

Morocco's Western Sahara Policy during the reign of Mohammed VI

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Abstract

Disputes over land, territories and boundaries are historically contentious ones which most oftentimes lead to conflicts, clashes and war between two or more territories and it also determines the balance of power and nature of relationship between the disputing parties. History is replete with many instances/examples of territorial conflicts between nations. Therefore, Morocco-Western Sahara conflict is one that has threatened the regional peace, security and balance of power in the Northwestern region of Africa for over five decades since its emergence. There has been several attempts by both parties to the conflict and other international state and non-state actors towards proffering a lasting solution to this dispute. However, like most territorial disputes, there has been failure in finding a lasting solution to the conflict between both sides. With a special reference to Morocco's Western Sahara policy during the reign of King Mohammed VI, this study revealed that the ascension of the new Monarch; Mohammed VI brought about dynamism in Morocco's policy towards this contested territory. Furthermore, in this study, it is also revealed that King Mohammed VI maintained the hardline and assertive approach towards Western Sahara. Just like his predecessor and father: King Hassan II, Mohammed VI views the Western Sahara region as part of the historical Morocco Kingdom. Relying on secondary data/sources obtained from journals and scholarly articles on the subject, this study adopted a historical and narrative approach in reporting its findings, thereby contributing to the teeming body of literature on the subject under discourse.

Keywords: Polisario Front, Ceasefire, Cold war, Referendum, Sovereignty.

Introduction

The Western Sahara is a resource rich territory in the Northwest of Africa which bears historical significance to the history of North and Sub-Saharan Africa. The indigenous people who inhabit this region are known as the Sahrawi. However, it must be borne in mind that when investigating the history of this region, there are divergent views as to its origin and the national identity of its inhabitants. Dwork (2023) described the history of this region as a nomadic one, with influences from other cultures. Munene (2010) on the other hand regarded the Sahrawi people as a hybrid people or group found mostly in Northwest Africa and the Western Sahara, who have been victims of multiple colonial rules. He further described the area under contention (Western Sahara) as an international anomaly which has suffered from colonial dominance. Furthermore, Munene regarded the Sahrawi as having to struggle with a dual African and Arab identity.

However, Munene asserted that the insistence of the Sahrawi people on their Arab identity was because of the prestige attached to being Arab as a social status. Therefore, this study will examine the evolution of the western Sahara conflict, as well as the disputes over claims to the vast land in this territory, to the point of domination by other neighbouring tribes and dynasties, colonization under the Spanish, and the period of occupation by Morocco and Mauritania in the

1970s which has subsequently precipitated into over four decades of armed and guerilla conflict between the newly formed Polisario Front which declared an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and the Moroccan government which laid claims to territory with evidence of these claims traced to the historical relations and contacts that existed in this region. The Western Sahara which is neatly tucked between Mauritania, Algeria and Morocco, was at the inception of the conflict first contested between Morocco, Mauritania and the Polisario Front. Mauritania reversed its claims to the territory in the late 1970s, thereby the dispute over the land became between Morocco and the Polisario Front until a ceasefire agreement was signed in 1991.

Munene, (2010) believed that for Morocco, the Western Sahara was historically part of its vast kingdom whose influence in that region penetrated pre-colonial Western Sahara, Mauritania, Southwest Algeria, and some parts of Mali. Morocco's claims to the territory can be traced to the period between the 10th and 17th centuries when Morocco and its diverse ruling dynasties exercised a great degree of influence over this region until the period of Spanish colonization, when Morocco was stripped of a large tract of its rightful patrimony.

From the foregoing, this study will fully examine Morocco's Western Sahara policy towards from the point of Spanish departure till date, with special focus on Morocco's Western Sahara policy from 1999 when King Mohammed VI ascended the throne till date. The study will further reveal the noticeable shift in Morocco's foreign policy in recent years, with a more open approach towards its Sub-Saharan African neighbours, as well as the forging of new alliances with Russia and China. In this new era, countries that don't share the same views with Morocco on its Western Sahara policy nonetheless relate with Morocco on other fronts such as trade, agriculture, foreign investment, partnership, etc.

Tracing the origin of the Western Sahara and its People

As earlier stated, the inhabitant of the Western Sahara indigenous population were described as a hybrid people (Munene, 2010). However, the African in them is revealed in their music and religion. Most group in this region trace their origin to a founding Patriarchy or Holy man. The people are predominantly nomadic, whose primary loyalty was to the *qabila or Clan*, they survived by engaging in raids/ghazi of their neighbouring clans and tribes in order to acquire livestock. The hybridized language in this region/territory is regarded as *Hussaniya* which is an incorporation of Arabic, Berber and Spanish culture.

