



FRENTE POLISARIO'S FIGHT TO LIBERATE WESTERN SAHARA

Frente Polisario UN Ambassador Sidi Omar explains the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic's 50-year national liberation fight.

BY BILL FLETCHER JR. | MAY 10, 2023

Displaced Sahrawis arrive to attend a Polisario congress at the refugee camp of Dakhla, which lies some 170km to the southeast of the Algerian city of Tindouf, on January 13, 2023. Photo by RYAD KRAMDI/AFP via Getty Images



Bill Fletcher Jr.:

Greetings. My name is Bill Fletcher. I'm your host today. This is the Real News Network, and we have an honor to have a discussion about the 50th anniversary of a very profound national liberation movement based in Western Sahara, called Polisario. Now, we'll get to this in a second, but let me just set the stage.

Polisario, which is an acronym for the Popular Front for the Liberation of El Saguía and Río de Oro, was formed in 1973. It was formed by independence activists who were at that point fighting Spanish colonialism. Spanish colonialism dominated what we now know to be Western Samara.

The movement proceeded along and the Spanish decided, in a way that broke international law, to withdraw from Western Sahara, but essentially to turn over the rights to dominate the territory to the Moroccans and the Mauritians, the Moroccans having claimed much of Northwestern Africa, as a matter of fact. The Polisario fought against both Moroccans and Mauritians.

They came to a peace agreement with the Mauritians, and the Mauritians withdrew their claims. The Moroccans, on the other hand, launched a major invasion and introduced a massive settler population into Western Sahara, ultimately occupying 80% of the territory. Polisario carried out a struggle against the Moroccans, and a ceasefire was agreed to through the United Nations in 1991, a ceasefire that the Moroccans have never truly respected, and the ceasefire was supposed to lead to a referendum resulting in self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. The Moroccans undermined this and have continued to undermine it, ultimately leading to a collapse in the ceasefire, the resumption of war, and some significant questions about the future of Northwest Africa.

We're delighted to have with us Ambassador Sidi Omar, the representative to the United Nations of Polisario and the government in exile, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Ambassador, a-salam alaykum.

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Alaikum assalam. Thank you.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

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Pleasure. Ambassador, I want to start with this question about the origins of Polisario. I was told by a Arab friend of mine, a leftist, he made an argument that I had never heard before, but he made an argument that in the early 1970s, the people that actually were going to build Polisario were initially thinking about building a revolutionary movement along with Moroccans to oust the Moroccan monarchy and to transform both Morocco and Western Sahara, and that at a certain point they decided not to do this, in part driven by the discovery of natural resources in Western Sahara. Ambassador, I'd never heard that argument, but I decided I wanted to ask you what's the story in terms of the origins.

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Well, first of all, let me thank you very much, Bill and the other members of the crew for giving us this opportunity to talk about the Frente Polisario, as it marks its 50th anniversary, and also to give more visibility to the question of questions are higher to audience in the United States and beyond, an issue that you are fully aware is not actually an issue that people talk about every day. So, this is really a good opportunity to, as I said, give more visibility to this very important issue.

Well, your question has to do with the origins of the Frente Polisario. Let me stress at the beginning that the Frente Polisario is an Indigenous liberation movement of Western Sahara. What you have referred to is something that we sometimes hear from people in Morocco, but the full story is not like what you have just said. The full story is that indeed Sahrawi is because of the Spanish oppression had to leave the country. Some of them settled to Morocco proper, some in Mauritania, neighboring countries, some in Algeria, and even abroad in Europe.

When the first national movement in Western Sahara, the movement for liberation of Western Sahara was crushed ruthlessly by the Spanish colonial forces in the '70s, in the famous Zemla Uprising. The people in Western Sahara, especially the young people who were active in the movement, thought that it was no longer useful to continue the struggle by peaceful meanings. And it was time for them, of course, obviously inspired by the liberation winds blowing all over Africa and beyond to resort to arms [inaudible 00:05:56] and for that to create a movement, which came later to be the Frente Polisario, created on the 10th of May. At that time, indeed, some activists within the Frente Polisario approached like-minded people in the neighboring countries, including Morocco.

