Western Sahara

50 years of exile and occupation

Ken Ritchie

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This book has been published by the Western Sahara Campaign UK, an independent voluntary organisation which has been campaigning for the rights of the Saharawi people, including their right to self-determination, since 1985.

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Front cover photograph:
'Our flag, our symbol of freedom', Tfarah Abd Mulana

Back cover photo:
El Aaiun Refugee Camp, Emma Brown

Any proceeds from sales of this book will be used to support the work of the Campaign.

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October 2025

Western Sahara Campaign

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PREFACE

In November 1975, Morocco invaded Western Sahara. In the face of the attack, many of the people of Western Sahara (the 'Saharawi') fled across the border into a desert area of southern Algeria where they have lived in refugee camps for the past 50 years. Those who remained in Western Sahara have suffered from an oppressive occupying power which has attempted to stamp on any manifestations of their Saharawi identity or their political aspirations: according to the international human rights watchdog, Freedom House, the denial of their rights has been worse than in Iran or Afghanistan and only very marginally better than in North Korea.

This small book charts the history of the conflict and the manner in which Morocco has defied the UN and blocked all moves which might lead to a just settlement. It also examines the international community's failure to uphold the rules it has created for itself and, indeed, the willingness of some to put their own economic interests before the democratic and humanitarian principles they claim to value. The book, however, also tells the story of people who have steadfastly refused to accept the authority of an illegal occupier and who continue to demand the right to self-determination.

To most people in Britain, Morocco is a holiday destination for the more adventurous – a place of sun-drenched beaches, ancient casbahs and colourful markets, the majestic Atlas mountains and the vastness of the desert. Few are aware of the brutality of the Moroccan regime, the political prisoners, the abuse of Saharawi women, the violence against student protesters and Morocco's contempt for international law. What should be a peaceful, democratic and moderately prosperous state of Western Sahara is regarded by Morocco as its 'southern provinces' where the indigenous Saharawi are outnumbered by Moroccan settlers and security forces.

Morocco is unlikely to end its illegal occupation and recognise the rights of the Saharawi unless it can be persuaded, or compelled, to do so by its international partners, but none of the world's major democracies have come to Western Sahara's defence. Russia'a attack on Ukraine resulted in sanctions on the aggressor and military help for the victim but Morocco, in spite of its invasion, has become an increasingly valued trading partner. That we have reached the fiftieth anniversary of that invasion without seeing any serious moves towards a settlement of the conflict shows the international community's lack of commitment to the principles and rules, enshrined in the UN Charter and its various protocols, which it has endorsed.

We, however, are part of that community and therefore have responsibilities. Although justice should not need to wait for anniversaries, they nevertheless give us opportunities to focus attention on the plight of the Saharawi.

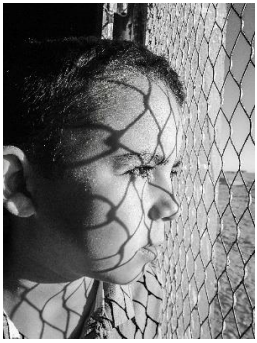
As individuals, it is a time to challenge many of the politicians who have failed, in most cases as a result of ignorance rather than indifference, to take a stand against Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara and its oppression of its people. Politicians are more likely to take action when they feel the pressure of concerned constituents, and public opinion therefore matters, but public opinion, requires public awareness. It is our hope that this book will provide its readers with a better understanding of the predicament of the Saharawi, thereby enabling them to raise concerns and call for action, whether through their political parties, through other campaigns and organisations of which they are a part, or simply amongst their circles of friends.

As a country, it is a time for the UK to take a more prominent role in the search for peace. Post-Brexit, the UK has been developing much closer commercial ties with Morocco and that should place on the UK a stronger obligation to work for a just settlement. However, how the UK will use its economic leverage (limited though it might be)

to move Morocco towards a recognition of Saharawi rights remains to be seen. Pronouncements by the UK government which appear to support Morocco's acquisition of territory by force are not encouraging but, at the same time, the UK has re-affirmed its commitment to the principle of self-determination.

This book has been published by the Western Sahara Campaign (WSC) which has for 40 years been supporting the struggles of the Saharawi and calling for action in defence of their rights. Those who established the Campaign in 1985 never imagined that four decades later they would still be campaigning, that Western Sahara would still be under a brutal occupation, and that around 170,000 Saharawi would still be suffering in exile in desert camps. The Saharawi have been waiting too long for justice and conditions in which they can enjoy peace and opportunities to fulfil their aspirations: if this book can do anything to push their demands for justice further up the political agenda and to help build public and political support for a fair settlement, then it will have been worth writing.

Ken Ritchie
October 2025



'Seeking the light of freedom at the end of the tunnel'
Photo by Najat Mohamed Mahjub

Acknowledgements

The book could not have been written without the help and advice of many past and present members of the WSC committee. John Gurr, who for nearly twenty years has been WSC's Co-ordinator and has been at the centre of all campaigning in Britain for Saharawi rights, has been involved in the planning of the book, has helped with research and has done a major job in checking and editing the early drafts. Mark Luetchford, who has been Chair of WSC for over three decades, has been a constant source of encouragement and advice; Jeff Smith has provided legal expertise for the chapter on the exploitation of Western Sahara's resources; and Beccy Allen, Karl Luetchford and Ollie Mills have all helped with ideas, research and arrangements for publication and distribution of the book. Responsibility for the contents, however, rests with the author alone.

We are grateful to Emma Brown of Olive Branch Arts for providing some of the photographs we have used, some taken by herself and others by the Saharawi photographers she has been training in the camps, including Tfarah Abd Mulana who has contributed the front cover photograph.

Thanks are also due to Sidi Breica, Lamine Baali and others who have, over the past fifty years, very effectively represented the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic in the UK.

UNISON has generously helped with the costs of publishing this book. We are very grateful for its support over many years and for its steadfast solidarity with the Saharawi.

The author

Dr Ken Ritchie was one of the founding members of the Western Sahara Campaign (WSC) in 1985 and has been one of its officers since that time. He has served in senior positions in non-government organisations, including Deputy Director of the British Refugee Council, UK Director of Practical Action and CEO of the Electoral Reform Society.

SUMMARY

The eight chapters of the book are summarised below:

1. **The years of war**

   In 1975, rather than giving Spanish Sahara its independence, Spain split it between Morocco and Mauritania, both of which invaded. About 165,000 Saharawi, being attack from the air with napalm, fled to Algeria and those who remained in Western Sahara were severely repressed. Polisario, the Saharawi liberation movement, fought the two invaders: Mauritania withdrew in 1978, but the war with Morocco lasted for 16 years.

2. **Britain takes note**

   Although Western Sahara was not considered to be in Britain's sphere of interest, many activists, academics, aid organisations and politicians campaigned on behalf of the Saharawi, arguing for a strong UK government response to Morocco's aggression.

3. **Referendum or a mirage?**

   The ceasefire in 1991 was supposed to lead to a referendum, under the auspices of the UN, offering the Saharawi a choice between independence and integration with Morocco. However, Morocco persistently blocked progress towards a referendum, and eventually declared that it would not accept a process in which independence was an option. In spite of the illegality of Morocco's position, France and the US prevented the Security Council from making an appropriate response.

4. Challenges to the occupation

Saharawi living under occupation suffered from disappearances, beatings, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment and torture. By 1999, their anger led to an intifada which was violently suppressed. Protests continued, culminating in 2010 in a ‘protest camp’ of thousands of Saharawi: this was attacked by Moroccan forces and tents set alight. Human rights abuses continue.

5. The theft of resources

Having forcibly invaded Western Sahara, Morocco started to exploit its resources. EU-Morocco trade agreements came under scrutiny as produce of Western Sahara was being treated as Moroccan. A series of court cases all concluded that Western Sahara is not Morocco and that agreements cannot cover Western Sahara without the consent of the Saharawi. Nevertheless, Morocco has continued to treat Western Sahara as if it were the country’s 'southern provinces’.

6. The peace process unravels

Morocco continued to claim sovereignty over Western Sahara and in 2007 presented its ‘autonomy proposal’. This would have denied the Saharawi the right to self-determination. It appeared that the conflict could not be solved without the UN imposing one, but that was unlikely to happen. In 2020, an incident in the buffer zone between Western Sahara and Mauritania ended the ceasefire, although the ‘war’ that has followed has been low intensity.

7. Prospects for progress

With the US, France and Spain all supporting Morocco’s autonomy plan and with Morocco’s effective annexation of Western Sahara, prospects for the Saharawi may appear bleak. Nevertheless, they have right on their side, while Morocco does

not: support for Morocco's position may be undermined by its appalling human rights record and its occupation of Western Sahara remains illegal. The UN classifies Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory and the Saharawi have the right to self-determination, and years of occupation and exile have not diminished their determination to be able to exercise that right.

8. Britain's betrayal or a bid for peace?

In June 2025, in a surprise move, the UK backed Morocco's autonomy plan as "the most credible, viable and pragmatic basis for a lasting resolution of the dispute." As the announcement was made in a joint UK-Moroccan communiqué about allowing British companies to bid for contracts in Morocco, it was greeted with some cynicism. However, the UK maintained that it did not recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and that it remained committed to the Saharawi's right to self-determination. In the communiqué, both countries claimed to accept that "the only viable and durable solution will be one that is mutually acceptable to the relevant parties, and is arrived at through compromise".

In the communiqué, the UK appeared to have committed itself to a more active role in the search for a settlement. That may mean holding Morocco to the pledges it has made on respect for human rights, and the UK taking measures to gain the confidence of Polisario. It is argued that Britain must take the moral high ground in the Security Council, rejecting any plan which does not allow the Saharawi reasonable opportunity to determine their future, and refusing to invest in Western Sahara or trade in its produce without the consent of Polisario, the UN-recognised representative of the Saharawi people.

Photo: Emma Brown

CHAPTER 1

The Years of War

Western Sahara became a Spanish colony – Spanish Sahara - in 1884 when Europe imposed its imperialist map on Africa at the Congress of Berlin. The Saharawi, although only a few hundred thousand in number, resented the arrival of a European power and the decades that followed saw many challenges to colonial rule. Morocco, soon after regaining its autonomy in 1956, made its own claims on the territory, signalling the conflict to come.

It was during the 1960s, however, when many other African countries were gaining their independence, that Saharawi nationalism became a serious force. The United Nations also took an interest in the process of decolonisation: in 1965 it asked Spain to prepare the country for independence and as early as 1968 called on Spain to hold the referendum on self-determination for which the Saharawi are still waiting. Spain was in no hurry, but, as it became apparent that Spanish rule was coming towards its end, Morocco's King Hassan made it clear that he did not want the Saharawi to get in the way of his territorial ambitions for a Greater Morocco.

The demand of the Saharawi for independence, however, continued to grow. The suppression of an uprising in 1970 led to the creation in 1973 of the Polisario Front (the Frente **Po**pular de **Li**beración de **Sa**guía el Hamra y **Rí**o de **O**ro) which was ready to fight for independence, and, unfortunately, would need to do so. In 1975, following a UN mission which asserted the Saharawis' right to self-determination, and the rejection of Morocco's territorial claims by the International Court of Justice, Moroccan troops invaded Western Sahara. Franco, on his death bed, signed the infamous 'Madrid

Accords' which divided Western Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania and, by the end of the year, most of the country had been occupied. Fleeing Saharawi, and those who congregated in make-shift refugee camps within Western Sahara, were attacked from the air with napalm and phosphorous bombs. Around 165,000 escaped to southern Algeria where they have lived in desert camps ever since – those who remained in Western Sahara have endured half a century of a repressive occupation.

Polisario's small bands of fighters never had any chance of holding back the Moroccan invasion, but that did not mean that they were prepared to accept defeat. They were hugely out-numbered by a Moroccan army which had been equipped mainly by France and the US: France sent fifty tanks as soon as the invasion began, with Mirage jet fighters following in the first few months of the war.[i] Nevertheless, Polisario's fighters were not deterred from entering a conflict that was going to last for 16 years.

