



THE POLISARIO FRONT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL

**Under the direction of Claude MONIQUET
President of the ESISC**

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INTRODUCTION

For the past thirty-five years, **the conflict surrounding the Western Sahara has disturbed North Africa and caused tension between Morocco and Algeria.** International efforts at mediation, promoted in particular by the United Nations enabled the signing of a cease-fire in 1991 but have still not resulted in an agreement over this territory, of which over 80% is controlled and administered by the Kingdom of Morocco.

At the same time, the regional security situation has changed considerably since the attacks of September 11, 2001, which gave a second wind to Islamist terrorist organisations like the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). **In fact, since 2001, North Africa has faced an explosion of violence linked to Sunni radical Islamism.** According to a recent report to which former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe General Wesley Clark contributed, the number of attacks reported in the region grew by more than 400% between 2001 and 2007¹.

This period was also marked by **the GSPC's joining forces with the movement of Osama Ben Laden via the January 2007 creation of an Al Qaeda branch in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).** The conversion of GSPC into the regional arm of Al Qaeda intertwined with a new shift in the violence and the arrival, particularly in Algeria, of large scale suicide attacks.

However, this trend was reversed in 2008-2009 as the number of attacks diminished. But the threat did not disappear, because **terrorist activity moved to the South and to the Sahel, taking advantage of porous borders and of the lack of cooperation between the states of the region.** This was clearly reflected in an increased number of kidnappings, particularly of Western citizens.

This recent mutation of the terrorist threat in North Africa **gives a very special dimension to the conflict of the Western Sahara which is concentrated in the midst of this area of instability, turning it into a major security challenge.**

As an illustration of the growing anxiety, in March fifty-four American Senators enjoined Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to redouble efforts to resolve the problem of the Western Sahara, which the legislators called a '*priority of American policy in North Africa.*' In a letter signed, among others, by the influential chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee Dianne Feinstein and by former presidential candidate John McCain, Democratic and Republican Senators mention '*the growing instability*' of the region and '*disturbing tendencies*' which might feed terrorism.²

At the centre of these concerns, we find the Polisario Front, an armed pro-independence movement, worn down by more than thirty years of fruitless struggle and today unable to offer its followers real prospects for the future. Its

¹ *Why the Maghreb Matters: Threats, Opportunities, and Options for Effective American Engagement in North Africa*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies and The Conflict Management Program, 31 March 2010, pp. 3-4.

<http://www.potomac institute.org/images/studies/NorthAfricaPolicyPaper033109.pdf>

² J. Taylor Rushing, 'Bipartisan Senate majority pushing Clinton on Western Sahara,' *The Hill*, 18 March 2010. <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/87689-bipartisan-senate-majority-pushing-clinton-on-western-sahara>

irremovable Secretary General, Mohamed Abdelaziz, has, for his part, recognised the vulnerability of his movement. *'We are not living on an island and everything which affects Africa, the Arab world and the Maghreb also affects us! It may be that the long period of waiting, the disappointments, as well as some ideas having currency in the Maghreb may somewhat influence young people. It may be that you can find among young Sahraouis some who are interested in radical Islamism,'*³ he said back in 2005.

The present report provides readers with an examination of the links between the Polisario Front and AQIM. It is based on an in-depth study of open sources – articles in the regional and international press, the reports of NGOs, international organisations and independent research centers, as well as interviews with witnesses to the changes in the Polisario and actors in regional security issues within North Africa.

We scrutinize of what has happened to the Polisario. We present an overview of changes in terrorism in the region, as well as a study of the signs illustrating connections between the Front and AQIM. All of this allows us to evaluate to which extent the recent change in the Sahrawi pro-independence movement has participated in the growth of terrorism in the Sahel.

³ Interview with Mohamed Abdelaziz published in the Algerian daily newspaper *L'Expression*, 23 August 2005. <http://www.lexpressiondz.com/article/2/2005-08-23/28914.html>

THE ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT IN THE WESTERN SAHARA

The origins of the conflict in the Western Sahara may be traced back to December 1884 and the establishment of a Spanish protectorate over the regions of Saguiet al-Hamra and Rio de Oro within the context of the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) on the 'sharing of Africa' among the European powers.

Immediately after gaining its independence on 2 March 1956, Morocco began recovering lands broken up by colonisation and, referring to its historic rights, claimed sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Under intense pressure from the international community, Spain began to withdraw from the territories it had occupied in Morocco. That process began in 1956 with the handover of the region of the North (Tétouan, Nador), then in 1958, with the region of Tan Tan and Tarfaya. It was only in 1969 that Sidi Ifni, located on the Atlantic coast, was ceded by Madrid. However, the Western Sahara, which appeared since 1963 on the United Nations list of territories to be decolonized, remained under Spanish protectorate.

This was the background when on 10 May 1973 a group of Sahraouis who were attracted by the socialist model of Algeria, created the ***Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro***, or ***Polisario Front***.⁴ Basing itself on the existence of a Sahraoui people and on the right to self-determination, it demanded the independence of the Western Sahara.

Analogous, Moroccan claims became more and more insistent which was illustrated by the Green March organised on 6 November 1975, in which 350,000 Moroccans participated peacefully.

On 14 November 1975, the Spanish government signed the Madrid accords which established the conditions for the handover of the Western Sahara and for its division between Morocco and Mauritania. The Polisario Front rejected these agreements and on 27 February 1976 it announced the creation of the Arab Democratic Sahrawi Republic (RASD). At the same time, the movement put in place a pyramidal organisational structure of the Marxist type with a Secretary General at its head, assisted by an executive consisting of nine members forming part of a Politburo composed of twenty-one members.

Meanwhile, the Polisario threw itself into a bloody armed struggle against Moroccan and Mauritanian forces, thereby prompting Nouakchott to renounce its claims to the Western Sahara in 1979. However, this fighting caused a mass exodus of Sahraouis to refugee camps set up in the Tindouf region, in the West of Algeria.

