Africa’s Last Colony

Morocco continues to stonewall on the human disaster it has created in Western Sahara, and John Bolton is not the only U.S. official unwilling to ignore the problem any longer.

by DAVID KEENE

August 10, 2019, 12:05 AM
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On the evening of July 19, Sabah Njourni joined a celebration of Algeria’s winning the Africa Cup of Nations soccer tournament in Laayoune, a city located in a part of the Western Sahara that Morocco invaded and occupied back in the Seventies. The 24-year-old and many others in the crowd were waving Algerian and Western Sahara flags, since they were not just soccer fans, but Western Saharans living under Moroccan control in what they and the UN refer to as “non-self-governing territory.”

Perhaps Sabah should have known that waving a Sahrawi flag as she was doing that evening is considered a crime by the Moroccan regime, which has been working overtime since seizing the Western Sahara to wipe out any expression of Sahrawi nationalism or support for independence.

But Sabah and the others threw caution to the winds that night. They were celebrating as rabid soccer fans and expressing both their friendship toward Algeria and support of their cause.

As the celebration went on, the Moroccan police and military arrived in force. The peaceful gathering turned violent when police used gas and rubber bullets to break them up. At least 80 of the celebrants were injured, and two, including Sabah, were killed. This was not the tourist paradise that so many Americans picture when they think of Morocco.
Witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International described just how. The Moroccan police have apparently taken to running down protestors in the street and turning their vehicles into weapons of terror. Sabah, according to two witnesses was crossing a semi-deserted street when she was struck by a police vehicle, thrown into the air and then run over by another police vehicle as she lay dying in the street. Several others suffered severe injuries after having been run down by the police as well.

Had this happened in the U.S. or any one of a dozen other countries, it would have been worldwide news, but Morocco systematically denies journalists access to what goes on in the Western Sahara. It is an on-going humanitarian crisis that no one in this country knows much if anything about and that is the way Morocco wants to keep it. Last year when a New Yorker reporter tried to visit the area, law enforcement agents took sent him packing, suggesting later that he was some sort of “agitator.” The result has been a generation long blackout of terror directed by a supposedly humanitarian Moroccan regime against a subjugated people.

The Western Sahara in which Laayoune is to be found was until the seventies a Spanish colony known as the Spanish Sahara. When Spain gave up her colonies, Morocco invaded initiating a twenty year war with the Sahrawi inhabitants as she fought to make the former colony a part of an expanded Morocco. It was a brutal war during which hundreds of thousands of Sahrawi men, women and children fled the fighting to sanctuary in neighboring Algeria where they remain to this day living in UN administered refugee camps and dreaming of the day they can return to their homes.

In 1991, the United Nations negotiated a ceasefire that ended the shooting war by getting the parties to agree to allow the Sahrawi to vote in a referendum on whether they wanted to remain a part of Morocco or be allowed self-determination. At the time, the Polisario or military arm of the Sahrawi was doing very well in the field against the Moroccan military, but Polisario leaders believed they could achieve their goal of self-determination at the ballot box and agreed to the
ceasefire based on what they took as an ironclad promise that the referendum would soon be held. That has yet to happen and if Morocco has its way, it never will.

Morocco seized the Western Sahara not because she didn’t have enough desert land herself, but because it was ripe for exploitation. The Spanish had built potash mines that have generated hundreds of millions of dollars a year for Rabat since the occupation and the fish rich Western Saharan coastal waters allow Morocco to export fish to the European market. In addition, it is believed that there is oil beneath these waters the Moroccan regime would love to get its hands on. It is no wonder that in Africa and internationally, the Western Sahara has come to be known as Africa’s last colony.

Morocco has no intention of allowing the Sahrawi to vote on their own future. Moroccan diplomats for years pretended that Rabat accepted the concept of self-determination but threw dozens of roadblocks in the way of actually allowing a vote. That went on for decades, but in recent years as Rabat has been pressured by the UN, the International community and, finally, the United States to live up to the promise made so long ago, Morocco has simply declared that a referendum is “off the table” and that the occupied territory will remain now and forever a part of Morocco.

In the beginning, Morocco claimed legal and historic rights to the territory, but those claims were rejected as absurd by the International Court of Justice in a 1975 decision that has been agreed to by every other court and international body that has examined the issue in the years since. She then asserted that the claims of the Sahrawi were a fiction made up by the old Soviet Union and Algerian officials to weaken Morocco as a bulwark of freedom in the region.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Algeria as a strategic ally of the U.S. in the region, the argument shifted with Moroccan diplomats warning that the very survival
of the Moroccan monarchy was at stake because giving up the Western Sahara would lead almost inevitably to its demise.

Then came 9/11. The Moroccan argument changed again with the claim that the Sahrawi were pro-terrorist and that giving them control of the areas from which they had been expelled would open the region to Al Qaeda and Isis. Added to this was a Moroccan inspired rumor that the Sahrawi are somehow secretly funded by Hezbollah. The U.S. military which works with Algeria and the Sahrawi in the region publicly rejected this particular conspiracy theory, but it persists in some quarters even today.

