
Reagan's Strategy for North Africa Aggravated the Crisis in Western Sahara

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Abstract: President Reagan gave a military boost to relations with Morocco, the likes of which had not been seen since the start of the Western Sahara conflict in 1975. The Republican president's strategy was to strengthen his ally so that it might emerge victorious from the war that had begun with its occupation of the Spanish colony. Reagan was a staunch believer in the use of force to resolve international conflicts, all of which were viewed from the standpoint of confrontation with the USSR. He did not care about the evidence stacking up against his argument in this case. Little did it matter that the conflict in the Sahara showed no signs of belonging to the long list of proxy wars between the two powers. Reality was invented by creating alternative facts. In this article it will become clear how erratic the US Republican administration's viewpoint was. The war in the Sahara should never have been seen as a link in the Cold War, but as a local conflict in a specific region of North-West Africa. Such thinking has prolonged this human drama for decades, making it one of the most enduring and longest-lasting wars today.

Keywords: Reagan, Hassan, Morocco, Sahara, Polisario, War

1. Introduction

In 1975, a war began in Western Sahara in the wake of the erratic decolonisation process begun by the Spanish dictatorship. The colonial power reached an agreement with Morocco to transfer sovereignty over the territory, which meant stripping away the protection of the Sahrawi people; until then they had been considered Spanish, and their territory a province of the Spanish state. Morocco's occupation of the territory had the explicit backing of the US government under President Ford. The US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, played an important role in making Hassan's desire to expand his territory southwards a reality. There is an irredentist faction of Moroccan nationalism that claims more territory than the kingdom possessed at the time of independence in 1956. Much of its activity in the region is geared towards this goal. That is why it engaged in a war against Algeria in 1963 to reclaim territory from that country, known as the Sand War [1], and did not recognise Mauritania until 1970 [2] because it claimed sovereignty over that country.

But the Madrid Accords [3-5] and American support [6, 7] were not enough for the occupation of the territory to proceed smoothly, because in 1973 the Sahrawis had formed a nationalist liberation movement – the Polisario Front – to fight for their independence. Guerrilla warfare was first waged against Spanish occupation and, after 1975, against Moroccan and Mauritanian occupation [8, 9]. In 1979 Mauritania decided to withdraw from its part of the occupied territory and Morocco illegally took its place. Since then, the war has played out unevenly [10].

The Polisario Front, always with the support of Algeria, has maintained a firm position in support of UN and OAU resolutions – which Morocco has never wanted to respect – guaranteeing the right of self-determination to the Sahrawi people. The Sahrawis have won the growing support of international organisations, but this has been undermined by the ongoing support of successive US administrations for Morocco, which they consider to be in their geopolitical interests. The economic, political and military support provided by the Ford and Carter administrations was substantial, but never matched the level of support provided by Reagan. A pivotal change in the fortunes of the war came with

this Republican president. The substantial support he gave to Hassan in all areas enabled Morocco to move from a position of disadvantage in the conflict to one of clear advantage. As a result, the war has dragged on to the present day.

In this article, I shall present a detailed account of the Reagan administration's actions, and how its reductionist approach of viewing the conflict as part of the Cold War did not contribute to bringing peace to the region and can rightly be considered responsible for prolonging the war to the present day. Implementation of the Reagan Doctrine, with its generous military, economic and diplomatic aid, backed up by France, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Israel and other powerful countries, slowed down and partly paralysed the guerrilla onslaught, but did not put an end to it. The Polisario Front, with the unwavering support of Algeria and the shifting support of Libya, faced a colossal enemy that has nevertheless been frustrated in its attempt to occupy and secure the territory once and for all.

2. Everything Is Cold War

On 20 January 1981, President Reagan was sworn into office. In the first year of his presidency, military and diplomatic relations with Morocco saw a major upswing. The new president came to the White House eager to win the desert war and supplied Hassan with abundant and sophisticated military aid. He first sent a considerable number of high-level government officials to visit Morocco. Vernon Walters, Deputy Director of the CIA between 1972 and 1976, had become the State Department's ambassador-at-large, and in that capacity made three visits to Rabat in March, October and December. Lannon Walker visited Morocco in March as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Francis West, Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs, made two visits during the year, accompanied by 23 military experts and advisers. Fran Carlucci did the same in the summer. The then Deputy Director of the CIA, Vice Admiral Bobby Inman, also went to Rabat. In December 1981 it was the turn of Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger to meet with Hassan in Fez. These notable visits to the king did not end there, and on 19 December it was the turn of the Republican Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Charles Percy. Finally, the new ambassador to Morocco, Joseph Verner Reed Jr., former vice-president of the Chase Manhattan Bank and adviser to its president, David Rockefeller, presented his credentials [11].

