

Imag(in)ing the Geopolitics of the Western Sahara conflict

By Jacob Mundy

It is difficult to look at Simon Brann Thorpe's *Toy Soldiers* and not dwell on the powerful metaphor these photographs literally play with. Fighters in the Western Saharan liberation movement have become playthings. But whose toys are they, and what is the game being played?

Western Saharan nationalists — like those captured in Simon's images — have been struggling for independence for over four decades, only to find that they have been caught up in a larger set of historically evolving games. Morocco, which took Western Sahara from Spain in 1975, has been backed in its contested acquisition of the territory by powerful allies on the UN Security Council — France and the United States. Morocco, by virtue of geography and innumerable historical contingencies, is likewise a piece in a larger game. From the Cold War to the Global War on Terror to the Arab Spring, Morocco has been a key vehicle for North Atlantic interests. It is this simple logic — the enemy of my friend is my enemy — that puts Western Saharan nationalism at a disadvantage and thus keeps the conflict stuck in a permanent stalemate.

Western Saharan nationalists have otherwise gone out of their way to be good international citizens. Unlike other armed liberation movements in Africa and the Middle East, the Western Saharan nationalists never adhered to radical ideologies like Maoism during the Cold War; they have denounced terrorism in all its forms and never engaged in it; their constitution calls for the creation of a secular, democratic, multi-party, free market republic after independence; and they have, since the 1990s, largely embraced international diplomacy, transnational solidarity, and nonviolent civil disobedience as the primary means through which they will achieve national self-determination. Their government in exile has been a member of the African Union since 1984, has been recognized by dozens of other states, and has signed international treaties and covenants. That they maintain a standing army, as the photos in this collection document, serves as a reminder to Morocco and, more importantly, the international community that the final status of Western Sahara has yet to be settled. Western Sahara has not witnessed war since 1991 but there is still no peace.

Indeed, the United Nations arrived in 1991 to deliver peace to Western Sahara by organizing a referendum on independence. Western Sahara's unique status as an internationally recognised non-self-governing territory — that is, Africa's last colony — adds further legitimacy to the Sahrawi struggle for national self-determination. Two decades later, the United Nations is still there but there are fewer and fewer signs that a vote will ever be held. The inability of the United Nations to organise a vote is not simply the result of

Rabat's unwillingness to see a referendum result in any other outcome but a popular affirmation of Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara. It has in fact been France and the United States who have proven just as complicit. In so far as Western Saharan nationalism poses a threat to Morocco's claim over Western Sahara, Paris and Washington have implicitly understood Western Saharan nationalism to pose a threat to their interests in Morocco. Though Polisario has gone out of its way to reassure the international community of its commitment to peaceful and cooperative relations with Morocco after independence, the wishes of 300,000 Sahrawis pale in comparison to the demands of the Moroccan state and the geopolitical forces that keep the conflict frozen. Meanwhile, Algeria, which has been Polisario's most important backer, is often accused of cynically supporting Western Saharan nationalism simply to antagonise Morocco, its regional rival. Western Saharan nationalists are well aware of the invisible and not-so invisible hands that keep their dreams of independence deferred and their people divided, with over 100,000 living as refugees in Algeria since 1975. They have, after all, been pawns in larger political games since the late 1800s.

'Terra nullius'

Spain hastily planted its flag on the Sahara desert's Atlantic coast in 1884. By then, Europe's scramble for Africa was well underway. France and Great Britain had divvied up spheres of influence in northern and western Africa. Spain was a latecomer to the party, one weakened by an extraordinary decline in imperial strength in the nineteenth century. Spanish interest in the Saharan coast was largely as a security buffer for the Canary Islands, one that would protect Spanish fishing interests as well. Imperial nostalgia, though, played a part. Some of Spain's late nineteenth century colonial adventurers believed they were re-conquering lands Spain had briefly held in the glorious times of the fifteenth century.

A Hispano-French protectorate over Morocco was formalised in 1912. To the south of Morocco (as France and Spain recognised it) was a "zone of free occupation," a colonial euphemism for a land without a clear sovereign power over it. The people who inhabited it were mostly nomadic pastoralists, as well as some who eked out a living from the sea. Islam had arrived in the desert centuries before. Along with it, so had a new language and a new socio-political imagination, transforming these Imazighen ("Berbers") into the Arabs of the westernmost Sahara desert, the "Moors." Historical accounts, particularly those of European and American sailors shipwrecked along the coast, suggest that the people of Spanish Sahara were largely indifferent to, or ignorant of, the grand schemes of the great powers, whether the kings of Morocco, the empires of West Africa, or those of Europe. European cartography reflected this fact, as the areas in and around Western Sahara were rarely allotted to any

single internationally recognised authority. In 1975, the International Court of Justice recognised this fact, stating unambiguously that Western Sahara, in 1885, simply belonged to the Western Saharans.

