

Western Sahara: fifty years later, what prospects for the Polisario Front?

Created on May 10, 1973, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Sakia el-Hamra and the Rio de Oro – which became the Polisario Front a year later – aimed to liberate this territory of 266,000 km² from Spanish control. Western Sahara was then called “Spanish Sahara” and was claimed, at the time, by both Morocco and Mauritania.

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A man waves the Polisario Front flag on February 3, 2017, in the Al-Mahbes region. AFP

By : **Houda Ibrahim** Follow

The Polisario Front was, initially, financed and armed by Gaddafi's Libya, which wanted to support liberation movements in Africa. The role was later taken over by Algeria which, at the time, confiscated weapons coming from Libya on behalf of the Polisario, not wanting to anger Spain on one side and Morocco on the other.

Fifty years to the day after the birth of the movement, where are we in this struggle for the independence of a territory two-thirds of which are today controlled by Morocco?

A status quo that suits everyone

During its 16th congress last January at the Dakhla camp, one of the Polisario fighters declared to the newspaper *Le Monde* that “ *the inaction of the international community condemns us to a slow death. We prefer, he said, to die with dignity .*” A clear rejection of the *status quo* which predominates in this post-colonial conflict, the oldest on the African continent.

“ *The status quo is one of the problems of this conflict which is not geostrategically important to attract sufficient attention for the international community to put pressure on the parties to reach a resolution ,* ” says Aboubakr Jamaï, specialist in Maghreb and professor of international relations in Aix-en-Provence. This academic notes that “ *there have always been more pressing conflicts for the international community, compared to a conflict which is quite cold in*

reality... We can probably say that it is a failure of the Polisario, because it thought that by deciding to break the ceasefire, he would be able to attract this attention. It is clear that he lost on this point, because there has been no renewed interest in this conflict, which, in my opinion, works in favor of the status quo and which is in favor of Morocco .

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According to Aboubakr Jamaï, it is this *status quo* situation which means that “ *the beginnings of a solution are distant due to this radicalization of everyone* ” .

Since American President Donald Trump recognized the “ *Moroccanness* ” of the Sahara, the Moroccan attitude echoes this position even if, in terms of international law, nothing has changed and the Sahara, in the eyes of the United Nations, remains a “ *non-autonomous* ” territory. According to several observers, this *status quo* ultimately suits everyone, especially the Europeans who do not want to quarrel with Morocco or Algeria because of this issue. They also do not want to go against the will of the United States.

Polisario youth opposes the older generation

Today, there are two opposing trends within the Polisario movement: youth who are demanding a change of strategy in the face of the *status quo* . She calls for a toughening of the armed

struggle. Faced with it, the older generation is still betting on the UN and the international community to resolve this conflict.

The position of this youth and its opposition is a very important element which has just appeared in the Sahrawi equation. According to Ricardo Fabbiani, director of research on the Maghreb at the International Crisis Group, “ *it is opposition to the **leader, Ibrahim Ghali**. The youth are demanding to raise the level of fighting a little and to try to carry out a kind of military escalation against Morocco, even within the occupied territory, in order to increase tension in the region .*

A position which goes against the strategy adopted by the leader of the Polisario, who continues to a certain extent to be open to the hypothesis of the resumption of talks. “ *This opposition within the Polisario is mainly supported by the youth. There is a generation of Sahrawis, in the Tindouf camps, who grew up in the atmosphere of the ceasefire of 1991 and therefore the UN agreement to organize a referendum, which therefore never had place. It is a youth who is fed up with the status quo and who believes that we must return to arms to liberate the occupied territory ,” analyzes Ricardo Fabbiani .*

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The impotence of the UN

If this long conflict also marks the lack of geopolitical interest of the international community for this region, the recent war in Ukraine does not help matters. “ *Finally, we returned to an international*

configuration, United States against Russia, Westerners against what we formerly called the non-aligned. So, returning to a configuration which is not the Cold War, but which resembles it, does not, in any case, move in the direction of regulation, underlines Pierre Vermeren, professor of contemporary history at the University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne . That being said, what will be very important is the end of the Ukraine crisis. Will Russia win, will there be a status quo ? Will the United States or its allies instead score points? »

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It is therefore the outcome of this conflict in Ukraine which will determine the new international context and which will perhaps give rise to a new world order. It must be remembered, notes Pierre Vermeren, " *that this question of the Sahara is debated every year at the UN, that the UN is present on the ground, that the UN has shown its impotence for a very long time, particularly in cause of the Cold War, but the Cold War ended a very long time ago and the impotence (of the UN) remained .*

Currently, the possibility of a resumption of talks seems difficult to envisage. The Polisario demands a change in the UN position. As for Morocco, it has succeeded in imposing a new reality on the political and diplomatic front. Several African and European countries now recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.