Therefore, it may prove problematic in trying to trace or understand the historical origin and national identity of the Sahrawi. The challenge in tracing the ancestry of the Sahrawi will come from distinguishing those of pureblood and those of mixed origins. However, due to incessant instability and waves of migration in the region, it is difficult to pinpoint any pureblood inhabitant of the Western Sahara from time immemorial. It is therefore surmise to say that many modern day Sahrawi people are primarily of Arab descent, who equally have mixed blood of the Sub-Saharan Black African nations. The inhabitants were also products of waves of migration of Arab tribes from the East by the end of the middle ages. The admixture of different races is central to

Munene, (2010) further traced the history of the Western Sahara to the introduction of Islam and the Arabic language which has played a pivotal role in understanding the modern history of this

territory. Western Sahara was never a Nation in the modern conception of the term. Despite the arrival of Islam in this region in the 8th century A.D, the region never enjoyed any significant development due to the incessant desertification of the territory. From the 11th to the 19th centuries, Western Sahara served as the link between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, with some Trans-Saharan trade routes traversing the Western Sahara. In understanding the origin of the modern Morocco policy towards Western Sahara, it must be noted that the historical interplay of diverse nationalities and tribal groups that inhabited this region became one of the remote causes of the modern disputes between Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario Front over claims to certain parts of the Western Sahara. Munene, (2010) further asserted that from the time of Spanish colonization in 1884 to 1958 when Spain combined separate districts in this region to form the province of Spanish Sahara, which was a colonial creation. However, Spain was forced to abandon Western Sahara on November 14th, 1975 due to pressures which gave Morocco the opportunity to annex two-third of the Northern Western Sahara in 1976 and the rest of the territory was subjugated in 1979 when Mauritania withdrew from disputes and claims over this territory.

Morocco's Western Sahara Policy before Mohammed VI

Historically, the Western Sahara has been one of Morocco's main foreign policy axes and the means to gain political legitimacy by any government in power. It is bounded by the Atlantic ocean in the West and Northwest, by Morocco in the North, by Algeria (a few miles in the Northeast) and by Mauritania on the east and south. The principal city is Laayoune which was the old colonial capital. The region is rich in sources of potash and iron ore at Agracha, vast phosphate deposits at Bu Craa, southeast Laayoune.

Morocco's control of the Western Sahara during the reign of King Hassan II (1961-1999)

King Hassan II ascended the throne of Morocco on February 26th, 1961. Before ascending the throne, He was named crown Prince in 1957. He came from the Alawi dynasty, and was the eldest son of Sultan Mohammed V. It was during his reign that the Western Sahara conflict started, as well as the sand war and two failed coup attempts against him in 1971 and 1972. His conservative approach to governance and foreign policy was probably one of the reasons why he strengthened his rule over Morocco and the Western Sahara. Throughout his reign, he maintained close diplomatic and political relations with the United States.

According to Britannica (2024), with the support of the United States, it is assumed that Hassan II was able to maintain Morocco's claim to Western Sahara. The United States on the other hand valued his ability to be able to mediate between conflicting parties in the Middle East. The United States and Morocco has maintained a long-standing special relationship and a treaty of friendship since 1787, which is the longest and unbroken peace agreement that the United States has maintained with any country in the world.. Since the beginning of the war in the Western Sahara with the Polisario Front, Morocco have received more than one-fifth of all U.S. aid to Africa, which is up to \$1 billion in military assistance and \$1.3 billion in economic aid. Zunes (1998) asserted that many Scholars and Critics have found the United States' relationship with Morocco problematic due to the fact that the U.S. support for Morocco's invasion and occupation of the Western Sahara legitimizes territorial aggression. The United States was also accused of supporting an autocratic Moroccan monarchy, most especially under the reign of King Hassan II.

Cody (1999) described Hassan II as the Arab World's longest-ruling Monarch, who was famous for having led the 350,000 unarmed Morocco's Green March to the former Spanish Sahara/Western Sahara which he regarded as a desolate territory which was long considered as part of the Alawite domain. This disputing claim over the territory has been considered the cause of the long war with the Polisario Front who sought to form an independent Sahrawi Nation. This dispute has not been settled ever since then, with Morocco refusing a call for referendum. This was the situation of the Moroccan conflict over Western Sahara when Hassan II was succeeded by his son Mohammed VI. The Moroccan policy over Western Sahara during the reign of Mohammed VI will be examined in the latter part of this paper. According to a policy analysis by the Washington Institute for Near East policy (1999), Hassan II was regarded as a leader who understood the requirements of global markets, and Arab-Israeli peacemaking efforts which he was willing to facilitate.

His approach to governance was based on claims to religious and temporal legitimacy and his demand for unquestioned loyalty from his subjects which is sometimes accompanied by brutal repressiveness were in line with the authoritarian political tradition of past Moroccan Sultans. Hassan II was highly sophisticated, urbane and French-educated. He maintained a balance between tradition and modernity, with western political and economic support. In 1998, a year before his death, King Hassan II appointed Abd al-Rahman Yousouffi as Prime Minister who was a long-time political opponent of the King. This served to achieve his goal of maintaining stability and equally forging a broad political consensus. This alternation of power in Hassan II's view was seen as a way to broaden the base of public support for the existing order and also maintain stability.

