is what Rabat aspires to change. More precisely, you want complete and comprehensive control over it. Morocco considered the crisis an opportunity to gain an advantage in the conflict, so it moved to secure its control over the entire Guerguerat crossing and to build a barrier in the narrow corridor linking Morocco with Mauritania. To complement the berm he erected to separate the areas under his control from those controlled by the Polisario Front. As for the latter, for its part, it worked on the military escalation to give impetus to the solution of the Western Sahara issue against the background of the internal challenges it faces. Some observers believe that the Polisario leadership is facing resentment inside and outside the refugee camps, as the Sahrawi people have been waiting for solutions to their problems for a long time. In addition to the emergency changes in Algeria since the February 2019 movement, the Polisario Front fears a change in Algeria's supportive position, or at least Algeria is preoccupied with its internal problems and withdraws its hand from the issue. (29) Although the new Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has repeatedly emphasized in his speeches Algeria's continuation of the same line in support of the Polisario Front and the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination.

International positions regarding the Guerguerat crossing crisis were different. While Morocco received support from its traditional allies, especially the Gulf states, the positions of the major were somewhat balanced. This is so as not to lose the Algerian party. Mauritania

appears to be the most affected by the Guerguerat crisis, as events are taking place on its direct borders, and the state of instability may negatively affect its commercial interests, especially with Morocco and West African countries. Therefore, its position was cautious and continued to call for restraint and non-military escalation. However, simultaneously, the Mauritanian army alerted its northern units to anticipate possible military developments. As for Algeria, its position was expected to support the Polisario Front. However, despite this, Algeria, in turn, does not seek to militarize the crisis because this is not in its interest, given its inflamed geopolitical environment on all fronts. Especially what is happening in Libya and the African coast. Algeria does not want a new armed conflict that might lead to a new state of instability. However, this did not prevent Algeria from carrying out military maneuvers, the largest since independence, on its western borders. The Algerian Foreign Ministry also denounced what Morocco had done, describing it as severe cease-fire violations. (30)

Morocco imposed a new fait accompli in Western Sahara, with almost complete control over the strategic Guerguerat crossing. However, this will impact the course of events in the desert region in the future. The fait accompli policy adopted by Rabat has resulted in military clashes with the Polisario Front. Since the beginning of the crisis, it has announced that it has launched military attacks on Moroccan sites stationed there. This will constitute a new obstacle to attempts at a peaceful settlement of MINURSO. However, the likely scenario for future events is the return of the two parties to the negotiating table again and the re-signing of the cease-fire, meaning; Return to the situation before the crisis. Because the current situation will not serve anyone, neither the direct parties to the crisis, Morocco and the Polisario Front, nor the neighboring countries directly or indirectly affected by it, especially Algeria and Mauritania.

The fourth axis: the stalemate of the Saharawi issue at the United Nations

After Spain was forced out of Western Sahara by the strikes of the resistance of the Sahrawi people, which began in the fifties of the last century and was renewed in 1973 after the founding of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia El Hamra and Río de Oro "Polisario". Spain left behind a mined case as it worked to sign bilateral agreements with the various parties that had eyes on the territory, namely Morocco and Mauritania, in order to guarantee its interests. (31) Then, it signed the Madrid Agreement in 1975 with Morocco and Mauritania, recognizing their right to the territory. The Polisario Front rejected this, and therefore, the Front directed its fire from Spain towards Rabat and Nouakchott.

The United Nations considers the issue of Western Sahara an issue of decolonization and, therefore, recognizes the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination. Moreover, that is by Resolution No. 1514 of the General Assembly in 1960. On April 19, 1991, the United Nations issued a report regarding the mission of the United Nations to organize a referendum in Western Sahara, "MINURSO." On September 06, 1991, it also reached a cease-fire agreement. (32) between the Polisario Front and Morocco. However, the United Nations' plan to settle the Saharan issue failed from the beginning due to the combination of many factors related mainly to the absolute contradictions in the positions of the two parties in the conflict. In addition to the efforts of the significant active powers in the Security Council to not activate the resolutions of the United Nations and to endorse the issue as required by their strategic interests, especially France and the United States of America.

The Impossible Referendum

After the UN settlement attempts failed, the United Nations resorted to the final solution, which was to hold a referendum in the territory of Western Sahara on the independence of the

territory or its survival under Moroccan sovereignty in 1988. However, all attempts to implement this referendum have failed to this day. Why? There are two types of reasons that prevented the implementation of the referendum, the first is procedural-legal, and the second is political. Legal-procedural reasons related to determining the identity of those included in the electoral lists and, therefore, of the Sahrawis entitled to participate in the referendum. There were mutual accusations from the Sahrawi and Moroccan parties, each claiming that the other side was manipulating statistics. At first, the statistics of the Spanish occupation of 1974 were adopted, which estimated the population of Western Sahara to be 74 thousand people. The Sahrawis, on the other hand, rejected the Spanish statistics and asserted that their actual number was close to one million. Morocco, for its part, argued that the numbers presented by the Sahrawis were greatly exaggerated and accused them of including immigrants from neighboring African countries into the territory. He claimed that more than 150,000 Moroccans of Sahrawi origin sought refuge in Morocco after the massacres they were subjected to in the Saharan region by the Spanish and French occupation forces. Morocco demanded the right of these people to participate in the referendum on the self-determination of the Sahrawi people.