But the real story is this: and thank you that you've brought it. Is that we were told, and this is on record, by some people, maybe [inaudible 00:06:22] Morocco that knew, "We don't want you to come here, and we want to help you. Go and liberate your Sahara, and we will liberate our Morocco." That actually was what was the response received from some progressive people in Morocco when Sahrawi is like all neighboring countries when they were struggling, sought help from the neighboring countries, which as you know, we have eventually found and very generously in Algeria.

Again, to stress the point that I started with, the Frente Polisario is an Indigenous liberation movement of Western Sahara. Indeed, it wanted and sought help from neighboring countries. But the response received from colleagues in Morocco was that you go liberate your Sahara, and we will liberate our Morocco.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

Your movement is very unusual in so many ways. One of the things that our viewers may not appreciate is that when the Moroccans invaded, thousands of Sahrawis left the country, and huge numbers reassembled as refugees in Southern Algeria. That seems to me to have created major strategic problems for Polisario, since building a national liberation movement has to be based among the people. But if thousands have left the country, what does that mean? So, what did that mean for the work of Polisario?

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Well, indeed, those Sahrawis who left Western Sahara end of 1975, when Moroccan troops entered and occupied the territory, they were driven by force, bombed by Moroccan aircrafts in these temporary camps that they built outside the big cities. They were driven by force to seek refuge, which they eventually found in Algeria. They did not

go out Western Sahara out of their own choice. They were driven by force. Within, of course, the structures of the Frente Polisario, which now administering, as you know, the refugee camps in southwest of Algeria for the past 40 years. So, it is not a problem for the Frente Polisario because it still administers the refugees in Algeria and also the territories that we liberated during our liberation war from Morocco where we have settlements also that we administer within the framework of the Sahrawi Republic, which as you know, is a member of the African Union, and it has its full-fledged institutions to cater for the basic needs of the Sahrawis.

As for those who were left in the occupied territories, of course they continue to sympathize with the Frente Polisario. We have underground activists and prominent, actually, human rights activists. Some of them have gained international recognition, such as Aminatou Haidar, the Sahrawi Gandhi; Sultana Khaya and others who continue the struggle, but in the occupied territories, inspired, obviously, by the thinking and the nationalist discourses of Frente Polisario because they are Sahrawis and they struggle for the same objective for which our brothers and sisters, both in refugee camps, in the liberated territories and also in the diaspora have been fighting for for almost 50 years.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

50 years, Ambassador. Your organizational party just had a congress, I know, and when people are looking over 50 years, are there significant lessons from your struggle, mistakes or correct steps that have been identified that are useful for other progressive activists and movements around the world to learn from?

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Well, indeed. 50 years is a long time in someone's life, but of course it's a short time in a nation's time. About 50 years for us have been a long time of struggle, of resistance, of unity, and of learning as well because, as I said before, Frente Polisario came out as a response of the Sahrawis against the Spanish colonial presence, but it was also inspired by other liberation movements in Africa and elsewhere. So, we have also learned a great deal and we have drawn great inspiration from other liberation movements, starting from our great neighbor Algeria, but also South Africa and others.

What we have learned, many things of course, and we have achieved tremendous achievements in different domains, but I can just highlight two things. Bearing in mind the fact that the Frente Polisario was created to liberate Western Sahara, exactly as you spelled out its name, the acronym. As for that, we know that after 50 years, we have not accomplished that mission. So, it's still a pending mission to liberate Western Sahara, which is the rationale, the reason of being of the Frente Polisario.

There are two main things that I can highlight that we have learned, the first of which is that the basis and the fundamental basis of any liberation movement is the people. If you are not able to bring everybody on board for your project, then you might have problems. The Frente Polisario, luckily, or because of its this very essence as a people-driven movement, has always been able to bring all Sahrawis together and to strengthen the unity of our people. That would explain the fact that we haven't had any of the common problems that other liberation movements faced when factions and groups splitted and created. We don't have that in the case of the Frente Polisario. So, the first thing is to be entirely dependent on your people.

The second is a firm belief in the cause. I'm saying this because during this 50 years, the world politics has changed many times, from a so-called Cold War to a new world, or alliances shifted, changes, new power configuration emerged, and we remained the same. We have not been affected by any of these. Of course, to some degree. But what I mean is that the shifting of power centers around the world and the globe has not changed in the way we operate and in the way that we have been conducting our struggle. Why is that? Because we have firm belief in our cause that remains unaffected by the positions that some individual countries, for example, might take, or of certain alliances have collapsed or changed.