Lloret (2022) stated that it was after the 1975 Green March did Morocco and Mauritania militarily occupied the Western Sahara, with Morocco occupying the northern part, while Mauritania occupied the Southern territory. Morocco's and Mauritania's claims to the Western Sahara were established after Spain withdrew from the region in February, 1976. After Spain's exit, an armed conflict ensued between the newly formed Polisario Front which was a militant group that demanded for an independent Sahrawi Republic against Morocco's and Mauritania's claims to the territory. In 1979, Mauritania renounced its claims to Western Sahara and withdrew from the Southern part of the territory which subsequently became occupied by Morocco.

Therefore, from 1975 when the armed conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front commenced till today, Morocco has occupied over eighty percent of the 266,000 sq. km of Western Sahara's land. The Polisario Front on the other hand controls the unoccupied parts of the territory which is on the other side of the military fortified sand walls built by Morocco. The area controlled by the Polisario Front was formerly a Spanish colony, a deserted area and a very small population spread over a cluster of villages scattered across the area. In Morocco's over 47 years of occupation of this region, Morocco has moved hundreds of thousands of Moroccan settlers to this occupied area in order to exploit its natural resources and wealth such as; fishing, phosphate, agriculture, oil exploration, etc. However, Morocco's occupation of this territory has led to cases of massive violation of the human rights of the Sahrawi people who are the indigenous occupants living in the occupied territories. At the same time, a large part of Sahrawi people are in exile in Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria, due to the exodus caused by Morocco's indiscriminate violence against the Sahrawi people.

Zunes (1998) described the Western Sahara standoff as the greatest challenge to cooperation between the countries of northwestern Africa/Maghreb and it has equally led to a source of dichotomy and perpetual conflict between Morocco and its neighbouring states of Algeria and Mauritania. It was the ceasefire agreement between Morocco and the Polisario Front in 1991 that led to a cessation of hostilities under the framework of a UN Peace Plan for a referendum on self-determination. In this referendum, the Sahrawi people were to vote either for independence for Western Sahara as a new state or as an autonomous territory which is however integrated into Morocco and also exist as a vassal of Morocco. Ever since then, this referendum despite the deployment of the UN Mission for the referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), has not taken place due to Morocco's opposition. Morocco's stance since the 1990s has been that a solution to the conflict can only be found in its own implementation of a proposal of autonomy for Western Sahara. This proposal will make formal and validate Morocco's annexation of the territory without the need for a referendum. This regular pattern is observable in historical territorial conflicts between two or more states, in which the victorious superior state see the weaker state or territory as an extension of its sphere of influence.

Rubin (2015) regarded the Western Sahara and Morocco as the only oases of security and stability in a region which is teetering on the brink of failure. This accounts for why the Western Sahara is of supreme importance in international relations and the regional balance of power in North Africa. In this view, it is believed that when confronted between a choice of choosing a strengthened partnership with Morocco and empowering the Polisario Front, which declared itself a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the choice of Morocco stands as the best option to deny the terrorists, Islamists and criminal gangs which increasingly plague many parts of North Africa and the Maghreb an access to the territory and its resources. Morocco's control over the region is thereby viewed in many Western circles as the best hope for the Sahrawi people to flourish culturally and economically. Similarly, Rubin posited that in the face of conflicting accounts on the national identity of the Sahrawi people, it was far more accurate to recognize Sahrawi as part of the diversity that had always marked the Moroccan national identity. In his summation, he viewed the subject of the Sahrawi nationalism as largely an artificial cold war construct.

The repossession of the Western Sahara have been part of Morocco's core foreign policy agenda since its independence. In 1963, Morocco pushed the United Nations to formally designate the Western Sahara to be a non-self-governing territory. In 1974, Morocco sought an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling to validate its claims to the Western Sahara. However, in October, 1975, the ICJ rejected Morocco's territorial claims, recognizing the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination. From close study, Morocco's claims to the Western Sahara were supported by overwhelming evidences, as well as legal ties between the Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco.

Therefore, the abundant historical evidence suggested that Morocco's claims could not be disputed. The issue was however complicated when in the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of the Western Sahara was entangled in the cold war antics. Morocco became a close ally of the West and the United States during the cold war, while the Polisario Front, its Algerian and Cuban backers were aligned with the Soviet Union. Therefore, the entanglement of the Western Sahara issue in the cold war rhetoric and ideological war served to exacerbate the armed conflict and guerilla warfare that occurred between Morocco and the Polisario Front for about two decades

until the ceasefire agreement of 1991. It was after the ICJ's ruling which rejected Morocco's claims to the Western Sahara in 1975 did 350,000 Moroccans organized the famous Green March. (Rubin, Michael, 2015).