The refugee camps that developed around Tindouf in south-west Algeria gave Polisario a base. Relations between Algeria and Morocco were already strained – since they gained their independence there had been boundary disputes and even, in 1963, a short period of military conflict. Although they had a shared culture, they were very different ideologically, with Algeria taking a leading role in the non-aligned movement and the OAU. The refugee camps, although close to the border, were therefore relatively safe from Moroccan attacks – Morocco was unlikely to risk any action which might provoke an Algerian military response.

In the early years of the war, Polisario suffered heavy losses in attacks on Moroccan positions, but it then confined its operations to attacks by small guerilla groups which could make night raids and then disappear into the desert. They had nothing like Morocco's fire power, but they could move fast and strike at Moroccan positions

across the territory, helped by Landrovers and weaponry captured from their enemy. They had a big advantage in knowing the terrain and, as they were fighting to regain their homeland, their motivation was very different from that of Moroccan conscripts. However, in spite of the daring of Polisario's fighters, there was never any prospect of them being able to defeat the Moroccans, but neither was there much chance of the Moroccans gaining a military victory.

Mauritania, which had invaded the southern part of Western Sahara following the signing of the Madrid Accords, was a much weaker adversary and certainly no match for Polisario's guerillas: in 1976, Polisario was even able to travel across nearly 1,000 miles of desert to strike at Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital. Morocco sent 10,000 troops to strengthen Mauritania's defences and, when Polisario took some French prisoners during an attack on Mauritania's phosphate mines, France, which was already extensively backing Mauritania's army as well as that of Morocco, used its air force to attack Polisario positions using phosphorous, napalm and explosive rockets (the attacks continued even after the prisoners were released). [ii] However, external support for the Mauritanian regime was in vain – in 1978 it was removed in a coup. The war was not popular amongst the Mauritanians and they had reasons to distrust Morocco whose king would also have liked Mauritania as part of his kingdom. The new regime in Nouakchott made its peace with Polisario and renounced any claims to Western Saharan territory. Morocco responded by claiming all of Western Sahara for itself.

In the few years that followed, the intensity of Polisario's armed struggle increased – it was able to mount attacks involving hundreds of fighters and with more sophisticated weaponry, including tanks, largely supplied through Algeria. It couldn't, however, match the huge amount of military assistance being given to Morocco, primarily from the US and France, including aircraft, missile systems, cluster bombs and teams of military advisors – even the white regime in South Africa

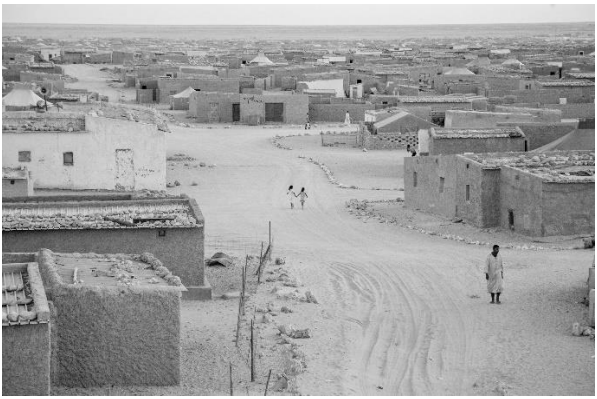
sent military equipment and a team to go with it. The war may have been costing Morocco nearly £1 million each day, but many of the bills were being paid by the Saudis.[iii]

In 1980, Morocco came up with a new strategy. Rather than trying to defeat Polisario, it would attempt to exclude them from the Moroccan-controlled areas. A start was made to building a 'berm' – a defensive wall of stone and sand with plenty of barbed wire, surveillance equipment and minefields to prevent anyone trying to penetrate it. Construction work, with South African and Israeli help, went on for about 8 years, resulting in wall of about 1,700 miles surrounding most of Western Sahara. Although Polisario often demonstrated that it could breach the berm and successfully launch attacks on Moroccan positions, its ability to inflict serious damage on the occupying forces was greatly reduced. Nevertheless, the war continued until 1991, even if not with the same intensity as in the earlier years.

As well as maintaining a military challenge to Morocco's occupation, the challenge that many Saharawi faced was simply one of survival. Some of those who were able to reach the Tindouf area had travelled by foot with only what they could carry, some had been bombed in transit camps en route and had serious injuries including burns from phosphorous, while others had made the journey truck or other transport that Polisario had been able to provide. A high proportion of the refugees were women and children, many of whom had been active supporters of Polisario prior to the occupation.

Although most Saharawi had belonged to nomadic tribes, by 1975 the majority had settled in the larger towns or near the phosphate mines where they could find employment. They were not accustomed to desert life but, even for those who were, conditions were extremely difficult – the mid-day heat could be intense but the nights could be

Many arrived in refugee camps with only what they could carry - conditions were dire, there was a shortage of food and medical help and many died of disease.



Sunset over Smara, photo by Emma Brown

Over time, the tented camps have developed into settlements of mud-brick buildings, but facilities are limited and life remains difficult.

frosty, water was scarce, there was little food to be found and most people were without shelter. The Algerian Red Crescent responded quickly, but what it could provide was quite inadequate, and the League of Red Cross Societies, which made an international appeal for help, reported finding exhausted people in poor health, many suffering from injuries and in a state of shock, malnourished children, mothers unable to feed their children and very little medical help available. Epidemics were inevitable, and around a thousand children died from measles.[vii]

Most refugee camps are places run by big international welfare agencies to accommodate refugees. The Saharawi camps, however, were, and remain, quite different. From the start, Polisario took charge: early visitors praised the refugees for their self-reliance and organisation, and for their willingness to share very inadequate resources with others.[viii]

As soon as the emergency needs had been met, they set about planning the camps physically, socially and politically. Rather than a single camp, they created three (and eventually four) clusters of camps (*wilayat*) up to 50 miles apart from each other: not only would this reduce the risks of epidemics, but it would make it more difficult for Morocco to make a strike were it to decide to risk crossing into Algerian territory. Each *wilayat* was divided into six or more *dairat* (communities), each of several thousand people, and each *dairat* was administered by a structure of committees responsible for matters such as health, education, justice, etc, and had a political leader. Every adult refugee became a member of a committee, thereby creating a society in the camps which was cohesive and as self-reliant as possible given their dependence on aid. Most of the leadership positions in the camps were filled by women while most of the men were involved as fighters, although this began to change after the ceasefire of 1991. Schools and hospitals were built, all staffed by Saharawi, and in many cases trained by Saharawi.[ix]

In the camps, Polisario was therefore making the very best of a bad situation, but no amount of creative organisation could compensate for the lack of resources and amenities. Moreover, with the arrival of mobile phones and the internet, young Saharawi who had never experienced anything outside the camps were able to know about the opportunities they were missing.

For those who were unable to escape to the camps, or chose not to do so, life was equally challenging, but in a quite different way. Following its invasion, Morocco unleashed a campaign of terror against any Saharawi suspected of having pro-independence views in the areas it occupied. Everyone, whatever their age or gender, who showed any sign of support for Polisario or of opposition to the Moroccan regime, was at risk of being picked up from the streets or from their homes at night, being beaten (or worse) and being held in prisons or special detention camps without any legal process and without their families being informed.

Many 'disappeared'. Some have estimated the number who were abducted by Moroccan agents, never to be seen again, to be as high as 1500. Others were simply executed, sometimes along with their families – some claim there are sixty known cases of entire families being buried alive in the desert. There have been reports of detainees being dropped into the sea from helicopters. Many more were detained in appalling conditions in prisons and subjected to a ghastly range of forms of torture.[x]

Reports on the scale and brutality of Morocco's occupation did reach other countries, but none took any action. Eventually in 1987, the European Parliament expressed its 'utmost concern' over the suppression of the Saharawi under Moroccan occupation, and in 1990, Amnesty International published another damning report (King Hassan was furious and responded by placing adverts in newspapers across Europe claiming the report to be propaganda). In the same

year, Human Rights Watch reported that the human rights council, set up by the king to respond to allegations, was making no progress in dealing with the most serious cases.

For Polisario, it was always clear that guerilla activity was not likely to result in the defeat of the Moroccan army, but it could create and maintain the pressure for a political solution. The battle was becoming a diplomatic one in which Polisario would need all the international support it could muster.

Polisario's diplomatic offensive began within months of Morocco's invasion: early in 1976, it declared the creation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic as an independent state under illegal occupation, and the list of countries – mainly in Africa but also in Asia and Latin America - which offered it recognition began to grow.

In 1980, the UN General Assembly recognised Polisario as the representative of the Saharawi and called for direct negotiations between the parties. In 1982 the SADR was accepted as a member of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), prompting the resignation of Morocco. The following years saw attempts by the OAU to end the conflict: in 1983 it formulated its own plans for direct negotiations, a cease fire and a referendum, under the auspices of the OAU and the UN, on the territory's future. The demand for a referendum then became central to all diplomatic initiatives, and the UN, with extreme optimism, called for it to be held on 31 December 1983.

Morocco, however, was having none of it: it offered to hold a referendum itself, but a referendum run by Morocco on Moroccan terms without a ceasefire was a non-starter as far as Polisario and the international community were concerned. At the end of 1985 the UN joined the call for direct negotiations, but Morocco refused to talk with Polisario: as a result, the UN proposed 'proximity talks' (in which the two parties would talk through an intermediary) which began in April 1986 but didn't get far as a result of Moroccan intransigence.

Discussions at the UN dragged on: the then Secretary General, Perez de Cuellar, appeared determined to press for a settlement, but he was far from even-handed as an arbitrator (he met the Moroccan side four times more often than he met Polisario). The plan for a ceasefire and a referendum which eventually emerged, and which received the backing of the Security Council, was, even within the UN team tasked with implementing it, known to be seriously flawed, but both parties felt compelled to accept it.[xi]

The ceasefire came into effect on 6th September 1991, with plans for a referendum to be held under the auspices of the UN in January 1992. Arrangements were to be made for the return of refugees and the UN was to establish a mission (MINURSO – the UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara) to monitor the ceasefire and oversee the referendum process.

Photo: Emma Brown

El Aaiun camp: the Saharawi have named their camps after the main towns of Western Sahara.

CHAPTER 2

Britain takes note[xii]

When Morocco invaded Western Sahara, few in Britain took much notice. Few were even aware that Spain had a colony to the south of Morocco and, of those who did, few were greatly bothered about who controlled it. A decade earlier Britain had seen its former African colonies, with the troublesome exception of what was to become Zimbabwe, gain their independence, and it was clear that the ending of colonial rule was often a messy business. While Morocco may have been behaving very badly, the UK government was not going to spend much time worrying about a dispute over what appeared to be a sparsely populated bit of desert (its own conduct during decolonisation had often been far from exemplary). It might have been sympathetic to the Saharawi (although there is little to suggest anything other than indifference), but Spain had been the colonial power and the invader, Morocco, had been under French control: from Britain's point of view, unsurprisingly, this was someone else's problem – a view that was to characterise British policy for years to come.

However, not everyone in Britain was prepared to turn a blind eye to Morocco's aggression. The British Red Cross, Oxfam and Christian Aid were soon on the scene, providing help to the refugees, many of them suffering from burns from Morocco's phosphorous bombs, who had fled across the border into Algeria.

The problem, however, was political and required a political response. There were some who, appalled by events, began to demand a tough line from the British government: Britain was, after all, a signatory to international conventions on human rights, a

permanent member of the UN Security Council and a significant voice in Europe. In May 1977, a group of about 30 people – academics, journalists and political activists – met and formed the 'Sahara Action Committee'. Messages of support were received from politicians including the veteran anti-colonialist, Lord Fenner Brockway, and Peter Hain MP and the Action Committee was soon busy producing newsletters, organising meetings and street protests and doing all it could to make people aware of the issue. When the Committee held its first public meeting in 1978, the Labour Party made its first public statement in support of Polisario. In the same year, Christian Aid highlighted the plight of the refugees in its report on 'The Hidden War' and, on 25th October, the Evening Standard's front-page headline was 'Death in the Desert' – a report on a successful Polisario raid on Moroccan forces. When the Queen visited Morocco in 1980, the Sahara Action Committee was able to organise a letter of protest signed by MPs of all three major parties.