So, two things, I state again, is the people and the firm conviction and belief in a just cause. These are the two main assets, among others of course, on which the Frente Polisario has relied during this past 50 years.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

Your comment about how much has changed over these 50 years immediately brings to mind that your movement started in the middle of the so-called Cold War. I remember reading that the Algerian government under Boudenyin was initially skeptical of Polisario, and then became a very strong supporter of your movement. Then the Cold War ends, and during the Cold War in 1975, what our listeners probably don't know is that then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for the United States actively supported and encouraged a Moroccan invasion, just as he did encouraging the Indonesians to invade East Timor in the same year, and then the Cold War ends. What did this mean for Polisario, particularly the end of the Cold War?

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Well, obviously the end of the so-called Cold War... I say the so-called because in Africa we viewed that war that was not cold because we saw the consequences of this global rivalry between these superpowers and their material affects on our continent, be it in Western Sahara, Angola, or [inaudible 00:16:39]. So, it was not a cold war, to be precise. It was rather a hot war as far as peoples in Africa and Asia and others were concerned.

Indeed, it marked a change in world politics, during which time, and you mentioned the former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who indeed played a role in convincing the the President Gerald Ford to support Morocco's claims over Western Sahara, or at least to mislead him in reading correctly the ICJ ruling, for example. And then, of course, the support that is given by the US to King Hassan, the late King Hassan, to conduct his infamous so-called Green March, which we understand or viewed and looked as a Black March. That was the beginning of the invasion, occupation of our land.

That marked a shift and a change in world politics, but with it came our hope that policymakers, for example, in the United States of America and in the West in general, would have a chance to rethink some of their misconceptions and prejudices about the Frente Polisario, that they viewed as a member of some unofficial group or being allied with a certain bloc against the other. And that was not true, and it's not true today. I hope they've come to realize the fact that the Frente Polisario's main ideology is to liberate Western Sahara. That's why you will always find us on the side of those who defend international law and respect people's fundamental rights.

We don't have enemies, except one, which is our north neighbor, Morocco. What makes us friends with many enlightened people around the world is that because we sure believe in the same values of a respect for these basic norms that make our life possible on this planet politically or economically or culturally. So, that's one thing that I wanted to highlight.

And the hope is still there, that after the collapse of a certain bloc and a certain ideology, according to some, that the Frente Polisario and the Sahrawi people remain committed to defending their cause. They're not the enemy of anybody, and whoever defends fundamental human rights and fundamental principle of international justice will find us on board because these are the same values and rights for which we have been fighting for the last 50 years.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

Ambassador, I for years have been involved in supporting the Palestinian struggle for liberation. To me, the similarities between the struggles are just so apparent that I have been stunned that the Arab world is split over the question of Western Sahara, and that countries and political parties that support the Palestinian's legitimate struggle for self-determination take a pass when it comes to Western Sahara, or actively oppose your movement. It's mind-boggling. How would you explain that to our audience?

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Well, I think the explanation could be found mainly in the nature of the very regimes that we have in the Arab world, and I can mention at least three orientations, if you will.

One of them is obviously related to a group of monarchies that we have, mainly in the Gulf, who obviously are aligned with Morocco, which is also another absolute monarchy in North Africa. There's those, to some extent, I would say that the [inaudible 00:21:22] Arabs, who view our struggle as a struggle to create a new entity within this world that they want to be just one. They're not for fragmentation. They want unity, and they have perceived the struggle by the Sahrawi people led by the Frente Polisario as an attempt to a split, and sow disunity within this main bloc that they call the Arab world.

Of course, there is the third group of countries who have been faithful to their own history of anti-colonial struggle, starting with neighboring Algeria and other countries in the region and beyond, who really saw in the struggle of the Sahrawi people a struggle against injustice, a struggle against occupation.

So, these are the three orientation, more or less, that you can see in the... Of course, I'm talking about the official and about governments regimes. But this view has been changing lately, thanks first of all to this drastic transformation that have taken place in the Arab world with the so-called Arab Spring where the voice of people could be heard, not only the government and the ruling regimes, and that indeed now, we are having more sympathy among Arabs in some Arab countries, but their governments are still adhering to the same position. Those monarchies in the Gulf who unfortunately have supported Morocco, not only diplomatically, but also financially to fund and finance its unjust war against us.

