Former US Secretary of State Baker presses for deal on Western Sahara

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Former United States Secretary of State James Baker has returned to negotiations over the future of Western Sahara. The territory has been the scene of a 25-year conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front, (an acronym for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro).

Baker has acted as the personal envoy of United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan for Western Sahara for the past four years. He took time out from the negotiations to go to Florida to campaign for George W. Bush. Baker's closeness to the US administration underlines the importance Western governments place on imposing a settlement between the warring parties.

The proposal advanced by Baker is that Morocco relinquishes some control over the Western Sahara, in return for Polisario giving up their demand for independence and accepting some form of devolution. In a recent statement Annan indicated that the proposal had UN backing, a shift from its previous policy—never seriously implemented—of holding a referendum over the future of the region. The UN has had a peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara since a cessation of military conflict was negotiated in 1991.

The Polisario Front, the military wing of the Saharwi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), was founded to fight the Spanish colonial rulers of Western Sahara in 1973. It is based in neighbouring Algeria, where an estimated 165,000 Saharwis are housed in four camps of mud-brick and canvas. Many have been living in these camps for the past 25 years since Morocco marched into Western Sahara and proclaimed its sovereignty, sparking 16 years of fighting. Conditions in the camps are described as some of the harshest in the world, with temperatures reaching 50 degrees centigrade in the summer. Water has to be brought in by tankers.

Western Sahara, an area larger than Britain, is mainly desert with a population of about 245,000 concentrated in a few towns. It is defended against the Polisario by tens of thousands of Moroccan troops behind a defensive wall of sand, about 1,500 miles long. Protected by razor wire, minefields and forts, the military effort is said to cost Morocco $1m a day. The area is rich in minerals, particularly phosphates—a major source of income for Morocco—and contains oil reserves.

James Baker's concern is to stop a possible re-emergence of fighting as Polisario leaders recently announced they intend to abandon the ceasefire. Morocco's stability is of key importance to the US, not only for its mineral wealth but as a major supporter of American interests in the Middle East.

Military conflict in Western Sahara could easily ignite social unrest throughout Morocco. Following his father Hassan's death in 1999, King Mohammed was urged to liberalise the despotic rule over Morocco—the poorest country in north Africa with up to 20 percent of the population living on one dollar a day.

The US considers it essential to maintain Morocco as a pillar of support in the Arab world at a point where its efforts to isolate Iraq are coming unstuck. Morocco provides the US Navy with port facilities and gives the Air Force landing and refueling rights. It receives more US aid than any other Arab or African country, apart from Egypt.

France and other European Union governments also want a settlement of the Western Sahara issue, given their economic interests in the region. There have been calls for a resurrection of the Mahgreb Union trade bloc—including Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya—and the promotion of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. There are calls for associate membership of the EU to be extended to both Morocco and Algeria.

Algeria has historically been the main backer of the Polisario, as a part of its own border disputes with Morocco. Algeria's president Abdelaziz Bouteflika is under pressure from the West to end the civil war with Islamic opposition groups in the country and restore the stability necessary for inward investment and exploitation of Algeria's resources, including huge oil reserves. It has also been pressured to resolve its differences with Morocco.

Polisario's decision to abandon the ceasefire came in January this year, when the Paris-Dakar motor rally was routed through Western Sahara without consultation with

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Polisario or SADR officials. On learning of the intended route, and the armed guard that would accompany the rally, Polisario declared it considered the decision an aggressive act and announced it would resume hostilities.

Polisario troops were put on alert, hospitals and barracks were evacuated, and hostilities seemed likely. At the eleventh hour, however, officials called off the war-footing citing an appeal from the Organisation of African Unity, the US and Algeria. Polisario stated that it still considered the cease-fire “null and void” however.

It is likely that the Polisario leaders' response is designed to deflect pressure from the refugees who know that the referendum process, held out as a way forward for the last decade, is a dead-end. Commentators point out that a return to war is unlikely as it would not receive support from Algeria or from the European NGO's on whose aid the refugee camps are dependent.

The issue of a referendum, initially proposed by the Spanish in 1973, has been the subject of a long drawn out dispute over who should have voting rights. In 1991 the UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara—known by the French acronym MINURSO—was established as a short-term mission. Since then it has had numerous extensions, the most recent being that announced last month by Annan. MINURSO was designed to give a pretence of Western concern over the sovereignty of Western Sahara, especially at the time that the supposed defence of Kuwait's national sovereignty was used as the pretext for war against Iraq. In truth there was never any real intention of challenging Morocco's domination. The UN was supposed to supervise the procedure to ascertain who is eligible to vote in the referendum (i.e. who can claim to be of Saharwi origin), but colluded instead with Morocco's use of one delaying tactic after another and turned a blind eye to the intimidation of the Saharwi population.

Throughout the Cold War, the US and Western governments made ritual condemnations of Morocco's occupation of the region but continued to back the brutal regime of King Hassan. The concern was that Polisario, who were receiving direct support from Algeria and Libya and were recognised by some 70 nations worldwide, should not become a base for Soviet intervention. Articulating these concerns US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger declared that the “The United States will not allow another Angola on the east flank of the Atlantic Ocean”.

In the 1970s and 80s, thousands of Saharwi were incarcerated in the prisons and torture chambers of the Hassan regime. The issue of the “disappeared”—the hundreds of prisoners killed—remains contentious. Despite the limited lifting of restrictions on opponents under King Mohammed, Amnesty International report continued arrests and harassment of human rights protesters by the regime's numerous security forces.

Continued Western support of the Moroccan regime is typified by the case of Britain. It came to light recently, following a slip by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook at a parliamentary Select Committee meeting, that Britain has refurbished 30 105mm cannons for the Moroccan regime. In June 1999, after being given the nod by the UN, Britain secretly undertook the £3.5 million contract to supply parts for these cannons, which are situated on the ‘defensive wall' in Western Sahara. This action was in direct violation of European Union guidelines and of the Labour government's so called “ethical foreign policy”.

Britain does not officially recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, and last year the Foreign Office claimed that it was not aware of any UK arms being used in the region. Labour's cynicism is apparent also in that, at the same time it was fulfilling the arms contract, the government was funding the building of food warehouses for the Saharwi refugees encamped in neighbouring Algeria.

SADR and Polisario leaders are publicly stating their opposition to Baker's devolution proposals. Clearly there will be huge opposition from the Saharwi people to accepting the oppressive rule of Morocco, even if it is dressed up as “autonomy.” Nevertheless such a climbdown can be the only outcome of the strategy Polisario has followed. It accepted the UN referendum process as a face-saving measure in 1991 having followed the lead of the PLO, ANC and other national independence movements in abandoning the armed struggle in return for a rapprochement with the imperialist powers.

Not only was the possibility of establishing a viable nation state in the Sahara revealed as a tragic illusion, but Algeria, Libya and other countries made it clear they would no longer support military action following the end of the Cold War and the possible loss of Soviet backing. Libya withdrew its backing for Polisario following a deal signed between Morocco and Colonel Ghaddafi in the mid 1980s.

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