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Western Sahara

Western Sahara: A forgotten war

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In its dying days, the Trump administration in the US brokered an agreement between Morocco and Israel. [1] Morocco agreed to recognise and have full diplomatic relations with Israel, the fourth Arab country to do so in recent times after the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan. The US for its part agreed to formally recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Furthermore the US signed a new arms agreement with Morocco. Western Sahara, on Africa's Atlantic coast was invaded by neighbouring Morocco in 1975. Polisario, the national liberation movement for the Sahrawi people of the territory, still actively resists the occupation today. [2]

Morocco, ruled by an autocratic monarchy, clearly wanted to further ingratiate itself in imperialist eyes through its recognition of Israel and consolidate support for its occupation of Western Sahara. This could ultimately backfire on the Moroccan regime. The national oppression of the Sahrawi people was much less known internationally than that of the Kurds or Palestinians for example. But now the agreement with Israel has put Morocco and Western Sahara firmly under the spotlight.

The declaration of position by the Trump administration was not really a change at all. In practice US imperialism has always supported Morocco in Western Sahara. The new position is unlikely to be reversed by the incoming Biden administration, though we may get some mealy-mouthed platitudes about the need for a 'peaceful' resolution to the conflict.

And it is not just the United States, in practice all western imperialist powers have supported Moroccan control over Western Sahara, if not openly then tacitly. A clear example is shown by the relations the EU has with Morocco. In 2016, in recognising it as an illegally occupied territory the European Court of Justice ruled that Western Sahara could not be covered by existing trade agreements between the EU and Morocco without the freely given consent of its people.

Nevertheless, shortly after in 2017 the EU foreign minister Federica Mogherini stated that the EU's trade agreements with Morocco would not be affected by the 2016 ruling. This was further emphasised by a later trade agreement between the EU and Morocco covering fisheries allowing the importation into the EU of fish caught in Western Saharan waters.

So today the EU allows the importation of fish and possibly other products from Western Sahara in violation of a legal ruling by its own court! [3] Brexit Britain is no better, Britain signed a post Brexit trade deal with Morocco on broadly the same terms as the EU's trade deals in 2019 which came into force once Britain left the single market. This agreement did not exclude imported goods from Western Sahara so by default they were included. But other than a statement signed by a small though influential number of NGO directors and trade union leaders it attracted little publicity at the time. [4]

Origins

Originally a Spanish colony, the origins of the conflict go back to the 1970s. In 1973, Polisario was formed to fight for the liberation of Western Sahara and in 1975 it started a guerrilla war against the Spanish occupation. In 1974, the previous year, the Portuguese dictatorship had fallen; a major reason being because it was fighting wars against

national liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique that it could not win.

No doubt mindful of what had happened in neighbouring Portugal, Franco's fascist dictatorship in Spain found itself in a political conundrum. Spain could not risk getting sucked into a colonial war in Western Sahara but equally it could not withdraw and allow Polisario to claim victory. The only solution for Spain was to withdraw from Western Sahara but let other powers occupy the territory to replace its role as national oppressor.

Accordingly, in 1975 only a few days before Franco died, Spain signed the so-called Madrid accords with Morocco and Mauritania, giving the northern two thirds of Western Sahara to Morocco and the southern third to Mauritania. In any event the war continued and in 1979 Mauritania signed a ceasefire with Polisario and withdrew from the southern part of Western Sahara, whereby Morocco immediately occupied the area and claimed sovereignty over all Western Sahara! In 1976 Polisario declared the formation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Today the SADR controls about 20% of Western Sahara in the eastern part of the territory and internationally is recognised as the only legitimate government of Western Sahara by 40 states, mainly in Africa; it is also a member of the African Union.

Western Sahara today is Africa's last colony, though not ruled directly by an imperialist power Morocco acts as the regional proxy in Western Sahara for the imperialist system as whole. At the time of the invasion in 1975 many Sahrawi people fled or were driven from their homes to become refugees in either neighbouring countries such as Algeria or the liberated territories in the east controlled by Polisario. They were replaced by migrants from Morocco so today the Sahrawi people are probably a minority in Morocco controlled Western Sahara, in other words the Sahrawi have become the Palestinians of North Africa.

Critical

The current situation in Western Sahara is critical. In 1991 the UN brokered a truce between Morocco and Polisario pending the holding of a referendum which never happened and is never likely to happen, nevertheless this uneasy truce held for 29 years. But this came to an end in November 2020 with military clashes between Morocco and Polisario. [5] It is very probably no accident that these clashes happened at more or less the same time as Morocco reached its agreement with Israel. Morocco very probably provoked the clashes as a pretext to prepare a future offensive to take control of the territory in Western Sahara that remain under the control of Polisario and the SADR.

International support for the Sahrawi people is imperative given the serious possibility of a new war in Western Sahara. In Britain though there have been some positive developments in this regard. In the wake of recent events a joint statement on Palestine and Western Sahara has been endorsed by the Western Sahara Campaign UK, Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and four national trade unions, GMB, NEU, Unison, and Unite. [6] This statement needs to be publicised and endorsed by more labour movement organisations.

But we need to go further. In Britain, Europe, and internationally we should build support for the Sahrawi people around the following demands. First, no to trade deals with Morocco and yes to trade embargos until Morocco has completely and unconditionally withdrawn from Western Sahara. Second; for recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as the only legitimate government of Western Sahara.

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Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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[1] See statement by al-Mounadil Morocco 25 December 2020 "[Against the declaration of the Moroccan regime's relationship with Israel](#)".

[2] Polisario is the acronym for Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro.

[3] Western Sahara Resource Watch "[New report: The EU ignores its own court on conflict trade](#)".

[4] Global Justice Now, 23 January 2020 "[Statement on human rights concerns about rollover of UK-Morocco trade deal](#)".

[5] Statement by Anticapitalistas, Spanish state, 19 November 2020 "[Faced with the war escalation: with the Saharawi people, for their right of self-determination and the end of the occupation](#)".

[6] Palestine Solidarity Campaign, 18 December 2020 "[Statement on Palestine and Western Sahara](#)".