This display of diplomacy following Reagan's inauguration was a prelude to the major changes that were to take place in relations between the two countries. If for Carter, despite his final about-turn, the solution to the conflict would come from a negotiated agreement between the parties, for Reagan the solution would come with Morocco's military triumph. Vernon Walters and Robert Newmann, arms industry lobbyists, had already leaned on Carter for the sale of F-5 and OV-10 surveillance aircraft, but with Reagan's arrival came the announcement that there would be full readiness to proceed with and step up the sale

of arms. "Two events facilitated the change in US policy. One was King Hassan's announcement to the OAU summit in Nairobi that he would accept a referendum on Moroccan sovereignty over the Saharan territory [...] The second event was the Polisario's victory in October in the Battle of Guelta Zemmur." [9, 11]¹. The Americans took the presence of Soviet weaponry in that attack as definitive proof of the USSR's involvement in the war, which was the perfect excuse for deploying and for aiding Morocco, as it could be justified on Cold War grounds. In reality, the weaponry represented no such thing, because it had been captured from the hands of the Moroccan army in previous attacks carried out by the Polisario. The position of the Republican Party did not require much in the way of cogent arguments. It was quite simple: any sign of Soviet presence was manifest evidence of the USSR's attempts to subvert the international order [12] even if, as in this case, the Soviet arms had been purchased from the Soviets by Hassan.

Reagan expected to win the war in a short space of time. For his administration, the Polisario Front did not exist, only Algerian and Mauritanian mercenaries, echoing the preposterous argument used by Hassan himself. The Americans expanded the presence of the Secret Service and set up a more powerful monitoring station to keep Gaddafi under close surveillance [11].

The US did not want to see a new Iran and were determined to tip the balance of the war in Hassan's favour. For Reagan, the politics of the region could be explained in simplistic Cold War terms. Reagan's radicalism was also fuelled by the intelligence reports he received informing his policies. In July 1981, the CIA assessed the danger of the Soviets penetrating the Third World using non-Communist proxy organisations. "The willingness of the Soviets to employ both overt and covert tactics and even to pursue seemingly contradictory policies gives them considerable flexibility in Third World states [...] their natural inclination to support the Polisario guerrilla movement in Western Sahara, for example, is tempered by their desire to protect their economic relationship with Morocco." [13] However, even in the face of such a neutral portrayal of the USSR's role in Western Sahara, the new administration saw the communists as being behind the Polisario, contradicting all evidence.

3. Morocco's Internal Problems

In 1981 Morocco faced a number of major problems that were viewed by the Americans from several different perspectives. They analysed the problems in domestic politics, noting that under Hassan's leadership the country had begun to move along a path of reform, including having a free press, promoting a parliamentary system, and opening up to the views of different political actors. This, however, must be regarded with great caution, because the Americans

¹ See Ahmed Omar (2017) for more on this important battle.

were happy to bestow the label of freedom on areas that they would be all too quick to dismiss as pure authoritarianism in an enemy state. It was pointed out that the parties did not have enough followers or legitimacy to make crucial decisions for the country. The monarchy was above these parties; not so in the case of Hassan, "who is unpopular" [14]. The king has been a great manipulator of Moroccan politics and has been able to play the game of confronting factions and interest groups. The main players that guarantee the monarch's position of authority are the security forces and the military, and these are the only elements capable of "unseating the king" [14].

In June, there was a brutal crackdown on crowds of protesters in Casablanca, driven to despair by the country's severe economic crisis that was aggravated by the government's move to raise the price of basic goods by 15 per cent. The crackdown on the strike movement resulted in hundreds of deaths, an estimated 600 to 1,000, thousands shot and wounded, and between 6,000 and 8,000 arrested [15].

The climate of tension generated by social protest and by party criticism of the policy of war in the Sahara led to fierce clampdowns [14]. The agency report stated that the economy continued to deteriorate and had been unable to recover after the collapse in phosphate prices; the costs of the war, together with widespread corruption, had already left the economy severely strained. It was the Arab monarchies, in particular Saudi Arabia, that reportedly took on a quarter of Hassan's debt. The Saudis also paid for the military equipment acquired from the US and France. The Americans were confident that the Saudis would continue to take on a large part of Morocco's debt [14].

As for the analysis of the military situation, the report noted that military morale was beginning to recover with the arrival of new equipment in the previous half year, namely since Reagan's inauguration. This, coupled with the fact that Hassan had given the generals on the ground greater freedom to run the war, had been key.