And that, in summary, what explains why the issue of Western Sahara has never been an issue discussed by the Arab League, bearing in mind the fact that we are an Arab nation because of history and culture, and we are proud of our belonging to the Arab family, our name actually the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. We insist on this heritage not because of any ethnocentrism, but because we embrace our history and our culture as part of this Arab world and Islamic world and African world as well. That's why we're equally proud of being an African, and I would say that frankly. Most of us and because of these political alignments and these political positions exhibited by these certain Arab nations, that there are few more African than Arab. Why is that? Because it was the African family that has embraced our struggle from the beginning and it continues to do so.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

One of the noteworthy elements of your movement is the role of women, very prominent in leadership, in playing a role in leading the movement. I'm curious, how did that come about? And were there major struggles within Polisario around the role of women? I mean, it's very different and certainly fundamentally different from the role of women that you see in fundamentalist movements. It's very liberatory. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Indeed. Well, there could be... Of course I need just one session to explain this. But briefly I could say that the fact that we have, and I would say that because we take pride in this very fact that we have one of the most empowered women in our region and in our continent. There is, I could say, if you will, an anthropological explanation for this because Western Sahara is mostly a desert, and Sahrawis, before the Spanish arrival in Western Sahara and even after, used to be nomads. In nomadic way of life in a desert, harsh environment, you don't have the luxury, actually, to have any division of labor. You need the cooperation of all family members. And in this case, the Sahrawi women have always been at the forefront of attending to guests and being in charge of the household while men tended to other tasks. So, that that's one aspect of it.

But the main aspect, because this is almost natural or cultural, the most important factor to account for this fact is that the Frente Polisario, being a liberation movement from day one, set it as a priority to give a much wider space for women to be a part of the movement, as an activist and underground, but also when the struggle was announced, for them to take part in the struggle. Of course, there is a reason, a practical one, that when the war started and men were needed to fight on the forefront, women had to take care of the domestic organization of our camps.

So, that's where we see as Sahrawis, and we are very proud of this fact when we say that we have built a nation and incite thanks primarily to our women because our men were

tending to the military tasks or being diplomats abroad. But it was our women who taught our children, who work as nurses and doctors, as administrators, and as a recognition of this fact, all a natural outcome, actually, of these efforts, to men's efforts done by the Sahrawis and the [inaudible 00:27:41] Frente Polisario that now will have 40, over 40% of women represented now in recently established parliament. In the latest elections, the rate was higher than the previous one. I think that that's something that we are proud of because it's an indication and demonstration of the key role played by Sahrawi women in this [inaudible 00:28:10].

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

I have two more questions before we close, and one takes us back to 2015. Now, I recognize that you're the representative to the United Nations, but I have a question about the African Union. In the spring of 2015, there was a proposal submitted to the African Union to reconstitute a liberation committee that would support your struggle, the struggle for Sahrawi freedom, and the proposal was pretty straightforward. It also called for the African Union to endorse and help to constitute a global campaign in support of Sahrawi freedom.

Much to my shock, this proposal went nowhere. It was pushed aside, allegedly because the proposal was "complicated." Ambassador, I was mystified. I thought that this was this... I mean, as you mentioned, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was one of the founders of the African Union. The Moroccans came crawling back to the African Union, having expected that their absence would bring everything down. They kept crawling back, and the African Union has been on record in supporting this struggle, yet didn't seem to want to take any steps. It just led me to wonder about both the African Union as well as nation states that claim that they support you. But as we say, the proof is in the pudding. So, Ambassador, can you break that down for us?

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Well, in the Sahrawi Republic, and as for the African Union, is a founding member, as you exactly said of the African Union. It was a member of the erstwhile Organization of African Unity. As far as the African Union is concerned, we are a state, primarily a state, a member of the union rather than, let's say, a liberation movement. This is still the case perhaps for those other countries and political organization movements that recognize us as a liberation movement rather than the state. If you want the institutional context in which the African Union approached the issue of Western Sahara, because as SADR, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, is already a member of the union.