Río de Oro was the first of many names given to Western Sahara throughout its career as a Spanish colony. Directly to the north was a relatively small Spanish protectorate in southern Morocco. The border between the Spanish colony in Western Sahara and the Spanish protectorate in Southern Morocco was, as with imperial geography generally, arbitrary. It was most of all an ambiguous transitional area between Sahrawis who sometimes recognised the sovereignty of the Moroccan monarchs and those that did so rarely, if ever. And it is for this reason — the large population of ethnic Sahrawis in southern Morocco — that one must distinguish between native Western Saharans (who are all ethnically Sahrawis) and Sahrawis generally. What unites the Sahrawis is affiliation to a social group (“tribe”) largely or entirely located in the territory of Western Sahara. The modern nationalist Sahrawi identity is thus inextricably linked to the colonially forged territory of Western Sahara.

A dying colonialism

Spain’s intrinsic interest in Western Sahara grew substantially when massive phosphate deposits were discovered in the territory after World War II. At the same time, Spain began to face internal Sahrawi pressure and external international pressure to decolonise. The Spanish Sahara was finally included in the official UN list of colonies in the early 1960s, though Madrid, like France in Algeria, insisted that Western Sahara was an overseas province like the Canary Islands. Such legal manoeuvres did little to change minds at the United Nations or among the Sahrawis either.

In 1957, a year after Moroccan independence, an insurgency against colonial authorities in northern Mauritania, Algeria’s southwestern Sahara, and Spanish Sahara was launched. French and Spanish forces brutally repressed it the following year. A younger generation of activists would then take up the mantle of Western Saharan nationalism in the late 1960s. Many of them were refugees from the 1957-58 conflict, having fled Western Sahara for the safety of their Sahrawi kin in southern Morocco. These refugees not only produced key figures in the nationalist movement that would become the Frente POLISARIO, these refugees would also become a pawn in the referendum being organised by the United Nations in the 1990s. And in the 2000s, some of the strongest voices for Sahrawi self-determination claimed origin not in Western Sahara, but in southern Morocco.

As Spain became more invested in its once neglected desert “province”, the growing urban centers of Al-‘Ayun, Smara, and Dakhla began to attract more Sahrawis. Devastating

droughts had accelerated the processes of urbanisation. Schooling provided by colonial authorities ironically resulted in Sahrawis becoming aware of their unique status as the last colony in northern Africa in the late 1960s. Sahrawis who studied abroad or in Moroccan universities learned of the global movement to end colonialism and to unite the third world against Western and Soviet machinations. Out of this milieu was born the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO or, hereafter, Polisario) in 1970.

Three years later, Polisario's first military operation against Spanish authorities was a comedic affair that almost ended in disaster for the fledgling liberation movement. Yet within two years, Polisario had not only claimed the mantle of Sahrawi liberation (the only other contender being a group of elite Sahrawi collaborators with Spain), but had also won support from veterans of the 1957-58 uprising and former Sahrawi elements of the colonial police and military. By 1974, the pressure Polisario exerted on Spain forced colonial authorities to accept independence as inevitable. Madrid hoped that a referendum could result in a vote of "free association" with Spain where the economic and security benefits would continue to flow in Spain's favour.

Madrid, however, was also feeling pressure internationally and regionally. The United Nations had been calling for Western Sahara's independence for years, yet Morocco had also laid claim to Spanish Sahara in 1956. Mauritania followed suit upon its independence in 1960. Morocco had also claimed western Algeria and northern Mali, along with all of Mauritania and Spanish Sahara, as a part of its alleged pre-colonial territory. Morocco even launched a war against Algeria in 1963 in a failed effort to build this idea of "Greater Morocco". But by the early 1970s, Morocco had made peace with all its neighbors and accepted their internationally recognised colonial borders — all but Spanish Sahara.

To assess Moroccan and Mauritanian claims to Western Sahara, the United Nations visited the territory and put the question to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1975. The visit found overwhelming support among the native population for independence. Similarly, the ICJ rejected Moroccan and Mauritanian claims as historically baseless.

Undeterred by these developments, Morocco's King Hassan II pressed ahead with efforts to take the territory from Spain by "peacefully" marching 350,000 Moroccan civilians to reclaim their rightful land. Behind this gesture stood the Moroccan army, which was ready to intervene if Spain did not comply. Madrid proved unwilling to be dragged into a colonial war that the UN Security Council was unwilling to stop. To advance their interests in the Cold War, Washington and Paris wanted to see Morocco gain Western Sahara. Moreover, Spain's longtime dictator, Franco, fell ill and died in the middle of this crisis, a development that put the Spanish leadership in disarray.