In 1983, Lamine Baali came to London and became Polisario's representative in the UK. He felt Western Sahara needed not just a 'Committee' but a 'Campaign' and he soon got together a small group to plan a new organisation. Its members were Adrian Fulford (who had been involved through the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers and whose career would later take him to the bench and a knighthood), Roger Hardy (a commentator and academic on Middle East affairs who later spent many years with the BBC) and Ken Ritchie who had become involved through United Nations Association. The fourth member, and a main driving force, was Tony Hodges, an academic and writer whose 'Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War' was published in 1983.

The Western Sahara Campaign (WSC) was officially launched on 27th February, 1985 – the ninth anniversary of the founding of SADR – with sponsors including David Alton MP, Lord Fenner Brockway, Basil Davidson, Lord Gifford, Peter Hain MP and Alf Lomas MEP, later to be joined by Harriet Harman MP. The Greater London Council sent a

statement welcoming "the establishment here in London of the Western Sahara Campaign". The Barrow Cadbury Trust gave a grant to help get the work started and the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust also helped with launch costs.

The year that followed saw visits arranged for Saharawi trade unionists, the National Union of Saharawi Women and Polisario's youth movement, UJSARIO. WSC contributed to a major conference of European support groups in Paris, enlisting the support of Lords Avebury, Brockway and Gifford, MPs Judith Hart, Ken Livingstone and Matthew Parris and actress Julia Christie as conference sponsors. In February 1986, those attending SADR's tenth anniversary event in the camps included Labour MPs Ron Davies and Sean Hughes and the Liberal Democrat peer, Lord Winchilsea, while Labour's Donald Anderson and Gerald Kaufman made a separate visit to the camps. The following month, WSC worked with Oxford University's Refugee Studies Unit on a conference which led, in 1987, to the publication of 'War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict'. When WSC produced its first annual report, it ran to 16 pages.

Further publicity for Western Sahara came in August 1988 with the first visit to Britain by children from the camps. The visit, organised with Woodcraft Folk, was essentially a humanitarian project, but photographs in the press of refugee children at an international youth camp and afterwards in London reminded people not just of the conflict but of the way it was depriving a new generation of Saharawi of the opportunities that most young people expect. Many more visits were made in the following years.

Lord Winchilsea returned from the camps determined to do something. Together with Lord Wise, a Conservative peer, he set up the 'Saharawan Aid Trust' which sent lorry loads of goods donated by companies and communities in Britain all the way to the refugee camps – the first of ten 'Rainbow Rovers' convoys reached the camps in 1989. (When Chris Winchilsea died suddenly in 1999, there were three days of official mourning in the camps, and in 2001 a

particularly large Rainbow Rovers convoy – two articulated lorries, fourteen Landrovers and two buses – travelled to the camps in his memory.)

Western Sahara may not have been on Britain's political agenda at the time of the invasion, but by the mid-1980s there was a growing lobby of support for the Saharawi, including political activists, human rights campaigners, academics and others. Although the UK may have started on the periphery of European solidarity with the Saharawi, in 1988, EUCOCO (the European Co-ordinating Conference on Western Sahara) recognised the importance of the UK contribution by holding its annual conference in Folkestone.

When the 1991 ceasefire was announced, Saharawi supporters in the UK celebrated – some felt that their work would soon be over, but there were others who were much more sceptical about whether the plan was viable and whether Morocco was ready for peace.

CHAPTER 3

A referendum – or a mirage in the desert?

After 16 years of war and bloodshed, a ceasefire had to be welcomed, but it was not just in the UK that there was also apprehension. Was the plan workable, could a voters' list based on an old Spanish census ever be agreed, and would Morocco really allow the Saharawi to choose independence?

It soon became apparent that Morocco was dragging its feet and things were not going to go as smoothly as the UN had hoped. 1992 passed without much progress as Morocco tried its best to rig the electoral register in its favour. Nevertheless, in 1993 there was still optimism but a year later it was clear things were going badly. Not only was Morocco was trying to add 120,000 (a number soon to rise to 170,000) of its own citizens to the electoral roll for the referendum, but human rights violations were continuing, the work of MINURSO was being obstructed, and Morocco was continuing to govern the territory as if the settlement plan did not exist.[xiii]

At the end of January 1995, the failings of the referendum plan were brought out into the open when US Ambassador Frank Ruddy, who had been a member of MINURSO, spoke out on the mission's failures. He accused the Moroccan authorities of harassing MINURSO and intimidating prospective voters: in his view MINURSO had "ceased to be a UN-run operation" but instead had become "an instrument for Morocco's domination of the (voter) identification process". Later that year, a Human Rights Watch report damned Morocco for human rights abuses against the Saharawi and for obstructing the referendum process, but also damned the UN for allowing them to do so. Although talks between Morocco and

Polisario were continuing, albeit intermittently, it was clear that Morocco did not want a referendum and was going to do everything in its power to prevent one.

In the UK, a 'Committee for a Free and Fair Referendum' was established to persuade the government to do more to support the process, even if it was not going to take sides. Its Westminster launch was hosted by David Steel, the Conservative Cyril Townsend MP and Labour's Michael Watson MP. The Liberal Democrat peer, Lord Redesdale, joined Townsend and Watson in the first all-party delegation to the camps. However, although the UK remained supportive of the UN's proposals and contributed financially to MINURSO, it withdrew its troops in 1993: an open letter from leading politicians of all three main parties was to no avail.

There were hopes that Britain would play a more positive role when a Labour government was elected in 1997. Labour had been unequivocal in its support of Polisario during its years in opposition – senior Labour figures had spoken on WSC platforms, some had visited the camps and Neil Kinnock, when Party Leader, had mentioned Western Sahara in conference speeches. However, it was soon clear that the 'ethical foreign policy' promised by the new Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, didn't extend as far as Western Sahara. When the head of Polisario, Mohamed Abdelaziz, visited London in 1998, he spoke at a packed meeting in Westminster, but the Foreign Secretary refused to meet him, in spite of Abdelaziz being in Europe to speak with other foreign secretaries, and in spite of Polisario having already been recognised by the UN and of SADR having been a member of the OAU for 20 years.

A new storm was, however, brewing. In opening an adjournment debate in 2000, Jeremy Corbyn criticised the approval of a licence for the export to Morocco of CS gas grenades and rubber bullets – concerns echoed by Jenny Tonge and Alan Whitehead. Keith Vaz,

deputising for the Foreign Secretary, weakly asserted that there was no evidence that British-supplied riot control equipment had been used in Western Sahara (equally, there was no evidence that it had not and, even if the equipment had only been used in Morocco, why was it being provided to a country with an appalling human rights record?).

But worse was to come. The following year in a meeting of a select committee, the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, revealed that Britain had agreed to upgrade the heavy guns that Morocco used to defend its berm in Western Sahara. WSC and supportive MPs were outraged. Cook argued that the upgrade did not breech agreements as Britain was not adding to Morocco's arsenal, but he must have been aware that it was supporting an illegal occupation. He claimed that Britain had consulted the UN which had not raised objections, but no-one in the UN acknowledged any approach from Britain, and there were indications that the UN would certainly not have approved.

In a powerful, open letter to the Foreign Secretary, APPG Chair Tess Kingham wrote: "The Labour Party has always supported the internationally recognised right ... to self-determination". Pointing out that several Labour ministers in the FCO had been sponsors of the Campaign for a Free and Fair Referendum, she continued: "When we took office, here was a perfect opportunity to implement a foreign policy with an ethical dimension", but "Not only are we unwilling to pressurise Morocco to comply with the peace process, we are also equipping them with the means to kill the very people the Labour Party has traditionally supported". Later that year the Government published a list of the arms it had licensed for Morocco: it ranged from assault rifles and heavy machine guns to optical tracking systems and components for combat helicopters. British claims of neutrality were beginning to look suspect.

By the middle of 1997 there was fresh optimism when the new UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, appointed a former US Secretary of State, James Baker, as his special envoy. Baker met with the two sides, separately, in London in March, and for the first time Morocco agreed to direct negotiations under the UN's auspices. Baker made it clear that the talks were to be about the implementation of the original plan, with any revisions agreeable to both parties, and that limited autonomy was not on the agenda. The talks moved to Houston where an agreement was signed in September, and in November the UN Security Council approved a new plan for the immediate resumption of voter identification and a referendum in December 1998.

It was soon clear, however, that Morocco was not going to co-operate. In his reports to the Security Council, the Secretary General at last came off the fence and openly pointed the finger at Morocco. December 1998 came and went without a referendum and the threat of a resumption of the war was a real one, but at the eleventh hour Morocco agreed to proposals by Kofi Annan for the resumption of the process with a vote in July 2000. Even that, however, proved to be optimistic: when, in 1999, the UN presented a list of 84,251 voters, Morocco immediately got to work challenging 72,000 of them. Kofi Annan had to concede that there was "little possibility of holding the referendum before 2002 or even beyond".

In 2001 Baker came up with a new plan: rather than a referendum, Western Sahara would be offered limited autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. It was the Saharawi themselves, however, who made it clear that this was a non-starter – they had not languished in the desert for 27 years only for autonomy as part of a Greater Morocco. In 2002, Kofi Annan and Baker had to go back to the Security Council and, after almost a year of indecision, James Baker came up with a different plan: Western Sahara would become a province of Morocco, with an elected 'Authority' with substantial powers, for 4 or 5 years after which there would be a referendum offering independence,

continued autonomy within Morocco, or full integration. Polisario accepted the proposals, although it was a considerable concession, but Morocco dismissed them as an attack on its "territorial integrity".

Baker resigned in 2004. Polisario called his departure a "serious setback to the UN's efforts", while the Moroccan Foreign Minister described it as "a result of the tenacity of Moroccan diplomacy and its rejection of certain principles threatening Morocco's territorial integrity". His resignation was largely motivated by Morocco's intransigence, French opposition and the failure of the international community to give the peace process sufficient backing.

In his final days as Special Envoy, Morocco accepted his "Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara", but only if self-determination was removed from it. The Security Council rejected this as unacceptable, and of course it would have been quite unacceptable to Polisario.

Baker had recognised the impossibility of what he had been asked to do. The UN had to deliver self-determination, but that required allowing the Saharawi to choose independence over any solution that put sovereignty in the hands of Morocco. In spite of having accepted the 1991 ceasefire agreement and having signed the Houston Accords, Morocco was not going to accept any proposal which could threaten its 'territorial integrity', and it considered Western Sahara as part of its territory. To resolve the matter, the UN would need to move beyond Chapter 6 of its Charter, which is about conflict resolution through negotiation, mediation, etc. to Chapter 7 which could give it powers to impose a solution, by force if necessary. However, France and the US were never going to allow the Security Council to force Morocco to do anything it didn't want, and Morocco knew it.

Some have questioned whether the Moroccan regime could surrender Western Sahara even if it wanted to.[xiv] At the time of Baker's resignation, the Moroccan army had been in Western Sahara for nearly 30 years. Its presence there had not just been about national

security. Hassan had motivated his senior officers by offering them the spoils of war – many had acquired land and enterprises, to the extent that Morocco's twenty most senior officers were collectively worth about $15 billion. Given the fragility of Moroccan politics, would the army accept a referendum result which required them to withdraw?

The 'peace process' went on, but without much sense of direction. Morocco, having been asked to produce its own proposals, presented its 'Autonomy Plan' in 2007. This proposed an 'autonomous region' which would have significant powers over local government matters, but always under the control of the king. There was no way, however, that the Plan could be squared with the Saharawi's right to self-determination.

Knowing that Morocco was about to make a proposal, Polisario presented one of its own. Recalling that Morocco had agreed to a referendum on self-determination both in 1991 and in the Houston Accords of 1997, a referendum, it argued, was the only way forwards. However, it was prepared to offer 'post referendum guarantees' which, if the outcome was independence, would be offered to Morocco and Moroccan citizens resident in Western Sahara: these covered co-operation on economic and security issues and the rights of Moroccans who had lived in Western Sahara for ten years, including the offer of citizenship. Polisario was not asking for anything more than what had already been agreed, but that was too much for the Moroccans who had been emboldened by the weakness of the UN.