During the initial years of the conflict, the Polisario enjoyed the military support of Algeria and, to a lesser extent, of Libya. It won some victories by applying a strategy of guerilla warfare. The unquestioned superiority of the Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army (APLS) faded at the beginning of the 1980s when Morocco decided to build a 'defensive wall.' This sand barrier which is up to three meters in places links fortified positions and provides the Moroccan forces with a strategic advantage by allowing it to impose its choice of battlefield on the adversary. During the entire period of construction of the defensive wall (from 1980 to

⁴ For a detailed history of the Polisario Front and of its political evolution up to 2005, we refer the reader to our study entitled 'The Polisario Front: Credible negotiating partner or legacy of the Cold War and obstacle to a political situation in the Western Sahara?' <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/fr/le-front-polisario.pdf>

1987), the APLS was forced to abandon its strategy of guerilla warfare and was reduced to attempts at breaking through the barrier, without any real success.

In 1991, a cease-fire was signed by Morocco and the Polisario Front under the aegis of the United Nations. MINURSO, the United Nations mission for a referendum in the Western Sahara, was created to monitor respect for the cease-fire and, as its name indicates, to prepare for holding a plebiscite on the future of the territory. Since then a series of high representatives of the United Nations including former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker has been involved in the process, though no agreement could be reached on the form of the plebiscite.

On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Green March, King Mohammed VI announced the launch of a process of internal consultations over possible autonomy of the Western Sahara which might yield some concrete proposals. Thus, in April 2007 Rabat presented a draft project of enhanced autonomy for the Western Sahara which provided for the election of a local administration and, in particular, of a parliament. This was welcomed by the United Nations, Europe and the United States as a '*serious and credible*'⁵ proposal. However, the Moroccan plan was rejected by the Polisario.

Discussions of this plan, which is called the Manhasset process, continue to this day but remain at an impasse. In fact, the UN Secretary General's personal emissary for the Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, said at the conclusion of new informal talks between Morocco and the Polisario that '*the proposals of the two parties were still being presented and debated. At the end of this meeting, neither of the parties present accepted the proposal of the other as a basis for future negotiations.*'⁶

2.1. An interesting comparison: the Polisario Front and the Republican Movement of Ireland

It is interesting from this point of view to compare the changes in the Polisario Front with another pro-independence movement, based in Europe: the Republican Movement in Ireland.

Following decades of political struggle against the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 which gave rise to the Republic of Ireland in the South of the island but led to the island's partition, in the summer of 1969 the Republican movement founded the **Provisional IRA**.⁷ From 1969 to 1997, the IRA expanded its guerilla and terrorist operations against the British forces present in Ulster, the Protestant Unionist forces and the police of Northern Ireland. Between 1969 and the cessation of hostilities, the activities of the IRA led to the death of more than 1,820 persons. **For a long time the organisation was considered to be the most virulent and dangerous nationalist terrorist group in Europe and the one enjoying widest popular support.**

But when it became clear that Great Britain would never yield to violence, a process of negotiations began between the belligerent parties and after several years they put in place a peace accord which led to the end of hostilities and the disarming of the IRA, which renounced its objective - the secession of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom and its

⁵ J. Peter Pham, 'Western Sahara: Time to Move Ahead, Realistically,' *World Defense Review*, 11 June 2009. <http://worlddefensereview.com/phamo61109.shtml>

⁶ 'Western Sahara: the talks between Morocco and the Polisario Front end in an impasse,' Magharebia, 12 February 2010. <http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/fr/features/awi/newsbriefs/general/2010/02/12/newsbrief-01>

⁷ Provisional Irish Republican Army, most commonly known by its acronym, the 'IRA.'

attachment to the Republic of Ireland. **Long considered as being a gathering of fanatical and unscrupulous extremists, the IRA proved that it had sufficient political maturity and perceptiveness to turn its back on violence and become a participant in the political life of Ireland within a territory which would continue to be administered by the British Crown.**

Confronted with a situation which is fundamentally rather similar – the impossibility of reconciling its initial aims dating from its foundation with the geopolitical realities of the moment – **the Polisario Front refuses to adapt and clings to its dream of independence at the risk of sacrificing those who are still its followers.** The reason for this intransigence – on the one hand following orders from Algiers, and, on the other hand, the refusal of the directors of the Front to accept changes that will question their leadership.. However, the reason behind this stance is less important for us than its consequences.

There are negative consequences for at least two groups. Firstly, maintaining the same radical political line while the position of the Moroccan adversary has evolved to **taking hostage the tens of thousands of Sahraoui refugees living in the camps of Tindouf.** Secondly, by its refusal to engage in dialogue, the Front is condemned to radicalising its message, making ever more frequent allusion during the past two years to a possible resumption of armed struggle. It is obvious that **among those who are susceptible this warlike dialectic leads to the belief that only violence can bring what has been promised to them,** whereas it is evident to most observers that the question of the Sahara will only be resolved by dialogue and compromise. By playing on this ‘military’ message, the leadership of the Polisario Front is artificially maintaining radicalism among the refugees, which can push some of its members towards terrorism.

THE POLISARIO FRONT TODAY

The lack of concrete progress after more than thirty years of fighting has, of course, had some consequences for an organisation whose *raison d'être* is the independence of the Western Sahara. The inability of the Polisario Front to reach a solution has considerably weakened the movement, thereby intensifying preexisting dysfunctionalities.

3.1. A weakened organisation

In 2005, **Hametti Rabani**, the former Minister of Justice and Religion of the RASD described the status of the movement in rather harsh terms: *'The Polisario is in a situation of failure. Most of the former combatants have left it and have turned to doing business in Mauritania. Many of the historic leaders have also left. Quite a few young people remain. What can you say about the leadership? What hope can it bring them? None. The movement is at an impasse.'*⁸

Despite initial military victories, the actions of the Polisario Front have not enabled it to reach a political settlement of the conflict due to the nature of the movement and its struggle. A certain number of issues emerge.