It was not until the late 1950s did Morocco started to contest the Western Sahara land. During the period of Spanish colonization of the Western Sahara and the French colonization of Morocco, Morocco never contested the land of Western Sahara, until the following year after its independence. Before and after its independence, Morocco benefitted immensely from its association with the United States. In this regard, Erik (2012) stated that part of the benefits Morocco enjoyed from its association with the United States is in the Madrid agreement and the Green March into the Spanish colony of Western Sahara which was led by King Hassan II, whilst the Security Council chose not to act decisively in stopping Morocco from its occupation and incursion into the Western Sahara. Similarly, in the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of the Western Sahara was paid little or no attention, and was relegated to an African infighting problem, thereby making it marginal to global concern. The continuity of the cold war in this period gave the United Nations little or no opportunity to intervene in ending the conflict. This fuelled the continuity of the conflict for fifteen years, with the Polisario front enjoying support from the Soviet Union as an anti-colonial movement, while Morocco enjoyed backing from the United States.

Conflicts between Morocco and the Polisario Front, 1975-1999

Pabst, (1999) linked the history of the Western Sahara to three phenomenon and development common to Africa, which are; the drawing of artificial borders in Africa by foreign European powers, clandestine agreements and treaties between colonial and regional powers without due consultation with the indigenous or local population of the territory and the sudden exit of the long-existing colonial power. The exit of Spain from the Western Sahara in his view sparked the outbreak of conflicts and hostilities between Morocco and the contending parties to the Western Sahara territory (Mauritania, Morocco and the Polisario Front). However, the history of the conflict over the Western Sahara was traced to as early as 1957/1958 when Western Saharan and Moroccan Irregulars attacked Spanish colonial troops in what was then Spanish Sahara. It was on March 20th, 1973 that the Polisario front first launched a guerilla war against the Spanish administration, and then against Morocco and Mauritania.

Therefore, from 1975-1978, Pabst, (1999) stated that the Polisario front launched a guerilla war against Morocco, while Morocco retaliated in many ways in suppressing the insurgent group. This escalated the conflicts and tensions between both sides. Following the declaration of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic by the Polisario Front on 26th February, 1976 near Bir Lahou, this was as a result of the Spanish abandonment of Villa Cisneros (Dakhla) in January, 1976. The Polisario's provisional capital was located at Guelta Zammour which reportedly sheltered about 25,000 Sahrawi refugees by March, 1976. This refugee camp and other ones such as the Polisario's rear base near Algeria and Tindouf suffered heavy bombardment from the Moroccan side.

According to Seddon, (1987) it was tafter the Rabat agreement between Morocco and Mauritania, which unequally divided the Western Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania, this gave the Moroccan side an opportunity to launch a major assault on Guelta Zammour which lasted for five days and ended with the defeat of the Polisario Front's stronghold. The Polisario

Front after realizing its inability to match and defeat the Moroccan stronghold began to launch the strategy of guerilla warfare in the desert. However, given the greater strength of the Moroccan side, the Polisario Front focused their attacks on the Mauritania side, with the Polisario launching continuous raids deep into the Mauritanian territory. From 1976 to 1977, the Polisario attacks were effective and at a point reached near the outskirts of Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital, enabling the Polisario Front to shell the Presidential palace, attack mining centres near Zouerate in May, 1977 and on the railway between the mines and the Atlantic port Nouadhibou, which threatened to bring the iron mining industry to a halt.

Seddon, (1987) further believed that it was the Franco-Mauritanian agreement which was signed in September, 1976, and whose scope was widened in January, 1977, which enabled the French to interfere in this conflict thereby allowing French military Personnel to be sent to Mauritania. Therefore, from December 1976 to 1978, the French who were based in Kakar launched heavy bombardment against the Polisario Forces which led to the besieging of many bases where the Polisario Front settled in. The French also assisted the Moroccan side in the form of providing jet strike aircraft and anti-aircraft missile system which were designed to counter any possible Algerian military involvement. This was so because Algeria was sympathetic to the Polisario cause and supported the Polisario from the onset. However, Algeria with over 200 combat planes based at Tindouf refused to intervene militarily in the conflict, perhaps, due to strategic reasons. With a weakened Polisario Front due to heavy bombardment from both the French and Moroccan side, their daylight raids was reduced, however, the offensive against Mauritania continued nonstop.

Seddon, (1987) further remarked that despite receiving military assistance from the United States, as well as Morocco's arms build-up within the occupied territories of the Western Sahara since 1981. However, Morocco remained essentially on the defensive as the Polisario Front went on the offensive. Pabst, (1999) stated that the Polisario Front's attacks and guerilla warfare against Morocco intensified throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, but in the mid-1980s, these attacks diminished when the Moroccan army successfully completed a huge defensive sand-wall with electronic equipment which effectively protected over 90% of the territory from guerilla attacks. In 1988, both parties (Morocco and the Polisario Front) accepted the United Nation's Secretary General's settlement proposal which called for a referendum where the people of Western Sahara will choose between independence and integration into Morocco. Therefore, the United Nations Mission for the referendum in Western Sahara became operational from September, 1991. It was established to monitor a ceasefire and also prepare for a referendum which was initially planned to hold in 1992. However, this referendum has not been held since then, due to many factors which will be highlighted in the concluding parts of this paper.