As for the Western Saharans, their interests were not represented in the November 1975 deal that transferred control of the territory from Spain to Morocco and Mauritania. The

simultaneous military invasion and Spanish withdrawal that followed saw nearly half of Western Sahara's indigenous population flee into exile where they remain to this day. Algeria, which saw these developments as an affront to its interests in the region, threw its full weight behind Polisario. Thus began the long war for Western Sahara.

War and war by other means

Following the Algerian model of national liberation, Polisario waged a simultaneous military and diplomatic struggle, realising that the latter was more likely to deliver independence than the former. They first created the structures of a government in exile, one that would represent the Sahrawi people internationally and manage the affairs of the tens of thousands of refugees who would call southwestern Algeria their home for decades to come. At the end of February 1976, the República Árabe Saharaui Democrática (RASD) was born. Algeria and several allies quickly recognised RASD as a sovereign, albeit occupied, state. Over the next decade, dozens of states would follow suit, as well as the African Union, back when it was the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

The early diplomatic successes of the Western Saharan nationalist movement were matched by successes on the battlefield. Despite direct French intervention to protect their mining interests and client regime in Nouakchott, Mauritania was quickly driven out of the conflict and has since maintained good relations with the RASD. With Mauritania's withdrawal from the conflict, Morocco quickly assumed control over the southern third of the territory granted to Mauritania by Spain. This included the important city and fishing port of Dakhla.

By the early 1980s, Polisario had liberated most of Western Sahara from direct Moroccan control. Unable to force Polisario into the open battlefield, Hassan's army was relegated to heavily defended areas around the three major cities and the phosphate mines at Bukra'. What had seemed like Hassan's crowning achievement in 1975 was pushing the Morocco to the brink of collapse. In the streets of Morocco, the negative economic impact of the war had quickly dissolved the national consensus Hassan had enjoyed at the time of the Green March. Consistent French economic and military aid was first augmented by financial assistance from Saudi Arabia in the form of a billion dollars each year during the worst years of the war for Morocco (1979 to 1982). In the United States, the Reagan administration ramped up military aid for Morocco as well. With this assistance, Morocco began to push outward from its safe areas and into the hinterlands where Polisario thrived. By 1987, Morocco had effectively constructed a heavily mined and patrolled wall of sand that ran from southern Morocco (near the Algerian border) to the Atlantic coast near the border with Mauritania. Polisario, once able to strike deep inside southern Morocco, was relegated to attacking only

the wall. Though the tide had clearly shifted in Morocco's favour, a true military victory would require invading Algeria to smash Polisario's safe haven. As this would prompt immediate retaliation from Algiers, the best Rabat could hope for was a grinding war of attrition to wear down Polisario. Polisario had essentially hoped for the same. In this context, diplomacy provided the only way out for both sides.

As the war in Western Sahara reached a stalemate, the UN Secretariat began a diplomatic mission to see if a negotiated agreement could be found. Prior to UN engagement, the OAU had attempted to mediate the dispute until Morocco left the organisation in 1984 to protest RASD's admission. The OAU had proposed a cease fire, a return of the refugees, and an internationally organised referendum on independence. Though Polisario would have preferred to be granted independence outright, a referendum had always been an acceptable solution as well. Polisario has always felt — and continues to believe — that a free and fair referendum polling native Western Saharans would yield a wide margin in favour of independence. It is for this same reason that Morocco has always been reticent to allow an internationally organised plebiscite in Western Sahara without a predetermined outcome. That said, Morocco had agreed, in principle, to the idea of a referendum in the early 1980s. Negotiating and implementing the technical details (e.g., who votes and on what questions) would consume the efforts of the United Nations in Western Sahara throughout the 1990s.

In the euphoria of the post-Cold War world, the task given to the UN mission in Western Sahara seemed simple enough: stop the fighting, monitor troop withdrawals, bring back the refugees, register the voters (i.e., native Western Saharans), hold a vote, and monitor post-conflict transition. What proved to be the most challenging aspect was the process of registering voters, as Morocco and Polisario maintained radically different understandings of what it means to be a native Western Saharans. It took the UN mission roughly five years to create a list of potential voters. As that list was about to be unveiled, history would take another unexpected turn when King Hassan died in the summer of 1999. His son and heir, Mohammed VI, soon rejected the idea of a referendum. The UN Security Council was inclined to agree. A similar referendum on independence in East Timor had ended in total catastrophe when Indonesian forces refused to recognise the outcome and embarked on a rampage against the Timorese. Instead of hoping that it would lead to a negotiated agreement between Polisario and Morocco, the Security Council now pushed for an agreement first, which could be then ratified by a referendum. The problem was that Morocco now rejected the option of independence whereas Polisario demanded it. Though international law backs Polisario's position, Washington and Paris were not going to force an independence referendum on Morocco's young and untested king in the first years of his reign.