The arrival of new aviation and ground equipment was costly, and the Moroccan coffers were at a low ebb. Moreover, the influx of new weaponry created its own problems because instructors had to be found in sufficient numbers to train personnel to use it, and a whole new arsenal of spare parts had to be procured to match the modernisation of the weapons systems.

In terms of international politics, Hassan was highly regarded by the Americans. They were particularly impressed by the position he took vis-à-vis Israel and his behind-the-scenes efforts to break Israel's isolation in the Middle East.

The US backed both the war in the Sahara and the domestic policy of repression. This gave them guarantees of continuity for the Alawite monarchy. With Reagan's arrival to the White House, the US saw the quashing of opposition forces as a necessary element of stability, and applauded Hassan's statesmanship. "The King has manipulated, co-opted or repressed virtually all legal opposition to the regime and its policies. The Socialist Union of Popular Forces, in

recent years Morocco's only credible opposition party, has had its activities severely restricted. Its secretary general [...] and two other Politburo members were under arrest from September 1981 until last March" [16]. In any case, it was the necessary course of action because, after the crackdown in Casablanca following protests over the price hikes, the king had to contain the situation. The growing economic crisis the country had endured since the collapse of phosphate prices in the late 1970s, and the implementation of harsh austerity plans, had plunged the population into a morass of misery and deprivation. The bleak outlook had led the rural areas, traditionally supportive of the king, to show signs of dissatisfaction with the monarch and the government, and this was compounded by the costs to the public coffers of the war in the Sahara. The people were beginning to attribute their day-to-day poverty to the consequences of the war and the enormous drain on resources caused by it. Hassan had staked the fate of his regime on victory in the Sahara, and now he was in trouble for it. Among the country's elites, too, confidence in the policies of the king was beginning to crumble. Businessmen, technocrats and the military elite criticised the lack of vision towards a coherent policy, and decried Hassan's handling of the war [17].

Hasan maintained control of the political system by using the tactics of divide-and-rule, granting political freedoms to the opposition or restricting them to constantly remain the arbiter of the situation, we are warned in a US Secret Service report to brief the other US security agencies. This intelligence memorandum considered that by keeping the opposition divided, along with the loyalty of the security apparatus and the loyalty of the army, the continuity of the regime was guaranteed. In addition to the war in the Sahara, the country had to cope with rapid population growth and a predominantly young population against a background of widespread misery, rising inflation and foreign debt, which diverted resources away from necessary social investments and the productive economy. Faced with this situation, if "the present system fails to satisfy rising popular aspirations, societal pressures probably will generate demands for major political change" [18] that would not be to Washington's liking.

The war in the Sahara was a factor of internal destabilisation and tensions with the other Maghreb countries. Morocco saw Algeria, Libya and the USSR as the main enemies of its regime, and as providing support for the Polisario Front. That is why Hassan was in favour of aligning himself with US foreign policy.

4. Our Friend the King

America wanted Morocco to consolidate its position, but too much overt aid and unequivocal backing for the country could undermine its deepening economic relations with Algeria, from which it was interested in acquiring gas and oil. Algeria wanted closer relations with the US, but not in exchange for relinquishing support for the Sahrawi cause and losing its role as a leader of the non-aligned countries [19]. In

any case, the US believed that the Polisario could not be defeated as long as it had the support of Algeria, even if it did significantly bolster its support for Morocco.

For the US, Morocco's geostrategic position was a highly valuable asset, given that it was the gateway to the Mediterranean, a highly sensitive space during the Cold War, and it also bordered one of the most influential countries in the Third World and a trading and military partner of the USSR. Morocco granted the use of its ports in both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and also buttressed NATO's southern flank, keeping Spain and Portugal protected in the event of a conflict with the Warsaw Pact. For all these reasons, the US wanted a strong ally in Morocco, which it hoped would benefit its relations with African countries that were not "radical states hostile to the United States" [18].

After the attack on Guelta Zemmur, the progress made by the guerrillas was noted and Morocco began to withdraw its most distant garrisons and concentrated its efforts on the construction of separation walls. The strategy of the walls proved to be successful because it kept the possibility of Polisario attacks and incursions at bay, while guaranteeing control of the most profitable territories of the former Spanish colony. From then on, Morocco's strategy focused on maintaining control of what it called the useful triangle in the north-west of the country [20, 21].