Joffe, (2010) believes that there are wider concerns that affect the outcome of the Western Sahara issue. First, is the battle for regional supremacy that has long existed between Morocco and Algeria. The relationship between both countries has been a tense one. Moroccan nationalists who resented the French drawing of artificial boundaries which led to the loss of part of Morocco's territory have continuously maintained a claim to Morocco's lost provinces which today form part of Western Algeria. Algeria on the other hand which gained a reputation for its revolutionary war of independence against France from 1954 to 1962 have always believed in the principle of self-determination as the path to legitimate and independent statehood have

always contested Morocco's claims to regional hegemony and leadership. This political and ideological dichotomy between Morocco and Algeria led to the sand war/War of the sands between the two countries in 1963 shortly after Algeria's independence. Therefore, George Joffe summated that the Western Sahara issue over the years has grown to become a paradigm and even metaphor for a wider dispute between Algeria and Morocco over regional hegemony.

Morocco's Western Sahara Policy under King Mohammed VI

Following his ascension to the throne of Morocco in 1999, King Mohammed VI has demonstrated his ability to pivot a new era in Morocco's diplomacy and foreign policy. Messari, (2020) revealed that foreign policy was a key area of interest and dedication for the King. In this new found approach to foreign policy under King Mohammed VI, Morocco has increasingly focused on Africa and equally diversified its relations and dependencies as revealed in its deepening ties with Russia, China and India. This is a marked shift from King Hassan II's long standing friendship and pivot to the West and the United States. There is also an adoption of a more combative and self-confident foreign policy demonstrated in its continuous and unequivocal stance in maintaining Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Although, Africa has always been a key focus of Morocco's foreign policy, as Morocco was a founding member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and has maintained strong links with African States such as; Senegal, Congo, Guinea and Gabon. However, Africa was never the priority scale in Morocco's foreign policy objectives in the first four decades of independence, its priority scale have always been the Arab world, but the ascension of King Mohammed VI saw a new pivot towards Africa, as Africa progressively replaced the Arab world in Morocco's foreign policy objectives under King Mohammed VI.

According to Messari, (2020), King Mohammed VI who inherited the Moroccan throne in 1999, maintains an overarching political authority, and has equally made some steps towards political liberalization. This was revealed in the wake of the Arab spring of 2011 that swept across North Africa and the Arab world, and in which many North African governments were toppled. The King in this period introduced a new constitution that strengthened the office of the Prime Minister and also expanded individual rights, with the King however maintaining his tripartite position as; the arbiter of national decision-making, the head of the military and the Commander of the Faithful which is Morocco's highest religious authority. Successive U.S administrations have viewed Morocco as an important regional security, trade and development partner. Following the 9/11 attack, the historic ties between Morocco and the United States deepened, as the United States sought the cooperation of Arab states in combating terrorism. Thus, the Bush administration in 2004 designated Morocco a major Non-NATO ally.

The 1991 ceasefire deal with the Polisario Front which was spearheaded by the United Nations Security Council through the UN Mission for the Organization of a referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO), sought to offer the Sahrawi people a referendum of self-determination and to also monitor the ceasefire. However, ever since, a successive effort by the United Nations to advance a referendum on self-determination has failed owing to its failure to obtain the backing of Morocco, the Polisario Front and the Security Council. The Security Council has however continued to extend the MINURSO's mandate to observe the 1991 ceasefire.

Furthermore, Messari, (2020) reported that in 2007, King Mohammed VI submitted to the UN a proposal to grant the area autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, as well as the pursuit of the

policies of political decentralization that will empower both Sahrawis and Moroccans. Following this proposal in 2007, the United Nations Security Council called for Morocco and the Polisario Front to engage in negotiations without preconditions and to also find a mutually acceptable political solution. Morocco asserted that it will only accept a solution that guarantees its sovereignty over the whole territory and its negotiations will be on that basis. The Polisario Front on the other hand stated that it will only accept an outcome that gave it the option of referendum and independence. On this basis, talks for a peaceful solution supervised by the United Nations were once again stalled and suspended until 2018/2019 when pressures from the Trump administration added some momentum to the talks and negotiations. In this period, the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Western Sahara; former German President Horst Kohler convened two roundtable discussion sessions involving Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania.