At that time, the lead UN negotiator for Western Sahara was former US Secretary of State James Baker. His search for a political solution ended in failure when Morocco rejected his

plan to hold a referendum on independence following a five-year period of interim autonomous self-governance in Western Sahara. Though Morocco endorsed the idea of autonomy as a solution to the conflict, the independence option was still a red line for Morocco. Baker had attempted to sweeten the deal by allowing Moroccan settlers — not just Western Saharans — a vote in the final status referendum. As it is widely believed that Moroccan settlers outnumber native Western Saharans two or three to one, Baker did not think Morocco could reasonably reject this offer. But Rabat did reject it, and Mohammed VI soon received support from France and, eventually, Washington, despite the close ties between Baker and then US President George W. Bush. Unable to find any middle ground, Baker resigned in 2004. Since then, the Western Sahara peace process has been in a death spiral.

The collapse of the peace process can be chalked up to the simple fact that, again, the Western Saharans found themselves on the wrong side of geopolitics. This time it was the Global War on Terror. Morocco has been a close ally of the United States in the fight against Al-Qaida and associated organisations. After September 11, 2001, the US military began to worry that the vast Sahara desert might become a safe haven for terrorist organisations. Indeed, the remnants of Algeria's Islamist insurgency from the 1990s appeared to be operating in the vast ungoverned space of the central Saharan desert. In 2012, these fears came to full fruition when Islamist militant groups seized control of vast swaths of northern Mali, forcing the French government and regional allies to intervene to dislodge the militants. Since the 1970s, Morocco has been asserting that Western Sahara would become a failed state if it was allowed to become independent. Post 9/11, these assertions were worded in the language of weak states and terrorist safe havens. Indeed, the Western Saharan refugees have had to defend themselves from increasing accusations of infiltration by, if not collaboration with, Saharan Jihadi organisations. Though these accusations are baseless and largely founded on crude geographical insulations, it is clear that Washington sees Morocco as a force for stability in an unstable region. Given the widespread instability that has followed the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, taking a risk for peace in Western Sahara is even less likely now than ever before.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Despite the steep geopolitical challenges facing Western Saharan nationalism, the past two decades have witnessed an increasing reliance on nonviolent strategies and tactics, especially from Sahrawis who live under Moroccan administration. Indeed, two months before massive protests would see the fall of Tunisia's longstanding dictator, Western Sahara witnessed the largest protests in the history of the Moroccan occupation. Thousands of Sahrawis attempted to draw attention to their marginalisation by creating an

encampment in the desert outside of Al-'Ayun, in a place called Gdaym Izik. Though some have called the Gdaym Izik protests the first of the Arab Spring, their relation to the events in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond is more correlative than causative. That is to say, Sahrawis in the Moroccan controlled territory were responding, in 2010, to a similar ensemble of economic and political conditions as the protestors from Casablanca to Manamah in 2011.

This ingenious initiative, led by Sahrawi youth, consciously used space to make three points. One, Sahrawis would have to govern themselves outside of Moroccan control to live in a just society. It was also a statement about limits of protest in cities like Al-'Ayun, which had become so saturated with Moroccan security forces — uniformed and plainclothes — that demonstrations had become impossible. Unlike the protestors that would occupy the centers of Tunis and Cairo, the Sahrawis decided to occupy the margins where they had been relegated anyway. These Sahrawis were opting to live in camps and thus showing solidarity with the Sahrawis who had lived as refugees in Algeria since 1976. Finally, the protest camp took notions of “traditional” Sahrawi culture — the nomad and the tent — and redeployed them in a way that underscored the failed project of Moroccan annexation. Caught off guard, the Moroccan authorities cracked down on the Gdaym Izik camp when estimates put its population between ten- to twenty-thousand. Several deaths were reported in the chaos that ensued, including protestors and Moroccan police officers. These developments caused a relatively significant splash in the international press and prodded the United Nations to take the conflict more seriously. That is, up until the protests in Tunisia and Egypt quickly stole the spotlight. Though the Arab Spring was initially lauded as a significant advancement for democracy and human rights, global leaders — once again — turned a blind eye to the ongoing denial of such basic rights in Western Sahara.

The paradox of Western Sahara today is the conflict's ambivalent relationship to the very forces that keep the situation from being resolved. On the one hand, Western Sahara has been at the mercy of regional and global powers – one imagines sets of giant hands and dozens of gazing eyes just outside of the frame of the photos in *Toy Soldiers*. On the other hand, if this conflict is to be resolved, it will require the mobilisation of the same global forces that currently keep the conflict frozen. But then how can a body like the UN Security Council become an agent for peace and reconciliation in Western Sahara when its role has been historically otherwise? We must therefore bring other sets of hands and eyes into the frame of Western Sahara. These are not the agents of *realpolitik* that have kept the Western Sahara conflict alive for too long. These are the agents of transnational civil society, who are Western Sahara's best hope for a peaceful, just, and lasting resolution to the conflict.