The Reagan administration became much more determined to intervene on Morocco's behalf and stepped up the policies of the last Carter administration, rearming its ally more heavily. This clearly had an impact on the Western Sahara conflict at the expense of the Polisario Front. "The Reagan administration rejected the view that changes in the international system over the last twenty-five years had limited US ability to shape regional events. It saw the string of unfavorable global events that occurred during the Carter administration as consequences of America's failure to assert its power" [22, p. 140]. For the US there was no other adversary than the Soviet Union. This new vision was immediately put into practice in Western Sahara with the shipment of 108 M-60 tanks to Morocco, and restrictions on arms sales provided for in the 1960 treaty were lifted. Moreover, Reagan did not require Hassan to show any signs of willingness to negotiate before he could continue to receive sophisticated weaponry. This represented a major shift in US policy.

At a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee in Congress, Deputy Assistant Secretary Morris Draper put it bluntly: "America's allies and close associates should expect understanding and reliable support. It would not be in the spirit of this Administration's policy if support for America's traditional and historic friends – to meet reasonable and legitimate needs – were to be withheld or made conditional other than under extraordinary circumstances [...] this Administration feels very strongly that traditional old friends such as Morocco deserve special support and consideration" [23]. Reagan's chief envoy for supplying Hassan with the new weaponry was Joseph Reed, who was reportedly called "Mister America" by the Moroccans. Under his tenure as

ambassador to Morocco, the CIA greatly expanded its presence by increasing both personnel and activities. In December 1982, a special correspondent in Rabat for the *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* recounted that: "A senior member of the Moroccan foreign service told me: 'Reed is our dream ambassador...we would never have been able to create a more perfect American ambassador to come to Morocco'" [24]. Reed combined his admiration and friendship for Hassan with that for the deposed Shah. He did not want to see a new friend fall from the throne [24]. Reed was a Republican fully committed to the President's strategy of forging good relations with friendly countries through the arms trade.

5. Reagan, Hassan, Gaddafi

The improvement in Moroccan-US relations was not entirely satisfactory for Hassan, and this explained the signing of the Oujda Treaty with Libya in 1984. The US intelligence assessment was that if the kingdom's economic situation did not improve, Morocco could re-evaluate its strategic ties with the US, even though a six-year agreement had been signed in 1982 that gave it access to Morocco's infrastructure and ports, including the transport and stationing of nuclear weapons. "A joint military commission was formed to manage the various facets of US-Moroccan security affairs" [25].

Despite this, Rabat was disgruntled by the deepening economic ties between the US and Algeria, as Hassan wanted to be the only one to have a specific and special relationship with Reagan at the time. Morocco felt that this was holding back a more far-reaching agreement with America and making it impossible for it to win the war. The rapport between Hassan and Reagan was very close, despite the Moroccan grievance with their US allies. Their pro-Israeli role in the Middle East always functioned as a mechanism of rapprochement with America [25], and for this they were also richly rewarded in the Sahara. Washington was well aware that its alliance with Hassan was not a blank cheque, as the signing of the agreement with Gaddafi, the real ogre and enemy in the region, made clear [25].

American unease at the signing of the treaty was evident. Ambassador Reed, he of Mister America fame, had been outwitted by his great friend Hassan, who did not inform him of the signing until an hour before he had signed the document. The evil Gaddafi, America's number one enemy, had reached an agreement with Morocco without Ambassador Reed or the CIA knowing what was in the works [26]. Anger at the mockery to which the US was subjected uncovered the view among some senators that Reed was often ridiculed by the Moroccans. Senator Thomas F. Eagleton said of him that he was "a 14-karat nitwit".

In December 1984 an audience took place in Fez between Hassan and Ambassador Reed. The king wanted to convey to Reagan that, despite his recent agreement with Libya, he could still be considered a firm ally. Hassan's intention was to secure more financial and military support than Reagan had already given him. It was clear that trying to win the war

was proving too costly, and the Moroccan monarchy did not have sufficient funds for such an endeavour. Hassan wanted to convey to Reagan that in the balance of relations the Moroccans contributed more than the Americans, and that this was why they had had to continue to seek funding outside the US, which justified their rapprochement with Gaddafi, while assuring him that their overtures to Libya would not affect their relationship with the United States [27]. Hassan commented that the Soviets were considering the option of no longer remaining neutral in the conflict and giving their support to Morocco. We do not know whether this was true or a comment made to prompt further US involvement. In any case, the comment belied the Republicans' determination to see the conflict in terms of a confrontation with the USSR, as had been made clear throughout the conflict. Ambassador Reed took this information at face value and stated in his report that the USSR was manoeuvring to gain ground in Rabat. The diplomatic defeats that Morocco had sustained in recent years and the impossibility of winning the war militarily were the reasons given by Reed to explain Hassan's attitude, in addition to the fact that "Hassan is prone to react like the tribal, Bedouin, Berber, Francophile chieftain which he is" [27]. What the ambassador was saying was that Hassan was trying to pressure, or one could also say extort money from, the US with the threat of military agreements with the Soviets as a bargaining chip.