Arieff, (2021) stated that this roundtable marked the first time that officials and representatives from Morocco and the Polisario Front had met since 2012, as well as the first time that Algeria agreed to join the UN-led talks. Following Morocco's encouragement and diplomatic lobbying under King Mohammed VI, Morocco was able to persuade at least 20 countries, mostly African countries to open diplomatic consulates in Western Sahara which was intended to be viewed as a recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over this region by these Countries. The Polisario Front on the other hand challenged Morocco's ability and efforts to conclude trade and natural resources extraction agreements pertaining to goods sourced in the Western Sahara. The Joe Biden administration while reaffirming the United States' and Morocco's longstanding warm relations referred to Morocco as a strategic partner of the United States. Furthermore, the Biden administration has maintained to date, the policy instituted by President Trump of recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Furthermore, Pabst, (1999) remarked that King Mohammed VI demonstrated the new focus of Morocco's foreign policy on Africa in a 2017 speech when he announced that the Arab Maghreb Union was an Organization without a future, and therefore applied for membership in ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), this is to note the south-bound pivot of Morocco's foreign policy. From the mid-1970s till date, the Western Sahara conflict has been the most important issue in Morocco's foreign policy. With King Mohammed VI asserting that Morocco's relationship with Algeria will be restored if Algeria adjust its position on the Western Sahara issue and withdraw its support for the Polisario Front and other separatist movements in Morocco. Morocco's decision to re-join the African Union in 2017 also reflected the decision by Morocco to forge progressive relationship with different African countries regardless of their position on the Western Sahara issue.

Following his historic visit to the Western Sahara territory in 2015, in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Green march, King Mohammed VI conveyed a message to the international community affirming that while the United Nations has failed to bridge the gap between conflicting parties to the conflict, Morocco is determined to implement its autonomy plan as the only workable solution to the Western Sahara conflict, following the failure of the United Nation's proposed resolution and referendum. According to Bennis, (2015), Mohammed VI's visit also served to reveal Morocco's steadfast determination to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty over the Western Sahara. This visit mirrored the King's speech in the previous year (2014) when he maintained the stance that the Western Sahara will remain part of Morocco. In a

2015 statement, the King affirmed Morocco's stance and unquestionable position on the Western Sahara issue;

The Sahara is not an issue for Saharan people only. The Sahara is also an issue for all Moroccans. As I said in an earlier speech: the Sahara is a crucial, existential issue, Not just a question of borders. Morocco will remain in its Sahara, and the Sahara will remain part of Morocco, until the end of time.

The major development projects that will be launched in the Western Sahara following the King's 2015 visit aims to turn the Western Sahara and the northwest Africa region into an economic hub. The large-scale projects were also expected to turn the region into a bridge between Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa, in line with the African policy promoted by Mohammed VI in recent years. This decision to invest in the region came at the wake of accusations against Morocco of exploiting the resources of the Western Sahara. However, when comparing the state of Western Sahara during the time of Spanish colonialism and the present time, it is revealed that the Moroccan government had spent tens of billions of dollars to turn the desert terrain of Western Sahara into a prosperous region. When the Spanish departed from the Western Sahara in 1976, the area lacked many basic amenities and requirements; there were no schools, hospitals, roads and airports.

Bennis, (2015) reported that during the Spanish occupation of the territory, there was little as 600 kilometers of roads in the area, but following the period of Moroccan occupation/sovereignty over the territory, the Moroccan government has built thousands of kilometers of regional national and provincial roads, in addition to the most recent highway that was to be built between Laayoune and Tiznit. Therefore, from this summation, in the past forty years or more, it has been estimated that Morocco had spent at least \$35 billion to build and develop the Western Sahara. This amount invested in the Western Sahara exceeds Morocco's external debts of \$27 billion. Therefore, the Mohammed VI's led government of Morocco has sought to mobilize the Moroccan public opinion and civil society in becoming aware of what is termed the media and diplomatic battle to defend Morocco's territorial integrity.

Suarez, C. A. et al (2015) asserted that regionalization was a core aspect of the institutional reforms initiated by King Mohammed VI upon ascending the throne, with good governance as the major objectives for this. The reforms were hinged on international and domestic pressures on the need to find a lasting solution to the Western Sahara issue. One of the measures adopted since his ascension to the throne was the adoption of the; *Model of Development for the Southern Provinces* and the reconfiguration of the *Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs*. Furthermore, the draft of the regionalization decree initiated by King Mohammed VI's reign established three regions in the Western Sahara territory namely; Region 10 - Guelmim-Oued Noun, Region 11 - Laâyoune-Saguia al Hamra and Region 12 - Ed Dakhla-Oued ed Dahab.

However, it is seen that this regional framework did not correspond with the Western Sahara territory, as Region 11 and 12 coincided with the non-autonomous territory, while Region 10 enters the internationally recognized division of Western Sahara through the Assa-Zag province. This was in stark contrast with the 1997 arrangement under King Hassan II which divided the Western Sahara into three regions; Laayoune-Boujdour-Sakia El Hamra, Oued-Eddaha Lagouira and Guelmim-Es Semara, while Western Saharan provinces such as Smara were included in a Moroccan region. Nevertheless, this regional framework and the degraded level of

decentralization which it achieved in this current state offers little or no opportunity in resolving the Western Saharan conflict, as the organic laws underpinning the regionalization framework has continued to provide the regions with little or no autonomy, as well as the rejection of referendum in order to grant the Sahrawi population the right to self-determination.