From a military point of view, **the construction of the 'defensive wall,' which was completed in 1987, and the cease-fire signed in 1991, considerably weakened the APLS**, the armed wing of the Front. The spirit of the troops was indeed affected by military setbacks and by the attitude of the leaders of the movement, who lived in opulence while the delays in service pays accumulated.

Immediately after the cease-fire, a large number of combatants withdrew to Mauritania. It is estimated that 6,000 men, or around 60% of the manpower of the APLS made this choice.⁹ The leadership of the Polisario preferred to close its eyes to these departures which considerably lightened the financial burden of maintaining the APLS. According to the Mauritanian press, this exile of Polisario soldiers, and especially of the officers, is still continuing.¹⁰ Though the exact strength of the APLS remains unknown, many observers estimate that it is between 2,000 and 6,000 men.

On the international scene, the Front has suffered due to its intransigence and its inability to negotiate but also because of the changing geopolitical context. During the Cold War era, over seventy states recognized the existence of the RASD. Since then, this number has only diminished and **at present only some thirty states recognize the RASD**. Furthermore, the support of many Western states like the United States and France for an autonomy plan proposed by Morocco which they described as

⁸ Claude Moniquet (dir.), *(The Polisario Front: Credible partner for negotiations or legacy of the Cold War and obstacle to a political solution in the Western Sahara?)* European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center (ESISC), November 2005, p. 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰ Laurence Ammour, 'Who profits from the freezing of the conflict in the Western Sahara,' NATO Research Paper

N° 30, NATO Defense College, November 2006.

http://se2.isn.ch/serviceengine/Files/EINIRAS/26890/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/7F784FF5-DACD-4839-BoD1-ECAA067D8A93/fr/NATO+RP+30.pdf

'serious and credible'¹¹ has weakened the Polisario still more on the international diplomatic scene. Today the only true support on which the Polisario can rely on is that of Algeria, which uses the pro-independence ambitions of the Sahraouis in an attempt to try to destabilise its regional rival: Morocco.

From a political point of view, **the Polisario thus also suffered from the conflict's getting bogged down, which aggravated the isolation and rigidity of its leadership.** According to a report by the European Research Institute on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation, '*since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the support of friendly countries and ideological motivation within the camps has weakened. The present situation has greatly deteriorated. The movement is now governed by some people who mainly prioritise their personal interests in the conclusion of the conflict.*'¹²

The isolation and sclerosis of the leadership of the Polisario also may be seen in **its increasingly aggressive attitude towards any form of challenge to its way of managing and operating. Among others, it has recently threatened an American NGO as well as the French contingent of MINURSO 'as a reprisal for the support France gives to the position of Morocco.'**¹³

These abuses of the leadership of the movement combined with the setback of its policy both contributed to its loss of legitimacy vis-à-vis the population. In the view of Sidati El Ghallaoui, a former diplomat of the RASD, '*this solitary exercise of power by a leadership not leaving its villas, some of whose members do not even set foot in the refugee camps, has led to great distrust on the part of the population living in these camps.*' He went on to say: '*they do not expect anything more from the leadership; we are witnessing a veritable divorce between the apex of the social order and the base.*'¹⁴ This disaffection also takes the form of a major movement to exile in Mauritania which is not limited only to soldiers but also concerns the civilian population and even some dignitaries.

The loss of legitimacy of the Polisario also has given rise to dissident currents. The *Khat Achahid* (the path of the martyr) movement, created in July 2004, calls for negotiations to resolve the conflict, though it does not exclude armed struggle.¹⁵ Many of its leaders are living in Spain. They also challenge the legitimacy of the present leadership and denounce its antidemocratic nature. '*The present leadership of the Polisario Front is illegitimate, since the 12th congress was neither democratic nor legitimate. This leadership has no legitimacy to negotiate or to speak about our future with the Moroccan government in the name of the Sahraoui people,*'¹⁶ one communiqué stated. '*This corrupt leadership continues to hold sway, without any changes, all of which confirms that Mohamed Abdelaziz distrusts our people and flouts the repeated calls for change, for justice and for democracy within the Polisario,*'¹⁷ the text goes on to say.

Meanwhile, we note that since May 2005 demands for independence have appeared among young Sahraouis who are not members of the Polisario and are apparently acting as private individuals.¹⁸ **This inability of the Sahraoui pro-independence movement to**

¹¹ J. Peter Pham, 'Western Sahara: Time to Move Ahead, Realistically,' *op. cit.*

¹² Olivier Pierre-Louveaux, *The Western Sahara Today*, European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation, November 2003.
<http://www.medeainstitute.org/index.html?doc=1568>

¹³ Laurence Ammour, 'Who profits from the freezing of the conflict in the Western Sahara,' *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Claude Moniquet (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁵ Laurence Ammour, 'Who profits from the freezing of the conflict in the Western Sahara,' *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Sahara: the dissidents of Khat Achahid denounce the illegitimacy of the Polisario, Maghreboo – Agences, 26 December 2007. <http://www.maghreboo.com/politique/sahara-les-dissidents-de-khatt-achahid-denonce-l-illegitimite-de-la-direction-du-polisario.html>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Laurence Ammour, 'Who profits from the freezing of the conflict in the Western Sahara,' *op. cit.*

attract and recruit the younger generation increases the risk that young people will slip into criminality and Islamist terrorism.