A document issued by the White House in April 1985 set out US priorities, following the 1984 Oujda Treaty between Morocco and Libya [28]. Hassan's rapprochement with Gaddafi was not at all welcomed by the Reagan administration. The policy of isolation towards Gaddafi could be jeopardised by this shift in Moroccan policy, and the Americans asked for personal assurances from Hassan that his venture would not go too far.

Following Morocco's rapprochement with Libya, the Algerians did the same with the US, thus shifting regional balances. Moreover, Algeria had long been critical of the USSR and, without this leading to a major rift, it showed the shifting balance of power in North Africa. However, the main factor driving the turmoil in the region was the war in the Sahara, and this is reflected in the White House report signed by Reagan [28]. In this document, Washington persisted with its mantra that it was interested in a negotiated solution, which clearly did not tally with the vast amounts of aid it was giving to one of the parties.

Reagan proposed maintaining close military and economic cooperation with Morocco, although his foreign policy team announced that they would continue to work with Morocco and Algeria to find a solution to the Sahara conflict. American pressure on Morocco aimed to repeal the agreement reached with Libya by requiring that "cooperation with the Government of Morocco must be such as to make the union less acceptable to Gaddafi" [28], which meant implementing the General Security and Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and maintaining Joint Economic Cooperation (JEC) and the Joint Military Commission (JMC).

The Americans opted to strengthen their alliance with Morocco, suspecting that Hassan's agreement with the Libyans would not have much effect, as became clear in 1986 when it was definitively annulled. US policy in North Africa was based on the primary relationship with Morocco, and to a lesser extent with Tunisia, strengthening economic and cultural relations with Algeria, although in the knowledge that the Algerians maintained an independent position and were committed, in any case, to the cause of the Sahrawis, and on the total isolation of Gaddafi's Libya.

The Libyan enemy was at the centre of local concerns, although for the Reaganites it was still an arm of the Soviet strategy of world domination, which they exploited opportunistically, fomenting regional wars to curb US influence [29]. Against this perceived global danger, they proposed strengthening existing alliances in order to neutralise Soviet efforts to increase its influence "through its use of diplomacy, arms transfers, economic pressure, political action, propaganda and disinformation" [29]. This also had as its goal "US access to foreign markets and to ensure [...] access to foreign energy and mineral resources" and to guarantee US access to space and the oceans [29]. Reagan's doctrinal radicalism foreshadowed the Trumpist policies of the American far right [30].

Washington's policy outlines for North Africa had been established by the Office of National Security in September 1984, a month after the Morocco-Libya agreement, and answered the question: "What can the United States do to help restrain Libya, aggression and terrorism in North Africa and facilitate the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict" [31].

In light of the facts, and the military and financial support to Morocco provided by the Reagan administration, the answer to this question was purely rhetorical in nature and reflected a vague notion of support for negotiations aimed at resolving the war in the Sahara without decisive action [32].

6. Conclusion

Despite US backing, Hassan had no chance of winning the war militarily and, although the bulk of the forces were on the Moroccan side, no one was under any illusions that there would be an early end to the war. While it was true that Morocco dominated in military terms, it was no less true that the position of Algeria and the SADR had gained much ground in diplomatic terms, especially among Third World countries, gaining the recognition of sixty-five countries.

The cost of the war was affordable for Morocco. The financial and general economic aid it received enabled it to maintain the deployment of troops in the desert without the unbearable cost of impoverishment for the long-suffering population. After the stabilisation of the walls, the costs were mainly related to patrolling them.

Algeria on its own could not dictate a solution to the conflict. Such a solution could, and can, only come from US involvement that seeks a just solution under the terms set out by the United Nations. While Washington maintained its

diplomatic position by defending the UN and OAU resolutions, in practice it sided with Morocco in the war.

The lack of prospects for bringing the war to an end persisted throughout the 1980s, and although it was thought that a way out would be found with Reagan's strong military support for Morocco, it did not happen that way.

Reagan's strategy bogged down the war and ensured that it became one of the most protracted armed conflicts of all time. The failure of his alternative for Western Sahara was not remedied by successive administrations and became catastrophic in the decades that followed. There was no will on Morocco's part to respect UN and OAU resolutions, and its entire strategy was aimed at fully and absolutely occupying the territory of Western Sahara. The Polisario Front's steadfast resolve to fight for their cause in the conflict amounted to an enormous feat. The differences in the balance of power were so overwhelming that any outside observer might have concluded that the Sahrawis faced a swift defeat, but the reality of the situation was otherwise.

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