CHAPTER 4

Challenges to the occupation

The 1991 ceasefire was welcomed amongst Saharawi in the occupied territory. Not only did the UN deal offer a chance to choose independence over life under Morocco's repressive regime, but it also brought a promise of reunions of families split between the Western Sahara and the camps. Following the ceasefire, Morocco released about 300 prisoners, some of whom had been presumed to be dead. Nevertheless, Morocco had made clear the consequences of opposition to the regime and the release of prisoners, although welcome, didn't mark any relaxation in Morocco's approach to dissent.

The advent of MINURSO could have made a real difference, but it didn't. In spite of lots of international lobbying (much of it co-ordinated by the Western Sahara Campaign in the UK), MINURSO remains the only UN peace-keeping force whose mandate does not include human rights. Each year the UN must renew the mandate and each year it has been argued that, with new reports of human rights abuses, MINURSO should have a role in human rights monitoring, but no matter how strong the case, France has refused to allow such a change. In 1996, Amnesty International accused MINURSO of being 'a silent witness to blatant human rights violations'.

Following Hassan's death in 1999, the new king, Mohammed VI, took a new approach, admitting the state's involvement in disappearances and setting up a scheme which went on to offer compensation to around 4,000 of the 5,000 claimants.

The end of 1999 saw the first significant stirrings of militancy within Saharawi society in the occupied territory. It began with

protests by Saharawi students demanding more financial support to enable them to attend universities in Morocco. The tented vigil which the students held in El Aaiun (in a square in which many Saharawi independence activists had been shot by Spanish troops in 1970) was soon joined by others – Saharawi workers from the phosphate mines and political prisoners. The protesters avoided relating their demands to Polisario's wider campaign for self-determination and the stalled UN peace process, instead focusing on socio-economic dissatisfactions, but it was nevertheless a protest by Saharawi against their treatment by the Moroccan regime.

After twelve days, the Moroccan authorities broke up the protest with what even the US State Department described as 'excessive violence'. The response of the wider Saharawi community was to hold a much bigger demonstration a few days later, but this time the Moroccans encouraged local thugs to break into and vandalise Saharawi homes – the UN State Department accused the police of provoking violence.

These events marked a turning point in the Saharawi's struggle for self-determination. During the years of war, resistance to the Moroccan occupation had taken the form of guerilla strikes by Saharawi fighters based outside the occupied territory, and following the ceasefire the diplomatic battles were conducted by those based in the camps. By 1999, with the limitations of military action all too clear and with little prospect of international support, the Saharawi in the occupied territory were not going to wait for others to act for them and became more willing to challenge the occupation themselves.

Although the protest had support from all parts of Saharawi society, the students who had begun it were a new generation who had lived all their lives under occupation – their willingness to confront their occupiers was a powerful message that Saharawi demands for independence were as strong as ever and that, in the 24

years since the invasion, Morocco had made no progress in persuading the Saharawi that annexation to Morocco might be in their interests.

The protests brought comparisons with struggles of the Palestinians. In the early years, opposition to Israel's take-over of Palestinian land was fought by guerilla groups based outside Palestine but, when that was no longer possible, it was the people of the West Bank and Gaza who challenged Israeli control through their intifadas. The events of 1999 have therefore been described as the Saharawi's first intifada, but more were to come.

In one respect, however, the situation in Western Sahara differed from Palestine. The settlers who were confiscating Palestinian land in the West Bank were ideologically motivated, but the large numbers of Moroccans who had moved into Western Sahara were mainly poor people who had been offered better conditions there than they could find in Morocco. Thousands had been moved by their government in 1991 in hope of influencing the outcome of the anticipated referendum, but that did not mean that they were supporters of the Moroccan regime. Many felt ignored and neglected by the authorities and joined the 1999 protests on the side of the Saharawi. This was a very significant development: there had been concern that the influx of Moroccans would make any referendum unwinnable for the Saharawi, but it could no longer be assumed that Moroccan settlers would prefer annexation over citizenship of a new and independent state. For the Moroccan king, the idea of a referendum became even less attractive.

In the years that followed the 1999 protest, the regime appeared to offer concessions by releasing some political prisoners, but it did not relax its grip – minor protests continued, and continued to grow as the Saharawi sensed the breakdown of Baker's attempts to negotiate a

way forwards, but Morocco continued to act against those who spoke out on human rights issues or asserted their Saharawi identity.

In 2005, protests on a much larger scale erupted across Western Sahara. This second intifada began after Moroccan forces forcibly broke up a protest over the transfer of a political prisoner from El Aaiun to a prison in Morocco, but the Moroccan intervention simply led to much larger, and overtly pro-independence, demonstrations in several parts of the town. A hard-line response by the police and army, in which many were beaten and detained, led to further demonstrations in towns across Western Sahara, as well as by Saharawi students in Moroccan universities. Clashes continued in the months that followed, and Morocco continued to respond with force: one demonstrator was, in public, beaten to death by Moroccan agents. Several prominent Saharawi activists were imprisoned after trials criticised by human rights organisations, and there were allegations of torture. The European Parliament passed, without opposition, a resolution deploring the expulsion of journalists and demanding the release of political prisoners.

In 2006, a delegation from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visited the area: two years later its report was leaked rather than released. It had found evidence of excessive and indiscriminate violence against demonstrators and criticised the “severe restrictions” on the right of people to express their views, create associations and hold assemblies. It concluded that almost all violations of human rights stemmed from the denial of the right to self-determination.

Aminatou Haidar, one of the many arrested during the 2005 protests, was a leading human rights advocate who had spent years in Moroccan prisons. After her release in 2006, which was met with massive demonstrations of support for SADR, she travelled abroad to seek international support (she had already received several international awards for her courage), but on her return in 2009 she

was detained and deported to the Canaries: Morocco argued that, by referring to herself as Western Saharan, she had renounced her Moroccan citizenship. She embarked on a hunger strike that lasted for over a month and attracted a huge amount of international support which helped draw the world's attention to Morocco's actions. The intervention of Barak Obama eventually persuaded Morocco to return her passport, and she returned to a hero's welcome.

That year there was intensive lobbying for a human rights' role for MINURSO, but France was having none of it. The only concession was a reference to "the importance of making progress on the humanitarian dimension of the conflict". Several members of the Security Council at the time made statements expressing their dissatisfaction, but Britain only argued that the 'humanitarian dimension' included human rights.

Shortly afterwards, the gutlessness of Britain's position was exposed when six young Saharawi were invited to a seminar, funded by the British Council, where they were to engage in discussions with six young Moroccans: although the Saharawi had visas for their visit, when they got to the airport at Agadir, they were taken from the plane, beaten with batons, and then driven to El Aaiun where they were interrogated and assaulted, verbally and physically, before being released. One of the six, a nineteen-year-old woman, was stopped by police a few weeks later, blindfolded, forced to strip, beaten, threatened with rape and released naked after five hours of interrogation on why she wanted to visit Britain. Here was clear evidence of the need for a strong MINURSO with a human rights mandate. Even if the British response was feeble, human rights increasingly became the issue on which the Saharawi could appeal for the international support they needed - and Morocco's abuses of their rights continued to provide them with ammunition.

Saharawi protest reached an entirely new level in October 2010. Thousands of Saharawi set up a camp – the 'dignity' camp – at Gdeim Izyk outside El Aaiun. Estimates of the numbers involved range from 5,000 to 20,000, but whatever estimate is correct, the numbers were astonishing – such a camp in Britain, if population size is taken into account, would have been ten to twenty times the size of Glastonbury. For a month they stayed there, but early morning on 8 November the security forces stormed the camp with jeeps and helicopters, setting tents alight and dispersing crowds with water cannons. Clashes followed in the streets of El Aaiun, and by the end of the day 11 were dead, hundreds injured and many more arrested. Neither MINURSO nor the press were allowed access to the area to observe how Morocco dealt with those who challenged its authority.

The Gdeim Izyk camp provided proof, if proof were needed, that the Saharawi were not going to submit meekly to Moroccan rule. Some have spoken of it as the first act of the Arab Spring – whether or not that claim stands up, none can deny that it was a hugely significant moment in the Saharawi quest for self-determination.

There was international condemnation of Morocco's attack on the camp. The European Parliament passed a strong resolution but, as in the past, there was no strong action to back it up. The Robert F Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights sent a mission which produced a damning report, and the SADR President wrote to the UN Secretary General demanding that the UN act on its responsibility for the protection of human rights and international peace.

CHAPTER 5

Theft of resources

King Hassan's decision to invade Western Sahara may have been based on his political ambitions for a Greater Morocco, but he would also have been aware that Western Sahara was not just a sparsely populated bit of desert – it was a territory of considerable mineral wealth and with coastal waters rich in fish. There was also speculation that it might have oil reserves.

Following the ceasefire of 1991, the economics of the occupation started to get a lot more attention. If Morocco was illegally occupying Western Sahara, then selling the assets of Western Sahara was surely illegal and that had implications for trading partners. There was also a concern that if the occupation was profitable for Morocco, persuading Morocco to withdraw would be much more difficult.

In 2001, Morocco began licensing companies to search for oil in Western Sahara. Jamaica, as the then President of the Security Council, asked the UN Legal Affairs Department for an opinion. The following year, the UN's Legal Counsel, Hans Corel, responded noting that Morocco was only in Western Sahara through an illegal invasion. He advised that contracts for exploration might not be illegal, but that:

> "If further exploration and exploitation activities were to proceed in disregard of the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, they would be in violation of the principles of international law applicable to mineral resource activities in Non-Self-Governing Territories."[xv]

It provoked debate in the Security Council, but not action, and, as normal, Morocco ignored it and carried on helping itself to Western Sahara's resources.

In 2004 it emerged that a Norwegian company had finished an off-shore seismic survey and that a Dutch company with British subsidiaries was doing similar work on-shore in Western Sahara. The Western Sahara Campaign in the UK and its counterparts in the other countries involved got together for a joint campaign. This coalition was to develop into Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW), an organisation with an office and staff in Brussels and a membership of individuals and support groups in more than 30 countries, which monitors the exploitation of Western Sahara's resources.[xvi]

On oil, the campaign had a partial success in 2004 when the French company, Total, decided to stop prospecting: the company claimed their decision was on their failure to find oil, but there was evidence that it had been questioning the UN on the legality of the contracts it had signed. In 2006, another company, Kerr-McGee, decided to end its work in Western Sahara: it had come under a lot of pressure from campaigners, resulting in the many shareholders, including the Norwegian government, selling their holdings. In Oklahoma, where Kerr-McGee was based, there had been huge protests by the local Christian community.

SADR responded to Morocco's search for oil by announcing it was open to bids for exploration work in Western Sahara, the work to start when independence was gained. The SADR proposals were launched in London in May 2005, using the prestigious setting of the Wellington Arch at Hyde Park Corner.

No oil has yet been found in Western Sahara or its territorial waters, although in 2024 there were still two current licences for exploration, both held by Israeli companies.[xvii]

Phosphates were another matter. The Spanish discovered extensive deposits of phosphates near Bou Craa, a small town in Western Sahara, and by 1975 they were already transporting the rocks to the coast on a 100 kilometre conveyor belt – the longest in the world. In the early years of the war, the long conveyor belt was an easy target for Polisario and for several years production had to stop. However, when the mines and the conveyor belt were surrounded by Morocco's defensive berm, it was possible to restart production. By 2024, WSRW estimated that Morocco was exporting about 1.5 million tonnes each year and that the value of the trade was over $300 million p.a.

Hans Corel's legal opinion on oil is equally applicable to phosphates, and companies buying phosphates from Western Sahara have been accused of dealing in stolen goods. In 2012 when WSRW began monitoring the trade, there were 15 purchasers but, by 2024, that had dropped to only 4, with many former customers having expressed concerns about the legality of the exports, about reports of human rights abuses and their unease about being seen to support an illegal occupation. Several suppliers of mining equipment have also terminated their links with Bou Craa for similar reasons.