In 2012, King Mohammed VI asked the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC) to design a new model for the economic development of the Southern Provinces. This was conceived as a platform where Morocco can consolidate its position on the Western Saharan issue, and to also initiate the Advanced Regionalization in Western Sahara as the unique and possible solution to the territorial dispute. ESEC's report will also facilitate the implementation of the autonomy plan for Western Sahara. This reflects Morocco's desire under Mohammed VI to implement a solution to the Western Saharan conflict that is separate from the United Nations resolutions. In a 2021 Aljazeera report on Mohammed VI's speech at the 46th Anniversary of the Green March, the King reaffirmed Morocco's stance on Western Sahara by stating: *Today, as in the past, Moroccan Sovereignty over Western Sahara will never be up for negotiation.* This statement was made at a time when tensions between Morocco, the Polisario front and Algeria flared up from 2021 over the disputed territory.

For King Mohammed VI, the only negotiations Morocco will engage in with the other disputants (Algeria and Polisario Front) is one that was lead to peaceful solution to what he regarded as an artificial regional conflict. Over the years, there has been back and forth between both sides over violations and adherence to the 1991 ceasefire agreement that was signed under the supervision of the United Nations. For example, in November 2020, the Polisario Front declared the 1991 ceasefire deal as null and void after Moroccan forces broke up the blockade of a highway into Mauritania which the Front believed was built in violation of the ceasefire. The Polisario Front also launched barrages of attacks on Moroccan forces. This resulted in the escalation of the tensions between Morocco and Algeria when Algeria broke off diplomatic relations with Morocco. Also in 2020, after Morocco normalized diplomatic ties with Israel as part of the U.S-backed Abraham Accords, the administration of the then Donald Trump recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

The recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara in 2020 by the United States served to give Morocco's claims over the territory an air of legitimacy and the major backing of a world power. This is so because in previous years before 2020, the United States had recognized neither Morocco's claims, nor that of the self-declared government led by the Polisario Front which seeks for independence. But it has always been considered by many U.S officials that Morocco's proposal of autonomy over the Western Sahara was credible, realistic and serious. For the leadership of the Sahrawi Republic, he affirmed in a 2020 social media post that there will be no new ceasefire as long as Morocco remained resolute in its attempts to forcibly impose what he called a colonial fait accompli in the occupied Western Sahara.

Challenges to a solution for the Moroccan-Western Sahara Conflict

Sola-Martin, (2009) noted that since the start of this conflict in the 1970s, there have been various efforts at settling the disputes amicably amongst all parties concerned. However, despite all these attempts, there have been deadlocks in reaching a solution. For example, in 1988, Morocco and the Polisario Front signed the Settlement Proposals under the auspices of the then UN Secretary General; General Perez de Cuellar, which led to the deployment of a peacekeeping

mission to supervise the ceasefire between both parties, and to also facilitate the organization of the referendum. Disagreements however ensued in relations to the voter's list/who is entitled to vote, as well as Morocco's unwillingness to go ahead with any revised version of the UN peace plan which involves a referendum, with an option for independence.

Mohsen-Finan, (2006) believes that one major challenge and obstacle to forging a workable solution to the Western Saharan conflict is the reticence on both sides (Morocco and Polisario Front) in maintaining their positions on their own proposed solutions to the conflict. As noted earlier, King Mohammed VI in a 2015 speech celebrating the anniversary of the 1975 Green March affirmed that Morocco can only accept a solution that ensures the Western Sahara gets autonomy, howbeit under Morocco's sovereignty. The King further reiterated the fact that the Western Saharan is historically a part of Moroccan territory and must be seen as such. Therefore, Morocco has continuously encouraged countries in the world to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the territory.

The Polisario Front and the Algerian Government on the other hand have maintained the stance that the only acceptable solution to the conflict is if there is a referendum with an option of self-determination and independence for the Sahrawi people. Therefore, these seeming divergent positions by both parties to the conflict has served to stall the conflict and lead to a deadlock in the negotiations over the years. From the framework of this analysis, Morocco has continuously obliged to seek a solution to what it regards directly or indirectly as an unresolved conflict. For example, as mentioned earlier, in 2007, Morocco proposed a plan to resolve the conflict by proposing extensive autonomy for the Western Sahara, without specifying what this autonomy will entail.

The Istiqlal Party on the other hand do not accept the solution of the Moroccan Monarchy, the Party contests the principle of autonomy and prefers a move towards regionalization in which the Sahrawi people would be included. Other political groups in Morocco such as Alliance et liberte (Alliance and Freedom) believes that the search for a solution to the Western Saharan issue will open up the political situation in Morocco. The younger generation in Laayoun and Smara believe that the Western Sahara people have the right to choose their own destiny. The divergent political views and opinions on the Western Saharan issue within Morocco and the region itself have served to postpone the search for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. With the strengthened relationship between the United States and Morocco under the reign of Mohammed VI, many people in the Maghreb hopes that the U.S' new interest in the region may help in finding a lasting solution to a conflict that the people in the region are tired of.

