

Partition and Propaganda: Why Morocco's "Autonomy Plan" for Western Sahara is Unworkable

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In 2007 Morocco presented an "Autonomy Plan" for the disputed, non-self governing territory of Western Sahara, to which it lays claim. The Autonomy Plan proposes limited self-government for Western Sahara within a greater Morocco, and precludes the possibility of a referendum with the option of full independence for the territory. Morocco maintains that the criterion of "self-determination" for the inhabitants of Western Sahara (as enshrined in a number of UN resolutions relating to the territory) can be met under its proposal.

In addition to the ethical shortcomings of a proposal which asserts that the forcible integration of a disputed territory into a neighbouring state is compatible with the principle of self determination, the Autonomy Plan fails to address other key issues which are at the heart of the conflict.

In particular, the Autonomy Plan does not address the fact that Western Sahara is physically partitioned, with the territory being divided into two parts by the "Berm", a series of defensive earthworks manned by Moroccan military personnel and protected by minefields, which stretches throughout Western Sahara. Morocco controls all the territory to the west and north of the Berm (some two thirds of the territory), while the Polisario independence movement controls the territory to the east and south of the Berm.

The physical partition of Western Sahara is rarely discussed, and it often appears that the majority of politicians, policy makers and journalists are unaware of the division of the territory. Western Sahara is invariably described as being "under Moroccan control" or "occupied by Morocco". The issue thus appears to be one of whether or not Morocco's de facto control of the territory should be accepted. Those supporting the Autonomy Plan presumably see the endorsement of Morocco's occupation as a means of resolving the issue of the status of Western Sahara, ethical considerations aside.

Morocco appears extremely keen to maintain the fiction that it controls the entirety of Western Sahara. Rabat consistently denies that the Polisario exerts any control, or indeed has any presence, in the areas to the east and south of the Berm, which Morocco claims to have established as a "buffer zone" for security purposes. Rabat also likes to give the impression that the UN recognises these areas as being somehow out of bounds to the Polisario, and complains vigorously whenever the Polisario organises political or cultural events in the areas under its

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control, accusing them of illegal incursions into Moroccan territory and/or of violating the terms of the ceasefire established in 1991. Advocates of the Autonomy Plan regularly claim that the Polisario has never “liberated” any territory, and that Polisario claims that it controls any territory in Western Sahara are false, and made purely for propaganda purposes². Morocco also claims that it is the only power capable of patrolling, governing and enforcing security in Western Sahara, particularly with respect to terrorist threats generally associated with the “empty spaces” and porous borders in this part of North Africa.

The reality is very different to the situation as represented by Rabat and its allies. Military Agreement No. 1 (MA#1), agreed between the MINURSO peacekeeping force, the Royal Moroccan Army, and the Polisario states the following³:

“MA#1 divides the disputed territory of Western Sahara into five parts:

- One 5 km wide Buffer Strip (BS) to the South and East side of the Berm;
- Two 30 km wide Restricted Areas (RA) along the Berm. The Buffer Strip is included in the Restricted Area on the POLISARIO side and the Berm is included in the Restricted Area on the RMA side;
- Two Areas with Limited Restrictions (ALR), which are the two remaining vast, stretches of land of Western Sahara on both sides respectively.”

The ALR on the Polisario side of the Berm is referred to locally as the “Free Zone”, and contains a number of Polisario military bases which house an unknown number of military personnel. The Polisario operates regular patrols throughout the Free Zone, and effectively controls Western Sahara’s borders with Algeria and Mauritania.⁴

In addition, the Free Zone is used by Sahrawi from the refugee camps around the Algerian town of Tindouf when environmental conditions permit. Some families in the camps maintain herds of animals (camels, sheep and goats) in the Free Zone, and migrate into the area when high rainfall provides good grazing, enabling herds to thrive to an extent that they can support something resembling traditional semi-nomadic livelihoods (contrary to Moroccan claims that the inhabitants of the camps are kept there against their will and are unable to leave). For example, such conditions prevailed in the winters of 2005 and 2008 in the area around Tifariti. While the permanent population of the Free Zone is low, it is not uncommon to encounter temporary or semi-permanent tented Sahrawi camps, and at least one small village exists near the border with Mauritania in the Northern Sector of the Free Zone. A number of civilians have also settled in and around Tifariti. In summary, the Free Zone is an inhabited region that is effectively controlled by the Polisario, and in which security is apparently good, there having been no recorded terrorism-related incidents in areas under Polisario control.

² Precisely such a claim was made to the author of this briefing note by the Moroccan author Abdel Hamid el-Ouali, during the UK launch of his pro-autonomy book *Saharan Conflict* in London in 24 June 2008.

³ From the official MINURSO website at <http://www.minurso.unlb.org/monitoring.html>.

