The new scramble for Africa in the Western Sahara

Urte March Sun, 10/01/2021 - 18:48
Urte March

In the dying days of his presidency, the chaos Donald Trump is inciting at home is matched by calculated provocations abroad. By recognising Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara in exchange for ‘normalisation’ of Moroccan relations with Israel, Trump has struck a double blow: undermining whatever token opposition remains to Israel’s annexation of occupied Palestinian land, while opening up a resource-rich African territory to exploitation by international capital.

The move is a betrayal of the rights of indigenous Sahrawi people and risks inciting further violence and instability in the troubled region. A closer look at the conflict in Western Sahara reveals a complex dynamic of intensifying great and regional power rivalry in West Africa.

Background

The desert territory of Western Sahara has been contested since the Spanish colonial administration withdrew in 1975, abandoning a promised referendum on self-determination. The region was plunged into civil strife between a newly formed anti-colonial liberation movement, the Polisario Front, and neighbouring Morocco and Mauritania, both pressing territorial claims.

Moroccan armed forces soon assumed control of the territory; the ensuing guerilla war led to a mass exodus of civilian refugees to Algeria, the Polisario’s principal sponsor. Today, the estimated 200,000 refugees who still live in Polisario-administered camps outside the Algerian border town of Tindouf, are entirely dependent on international aid for survival. The Polisario also controls a stretch of barren land comprising around 25 per cent of Western Sahara territory, the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), partitioned from the Moroccan-administered zone by the berm, a heavily militarised sand and stone wall built to keep out guerillas.

The promised referendum on independence, revived by a 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire, has failed to materialise thanks to disputes over who should be allowed to vote and what should be on the ballot. Meanwhile, Morocco has pursued an aggressive settlement policy to guarantee a majority in favour of integration. Since 1991 the Polisario has largely abandoned the armed struggle in favour of a political campaign and establishing a civil administration in territories under its control.

But two decades of failed diplomacy are fuelling renewed calls for an armed liberation struggle among young Sahrawis, who see no alternative to the boredom and destitution of the camps. In November last year, the Polisario announced it was officially ending the ceasefire and mobilising thousands of volunteers? to fight after Moroccan armed forces violently dispersed a pro-independence protest in the border town of Guerguerate.

Imperialist interests
The US is the first country to officially recognise Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara, granting a valuable diplomatic boost to Morocco’s regional economic expansion. There are rich spoils to be had in the territory, including phosphate - a finite mineral essential to synthetic fertilisers - shale gas, and untapped offshore oil and gas reserves. Morocco and Western Sahara combined hold more than 72 percent of all phosphate-rock reserves in the world, offering the prospect of a global monopoly as smaller reserves elsewhere are depleted.

Western Sahara’s strategic position on the Atlantic coast also makes it essential to linking swiftly developing Sub-Saharan Africa with Europe. A state development plan for the ?southern provinces? - a Moroccan government term for occupied Western Sahara - proposes the expansion of three ports, including a new $1billion mega-port at Dakhla, with tenders for construction set to open this month. Waters off the coast also support a lucrative fishing industry and untapped potential for wind and tidal energy generation.

So long as US foreign policy accepted the territory’s disputed status, investment in Western Sahara was problematic. Trump’s recognition of Moroccan sovereignty opens the floodgates to US capital, and the vultures have wasted no time. Announcing his company’s intention to build a 900 megawatt wind farm in Dakhla shortly after Trump’s statement, the CEO of Soluna Technologies, John Belizaire, said the region, ?abounds in resources and potentialities on land as at sea, [and] will serve as a bridge and hyphen between Morocco and its African depth?.

For the same reasons, imperialist countries around the world have a shared interest in opening up Western Sahara to their own share of the ?development?. As part of its Belt and Road initiative, China is already vying with Morocco’s traditional imperialist sponsor, France, to build a new leg of high-speed railway in Morocco, which King Mohammed VI has promised to extend further south to Dakhla. Russia has recently signed a new fisheries agreement with Morocco allowing Russian trawlers to fish in waters off Western Sahara. The EU operates under a similar fisheries agreement, in contravention of repeated rulings by the European Court of Justice.

The Gulf States, eyeing investment opportunities, as well as the trade benefits of better connectivity to Europe, have all supported Moroccan claims to Western Sahara, without risking the diplomatic fall-out of formal recognition. When opening a diplomatic mission in the territory last November, the United Arab Emirates said this was a ?recognition of the 'Moroccan identity'' of Western Sahara?.

Consequences
The public revival of relations between Morocco and Israel will not in itself constitute a significant departure from the status quo. For decades, the Moroccan monarchy has cooperated with Israel on military and intelligence matters, providing a back-channel to other Arab nations and supplying intelligence on Israel’s enemies in the MENA region in exchange for weapons, military training, and covert operations. Moroccan officials maintain they are not establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel but only reopening ?liaison offices? previously closed in 2000 and said that Israeli-Moroccan relations are ?already normal?. The reluctance is surely in part because 88% of Moroccan people, unlike their reactionary monarchy, oppose diplomatic recognition of Israel.

More than anything the announcement is symbolic - another victory for Trump’s ?deal of the century? just ahead of his departure from office, and a seal of approval for the exploitation of Western Sahara already well under way. Of course, as well as harming the Sahrawis, it strikes another blow against the Palestinian cause, further legitimising Israeli human rights abuses and the illegal occupation of the Palestinian Territories.
But the move may yet create new problems for Morocco and its allies. Further unrest and armed resistance from the Polisario is likely to be exacerbated by the flagrant disregard of international law. Algeria, which backs the Polisario Front and has previously provided it with weapons and funding, has so far limited itself to rhetorical denunciations, but could easily renew a more muscular intervention if hostilities escalate. A complex constellation of armed groups with ties to Morocco, Algeria, and Western Sahara operate in Mali and across the Sahel and could be drawn into the conflict if it degenerates into a proxy war. A low level Islamist insurgency in Northern Mali and Chad has seen France step up its military commitments in the region, acting as the gendarme for the interests of the whole Western alliance against the encroachment of China.

Nevertheless, it seems a trend towards international recognition of the Moroccan claim to Western Sahara is likely to persist. The incoming Biden administration, though it might not itself have made such an aggressive move, has little incentive to walk back the decision and largely supports Trump’s policy towards Israel. Although it once claimed a secular Arab nationalist tradition and promoted a programme of social reforms, the Polisario Front now has no political programme or strategy beyond calling for independence. With Algeria as its only regional ally, it has little international leverage and scant chance of any significant military advances, even if it could mobilise a fighting force after 20 years of acting like an NGO.

Socialists support the right to self-determination for all nations and back the national liberation struggles of oppressed peoples including the Sahrawi in Western Sahara. Yet we also recognise that independence on its own will not solve economic or social problems; indeed, in an era of imperialist rivalry can often intensify them. Despite its wealth in some key resources, Western Sahara has a tiny population, and its desert landscape makes agriculture and most industry unviable. Even if independence were possible, the country would continue to be totally reliant on foreign investment and protection, its semi-colonial status largely unchanged.

The only way to guarantee cultural and economic freedom for the Sahrawi people is for them to unite with the working classes of neighbouring countries, particularly with the democratic youth movement against the gerontocratic FLN dictatorship, and fight to overthrow their reactionary regimes, uniting in a socialist federation of states which can expropriate imperialist capital and put it to use meeting the needs of the peoples of the whole region.

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/new-scramble-africa-western-sahara