For political reasons, The referendum as a legal procedure requires time to be completed, which the Kingdom of Morocco exploits to unify the internal Front around its project and weave external relations to support its point of view in solving the Sahrawi problem. Therefore, Rabat has been procrastinating to thwart the referendum and extend its duration as much as possible to gain the time factor. Even the Polisario Front is seeking to gain time from the delay in holding this referendum, as researcher Khadija Mohsen Feinan imagines that the Polisario links its existence and survival as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people to the outcome of this referendum, especially at the relative level. Therefore, it does not want to take the "adventure" of the referendum before ensuring a significant success rate and mobilizing Regional and international support. (33) Because if it fails, it means its sure end.

Conclusion

It seems as if all local, regional and international circumstances have combined to make the issue of Western Sahara remain stagnant and unresolvable. The main conflict parties regard the issue of Western Sahara as a zero-sum game. The Polisario Front considers it a matter of liberation and decolonization. At the same time, Morocco sees it as a national issue that cannot be waived, in addition to being one of the most important sources of legitimacy on which the monarchy in Morocco relies. Any waiver of this issue will inevitably lead to the destabilization of the Moroccan regime. Therefore, this issue seemed intractable to a solution. Despite all the developments I have known for decades, they did not convince the parties of the conflict or the need to reach points of an agreement but instead increased the complexity of the issue.

The Algerian-Moroccan dispute was the main entry point for all the major powers to penetrate the Maghreb region and the African coast. Playing the balancing game between the two countries was the best strategy to pressure the two parties to win more concessions. Even the new powers that entered the arena of competition in the Maghreb, such as Russia, China, and Turkey, have realized this and are playing the same game. By pressure and bargaining on Algeria and Morocco to achieve their regional economic and strategic goals, Western Sahara remains the means for that.

For more than forty years since the beginning of the conflict, the United Nations has been unable to settle this issue because of its complexity on the one hand and because of the conflicting interests of the major powers that do not want the Saharan issue to find its way to a settlement. The MINURSO mission that the United Nations has been sending to Western Sahara

fails every time and returns to its starting point. The reason for this was always its inability to hold a referendum for the self-determination of the Sahrawi people, which it recognized as the only solution to the issue. However, it could not impose because it seems impossible to implement for technical and political considerations. In addition, all parties to the conflict are strategically employing this issue to achieve their interests.

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- (2) Larbi Ben Ramadan, "The Moroccan Sahara Issue, the Fragmentation Knot in the Maghreb: A Moroccan Vision," *Arab Politics*, No. 23, November 2016. p. 70.
- (3) Yahia Zoubir, « le conflit du Sahara occidentale: enjeux régionaux et internationaux », CERI, 2010. P 04. https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/art_yz.pdf
- (4) Mohammed El-Mukhtar El-Khalil and others, "The Western Sahara Crisis: Sensitive Developments in Differing Situations," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, November 24, 2020. p. 04.
- (5) Yahia Zoubir, op. Cit.
- (6) This resolution states in its first article: "All peoples have the right to self-determination. By this right, they are free to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development."
- (7) See the website of the Presidency of the Republic <https://www.el-mouradia.dz>
- (*) The kingdom's demands for the establishment of the Great Empire of Morocco include current Morocco, about 38 percent of Algeria, the entire Western Sahara and Mauritania, and about a third of the state of Mali so that the kingdom's area swells and expands more than six times from its actual size (from 446,000 square kilometers to more than over three million square kilometers).
- (8) Anouar Boukhars, « Reassessing the power of regional security providers: the case of Algeria and Morocco,» *Middle Eastern Studies*, VOL. 55, NO. 2, 2019. P 249.
- (9) Djallil louannas and Nizar Messari, *Algeria Morocco relations and their impact on the Maghrebi regional system*, *Menara waring paper*, N°. October 20, 2018, p 05.
- (**) means that each country has something in its possession or what is in its possession. Hence, this principle leads to the stability of the borders that existed before independence. This principle has two components; The bond over the territory gives the state that owns it a legal basis to exercise its legitimacy. Moreover, the location of the boundary indicates the place on which the international boundary line of the territory should be.
- (10) Mohamed Meziane, *Al-Mafrab, and Algeria: The Difficult Neighborhood*, *Arab Politics*, Issue: 13, January 2015. pg. 46.
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- (15) Abd al-Rahim Manar Selmi, "The United States and the Western Sahara Issue: The Controversy of Support and Abandoning the Moroccan Ally on the Pretext of International Entrepreneurship," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 16, 2009, pp. 1-3.

