

Western Sahara: Resignation of UN envoy James Baker puts referendum in doubt

By Brian Smith
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The resignation of James Baker, the United Nations Secretary General's personal envoy to Western Sahara, has thrown the referendum on the future of the disputed African territory into question.

Following the Iraq invasion, the United States has increasingly turned away from using the UN as a means of resolving international disputes in its favour. Instead, the Bush administration has sought bilateral agreements, and utilised direct military action, as the best ways to promote the interests of US imperialism.

Baker, previously a member of both Ronald Reagan's and George Bush Senior's administrations, cited growing frustration as the reason behind his decision. He had been attempting to broker an agreement, since 1997, between Morocco, which controls the territory, and the Polisario Front, which is backed by Algeria. Both Morocco and Algeria are effectively US client states and keen to impress their paymaster, but the US has been unable to resolve the dispute via the UN.

The Polisario Front (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro) is the military wing of the Saharwi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and was founded to fight Spanish colonial rule in 1973. Spain relinquished control of the sparsely populated territory in 1976, whereupon it was promptly annexed by its neighbours Morocco and Mauritania whose rulers share clan ties with each other. Fighting ensued between US-backed Morocco and Polisario, continuing for 16 years whilst Mauritania backed out of the third of Western Sahara which it controlled in 1979.

In 1991 the UN mission to Western Sahara was established—using the acronym MINURSO—to resolve the dispute. It was intended as a short-term mission but has had numerous extensions, the most recent being that announced in April this year by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which extended the mission for a further six months.

Annan has threatened to pull the UN peacekeeping troops out of Western Sahara next February if no agreement is made. He noted that the cost of maintaining MINURSO since 1991 has so far reached around \$600 million.

The UN, through MINURSO, promised a referendum on the territory's future—whether it should remain a part of Morocco,

become an autonomous province or be granted independence. 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.

SADR and Polisario leaders accepted the UN referendum process as a face-saving measure in 1991, having followed the lead of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the African National Congress and other national independence movements in abandoning the armed struggle in return for a rapprochement with the imperialist powers.

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. The UN never had any real intention of challenging Morocco's domination. Annan himself has described UN mediation as a "zero sum game", i.e., one with no winners. The continuing impasse between Morocco and Polisario makes it technically Africa's longest-running war.

In June 2001, Baker advanced a Framework Agreement, known as the Third Way, which proposed that Morocco relinquish some control over the Western Sahara in return for Polisario giving up their demand for independence and accepting some form of devolution. It initially provided for a four-year transition period, to be followed by a referendum in which Moroccans resident for more than one year and Saharwis included on the UN's Repatriation list as at October 2000 would be eligible to vote.

Following rejection by all parties the agreement was adapted in 2003, proposing that Western Sahara become a semi-autonomous region of Morocco for a period of five years—to be followed by a referendum. The eligibility to vote was also adapted to include only Moroccans who had been continuously resident in the territory since 1999. Polisario has always been concerned that Morocco would flood Western Sahara with pro-Moroccans prior to any vote.

Polisario accepted the new proposal in July 2003, and the UN Security Council, shifting from its previous position, backed it in August 2003. Despite signs in January that Morocco was about to back the deal, however, it recently ruled out eventual

sovereignty for the territory, suggesting instead greater autonomy. It was largely frustration with Morocco's intransigence that caused Baker to resign.

A key concern of Baker's was to stop a re-emergence of the fighting, since Morocco's stability is of key importance as a major supporter of US interests in the Middle East. The US considers it essential to maintain Morocco as a pillar of support in the Arab world, especially in the face of growing hostility to American militarism. Morocco provides the US Navy with port facilities and gives the US Air Force landing and refueling rights. It receives more US aid than any other Arab or African country, bar Egypt.

Western Sahara, though larger than Britain, is mainly desert with a population of about 245,000 concentrated in a few towns. It is controlled by tens of thousands of Moroccan troops behind a 1,500-mile defensive wall of sand and minefields. An estimated 165,000 Saharwis have been living in four camps of mud-brick and canvas over the border in southern Algeria for the past 25 years.

The area is rich in minerals, particularly phosphates, has substantial fishing rights and contains potentially large oil reserves. Baker had said that an independent Western Sahara would be viable, though this is a myth that would only act as a fig leaf for US domination of the region.

Polisario's hands are somewhat tied, and a return to fighting seems unlikely since Algeria, Libya and other countries have made it clear that they would no longer support military action following the loss of Soviet backing. Libya withdrew its backing for Polisario following a deal signed between Morocco and Colonel Ghaddafi in the mid-1980s.

Algeria has historically been the main backer of Polisario, as a part of its own border disputes with Morocco. It is under pressure from the West to end its civil war against Islamic fundamentalists and restore the stability necessary for inward investment and the exploitation of its resources, including huge oil reserves. Algeria has also been pressured to resolve its differences with Morocco. But Algeria favours an independent Western Sahara, which it might control and would give it direct access to the Atlantic.

The US military presence in the region also makes a return to the armed struggle by Polisario unlikely. US special troops are currently active in the Sahel—the region directly south of Morocco and Algeria—ostensibly providing anti-terrorism training to the militaries of Mauritania, Chad, Mali and Niger. The US Military is to spend \$125 million over the next five years on the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative (a part of its Pan-Sahel Initiative), which aims to prevent groups allied to Al Qaeda from establishing a foothold.

Military cooperation with Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco in the Maghreb region has increased also. The Maghreb borders the Mediterranean, which is of strategic geopolitical importance as the main waterway for transporting oil and armies to and from the Middle East.

The US has for some time openly discussed plans for military bases in Africa, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, where a naval base appears likely on São Tomé and Príncipe, a tiny oil-rich island state off the west coast of Africa. Following the Iraq war the US has sought alternatives to Middle Eastern oil, and West Africa has large proven and potential deepwater deposits.

Over the last few years Morocco has given licenses to US firm Kerr-McGee and French Total-Fina-Elf to explore for oil off the coast of Western Sahara. The UN has declared that Morocco has no right to grant such licenses. Meanwhile Polisario has signed a deal with Australian concern Fusion Oil for exploration off its coastline. Most recently a UK company, Wessex, has signed an exploration agreement with Moroccan oil company ONAREP, a deal which is opposed by Polisario and the SADR.

Spain too has ongoing oil interests in the region determined by what resources may lie off the coast of Western Sahara, and its involvement in the \$2.3 billion Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline, linking the Hass R'mel field in Algeria with Cordoba in Spain via Morocco. Spain increasingly favours an independent Western Sahara, whilst France historically backs Morocco's position.

The essential precondition for the western powers' ability to exploit the oil and gas deposits of the region and to transport them to their own countries is the political reliability of the countries which own them and through which the pipelines will travel.

The European Union governments, like the US government, also want a settlement of the Western Sahara conflict due to their trade interests in the region. The issue is considered a stumbling block in the hoped for resurrection of the Maghreb Union trade bloc—including Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

The US and the European powers, however, are locked in a growing trade war, with both separately courting North Africa. The EU is promoting the Mediterranean Basin Initiative, which will bind all of the Mediterranean countries to the EU in a trade bloc, and as a source of cheap imports and cheap labour. There have been calls for associate membership of the EU to be extended to both Morocco and Algeria. The US, meanwhile, is promoting its own Middle East Partnership Initiative, which includes North Africa, and is intended to rival the EU in what is considered to be Europe's backyard.

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