Boukhars, (2013) regarded the dispute over the Western Sahara as one of the most complex conflicts in recent times. This is so because after over 38 years of war and diplomacy, both parties have not reached, neither are they close to reaching a mutually-satisfactory settlement. Boukhars further suggested that understanding the various dimensions of the Western Sahara conflict and the political challenges that hinder its resolution is paramount to reaching a solution. Javier Perez de Cuellar who was the architect of the MINURSO and the fifth UN Secretary General admitted in his memoirs that the only realistic solution to the Western Saharan conflict was for the territory to be integrated as an autonomous structure within Morocco. Despite all the western and international support, Morocco has found it challenging to win the support of the Sahrawi people who are resolute on a referendum that grants them independence, self-

determination and self-governance. Due to the failure of the Moroccan investment of about \$3 billion which provided critical infrastructure, it has not yet fostered sustainable development. From 2005, the Polisario Front used reports about human rights violations in the territory to win international support and also strengthen its case for independence.

Furthermore, Boukhars, (2013) described the dispute as a “frozen conflict”, and decolonization’s last stand, and despite the multiple ceasefires to the conflict throughout its history, the Western Sahara conflict has not been fully resolved till date. After over 50 years of fighting for independence by the Polisario Front mostly through arms and guerilla warfare, the conflict has lingered with no solution in sight. However, it was Morocco’s repressive response to the Sahrawi protest in 2020 that led to a disruption of the ceasefire and resumption of fighting by the Polisario Front which has revived an age long conflict that had gone into a comatose state for a long time. In the year 2000, through the United Nation’s efforts in finding a permanent resolution to the conflict, the *Baker I* plan was initiated by the UN Special Envoy to the conflict; James Baker which offered an option for Western Sahara to be an autonomous state within the Moroccan jurisdiction. The Sahrawi government would have control over all of its policies except defence and foreign policy. However, this plan was rejected by the Polisario Front. Similarly, in 2003, the United States Government proposed the *Baker II* plan which sought to turn Western Sahara into a fully self-governing territory. Morocco equally rejected the Baker II plan, while the Polisario Front accepted it as a basis for negotiation.

In 2007 and 2008, rounds of discussions opened again in New York, during the Manhasset negotiations. However, these discussions led to a stalemate as Morocco advocated for autonomy for the Western Sahara, while the Polisario Front favoured full independence. Symeonidis, (2024) asserted that Algeria is the key regional factor that contributes to the continued resistance of the Polisario Front to full annexation by Morocco. With the Algerian city of Tindouf been the birthplace of the Polisario Front and from whence the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was declared in 1976, Algeria have served as the closest ally to the Polisario Front over the years, a position which the Moroccan government utterly resent. Algeria has equally rejected Morocco’s territorial claims over Western Sahara, which led to the severing of diplomatic ties with Morocco recently in 2021. Algeria supported the Polisario Front militarily in the 1980s and 1990s with tanks and arms. This therefore suggests that Algeria has played a critical role in this conflict. These roles are dual; on the one hand, Algeria’s involvement will provide a safe haven for a group demanding for self-determination and territorial sovereignty, and on the other hand, Algeria’s support for the Polisario Front will fuel the continuity of the conflict, rather than help in finding a peaceful resolution.

Over the years, it can be observed that the obstacles to finding a peaceful solution to the Morocco-Western Sahara conflict come from many fronts. The Istiqlal party and other political groups or movements within Morocco have different positions as regards solution to the conflict. Second, the failure of both parties; Morocco and the Polisario Front to reach a consensus decision and agreement that will bring lasting peace. Both sides have divergent positions which they have sought to maintain over the years without comprising on their stands. While Morocco seeks to establish and legitimize its sovereignty over the Western Sahara, the Polisario Front on the other hand wants an independent and self-governing territory. Lastly, the involvement of international actors in this conflict such as; The United States, France, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Spain, ESEC, the United Nations, etc. have served to further elongate the conflict, as

all the resolutions and proposals recommended by external actors to this conflict have proven unworkable, thereby making the conflict to remain persistent.

Conclusion

Conflicts over boundaries and territorial integrity in history have proven to be long-existing and persisting for over a long period of time. This paper therefore understudied the Western Sahara and the conflicts that have emerged in this disputed territory ever since the late 1950s which has threatened regional stability. With a special focus on Morocco's Western Sahara Policy under king Mohammed VI, it is seen that although Mohammed VI approached Morocco's foreign policy following his ascension to throne with dynamism which was reflected in his openness to reforms and adoption of new approaches in resolving the over five decades conflict, his reign is still characterized by the hardline Moroccan approach to the Western Sahara issue. Just like his Predecessor (King Hassan II), Mohammed VI still viewed the Western Sahara as historically part of Morocco. This affirmation to Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory has been reiterated by the King in speeches and statements regarding the status of Western Sahara. Under his reign, the Western Sahara issue remains unresolved, the referendum which was meant to have been held since 1991 has not been held. There has been a back and forth between both sides towards winning international support for their cause. This study concluded by examining some of the major obstacles and challenges that had served to impede a peaceful resolution to the Morocco-Western Sahara conflict.

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