3.2. A movement blighted by criminality

When you delve into the history of the Polisario, you see that the problem of abuses by certain members of the movement is not a new phenomenon. For many years, **the Polisario Front has been accused regularly of misappropriating humanitarian, financial and material aid provided by NGOs, as well as by international organisations.**

Many cases of embezzlement have been revealed by the international press. For example, the Spanish daily *El Pais* revealed in 1999 that aid amounting to 64 million pesetas (around 385,000 Euros) given by the Spanish Red Cross to the Polisario for the purchase of 430 camels to improve the nutritional conditions of Sahraoui children had disappeared. These accusations were not denied by Embarek Malainine, the officer within the separatist movement responsible for international cooperation. She candidly acknowledged the embezzlement but said that it had not contributed to her '*personal enrichment*.'¹⁹

This tendency was accentuated by the process of disintegration of the movement which accelerated over recent years. In 2003, the European Union decided to strengthen its **system of monitoring its humanitarian assistance but 'encountered resistance from the Polisario to its carrying out its mission.'**²⁰ This made it impossible to curb the phenomenon if one may believe the NGO *Interfaith International* which, in 2008, complained to the UN Council of Human Rights about the embezzlement of humanitarian assistance and its resale by the Polisario, which it accused of spending '*enormous sums of money on military parades*.'²¹

The fact that the Polisario has still not authorised the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to go to the camps in Tindouf, not even to carry out a census, does not point to positive change as regards this practice of misappropriation. A recent investigation by the *European Anti-fraud Office* (OLAF) which we learned about in a briefing published on 26 April 2010, established a possible co-responsibility of Algeria and the Polisario Front in these cases of misappropriation.²²

In parallel with these abuses, the extreme poverty which reigns in the camps under the Front has encouraged the growth of criminality. Neither the officials, nor the soldiers are spared by the bankruptcy of the Sahrawi authorities who compel them to find other sources of revenues. A former member of the Polisario explained in 2001 that '*officers received between 12 and 17 dollars twice a year, a situation which forces them to find other revenues, (...) such as trafficking*.'²³

¹⁹ Ignacio Cembrero, 'CRE investigó el desvío por el Polisario de ayudas para comprar 430 camellas,' *El Pais*, 7 March 1999.

http://www.elpais.com/articulo/sociedad/ESPANA/SAHARA_OCCIDENTAL/SAHARA_OCCIDENTAL/FRENTE_POLISARIO/RASD/CRUZ_ROJA/CRE/investigado/desvio/Polisario/ayudas/comprar/430/camellas/elpepisoc/19990307elpepisoc_5/Tes

²⁰ Denis Ducarme, *Report of the Independent Commission of Investigation into allegations of violations of human rights, crimes, abuses and misappropriations of various kinds brought against the Polisario Front*, Brussels/New York, October 2006, p. 21.

²¹ *World Refugee Survey – Algeria*, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), 2008. <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?id=2116>.

²² <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/fr/les-camps-de-tindouf-lalgerie-et-le-front-polisario-face-a-leurs-responsabilites-466.pdf>

²³ *World Refugee Survey – Algeria*, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), 2008. <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?id=2116>

Furthermore, **the movement is also involved in illegal activities intended to counteract the erosion of popular support.** According to the university researcher Aymeric Chauprade, the Polisario had *'to increasingly buy off its people'* to offset its loss of legitimacy. For this purpose, it reverted into different types of trafficking and actively participates *'in clandestine immigration networks.'*²⁴ These practices have attracted the notice of the United Nations, which criticised them in numerous reports.²⁵ In parallel, we note that many Sahraouis with ties to the separatist movement have been subjected to arrest for acts relating to trafficking arms, petrol, contraband cigarettes or automobile spare parts.²⁶

The development of criminality in the ranks of the Polisario must be understood in the context of the impunity which exists in the Sahel and which, in the same way as for terrorism, has encouraged the growth of all kinds of illicit trafficking. The region is both a major area of drug production (cannabis) and a transit corridor towards Europe for cocaine originating in Latin America. According to one adviser of the United Nations Secretary General, the Latin American drugs traffickers *'are fighting for control of the trans-Saharan routes which allow them to deliver their narcotics to Europe and as far as the Gulf.'*²⁷

The involvement of the Polisario in drug trafficking was made clear in January 2007 when a network of narcotics trafficking was dismantled in the North of Mauritania. According to local authorities, *'some elements of the Polisario who arrived from Algerian territory on four-wheel drive vehicles went rather frequently to a place where the merchandise was hidden, in the locality of Fdirik, twenty kilometres from Zouerate.'*²⁸

The Sahrawi pro-independence movement **also takes advantage of its favourable position in a region outside the control of normal states in order to pick up easy money by participating in arms trafficking.** In fact, according to a recent publication of the NATO Defense College, *'the Sahrawi refugee camps of the Polisario Front in the south-western part of Algeria, southern Libya and northern Mali are also areas of transit [for smuggled arms]. Due to its strategic position, the city of Tindouf represents the ideal point of passage between the Eastern Sahel and the Western Sahel.'*²⁹

In February 2010, an arms trafficker was arrested near **Smara** (Western Sahara) and it turned out that he was also a member of the Polisario Front.³⁰

3.3. A movement in the forefront of radical Islamism

Criminality is not the only regional problem that threatens a rapidly decomposing separatist movement. The growth of radical Islamism in North Africa, which took concrete form when a

²⁴ Aymeric Chauprade, 'Sahara, the risk of 'grey zones.' *L'Economiste*, December 2006.

²⁵ Kofi Annan, *Report of the Secretary General on the situation in the Western Sahara*, S/2004/827, 20 October 2004.