The most successful challenge to the trade was made in 2017. A ship, the 'Cherry Blossom', travelling to New Zealand with 55,000 tonnes of phosphates, stopped to refuel at Port Elizabeth in South Africa. SADR alerted the South African Supreme Court which detained the vessel and, about 10 months later, ruled that the Moroccan companies exporting the phosphates did not own the cargo and were not therefore entitled to sell it. The ship was held in South Africa for more than a year.[xviii]

Some of the major debates about Western Sahara's resources have been about fishing. The Madrid Accords of 1975 included an agreement by Morocco to allow Spanish vessels to continue fishing

off the coast of Western Sahara (as well as other economic benefits for Spain[xix]). The Accords, of course, showed a blatant disregard for international law and were not accepted by the UN, but the Spanish took advantage of the provision. When Spain joined the EU in 1988, fishing became an EU matter, leading to a Fisheries Partnership Agreement (FPA) between the EU and Morocco. Under the FPA, payments were made to Morocco in return for giving EU vessels access to Moroccan territorial waters, understood to include the ocean off the coast of Western Sahara. Thus, the FPA allowed Morocco to benefit from the resources of a territory which it was illegally occupying.

When the FPA came up for renewal in 2011, there were concerns that Morocco had not provided the required assurances that the FPA had benefited the local population (although there was plenty evidence that it had enriched the king and some of his most senior generals), and a one-year extension was proposed to give time for further discussions. However, in spite of vigorous lobbying by Morocco, as well as France and Spain, the European Parliament voted against the extension. Morocco was furious and withdrew fishing rights while a new FPA was negotiated. For a couple of years, politicians agonised over how to appear being sympathetic to the Saharawi while at the same time allowing Morocco and others to steal their fish – it was, of course, a circle that could not be squared. This time France and Spain won the battle and a new FPA, agreed in 2013, allowed a return to business as usual. On the day the agreement was signed, Moroccan security forces attacked and injured Saharawi who were protesting against the illegality of the deal and the theft of their fish stocks.

Two months after the rejection of the FPA in 2011, the EU was debating the renewal of the EU-Morocco Association Agreement which would allow the free trade of agricultural products between Morocco and EU markets. Western Sahara was again an issue – WSRW had identified several plantations in Western Sahara owned

by the king or by French or Spanish companies and questions arose over whether produce of Western Sahara would be treated as if from Morocco (if they were to be regarded as the produce of Morocco for the purposes of the Agreement, it would be a further incentive for Morocco to maintain its occupation). In the final text, Western Sahara was not even mentioned.

In response, Polisario tried a new approach. They were not going to get justice from the European Parliament - although many MEPs supported them, there were more who were prepared to put what they saw as their nations' economic interests before human rights considerations – but the courts might take a different view. In 2012, they took legal action against the EU Council, arguing that the Association Agreement should not apply to Western Sahara. They won their case. The EU Council appealed against the decision, but the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) upheld the original decision: Western Sahara was not part of Morocco and could not come within the scope of EU agreements without the consent of the people of Western Sahara.

In Britain, the Western Sahara Campaign took similar action against the UK government in 2015 on the grounds that produce of Western Sahara should not be imported into the UK under a trade agreement with Morocco. The judge concluded that "there is an arguable case of a manifest error by the Commission in understanding and applying international law relevant to these agreements": as the case concerned the interpretation of an EU agreement, it was referred to the CJEU which accepted the Western Sahara Campaign's arguments and in 2018 ruled that the EU-Morocco Fisheries Agreement was invalid as it failed to respect the rights of the Saharawi. The following year, the High Court in the UK accepted the CJEU ruling and judged that HMRC had erred in not investigating the origins of produce imported under the Agreements.

On both agriculture and fisheries, however, the EU Council ploughed ahead, seeking ways to circumvent legal judgements to allow Morocco the benefits of its plunder of Saharawi assets. New proposals, which specifically included Western Sahara in their scope and referred to sham consultations with people who were far from being representatives of the Saharawi, were voted through the European Parliament. Polisario made another legal challenge, leading to the EU's General Court again ruling in 2021 that the agreements were unlawful, but this time adding that the consent of the Saharawi had to mean the consent of Polisario. The appeals of the EU Council and Commission to the CJEU were rejected in 2024.

Nevertheless, in August 2025, after a decade which had seen seven court judgements against EU-Morocco agreements which included Western Sahara, it emerged that the EU Commission was seeking a mandate to negotiate new agreements with Morocco with the specific intent of enabling Western Saharan produce to be treated as if it were Moroccan. Leading members of the EU, which had originally been formed to promote peace, democracy and human rights and to set rules by which member states would do business together, had spent a decade ignoring the judgements of the court they had established and had spent a fortune in legal fees arguing that the rules they had created should not apply to them.

In 2020, the UK ceased to be a member of the EU. Although it had decided it didn't want to be bound by EU rules, it did want to keep the benefits of EU trade agreements. For trade with Morocco, it quickly negotiated a UK-Morocco Association Agreement which simply copied the EU-Morocco agreement which was in place at the time of Brexit, and which was the subject of a legal dispute in the EU. In 2021 when the UK's agreement with Morocco came into force, the Western Sahara Campaign therefore made a legal challenge in the UK courts. Four months later the EU General Court judged the EU-Morocco

Agreement unlawful. Despite that, the WSC's case in the UK, against effectively the same agreement, was lost: out of the EU, the UK did not need to consider EU rules or CJEU judgements on the application of international law; self-determination was not considered to be a legal right; it was not the job of a UK court to rule on the legality of another country's actions, etc. While that was a setback, it did at least let the government know that its agreements will be scrutinised from a rights perspective.

In 2024, the appeal by the EU Council and Commission against the ruling of the EU General Court on the EU version of the agreement was dismissed: the CJEU again ruled that the EU's trade agreements do not apply to occupied Western Sahara. As a result, the agreement that the UK had signed with Morocco was effectively a copy of the one that the CJEU would not allow in the EU because it does not respect Saharawi rights. One might have hoped that the Labour government elected in 2024 would have found this embarrassing and made changes in its own agreement, but there has been no sign of the matter even being considered.

Court cases have been about Morocco's trade with other countries, but its exploitation of Western Sahara for its domestic interests is equally concerning. For years, Morocco has been developing infrastructure, often with EU finance, to support the fishing industry, and some senior generals in control of occupied areas have grown exceptionally rich on the profits. Local fishermen have lost their livelihoods and there have been concerns over the rate at which fish stocks have been depleted. Powerful Moroccans have acquired land in Western Sahara, and although construction work has brought jobs, these have been mainly for Moroccan settlers. The Saharawi have been moving towards becoming an underprivileged minority in their own country.

Renewable energy has been expanding rapidly. Morocco has claimed to be a trail-blazer in the development of 'clean' energy, and it has the advantage of plenty of sun, wind and land. However, much of the development has not been in Morocco but in Western Sahara, generating profits for both the king and the state but doing little for the Saharawi. Morocco's wind farm programme began in 2012, leading to five wind farms in Western Sahara: in 2025 it was announced that another major wind farm would be developed in the territory with a 1,400 km 'electric highway' to take power to the centre of Morocco. Plans are also being made for increasing the use of solar energy and exploring the production of 'green hydrogen' in Western Sahara.

The development of clean, renewable energy is in itself a good thing. However, the siting of its production in Western Sahara, with the twin aims of powering the development of Morocco's illegal enterprises in Western Sahara and generating electricity for consumers in Morocco, means that the indigenous population gets little benefit (as international law would require) and that the reliance on Western Saharan power will make persuading Morocco to recognise the Saharawi's right to self-determination even more difficult. Western Sahara has been described as the last colony in Africa, but Morocco's use of a territory that it occupied by force as a source of raw materials, mirroring how several European states had treated Africa in past centuries, surely makes Morocco the last colonial power in Africa.

CHAPTER 6

The peace process unravels

With Morocco's rejection of Baker's proposals in 2004 and Morocco's determination to press for its own autonomy proposal, which ruled out independence from Morocco as an option, the UN peace process was effectively dead. It continued, however, because the Security Council was not prepared to countenance an alternative.

In 2009, Polisario and Morocco held their first talks for three years, but they were never going to be able to discuss the essential questions. In Washington, after the resignation of Baker, the Bush administration had become more favourable to the Moroccans but, with the arrival of Obama that year, the US reverted to a more neutral position. Although, between 2007 and 2013, Morocco spent $20 million on lobbying, in 2013 the US, for the first time, wanted MINURSO to have a human-rights monitoring role. Following a furious response from Morocco, which cancelled plans for joint military training exercises, and opposition from France, the US retreated. There were hopes that Obama would have brought a fresh approach, but his Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, was an old friend of the king who had donated $12 million to the Clinton Foundation.

Morocco was irritated that the UN had not reacted more positively to its autonomy proposal. It refused to deal with Christopher Ross, a senior US diplomat who had become the Special Envoy, making it clear that Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara was not to be questioned. In 2016 there was a worse spat with the UN when the Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, visited the area and described the situation, perfectly accurately, as 'occupation'. Morocco went wild – the king refused to meet the Secretary General and many of

MINURSO's staff were expelled from the territory. Several members of the Security Council wanted a strong rebuke for Morocco's violations of its obligations as a member of the UN, but the US was not one of them.

The UN's peace process was now 25 years old, but there was no real commitment from Morocco or from the Security Council to finding and implementing a solution. Instead of moving the parties towards a settlement, it was merely maintaining the status quo, and that was to the advantage of Morocco: MINURSO could keep Polisario at bay while it got on with the job of exploiting Western Sahara's resources.

Polisario was making no progress. In its earlier resistance it had been out-gunned by Morocco's armed forces, and it was now suffering in a similar way in the diplomatic battles. The manner in which the Gdeim Izyk protest had been crushed and the treatment of the Saharawi's leading human rights activists were fuelling anger in the camps as well as in the occupied territory, and there were growing demands for a return to war. While there was a danger that armed conflict might lose them some goodwill, they were watching the takeover of their homeland by a vicious regime, they could see that the UN was not going to stand up for their rights, and it appeared that doing nothing was effectively surrendering.

What re-ignited the war was a confrontation near Guerguerat, a small village in the far south-west of Western Sahara near the border with Mauritanian. The coast road through Guerguerat is the only land route from Morocco to Mauritanian and other countries of southern Africa. In October, a group of Saharawi blocked the road in protest against Morocco's ever increasing exploitation of Saharawi resources and its plan to improve the road through the UN buffer zone. With long lines of trucks building up on both sides of the border, Morocco threatened to use military force to remove protesters if they would not go voluntarily. The UN reported the presence of 12 armed Polisario members who claimed they were in the buffer zone to protect

Saharawi civilians, but a week later they reported the arrival of a Moroccan military force of about 250 vehicles, many with heavy weapons, as well as earth-moving equipment, and work soon started on building a new sand wall through the buffer zone. On November 13th, after the protestors moved away, two gunshots were heard from Polisario positions and the Moroccans responded with heavy weapons before taking over the protest site in the buffer zone. The following day, Polisario announced that the ceasefire was over. Since then, there has been a state of war between Morocco and Polisario, but it has been a fairly subdued one – spasmodic minor attacks and retaliations – and the diplomatic discussions at the UN and elsewhere have continued.

In December 2020, there was a sudden change in the US position: Trump, approaching the end of his first term as president, announced that the US recognised Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. The shift in policy had nothing to do with law, morality or the case for Morocco's autonomy plan – it had been part of a deal whereby Morocco agreed to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. Senior US figures who had been involved in the peace process were appalled, and there were even prominent Republicans who expressed concern. Some in the State Department tried to argue that the promise of self-determination had not been abandoned, but the situation seemed quite clear: the US had just given legitimacy to the seizure of a territory and its assets by force.