⁴ The author of this note directs a research project (the Western Sahara Project) in the Polisario-controlled areas. When travelling in these areas, field teams inform the regional Polisario military commands of their activities in advance, and acquire permission from the regional commanders to conduct fieldwork. Polisario patrols are encountered frequently, and the author has been approached by such patrols on numerous occasions as a result of detection by Polisario patrols in remote locations. The Polisario also operates the border crossing between Algeria and Western Sahara west of Tindouf, close to the border with Mauritania. In the light of recent terrorist activities in Mauritania, it is probably reasonable to say that the Polisario exerts more effective control over its territory than does the government of Mauritania.

The existence of the Free Zone and its status as a territory controlled by the Polisario and used by Sahrawi from the refugee camps around Tindouf represents a serious barrier to the effective implementation of the Autonomy Plan, which would take place under one of the following scenarios:

1. Negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario result in the Polisario agreeing to hand power to Morocco and relinquish the Free Zone. The entire territory of Western Sahara is incorporated into Morocco as a province with a limited degree of autonomy.
2. Morocco extends its control throughout the entire territory of Western Sahara by invading the Free Zone.
3. Morocco unilaterally implements the autonomy plan in the regions under its control. The Free Zone is left as a rump Sahrawi state under the control of the Polisario.

Scenario 1 essentially would require the complete capitulation of Polisario, and appears unlikely given the failure to date of the parties to the conflict to reach agreement on the status of Western Sahara. Any such capitulation would be likely to alienate the population of the refugee camps around Tindouf, many of whom appear to favour a return to armed conflict given the failure of the peace process.⁵ It appears unlikely that Morocco would welcome a large number of pro-independence Sahrawi refugees from the Tindouf camps into a greater Morocco: Rabat consistently maintains that the population of the camps is considerably lower than that estimated by independent observers, and claims (without evidence, and contrary to all observations by third parties) that around half of the camps' population consists of economic migrants from Mali and Mauritania. The prospect of the Polisario being integrated into Moroccan political life, or of Rabat welcoming members of the Polisario as citizens/subjects within a greater Morocco, seem remote under the current political system in Morocco. The autonomy plan appears to make no allowance for the return of refugees, and consistent under-estimation of refugee numbers by the Moroccan government would appear to preclude the return of the majority of the population of the camps.

Scenario 2 appears more realistic than Scenario 1. However, any attempt by Morocco to extend its physical control of Western Sahara into the Free Zone would inevitably lead to conflict with the Polisario, and very probably with Algeria. Mauritania might also be drawn into the conflict, given the strong cultural links between the Sahrawi in the camps and elements of the population of northern Mauritania. Even in the (unlikely) event of Algerian consent to an expansion of Moroccan control into the Free Zone, the Polisario would be likely to resist any such expansion. Failure to do so would be viewed as unacceptable by the population of the refugee camps. Any armed conflict in the Free Zone would undermine regional security, and would very probably destabilise Mauritania.

Scenario 3, consisting of formal partition, would simply represent a crystallisation of the existing situation and the final failure of peace negotiations. With the prospect of a mutually acceptable solution removed, pressure from the population of the camps on the Polisario to renew the armed conflict would increase. The likely position of Algeria, which currently houses and to a large extent supports the Sahrawi refugee population, under this scenario is unclear. Withdrawal of Algerian support would probably result in at least some of the refugees settling in the Free Zone, to the extent that resources (principally water) permitted. The extent to which Rabat would be willing to tolerate the existence of a potentially hostile Sahrawi state on the borders of a greater Morocco is debatable.

⁵ Based on conversations with Sahrawi refugees in the camps around Tindouf.

Of course the most likely outcome is that the implementation of the autonomy plan depends on the agreement of all the parties to the conflict, such agreement is not forthcoming, and the current uneasy status quo is maintained.

The autonomy plan is predicated on two fictions. First, that Western Sahara is simply a part of Morocco with a troublesome secessionist movement, when in reality it is a partially occupied territory that has been partitioned between Morocco and the Polisario. Second, that the refugees in the camps around Tindouf would be happy, and welcome, to return to their homeland as Moroccan subjects. While the proponents of the plan are presumably aware of these problems, they are never addressed, suggesting that the plan does not represent a serious attempt to resolve the conflict. Instead, the Autonomy Plan appears to be a stalling tactic designed to defuse criticism of Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara, and to discredit the Polisario, the latest ruse via which Morocco seeks to avoid the holding of a referendum, while appearing to act constructively on the issue. It may seem like a solution to those not familiar with the realities of partition, which is why Morocco tries so hard to play down the existence of the Free Zone, and consistently underestimates the number, and misrepresents the aspirations, of the Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps. The reality of the situation on the ground in the Free Zone represents an "inconvenient truth" for Rabat, as it calls into question the viability of the Autonomy Plan.