<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No4/555/85/PDF/No455585.pdf?OpenElement>

²⁶ Claude Moniquet, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

²⁷ Nadja Bouchira, 'How to disarm the bomb of the Sahel?', *El Watan*, 15 June 2008,

<http://www.elwatan.com/Terrorisme-trafic-et-conflit>

²⁸ 'Mauritania: Some elements of the Polisario involved in a case of drugs trafficking,' MAP, 19 January 2007. http://www.emarrakech.info/Mauritanie-Des-elements-du-polisario-impliques-dans-une-affaire-de-drogue_a10638.html

²⁹ Laurence Ammour, 'Evaluation of risks linked to criminality in the Sahel arc,' NATO Research Paper N°53, NATO Defense College, November 2009. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/24077787/RP-NDC-Criminalite-Sahel-novembre09>

³⁰ Assabah, Thursday, 25 February 2010.

branch of Al Qaeda was created in the region in 2007, has not spared the Polisario. Indeed, **the vacuum left by the ideological bankruptcy of Polisario has led part of the fringe groups among the younger members of the movement to turn to the radical practice of religion.** According to Hametti Rabani, the young *'do not expect anything further from the bosses of the Polisario but everything from God. God fills the void left behind by the backward looking leadership of the Polisario.'*³¹

Indeed it seems that the evolution of the geopolitical context and **the end of the Cold War have encouraged the replacement of Marxism by radical Islamism**, which, since 11 September, has appeared as the new transnational ideology challenging the present world order. The French university researcher Aymeric Chauprade goes still further, saying that this ideological shift of the movement was precipitated by **'the arrival in its ranks of a new generation of militants imbued with fundamentalism during its time spent in Algerian universities.'**³²

Other personalities like Saïd Djinnit, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for West Africa, have insisted there are **links between criminality and Islamisation.** *'The rise of tension in the Sahel region is the combination of many different factors. There are the old rebellions onto which have been grafted some new phenomena: terrorism, which is present in the region but, above all, drugs trafficking and organised crime, which have grown in a very serious way,'*³³ he explains.

We note, nonetheless, that this radicalisation of the youngest fringe is not something new. Indeed, according to **Mustapha Bouh**, a former member of the Front's Politburo, **the links between members of the Polisario and radical Islamist currents goes back to the 1980s.** *'Everything began at the end of the 1980s. Students arriving from the camps in Tindouf and present in the universities of Algiers or other cities of the North met there with members of the FIS [Islamic Salvation Front] which had the upper hand in the university departments during that period. They were contaminated and returned driven by Islamist ideology,'*³⁴ Mr. Bouh explains.

These first contacts facilitated the **development of further relations between members of the Polisario and terrorists of the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) in Algeria, which shifted, in certain cases, allying itself with military support.** In fact, in 1994 arms furnished by the Algerian Army to the Polisario were found by the same Algerian security services in the hands of GIA militants.³⁵ The conditions under which these arms ended up in the possession of Algerian terrorists have not been established. We don't know if they were sold within the context of arms trafficking or if they were provided to the terrorists by sympathisers in the camps of Tindouf.

Nevertheless, this episode highlights the proximity between the Polisario Front and Islamist terrorist groups and it attracted the attention of the Algerian authorities to this possible abuse. According to a senior Moroccan officer, *'Algerian Military Security asked the Polisario for explanations and seriously tightened its control over the Islamists belonging to the Front.'*³⁶

³¹ Claude Moniquet (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³² Cited in Laurence Ammour, 'Who profits from the freezing of the conflict in the Western Sahara,' *op. cit.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Claude Moniquet (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN THE POLISARIO FRONT AND AQIM

The attacks of 11 September 2001 revived terrorist activity in North Africa by supplying a new *raison d'être* to Islamist groups like the Algerian GSPC. The threat then expanded to the South, thus offering new prospects to young people milling about in the camps of Tindouf but also to former or active members of the Polisario.

4.1. Development of terrorism in the Sahel

The year 2007 was a turning point in the development of terrorism in North Africa. Algeria's GSPC decided to integrate itself into the global Jihadist movement by becoming Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). **This merger with the organisation of Osama Ben Laden encouraged the emergence in Algeria of large scale suicide attacks in Algeria similar to those carried out by the Jihadist movement in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a practice that was unseen in this country, even during the tragic events of 1990.**

During the year 2007, Algeria was hit by three major suicide operations. On 11 April, the nearly simultaneous explosion of three booby-trapped cars in Algiers killed at least thirty persons and wounded several hundred. On 11 July, 10 persons died in a suicide attack involving a bomb-laden lorry directed against barracks in Lakhdaria. Finally, on 11 December of the same year, two suicide attacks against a representation of the United Nations and a building of the Supreme Court in Algiers caused the death of at least 60 persons, many of them foreigners. Apart from the operating mode, this attack also revealed the influence of Al Qaeda in the choice of foreign targets.

This trend continued during the first part of 2008, which was still more marked by numerous suicide attacks directed principally against the security forces and Western interests. This strategy left the Algerian authorities with no choice but to appreciably increase their efforts in the domain of counter-terrorism.

At the same time, this explosion of violence and its numerous civilian victims revived the hostility of Algerian society, which had been traumatised by the terrorist wave of the 1990s. **These two factors contributed to the shift of the centre of gravity of regional terrorism towards the Sahel, where the terrorist groups associated with AQIM could take advantage of wide open spaces, porous frontiers and the lack of cooperation between the states of the region in order to operate almost freely.**

At the fringe of AQIM, a small local Salafist group called the *Imarat Assahraa* (*The Emirate of the Sahara*) began to develop in the South of Algeria. According to various sources in the security forces and intelligence services that we were able to speak to, ***Imarat Assahraa* was formed from among combatants coming from the Polisario camps.**³⁷

³⁷ Discussions with members of the Western intelligence services operating in North Africa, Spring 2010.