Spain was the next country to abandon the UN's principles and support Morocco. In 2021, Morocco was furious when it discovered that the Polisario leader, Brahim Ghali (a Spanish passport holder), was in Spain receiving hospital treatment. Spain has always been vulnerable to Moroccan pressure because of its enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, on Morocco's north coast and, in response to Spain's decision to admit Ghali for treatment, Morocco relaxed its security to allow nearly 8,000 migrants to cross into Ceuta and therefore into Spain. Around the same time, when the mobiles of several Spanish

ministers were found to have been infected with Pegasus, an Israeli spyware program, Moroccan involvement was suspected (the mobile of Aminatou Haidar, the prominent human rights campaigner, was similarly infected). In March 2022, Spain attempted to mend its relationship with Morocco by giving its support to the Moroccan autonomy plan – a move which resulted in major protests in Spain and the withdrawal of the Algerian ambassador. Nearly 400 members of the Spanish Association of Professors on International Law and International Relations signed a statement accusing Spain of a serious violation of international law.[xx]

Two years later, France's announcement of its support for Morocco's autonomy plan was hardly a surprise – nearly half a century earlier it had sent its armed forces to help Morocco drive Polisario out of Western Sahara and it had spent decades preventing the Security Council from taking decisions that Morocco might not like. The announcement was made by Macron, a president who had impressed many in the western world by his principled and forthright condemnations of Putin's invasion of a smaller neighbour and his attempts to capture and annex territory by force. Macron also promised French investment in Western Sahara – it appeared that, after so many years of political services to Morocco, France now wanted its share of the plunder.

Although these expressions of support for Morocco's position appeared to be reducing the UN's space for mediation and negotiation, the UN peace process continued year after year with the Secretary General making annual reports and the Security Council passing resolutions to extend MINURSO's mandate. The new Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, insisted that UN positions were based on resolutions and not on the views of individual states, and annual Security Council resolutions all called for negotiations

> "with a view to achieving a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara".

Photo: Adala UK

In 2025, it was reported that there were 40 portraits of King Mohammed in Smara Avenue, El Aaiun, each with police protection.

Nevertheless, Morocco must have felt that things were moving in its favour, but it was not going to relax its grip. Each year brought new reports of human rights abuses and, in July 2025, the UN Secretary General reported that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had not been allowed access to the territory since 2015 despite repeated requests, while

> "International observers, including parliamentarians, researchers, journalists and lawyers, reportedly continue to face entry restrictions, with dozens denied entry or expelled."

The previous month, eight UN Special Rapporteurs sent Morocco a joint 'communication' denouncing:

> "Morocco's ongoing campaign of repression, racial discrimination, and violence against Saharawi human rights defenders, journalists, and advocates for self-determination."[xxi]

In their statement, which followed a series of UN communications raising similar concerns over the previous five years, the UN experts noted that "patterns of repression, harassment, and discrimination

against Sahrawi individuals and organizations have not only continued but worsened."

Freedom House, a respected non-government organisation based in Washington, assesses each country and territory on factors such as the right to vote, freedom of expression and equality before the law and awards them scores out of 100. While some European countries achieved 99 (but only 92 for the UK), Western Sahara was given a score of only given 4 – less than countries including Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, Myanmar and Syria, and only one point above North Korea.

Neither was life improving for Saharawi in the refugee camps. The great majority of those in the camps were reliant on external aid, but budget cuts in 2025 for UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO had consequences for food supplies and essential services. A survey in 2025 found nearly 13% suffering from acute malnutrition.

Another threat was looming. As a result of climate change, the camps have suffered from periods of extreme heat in which temperatures have reached 50 degrees, a danger point at which the body has great difficulty in cooling itself and many bodily functions are impaired. It is not inconceivable that a situation could be reached in which life in the camps is no longer possible for people who do not have access to air-conditioning and refrigeration.

In his report to the UN General Assembly in July 2025, Antonio Guterres observed that "the continued deterioration of the state of affairs is alarming and unsustainable", but there didn't seem to be a solution in sight.

CHAPTER 7

Prospects for progress

The 50 years since the Moroccan invasion have seen piles of reports, proposals and UN resolutions on the conflict, but little, if any, progress towards a settlement of the issue. In many respects, changes that have taken place over these 50 years have made a resolution of the conflict more difficult to find.

It is Morocco that must be blamed for the invasion and its consequences. It was Morocco which asked the International Court of Justice for an opinion on Western Saharan sovereignty and, not getting the answer it wanted, ignored it and used its superior military power to take the territory by force. Thousands of lives have been lost (some estimate as many as 20,000), more than 150,000 have been forced to flee from their homes and, rather than being able to enjoy the benefits of nationhood, thousands of Saharawi have suffered under an oppressive occupation, all as a result of King Hassan's greed for power and his delusional quest for a greater Morocco.

It is the international community, however, that must be held responsible for allowing the conflict to continue for half a century. When Morocco and Mauritania invaded Western Sahara, they were in breach of the UN Charter which prohibits "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state" and Morocco's attacks, using napalm and phosphorous bombs, on defenceless civilians trying to escape from the conflict were undoubtedly war crimes. When Russia invaded parts of Ukraine there was an international outcry, but Morocco's invasion resulted only in expressions of concern, and mainly concern over the danger that fighting might escalate and destabilise the region. There were plenty

of international rules which could have been used to hold Morocco to account for its aggression, but no action was taken.

A robust response by the UN Security Council might have forced Morocco to rethink its position. However, although UN Secretary Generals have all tried to find a way forwards, they have needed to do so with proverbial hands tied behind their backs. France, as a permanent member of the UNSC and therefore with veto powers, has always sided with its former protectorate with which it has strong economic links. It has been Morocco's biggest supplier of military equipment, and it even intervened, in breach of the UN Charter, to support the fight against Polisario.

France might have been more inclined to allow the Security Council to do its work if it had felt it was on its own, but the US also had interests in Morocco. These were more of a geo-political nature: Morocco under Hassan, and later under Mohammed, was seen as a moderate state in a turbulent Arab world and preserving its stability was therefore important. Geographically, it was strategically situated at the entrance to the Mediterranean. In 1975 the US had been aware of Morocco's intentions prior to the invasion and, fearful that Hassan could be deposed if his project were to fail, they hoped to engineer a process by which the UN would pass Western Sahara to Morocco. In the years that followed, US support for Morocco was more nuanced and more subtle than that of France, but the US was never going to take a position which would seriously threaten Moroccan plans and, more importantly, its stability. Nevertheless, there were people like James Baker, John Bolton and Christopher Ross who sought a just settlement and, at least initially, the Obama administration took a more neutral stance than its Republican predecessor. However, the entire debate in the US was thrown aside when Trump persuaded Morocco to sign the Abraham Accords and enter into full bilateral relations with Israel in return for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara – a policy change which had

absolutely nothing to do with the nature of the conflict or merits of Polisario's case.

The other major player in the affairs of Western Sahara has been Spain. Western Sahara was a Spanish colony, and it was in an untidy end to colonial rule that Morocco saw an opportunity to make its move. Although Polisario had originally been formed to fight against Spanish colonialism in the Franco era, many Saharawi had Spanish passports and still have strong links with Spain. Spanish society has generally been sympathetic to the Saharawi and there are many groups which have worked to provide humanitarian help, but the Spanish government has been weak and wobbly in is support. Its enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, make it vulnerable to Moroccan pressure, as was seen in 2001 (see pages 36 and 37).

The situation facing the Saharawi is therefore, to say the least, difficult. They cannot match Morocco's military might and the UN Security Council, which should be there to protect them, is hamstrung by the US and France. That does not, however, mean that their cause is hopeless.

Countries can change their governments and their perceptions of what is good for them. As recently as August 2025, John Bolton made the case that a referendum on independence is in the interests of the US as well as those of the Saharawi (one of his arguments was that the instability caused by the conflict opens up the area to other influences, and Russia and Morocco were talking trade in the first half of 2025[xxii]). In France, not everyone supports government policy which has strayed so far from *liberté, égalité et fraternité*, especially when it causes friction with Algeria, and in August 2025 it was claimed that LeMonde was supporting SADR.[xxiii] Some may also remember that Danielle Mitterand, a former president's wife, was a big Saharawi

supporter. Likewise in Spain, government positions have changed in the past and, with a strong Saharawi lobby, could easily change again.

However, even if there is no immediate prospect of other countries changing their policies, it does not mean that the Saharawi cause is lost. Reasons to believe that self-determination and independence, in some form, are attainable include:

1. The Saharawi have right on their side. It was the Moroccans who attacked them, disregarding all the UN's prohibitions on attempting to gain territory by force, and it is Morocco which has refused to comply with UN resolutions, which has violated the UN Charter on Human Rights and which has obstructed attempts to resolve the conflict. The Saharawi have been innocent victims of Moroccan aggression: that may not cut much ice with the Trumps and Macrons of this world but, for many in the wider international community, it is an important determinant of where their sympathies will lie.
2. Having right on your side is important when it comes to legal matters. In terms of political weight, Polisario is no match for the EU, but it was nevertheless able to successfully challenge the EU in court, requiring EU member states to review their policies. It was also a legal challenge that led to South Africa confiscating a cargo of phosphates which was *en route* to New Zealand, and it would not be surprising if there were further legal challenges to aspects of Morocco's occupation and to those who seek to benefit from it.
3. Western Sahara has broad backing within the UN. Even if leading members of the Security Council are prepared to ignore their obligations to the UN Charter and support Morocco's illegal occupation, the UN does not. Western Sahara remains on a small list of 'non-self-governing territories' which forms the agenda for the UN Decolonisation Committee. Some have described Western Sahara as the last colony in Africa, making

Morocco the last African colonial power. The Decolonisation Committee may lack teeth, but it sees the creation of a free Western Sahara as part of its mission.

4. Resolving conflict has an importance to the UN and the international community that goes beyond the need to provide justice to a small country with a tiny population. Western Sahara has been a UN issue from the years in which the UN was pressing Spain to make plans for its decolonisation and, for more than 30 years, there have been annual reports and debates on the progress of the peace process and the future of MINURSO. For some, that the UN has failed to end the conflict raises questions about the efficacy of the whole UN system. It is not a conflict that involves any super-power (at least directly) and the issues involved are not complicated: if the UN is shown to be incapable of resolving the matter of Western Sahara and Morocco, what hope has it got when it comes to the wider and more complex conflicts of the Middle East and war in Ukraine? For those who still believe the UN should be a place where nations can resolve their differences without going to war, Western Sahara is a test the UN cannot afford to fail.
5. The Saharawi are able to appeal for the backing of public opinion. So far, they have suffered from being largely ignored in a world full of bigger and more pressing problems and that has made it more difficult for them to attract the levels of international solidarity which can change the policies of governments. However, the more that knowledge of Morocco's human rights abuses becomes widespread, the more support they are likely to receive. The work of organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which have large numbers of followers, and people like Aminatou Haidar, who have received international recognition in the human rights world, will result in Western Sahara getting more attention. That will create opportunities for the Saharawi, with a little help from

their friends, to convert sympathy into solidarity and political support.

6. A settlement is needed because failure to reach one could have implications for regional stability and security. Politically, north Africa has had a few turbulent decades. Hopes that the events of the Arab Spring of 2011 might lead to an outbreak of democracy were soon dashed, leaving the region looking more unstable than before. Radical Islamist groups, which have wrought havoc on countries of the Sahel, have also been active in the Maghreb and Algeria has suffered from a number of attacks. While Morocco and Algeria are in conflict over Western Sahara, and while a low-level war continues between Morocco and Polisario, co-operation on security is much more difficult.

   Some of Polisario's opponents have attempted to link the movement to Islamic terrorism, but without any evidence whatsoever (a point strongly made in May 2025 by John Bolton, a former National Security Adviser to Trump and a former ambassador to the UN[xxiv]). However, although Polisario has never staged a terrorist attack against civilians, some have pointed to the danger that, if there is no sign of political progress, some young Saharawi may feel they have little to lose by turning to violence: Antonio Guterres remarked that Hamas's atrocities in 2023, although quite indefensible, did not happen in a vacuum – in Western Sahara as in Gaza, there is a danger that resentments left simmering for years will boil over. The argument that the Moroccan regime must be supported to ensure regional stability simply doesn't wash – stability and security cannot be assured without tackling the sources of conflict.