But the point that they have raised may also have something to do with the path that we have taken in Africa all along these years to a time where I think the founding values, and I'm saying this as an African and someone who served at the African Union headquarter in Addis Ababa, that we have indeed walked a long walk in liberating our peoples during the anti-colonial struggle and then building the state or the nation state, whatever we way you want to look at it.

But I think on the way on this hard journey, we have also started to look [inaudible 00:32:05] some of the value of some of these founding and principle values of our union, which is, for example, pan-Africanism, which is associated basically with our continuing struggle for liberation because the formal independence, whatever way in which it was obtained through armed struggle or negotiations, has not finished yet because the liberation means a complete liberation of minds and bodies, where we as Africans are owners of our destiny: politically, culturally, economically. This is not the case because, of course, foreign interference, because of our own making sometimes the kind of governance and rules that we have in some places in Africa.

It's all mixed back of, as I said, the long way that we have walked from the early days of anticolonial struggle. But during this journey, as I said, we seem to have, or some of us have forgotten that we still owe our continent and individual countries and peoples a lot to really bring to conclusion our total liberation from foreign domination and interference. So, it is, in this context, that I think we should approach this issue of, as you mentioned, liberation committee and so on.

But to summarize all of this, as far as the African Union is concerned, the Sahrawi Republic is a full member. The African Union has a very clear position based on the principles and objectives of the Constitutive Act, including the principles of respecting the

borders existing on the achievement of independence, opposition to the use of force or threat of use of force against member states, and the peaceful resolution of conflict. These are the guiding principles and values that underpin the position of the African Union regarding the West Sahara; or, more precisely, the conflict between the Sahara Republic and the Kingdom of Morocco.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

Indeed, Ambassador, one final question. You're speaking to a global audience. Certainly in the United States, I have to say, unfortunately, most people have not a clue about the struggle in Western Sahara and the struggle of the Sahrawi people. But when you're speaking to a global audience, including but not limited to people in the United States, what do you want them to do? How can they step forward and support the work that your movement has undertaken for 50 years?

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Well, people in the United States and elsewhere, in Europe or Asia or even in Africa, those who have fought for their freedom, not perhaps themselves, but their forefathers... In the case of the United States of America, people fought for their freedom, worked hard to enjoy the basic rights that every American citizen, regardless of his color, creed or religion or political ideology enjoys.

So, imagine you'll be in the US or in Europe and elsewhere, that someone wants to take those rights away from you, someone who invades your country and removes you from your home, from the place where you were born, your ancestors were born, unjustly, by use of force. Imagine this situation. If you are able to imagine this situation, then you will be able to understand the situation of the small and peaceful people of Western Sahara. There are people who have been removed from their homes, whose country has been unjustly invaded by a mighty neighbor, supported, unfortunately, by a government like the US government or the French government, for that matter, sent in weapons to Morocco to use against us, the money of taxpayers in Europe or in the case of the United States.

So, our message to this global audience is very simple. We are a small people who want to go back to our place, to live in peace with all our neighbors, including Morocco. Because in our struggle, indeed, it's 50 years of the creation of the Frente Polisario, or 40 years of war with Morocco, but at the end, we don't have any grudge against the Moroccans themselves as the people of a neighboring country because we know that they are our neighbors, and in this case, geography dictates that we have to live in peace. Our problem is with a certain regime that invaded and occupied our country.

So, this is what we want. We want our country back to live in peace and have time to go about the same things and daily businesses that people in the United States or Northern Europe or in Asia have time to do because when you don't have home, you don't have a life, and you don't have a future. So, my message to you is please help these people to regain their land back and to live in peace, as I said, with themselves and with all their neighbors, including Morocco because at the end of the day, it is about an injustice being inflicted on a small people. And all justice and freedom-loving people around the world do have this moral duty to help and whatever they can, so the people of Western Sahara can regain their land back and live in peace.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

Ambassador Sidi Omar, representative to the United Nations of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and the Frente Polisario, I want to thank you very much. I want to also express congratulations on 50 years and hopefully liberation will be sooner than the next 50 years, and just express appreciation for all that you're doing and for the courage of your people. Thank you very much, Ambassador.

Amb. Sidi Omar:

Thank you very much, Bill.

Bill Fletcher Jr.:

Take care.

Speaker 3:

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