Thus, **since 2008 the kidnappings of Westerners have increased in number across the entire region and have become one of the main expressions of terrorist activity in North Africa.**

- On 22 February 2008, two Austrian tourists were kidnapped in the South of Tunisia, and then transferred to camps run by AQIM in the North of Mali. They were freed after eight months in captivity.
- On 14 December 2008, two Canadian diplomats were taken hostage northwest of Niamey, in Mali; they were released on 22 April 2009.
- On 22 January 2009, four European tourists (two Swiss, one German and one Briton) fell into the hands of AQIM in the western part of Niger, a few kilometers from the border with Mali. One of the hostages, the Briton Edwin Dyer, was executed by AQIM at the end of the month of May 2009.
- On 23 June 2009, an American humanitarian aid worker was killed in the Mauritanian capital when he resisted an attempted kidnapping. Responsibility for the operation was claimed by AQIM.
- On 25 November 2009, the Frenchman Pierre Camatte was taken hostage by armed men in the North of Mali, some hundred kilometers from the border with Niger. He was later handed over to AQIM. He was freed on 23 February 2010 in Mali.
- On 29 November 2009, three Spanish humanitarian aid workers were kidnapped by armed men in the Northwest of Mauritania. AQIM later claimed responsibility for this operation.
- On 18 December, an Italian couple and their driver were kidnapped in the East of Mauritania, near the border with Mali.
- On 8 April 2010, the intervention of the Mauritanian security services made it possible to foil an attempted kidnapping of a French couple in Nouakchott, not far from the French embassy.
- On 22 April 2010, a French tourist and his driver were kidnapped by armed men in the North of Niger, near the border with Algeria.

▪ **The shift of terrorist activity towards the South was also accompanied by the first suicide attack reported in Mauritania.** On 8 August 2009, a young kamikaze set off a belt of explosives outside the French embassy in Nouakchott, slightly wounding three persons, two of them French gendarmes who were jogging nearby. According to the local authorities, the young Mauritanian kamikaze, twenty years of age, had spent time in the AQIM camps located between Mauritania, Algeria and Mali. AQMI claimed responsibility for the attack, calling it *'a reaction to the attacks carried out by the Crusaders against Islam and against the Muslims.'*³⁸

Several days beforehand, **the terrorist organisation had confirmed having killed nearly thirty Mali soldiers during an ambush of a convoy near Timbuktu.** The Mali authorities confirmed the clashes, saying however that they caused numerous casualties on both sides.

³⁸ 'Al Qaeda in the Maghreb claims responsibility for an anti-French attack,' RFI, 18 August 2009. http://www.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/116/article_83789.asp

We call attention to the the rudimentary nature of most of the attacks carried out in the Sahel. The suicide attack on the French embassy in Mauritania, where the kamikaze was the sole victim, illustrates the **gap which exists at the level of know-how between the elements of AQIM in Algeria and in Mauritania.** In effect, in 2007 and 2008 we saw the appearance in Algeria of coordinated large-scale suicide operations involving booby-trapped vehicles similar to those conducted by Al Qaeda in Iraq or by the Taliban in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. While terrorist activity has undoubtedly increased in the Sahel, the level of sophistication of the attacks remains much lower. The failed attempted kidnapping of an American humanitarian aid worker in Nouakchotte in June 2009 (which ended unfortunately in the intended victim's death) also reveals the difference.

4.2. Multiplying signs of links between the Polisario and AQIM

In parallel with this shift in the centre of activity of regional terrorist activity towards the Sahel, **we have seen the emergence of revealing signs of links between AQIM and elements of the Polisario Front.**

One of the first illustrations dates back to December 2003, when the Mauritanian security services arrested Baba Ould Mohammed Bakhili, a leader of the Polisario Front, together with many of his lieutenants and sympathisers of the Sahrawi independence movement for their involvement in the theft of explosives in the premises of the Mauritanian National Company of the Mining Industry (SNIM). Though SNIM had been the target of the Polisario repeatedly during the 1970s, the nature of the material stolen led to many interrogations. The 153 canisters of inflammable products and the 12 kilometres of wire used for remote control explosions found in the Mauritanian city of Z erouate **are not in fact part of the materiel usually used by guerillas; rather they are typical of terrorist organisations wishing to make bombs.**³⁹ Although the exact motives of this group remain unknown, **we may wonder if this operation was intended to allow the group to prepare attacks or if it wished to sell these products to radical Islamist groups operating in the Sahara.**

Still more convincing signs emerged from an attack carried out on 4 June 2005 by the GSPC against a barracks used by the Mauritanian security forces in **Lamghiti.** The operation, which was led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a leader of the GSPC, and in which more than one hundred men participated caused at least 15 deaths and wounded 17. **It reinforced existing suspicions over the collaboration between members of the Front and radical Islamist groups due to the participation of vehicles belonging to the Polisario in this attack led by the predecessor of AQIM.** Furthermore, according to many witnesses, **some of the assailants spoke Hassani, a dialect common in Mauritania and in the Western Sahara.**⁴⁰

For several years now, we have seen a **certain interest on the part of AQIM for the Polisario Front, which has become one of the main manpower pools for recruitment by the terrorist organisation.** The opportunity which the Polisario camps represent for an organisation like AQIM has also been stressed by Michael Braun, a former director of operations of the DEA (*Drug Enforcement Agency*), the American agency for combating the narcotics trade. Mr. Braun believes that in the camps de Tindouf, *'youths aged between 16 and 25 are deprived of their rights and live in abject conditions, without any hope of a better tomorrow.'* And he adds: **'powerful terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are expert at detecting persons showing signs of**

³⁹ Claude Moniquet (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

vulnerability. Thus, the camps of Tindouf represent a potential gold mine for recruiters from groups like AQIM.⁴¹

Citing local security sources, the Algerian daily *El Khabar* confirmed in July 2008 the presence of many individuals coming from the Western Sahara to AQIM training camps located near the border with Mali.⁴² At the same time, the Moroccan press revealed that **members of the terrorist organisation scoured the Polisario camps, especially those of Tindouf, for the sake of enrolling new recruits** having experience with the techniques of combat in the desert. It estimates that 265 former Polisario fighters joined AQIM.⁴³