7. Morocco's backers must recognise that a complete military victory over Polisario would be very difficult to achieve as long as it has Algerian support, and it is likely to have Algerian support as long Morocco wants to crush it. Polisario therefore

has the capacity to remain a thorn in Morocco's side, and a very expensive thorn – as long as Polisario is at bay, Morocco must maintain its 1,700 mile berm to protect its hold over the 80% of the territory it occupies.

8. Resolving the conflict is not just in Morocco's economic interests but in those of the whole region. It has not just been a dispute between Morocco and Western Sahara, but one that has affected relations between all states of north Africa. The Union du Maghreb Arabe was formed in 1989 (a time at which tensions were reduced by the UN's involvement in the conflict) with the aim of encouraging economic co-operation to the advantage of all states, but arguments between Morocco and Algeria over the latter's support for SADR effectively brought the project to an end.
9. A final reason for optimism is the Saharawi themselves. Having maintained their opposition to Moroccan occupation for over 50 years and endured all the hardships it has brought, they are not going to abandon their struggle. Their resilience has got to be respected. The small bands of Polisario guerillas who confronted the Moroccan army in 1975 were not deterred by the apparent odds and, although their ability to strike at Moroccan positions became limited by the scale of Morocco's defences, they have not been defeated. Moreover, the shared experiences of armed conflict, of the privations of camp life and of resistance to an oppressive occupation appear to have strengthened their sense of national identity, and surrender to those who have bombed them and abused them is not on their agenda.

Self-determination therefore remains a realistic ambition for the Saharawi, but what is that likely to mean in practice? The 1991 ceasefire was based on an agreement that there would be a

referendum in which the Saharawi could choose between independence and some form of integration with Morocco. The Moroccan position, however, is now that a referendum is only acceptable if independence is not a choice on offer and therefore, unless Morocco can be brought to its knees by some superior force, either the impasse of the last 30 years will continue or independence must be presented in a form that Morocco can stomach.

These are matters that must be resolved between Morocco and Polisario / SADR[xxv]. Negotiations normally require compromises, and from a Saharawi perspective that might seem unjust – some may ask why concessions should be made to Morocco when it has been the aggressor. However, Polisario has already recognised the political reality: independence is never absolute, and Polisario, in its 2007 proposal to the UN, has already accepted that independence might need to come with qualifications covering issues such as relations between Western Sahara and neighbouring states, the position of Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara, and what happens to Morocco's investments in Western Sahara. Independence might therefore need to be presented as a package of measures – not necessarily one that Morocco would want, but one that it could accept as being less politically damaging.

The experiences of the 1990s also raise questions about the nature of any referendum. Rather than the 1991 agreement on a referendum on independence or not, which would then allow the victor to decide how the decision would be implemented, there may be a case for a referendum on acceptance, or rejection, of a proposal which the two sides have formulated through negotiation – a position with the parties seem to have accepted in the discussions with James Baker.

In his report to the Security Council in October 2024, and again in his 2025 report to the UN General Assembly, Antonio Guterres commented:

> "As the fiftieth anniversary of the conflict is approaching, this challenging context continues to make it more urgent than ever to reach a political solution to the question of Western Sahara. I maintain my belief that it is possible to find a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that will provide for the self determination of the people of Western Sahara in accordance with Security Council resolutions …"

That inspiringly optimistic statement might have been the ending of this book, but David Lammy, the then UK Foreign Secretary, had more to say.

CHAPTER 8

Britain's betrayal or a bid for peace?

When Labour won the British general election in 2024, there was nothing to suggest that the new Foreign Office ministers were even aware of Western Sahara's existence. There were many more pressing problems – Putin's invasion of eastern Ukraine, Israel's massacre of Palestinians in Gaza, and the job of negotiating new trade agreements in a world being driven by an unpredictable and uncontrollable US President.

On 1st June 2025, however, the UK and Morocco published a 'joint communiqué' on their 'Strategic Dialogue' in which it was stated that the UK

> "considers Morocco's autonomy proposal, submitted in 2007, as the most credible, viable and pragmatic basis for a lasting resolution of the dispute."[xxvi]

One sentence in a nine-page document seemed to overturn the carefully balanced approach to the conflict which the UK had taken for decades. Although Britain had developed close commercial ties with Morocco, on Western Sahara it had maintained a degree of neutrality which had led the SADR to regard it as an honest broker, but that position appeared to have been suddenly abandoned. The change had not been discussed, far less agreed, by the UK parliament (and by 2025 there were few MPs who had been sufficiently engaged with Western Saharan issues to recognise the significance of what had been announced). However, for those activists who had spent many years campaigning for justice for the Saharawi, and particularly for those who had been campaigning within the Labour Party, the announcement came as a proverbial kick in the teeth: a position of

solidarity with the Saharawi, which had been supported from conference platforms by past Labour leaders and other senior Labour politicians had been dumped without any consultation.

To make matters worse, the communiqué was not primarily about Western Sahara but about economic relations and it was difficult not to conclude that David Lammy, the UK's Foreign Secretary at the time, had abandoned principle in hope of winning some construction projects related to Morocco's hosting of football World Cup matches in 2026. It was clear that the positions of France, Spain and the US on Western Sahara were based on what these countries saw as their strategic and commercial interests rather than on any analysis of the rights and wrongs of the conflict, but was Britain not supposed to be above that sort of grubby diplomacy? And even if there were a need for words that would avoid differences over Western Sahara getting in the way of commercial contracts, was it necessary to describe Morocco's past attempt at blocking Western Saharan independence as "the most credible" basis rather than just an option to be considered?

The communiqué itself had a rather Pythonesque quality. It began by claiming the relationship between the Crowns of the two countries goes back 800 years but the UK did not exist in 1225, and references to the roles of Mohammed VI and Charles III added a little colourful fiction. However, in the section of the communiqué dealing with Western Sahara, it was asserted that:

> Both countries reaffirmed the paramount importance of a rules-based international order and the fundamental principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and their constant position on respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of countries, the non-use of force for the settlement of conflicts and their support for the principle of respect for self-determination.

In signing the communiqué, Lammy, and his Moroccan counterpart, would have been fully aware of its grotesque dishonesty: the Western Sahara conflict exists because Morocco violated international rules

and the principles of the UN Charter and because it used force against a much smaller and weaker neighbour whose right of self-determination it did not accept.

Much of the communiqué, insofar as it referred to Western Sahara, therefore appeared to be a bit of cynical fiction, and the change of policy which it announced was appalling news for the Saharawi and for those who had spent years campaigning for a just resolution of the conflict.

However, although the communiqué cast a cloud over the morality of the UK's foreign policy, it soon emerged that there were several silver linings which were possibly as big as the cloud itself.

Perhaps anticipating the reaction to the communiqué, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) briefed key partners before it was released, including Polisario and Algeria. They made it clear that the UK had not budged on the importance of self-determination and that it did not accept Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Although this raised questions about how support for self-determination could be reconciled with Morocco's autonomy plan which ruled out independence, it was pointed out that, in the communiqué it had signed, Morocco had accepted that:

> "the only viable and durable solution will be one that is mutually acceptable to the relevant parties, and is arrived at through compromise."

The FCDO maintained that the UK was serious about wanting to take a more active role in trying to find a way forwards, and the first real evidence of that came in August 2025 when, for the first time, an FCDO minister, Hamish Falconer, met his opposite number in SADR (for many years, campaigners had been pressing for such a meeting) and made plans to visit the camps in Algeria.

Thus, what at first sight appeared to be a disaster could turn out to be the beginning of a new initiative for peace. While it would be unwise to be over-optimistic about the chances of the UK being able

to find a solution which has evaded the UN for 50 years, there are nevertheless good reasons for the UK taking a more prominent role in the search for a way forwards. In their communiqué, both Morocco and UK expressed their full support for the efforts of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, Staffan di Mistura but, over the decades, Special Envoys have achieved little, no doubt because their authority ultimately comes from the Security Council which has members who are not prepared to make demands on Morocco, and consequently Morocco has paid little attention to Security Council resolutions. Although any solution must be agreed by the UN, it is possible that a respected mediator may be more successful in negotiating the compromises that are going to be needed. It is also possible that, with all the planned co-operation agreements list in the communiqué, Britain may now be seen by Morocco as more of a trusted friend and be able to play that role and, in spite of the UK's apparent support for the autonomy plan, the trust of SADR may not have been totally lost.

Fully regaining SADR's trust, however, will need more than fine words. If the UK really wants to play a role in the peace process, it will need to find ways of demonstrating the seriousness of its intentions to SADR as well as to Morocco. It could, for example,

- Make a significant contribution to the humanitarian needs of people in the camps: the UN Secretary General's report for the year to June 2025 recorded that budget cuts by UNHCR, UNICEF, the WFP and WHO had resulted in an alarming increase in malnutrition with effects on primary education and youth-support programmes;
- Launch a new programme of scholarships for Saharawi students (both in the Western Sahara and in the camps) who want to study at British universities and colleges (there is also a case for extending the eligibility for scholarships to deprived Moroccans living in Western Sahara: as they may become citizens of a new Saharawi state, it is important that they are treated in the same way as other potential citizens);

- Offer to run and/or fund training programmes in the camps to develop technical skills which would be valuable in the camps and in any new state;
- Fund other projects that improve the lives of those in the camps and prepare them for their roles as citizens of a new state (for example, as sunshine is one of the few resources that Saharawi have, the UK could easily give the camps a solar-energy farm and provide technical assistance on how cheap energy might be used to develop local enterprises).

A much more difficult job, however, will be persuading Morocco that allowing the Saharawi to determine their own future is in its interests (or at least that it is more advantageous to them than refusing the Saharawi their rights). How strongly will the UK be prepared to push Morocco towards allowing Saharawi self-determination? The lever which the UK now has is the communiqué in which the two countries have pledged "to uphold the principles of peace, security, tolerance, and human rights": if that pledge was made with any sincerity, Morocco must surely accept that MINURSO should have a role in monitoring human rights, that the Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights should have unfettered access to both Western Sahara and the camps, that those imprisoned for their support for Polisario should be released, and that Morocco ceases to harass those who advocate independence. If Morocco is not prepared to accept these changes, then it will appear that it did not sign the communiqué on the 'Strategic Dialogue' in good faith, potentially undermining the entire document.

If Morocco does not make good on its pledges, what does the UK propose to do? Will it help Morocco to build football stadiums and continue to co-operate with it in all other fields listed in the communiqué if Morocco continues to abuse the rights of the Saharawi, or will it make contracts conditional on a change of

approach? If the UK is not prepared to hold Morocco to account on the commitments it has made, then the UK too will have acted in bad faith.

Even if all the proposals contained in the communiqué come to fruition, the UK will neither be the biggest nor the most important of Morocco's trading partners and the UK's leverage alone may not be enough to get Morocco to accept the Saharawi's right to self-determination. What the UK can do, and must do, is provide moral leadership, particularly within the Security Council. Although the UK, like the US, France and Spain, has expressed support for Morocco's autonomy plan, there are two things it must make it absolutely clear to its partners and to Morocco:

- firstly, that it will never support the implementation of the autonomy plan, or of any other plan, unless it has been accepted through a process that has allowed the Saharawi to choose what future they want; and
- secondly, that while Western Sahara is under an illegal occupation, economic activity in Western Sahara which does not have the consent of Polisario is illegal, and that the UK will neither take part in the theft of Western Sahara's resources nor trade in produce that has been stolen from the Saharawi.

We may never know what David Lammy was thinking when he signed the joint communiqué. Did he think that an offer of strong support for Morocco's autonomy plan was necessary to conclude a trade agreement? Was he aware that he was selling out on positions his party had held for nearly half a century? With his legal background, did he not appreciate that the plan which he described as "credible, viable and pragmatic" would violate international law and the principles of the UN Charter and did he not see parallels between what Russia was doing to Ukraine and what Morocco had done to Western Sahara? While Lammy and his team must be given some

credit for ensuring references in the communiqué to the importance of human rights and self-determination – neither of them concepts which have been high on Morocco's agenda – their support for a plan which is likely to deny rights and prevent self-determination does not appear to be a good starting point for the "active support and engagement" that the UK has promised to give to the UN peace process.

However, if the UK really means what it said in making that promise, the UK's role in the Western Sahara must change. In the earlier years of the conflict, Britain appeared content to let Spain, France and the US take the lead in responding to events, and the UK's line was never more than a vague expression of support for whatever the UN Special Envoy was doing. The communiqué and the discussions which followed its publication suggest that while the UK still supports the UN process, it has its own position and is ready to be more than just a passive observer.

Greater engagement with the search for peace is to be welcomed. Historically, what happened in Western Sahara did not seem to have much relevance for Britain, but the UK has been central in the creation of the UN and in the drafting of its Charter and of its Declarations on Human Rights and on Refugees, as well as the development of the Geneva Conventions and all the other international agreements by which the world should operate. For that reason alone, Britian should be involved in the Western Sahara issue, doing all it can to uphold a world order based on rules and justice and to oppose any slide to one in which who has power is much more important than principles.

Although Britain had few links with the Saharawi when their territory was invaded in 1975, things have changed over the past 50 years. Chapter 2 has described how interest and concern grew in the UK: the Western Sahara Campaign, although never a large organisation, became a catalyst for actions by others; many politicians visited the refugee camps; trade unions passed motions

and provided funding for solidarity work; human rights organisations including Amnesty International and Human Rights watch exposed the brutality of the occupation; Oxfam, War on Want, Christian Aid and Tear Fund have all appealed for support for the camps; and visits by children from the camps have increased the number of people who are aware of, and are concerned about, the Saharawi.

Support in Britain for Western Sahara has also grown with new organisations promoting the cause of the Saharawi through their culture, fundraising for projects to improve the lives of those in the camps and documenting the abuse of those living under occupation – these groups are described on pages 58 to 61.

The strength of the Saharawi lobby may not be great when compared with some other causes, but it has become significant. In 1975, a change in the UK government's policy on Western Sahara might have gone largely unnoticed but, by 2025, many were outraged by their government's endorsement of Morocco's autonomy plans. They had come to accept that their government would do little more than express support for the UN Secretary General and his Special Envoys, but hearing their Foreign Secretary backing the plans of an aggressor rather than defending the rights of the victims, and doing so without any clear political mandate or process of consultation, caused consternation. However, although few were likely to believe that the change in policy was a political gambit aimed at increasing Britain's influence over the future of Western Sahara, some of the anger was cooled by the references in the communiqué to self-determination, and the news that, for the first time, a British minister had met with Polisario could only be welcomed.

Whatever the reasons for the UK's policy changes, it is now more engaged with both Morocco and Polisario. After 50 years of conflict, will the UK be able to use its new position to help bring about a settlement which allows the Saharawi to decide on their own future? Many around the world have, rightly or wrongly, praised the British Foreign Office staff for their diplomatic skills, but whether they can

help resolve the problems of Western Sahara may depend on the extent to which the UK government is committed to using whatever political and economic leverage it has in trying to work towards a solution.

The Saharawi have suffered from exile and occupation for far too long. Morocco has wronged them and the international community has failed them. Now, after half a century, it is surely time to bring colonialism in Africa to an end and allow the Saharawi their right to self-determination. It is not just the lives and liberties of future generations of Saharawi that are at stake, but whether we can have a world in which conflicts can be peacefully resolved by rules based on fairness and justice, rather than one in which matters are determined by who has the most power.

Appendix

Working in Britain for Saharawi rights

The beginnings of British support for the Saharawi were described in Chapter 2. Over the years, it has grown and diversified.

Western Sahara Campaign

For forty years, the Western Sahara Campaign (WSC) has been at the centre of efforts to persuade the UK government to take a tough stance in opposition to Morocco's illegal occupation of Western Sahara, its abuses of human rights and its theft of Western Sahara's natural resources. WSC keeps supporters and politicians updated on Western Sahara through its newsletters and website, and it works with partners in other countries on international campaigns. WSC provides support for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara which over the years has been ably led by MPs including Tess Kingham, Jeremy Corbyn, Mark Williams and Ben Lake.

WSC has also worked with trade unions, including CWU, FBU, GMB, NEU, UNISON and UNITE, which have provided both political and financial support. Following a motion condemning Moroccan violence against the Saharawi at the TUC Congress in 2005, a TUC delegation visited the camps in 2006. War on Want has also remained an important partner of WSC, encouraging its donors to get involved in campaigns for Saharawi rights.

While WSC has been the principal voluntary organisation seeking political action in the UK, it liaises closely with other groups, described below, which have been doing valuable work supporting the Saharawi in other ways, including through humanitarian and cultural projects and campaigns for human rights.

Adala UK

Adala ('Justice' in Arabic) is an organisation which protects and promotes human rights in occupied Western Sahara. It does a very important job, monitoring and documenting human rights and bringing them to the attention of politicians and campaigners. Through its contacts with human rights defenders, it has been able to provide the information and evidence that supports work in lobbying in the UK, at the UN and with other organisations.

https://adalauk.org/

Olive Branch Arts

Olive Branch Arts was founded by Becky Finlay-Hall, a drama and movement therapist. Since 2010, it has worked in the camps, using theatre, photography, and storytelling as tools for empowerment and cultural exchange. In 2012, photographer Emma Brown joined the team, expanding its work into visual storytelling, strengthening opportunities for Saharawi voices to reach international audiences.

Olive Branch Arts' programmes, combining performance, creative writing, and visual arts, help people, and in particular young people and women, to develop creative skills, strengthen their confidence, and share their experiences with the wider world. Through creativity, participants are able to explore identity, address trauma, and build skills that can support future education and employment.

In the UK, Olive Branch Arts organises performances, exhibitions, and public talks to showcase Saharawi culture and highlight the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara. By partnering with UK arts and human rights organisations, including Amnesty International groups, they

ensure that Saharawi voices reach political, cultural, and educational spaces where they can influence public understanding and international solidarity.

www.olivebranch-arts.com

Sandblast

Sandblast was created by Danielle Smith in 2005 to raise awareness of the Saharawi through art and cultural events. Over the years it has run many projects in the camps to give Saharawi artists and performers opportunities to develop their skills and use them in mobilising international solidarity. In the UK, it has hosted live music events, art and photography exhibitions, film screenings, talks and festivals to showcase Saharawi culture, draw attention to their cause, and build support.

Its Desert Voice programme trains local teachers to provide English-language and music education to children in the camps, thereby giving children chances to learn these skills in fun and stimulating ways outside the classroom: in doing so, it is responding to the dire need for extracurricular activities to engage children who might otherwise have limited constructive opportunities in the camps.

Sandblast also is the UK organiser of the annual Sahara Marathon, an international sports event held in the camps, both to raise funds for projects in the camps, and to raise awareness of the plight of the Saharawi and the need for a resolution of the conflict.

https://sandblast-arts.org/

Western Sahara Support Group

In 1999, a group of people in Manchester hosted, in collaboration with Woodcraft Folk, a visit by children from the camps. The bonds of friendship that were formed soon led to further visits, and in 2008, five adults and five children who had hosted the Saharawi visitors in Manchester travelled to the camps. Contacts between the two groups continued in the following years, with the Manchester-based group raising both funds for the camps and awareness in the UK of the situation in Western Sahara.

A young Saharawi woman, who had been an early visitor to Manchester, proposed a vegetable-growing project in the camps: in spite of the extremely arid conditions, with wells for irrigation and with polytunnels to provide protection from the wind, it had been demonstrated that some market gardening would be possible. Fundraising work began, leading to the Western Sahara Support Group being formally established in 2018 and registered as a charity in 2020. With many children suffering from malnutrition, the vegetable plots now provide a much-needed addition to the limited diets provided by the food aid on which the camps depend.

https://growhopesahrawi.org.uk/

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Notes

[i] Reported in **Seddon** (p 100). For a fuller picture of military aid and sales to Morocco during the war years and beyond, see **Zunes and Mundy** (pp 16-20 and pp 43-48).

[ii] **Seddon**, pp 101-102.

[iii] **Zunes and Mundy** (p 18).

[vii] **Lippert**, p 152.

[viii] A League of Red Cross Societies' representative described the refugees as "the most unusual refugees he had known" because of their willingness to share and help each other (**Lippert**, p 153) while George Houser, an American activist for African rights commented that he "found it impossible to think of them as refugees" (**Zunes and Mundy**, p 113).

[ix] **Firebrace**, pp 167-185.

[x] **Zunes and Mundy** pp 145,146, and **Smith T**,

[xi] **Zunes and Mundy**, pp 183-188

[xii] For a more detailed account of the development of support in the UK, see **Ritchie** (downloadable from https://www.westernsaharacampaignuk.com/about-us). The early papers of the Western Sahara Campaign, including reports from partner organisations, are archived at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London.

[xiii] See **Zunes and Mundy**, p 214 for an analysis of the numbers applying to vote in the proposed referendum.

[xiv] Ibid p 251.

[xv] **Hagen and Pfeifer**, pp 23 and 42

[xvi] Western Sahara Resource Watch publishes regular reports on Morocco's exploitation of Western Sahara's resources. All reports can be found on their website: https://wsrw.org/en

[xvii] Western Sahara Resource Watch, *The hunt for oil and gas*, 2024, downloaded from https://wsrw.org/en/news/the-hunt-for-oil-and-gas

[xviii] **Smith J**, pp 128-146.

[xix] **Hodges**, p 224.

[xx] AEPDIRI (Spanish Association of Professors of International Law and International Relations): the AEPDIRI 'Statement on Western Sahara and International Law' can be downloaded from: https://www.aepdiri.org/index.php/actividades-aepdiri/declaracion-sahara#

[xxi] Downloaded from https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=29772

[xxii] African Initiative, a Russian-based website, posted several articles during 2025 on the growth and prospects for Morocco-Russian trade. In September 2025 it reported on a telephone meeting between the Foreign Ministers of the two countries which had taken place at Morocco's request: https://afrinz.ru/en/2025/09/lavrov-and-moroccan-foreign-minister-discuss-strengthening-bilateral-ties/

[xxiii] Reported in: https://barlamantoday.com/2025/08/26/le-mondes-fixation-on-moroccos-monarchy-a-failed-attempt-to-destabilize-king-mohammed-vis-reign/.

[xxiv] Bolton refuted claims that Polisario had terrorist links in a Washington Times article on 28 May 2025. In an interview in August 2025, he dismissed Morocco's allegations as "baseless" and argued that denying the Saharawi a referendum was a "glaring injustice" (https://www.spsrasd.info/en/2025/08/14/11329.html)

[xxv] Although Polisario is the political movement of the Saharawi and SADR the state which Polisario has established, the two are so intertwined that they can be regarded as a single body. According to the SADR constitution, "Until the achievement of national sovereignty, the Polisario Front remains the political framework that groups and politically mobilises the Saharawi" and the General Secretary of Polisario is, constitutionally, the head of state of SADR. See **Shelley**, pp 181-185.

[xxvi] The Joint Communique can be downloaded from: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-morocco-joint-communique-strategic-dialogue-2025

El Aauin Refugee Camp, Tindouf Region, Algeria

In 1975, Morocco invaded Western Sahara. Since that time, the Saharawi people have needed to live either under a repressive occupying regime or in refugee camps in the Algerian desert.

This book tells their story – how they have been denied their country and their rights by Morocco, how they have been let down by a UN system that, instead of protecting their rights, has allowed Morocco to profit from its illegal occupation, and how the Saharawi have endured fifty years of exile and occupation without losing their determination to continue their struggle for nationhood.

It is also a book about what needs to be done, particularly by the UK Government, to help find a way towards a just and peaceful settlement of the Western Sahara conflict.

Western Sahara Campaign

https://www.westernsaharacampaignuk.com/