One year later, at the beginning of the month of September 2009, the Arab-speaking site of the *Algeria Times*, which is often well informed, revealed that AQIM had recruited **'more than 200 young European, American and Canadian Muslims'** to be sent to training camps of the radical Somali group **al-Shabaab**. And the site emphasises the important role played in the recruitment of Jihadists in Europe by **'former members of the Polisario'** who had converted to radical Islamism and were running logistical networks in Spain.⁴⁴

4.3. The 'Omar le Sahraoui' affair and other special cases

While the signs of collusion between members of the Polisario and Islamist terrorism were already numerous, **the abduction of three Spanish humanitarian aid workers in November 2009 attests to the extent of the phenomenon and reveals the shift of certain leaders of the Sahrawi pro-independence movement towards terrorism.**

In effect, on 29 November 2009, three Spanish citizens from the Catalan association *Barcelona Accio Solidaria* were kidnapped in the Northwest of Mauritania. Their convoy, which was transporting humanitarian aid coming from Barcelona, was attacked by armed men on the highway between Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, at around 170 kilometres from the Mauritanian capital. According to the press, the abductors fired repeatedly to force the caravan consisting of many vehicles to stop. They then took the three humanitarian aid workers who were in a car at the end of the convoy, put them in a pick-up and left the asphalted road to flee across the desert following sandy paths.⁴⁵ In a message broadcast by the television channel *Al Jazeera*,⁴⁶ AQIM claimed the kidnapping of the Spaniards, which took place at the same time as that of the Frenchman Pierre Camatte, at the beginning of the month of December.

An investigation carried out by the Mauritanian security services led them to Omar Ould Sid'Ahmed Ould Hamma, known as 'Omar le Sahraoui,' whose services had been hired for money by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Emir of AQIM in the Sahel. This individual, aged about fifty, was arrested in February 2010 near the border with

⁴¹ 'Tindouf risks becoming a breeding ground of terrorists according to one American expert,' *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, 18 February 2010. <http://www.aujourd'hui.ma/couverture-details74196.html>

⁴² 'Some Tuareg and Western Sahara terrorists in the fiefs of Al Qaeda in the South,' *El Khabar*, 15 July 2008.

⁴³ 'The Al Qaeda organisation is recruiting Sahraouis in the camps of Tindouf,' *Al-ahdath Almaghribia*, issue 3468, 6 August 2008.

⁴⁴ <http://www.algeriatimes.net/news/algernews.cfm?ID=1804>

⁴⁵ 'Kidnapping of three humanitarian aid workers of the Catalan NGO Barcelona-Accio,' AFP, 30 November 2009. <http://www.france24.com/fr/20091130-humanitaires-espagnol-enleves-mauritanie-barcelone-accio-ong-senegal>

⁴⁶ 'Al-Qaeda group claims kidnappings,' *Al Jazeera*, 8 December 2009. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2009/12/20091287345403295.html>

Mali and was charged at the end of March by the Court of Nouakchott with a *'premeditated attack on the life of persons, their abduction and their incarceration, the conclusion of an agreement for compensation for the purpose of disposing of the liberty of others.'* He must also answer to charges of *'using Mauritanian territory for conducting assaults against the citizens of a foreign country (Spain), bearing and using arms and munitions in an illegal manner.'*⁴⁷

According to the Spanish daily *ABC*, **Omar le Sahraoui is a former leader of the Polisario Front who 'was part of the hierarchy' of the movement.** Not being entirely a member of the Belmokhtar cell, this *'man of the desert'* placed his knowledge of the territory and *'his experience at the service of the terrorists and other traffickers in drugs as well as other contraband products such as tobacco.'*⁴⁸ According to sources close to the investigation cited by *ABC*, he has also been charged with providing AQIM with the vehicles needed to escape from raids by the Mauritanian security forces and to cross over the border into Mali.

Meanwhile, other members of the Front were also arrested with Omar le Sahraoui in connection with the abduction of the three Spanish humanitarian aid workers. **Indeed, some twenty persons have been charged in this case, some of them soldiers serving with the Polisario.** We find among them Mohamed Salem Mohamed Ali Ould Rguibi, around fifty years of age, and Mohamed Salem Hamoud, barely twenty, both of whom were working in the fourth military district, called 'M'heriz,' based at Tindouf. Nafii Ould Mohamed M'Barek, aged about forty, who operated in the seventh military district before going into smuggling and trafficking in the North of Mauritania, also figured among the persons accused by the Mauritanian courts of justice.⁴⁹

This affair is a perfect illustration of the abuses which are multiplying in the region and of the aggravating role played by an organisation in complete decay like the Polisario Front. It shows the diversity of links which exist between the Polisario and AQIM, to the extent that this rapprochement does not match a single model. Indeed, while we have seen how the young and idle Sahraouis could allow themselves to be seduced by the ideology of AQIM, **this last example underscores the fact that some active members of the movement are on the lookout for supplementary revenues, like mercenaries who seek to make money from their past experience in military structures of the Sahrawi independence movement, can slip into terrorism after likely passing through various forms of trafficking.** The diversity of the paths which lead to terrorism is just one more proof of the advanced state of decomposition of the Polisario Front more than thirty-five years after its creation.

It also illustrates the **complexity of the security issues of the region, where it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish terrorists from traffickers of all varieties.** This collusion between terrorism, arms and drugs trafficking, and former or present members of a decomposing pro-independence movement has facilitated the development of what is presented by the Institut Thomas More as a *'hybrid industry of*

⁴⁷ 'The presumed author of the abduction of three Spaniards goes to prison,' AFP, 30 March 2010.

<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/DEPAFP20100330120803/actualite-afrique-auteur-presume-du-rapt-des-trois-espagnols-ecroue.html>

⁴⁸ 'Mercenario de Al Qaida,' *ABC*, 12 April 2010. http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-12-04-2010/abc/Nacional/mercenario-de-al-qaida_14043335259.html

⁴⁹ Abdellatif Mansour, 'Al Qaeda-Polisario: the dangerous liaison,' *Maroc Hebdo International*, No. 881, 9 April 2010. http://www.maroc-hebdo.press.ma/MHinternet/Archives_881/pdf_881/page22et23.pdf

abductions,⁵⁰ which, thanks to payment of ransoms, finances terrorism and the activities of AQIM in the entire region.

There is one other interesting case, that of **Mohamed Fadel Ould Mohamed Salem**. Born in the camps of Tindouf, this young man was sent to Russia to continue his education and **came into contact with radical Islamists who persuaded him to go to Chechnya and join the Jihad against the Russians**. He was arrested in Kazakhstan, where he was sentenced to four years in prison after which he was expelled to Algeria.⁵¹ He is living there today, with his children, in the camps of Tindouf.

But as we have seen, winning people over to AQIM and its Jihadist ideology doesn't concern just the 'foot soldiers' of the Polisario Front. Some leaders of this organisation have also been overtaken by the contagion, and this can turn out to be especially dangerous since these eminent members of the group can influence others and thus become proverbial magnetic poles of Islamist recruitment in the camps.

In this regard, in January 2010, **the Algerian security services arrested Mahjoub Mohamed Sidi, a Mufti of the Polisario and one of the most radical Imams of Tindouf**. He was suspected of maintaining links with AQIM and a search conducted at his home turned up twenty or more kilos of explosives, arms and correspondence with some leaders of AQIM.⁵²

According to our sources, apart from the frustration created by the lack of political prospects offered today by the leadership of the Polisario Front, **one of the major elements which motivated members of the Polisario wishing to join the ranks of AQIM or other armed Islamist organisations has been the fact that these groups try to target the Kingdom of Morocco, the same country that the separatist propaganda has taught them to hate since their childhood**. These Islamist cells thus appear to desperate youths as being capable of achieving what the leadership of the Polisario has been promising for years but never managed to accomplish: creating an *Intifada* within the interior of the Western Sahara and southern Morocco, and carrying the armed struggle there. Thus, a Jihadist group dismantled in Morocco in 2009, **Fath Al Andalous**⁵³, planned to conduct a large-scale terrorist operation in the Western Sahara and had, at Layaoune and Boujdour,⁵⁴ two cities in the Sahara, some operational cells maintaining links with elements of the **Polisario Front**.

⁵⁰ *For sustainable security in the Maghreb: A chance for the region, a commitment for the European Union*, Institut Thomas More, April 2010, p. 15. <http://institut-thomas-more.org/mag/Fr.pdf>

⁵¹ Interview with a Russian security source, April 2010.

⁵² Al-Alam, 8 January 2010. These facts were confirmed to us by sources close to Algerian intelligence.

⁵³ After its discovery, Fath al-Andalous aroused great interest among all the Western intelligence services active in North Africa due to its heterogeneous composition: it was financed by a cell in France, had logistical support furnished by Mauritanian fighters of AQIM, and recruited its operational forces in the provinces of the South of Morocco.

⁵⁴ Eight members of this group were sentenced to terms of between 4 and 8 years in prison by the Court of Salé on 2 April 2010.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, **the way the conflict in the Western Sahara has gotten bogged down and the absence of prospects for solving it have considerably increased the vulnerability of the Polisario Front.** They have greatly reduced the legitimacy of the leadership of the movement, which grew more isolated from its base, limiting itself to defending private and financial interests of the main dignitaries of the regime.

This moral and economic bankruptcy of the Polisario, which is not new but which has been accelerated by the cease-fire of 1991 and the end of the Cold War, has allowed a large number of Sahraouis to come to appreciate the useless nature of the independence struggle. While, as we know, many former leaders of the Polisario have broken with the movement, preferring to go into exile in Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, the youngest and/or most modest Sahraouis have also sought to free themselves even as they share this knowledge of the defeat.

Criminality, particularly arms and drugs trafficking which have developed in the region for the past several years, has thus appeared to many Sahraouis to be the only viable prospect for the future. **This criminal path has also facilitated the transition to Islamist terrorism,** given that the bound between these two activities is porous throughout Northern Africa. **If we also take into consideration the ideological void left behind by the bankruptcy of Marxism-Leninism to which the Polisario held claim, then we easily can understand that radical Islamism may be for some a substitute for the pro-independence fight.**

Nonetheless, one must say that the situation is a lot more complex than it has seemed and that the pathways leading to terrorism are various. Organised crime can lead one to participate in supporting a terrorist cell and providing it with arms or intelligence out of simple opportunism, without this necessarily demonstrating any sharing of Islamist ideology. **This collusion between terrorists and traffickers, which does not allow us to clearly establish the boundaries between these two activities, is nonetheless a tangible sign of the deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel, which is on its way to becoming a veritable ‘grey zone.’**

All the same, this study has allowed us to demonstrate that the links between the deterioration of the Polisario Front and the development of terrorism in the Sahel are growing ever closer and that the collapse of the Sahrawi independence movement feeds the activity of AQIM. While this hypothesis initially reflected the simple fear of excesses of the Polisario, every day it becomes a bit more concrete, to the point where now there is a consensus among analysts regarding the security situation in the region. The involvement of Omar le Sahraoui and other members of the Polisario in the abduction last November of three Spanish humanitarian aid workers on behalf of AQIM is just the most relevant and most recent illustration.

We can thus improve our understanding of the wish of the American Congress to see this conflict get resolved as quickly as possible. It is also worth stating that this question occupies an ever more prominent place in the reports of the American media, as can be proven with the numerous articles published since the beginning of 2010.

The stakes are all the more crucial given that the failure to resolve the problem of the Western Sahara sustains the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria. In parallel with the Polisario’s contributing to regional instability, **the tensions between Rabat and Algiers**

block any regional cooperation over questions of security and are considered to be one of the main reasons explaining the development of terrorism in the Sahel during the past several years.

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