In the hope perhaps of driving a wedge between the Sahrawi and the Muslim world, the Moroccan press this year has come up with yet another conspiracy theory; alleging that U.S. support for the refugees stems from a devil’s pact entered into between Polisario leaders, evangelical Christians in the United States, and Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, the main supporter of the Sahrawi in the U.S. Senate, to allow Christian missionaries to openly urge those in the refugee camps to abandon Islam for Christianity.

The Moroccan regime’s strategy is both simple and makes sense from her point of view; do whatever is needed to discourage any action on the issue because in time the world will come to accept the status quo as legitimate. To accomplish this goal, Rabat has spent tens of millions of dollars on lobbyists and others in Washington to convince policy makers to do nothing and until recently Morocco was confident that the strategy would work.

John Bolton summed up the Moroccan strategy as well as anyone when he wrote in 2007 that Morocco is “expecting that de facto control will morph into de jure control over time.”

All that changed when President Trump appointed John Bolton as his National Security Council head. A French journalist who happened to be in Rabat when news of the appointment reached Morocco told me that to say that they saw the appointment as “troubling” would be a gross
understatement. They know that for years, Bolton has been pushing for a resolution of the status of the Sahrawi both because he sympathizes with their plight and because the on-going stand-off is a threat to regional stability in North Africa and hence to U.S. interests there.

Bolton made his interest clear in two ways. Each year the UN has to vote to extend the mandate that allow the international body to continue funding the refugee camps in Algeria and what is known as MINURSO (The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), but last year with Bolton in a position of influence, the United States demanded a six-month rather than what had become the traditional one year extension of the mandate to serve notice on the parties that the U.S. wanted them at long last to move toward a resolution of the roadblock to the promised referendum.

Then, on December 13 of last year, in a major speech on the Trump administration’s Africa policy at Washington’s Heritage Foundation, Bolton drew public attention to the problem and made solving it a major test of whether the UN is capable of much of anything.

Officially and unofficially, Morocco shrugs off Bolton’s actions as insignificant given their long friendship with the U.S. Last year when New Yorker reporter Nicholas Niarchos was preparing an article on the Western Sahara he was told by the Moroccan Ambassador to the UN that Rabat isn’t all that worried about whatever pressure Bolton might exert on them to deliver on the promised referendum. “Our bilateral relationships are so strong that they will never be jeopardized by any person,” he told Niarchos, adding that “there is no way to organize a referendum ... referendum is dead.”

Bolton disagrees. His longtime focus on the Western Sahara stems at least in part on the assistance he provided to former Secretary of State James Baker who was appointed by the UN after President George H. W. Bush left office as a UN Special Envoy to get the parties to agree to a way in which the long promised referendum could be held. The two did just that and after
agreeing to many compromises to satisfy Rabat, convinced the Polisario and Morocco to sign off in 1997 on what became known as “The Baker Plan.” The plan went through two iterations to satisfy the Moroccans, but at the last minute the Moroccans pulled out; Baker resigned and went home to Texas as the impasse continued.

Finally, last year under pressure from the international community and the U.S., the UN appointed yet another Special Envoy, former German President Horst Kohler, who miraculously got the Polisario and Morocco to sit down together twice in Switzerland, but at these meetings and in the corridors between the sit-downs it became clear that Morocco would agree to nothing. Kohler, citing health reasons, quit and went home.

The betting over the years has been that Morocco’s intransigence would break only if and when the U.S. demanded action. That, it was believed, would convince other nations upset about the continuing denial of self-determination to the Sahrawi to act rather than simply issue pro-forma denunciations of the continuing illegal occupation of the Western Sahara and that may be what’s happening now.

A European court recently invalidated a European Union trade treaty with Morocco because the fish the Moroccans have been shipping to the EU come from Western Saharan waters without the consent of the Sahrawi, making their sale unacceptable under international law. EU politicians under pressure from France in particular have convinced the EU to ignore its own court’s decision, but the decision strengthened pro-Western Saharan advocates in Europe.

Meanwhile, purchasers of Western Saharan potash are having second thoughts. At least one ship carrying the illegal cargo has been seized and several purchasers have decided to look elsewhere for potash and the oil companies so anxious to help Morocco explore for oil in Western Saharan waters have suspended their plans to do so. All of this combined with the billions in military spending needed to enforce the status quo in the occupied territories and on the border has made
the whole enterprise far more costly than Rabat ever imagined and strengthen the international belief that their protestations notwithstanding the day may be arriving when a referendum will be “back on the table.”

Meanwhile the Sahrawi who fled the fighting continue to live in refugee camps in the Algerian desert, depending on the UN and aid from churches in the United States for the funds needed to survive until the impasse breaks. In the meantime, they have established within the camps and those parts of their homeland not taken by Morocco a government recognized by more than eighty nations, gained full membership in the African Union, and educated a generation in preparation for the day they will win the self-determination promised them. Over the years dozens of U.S. Congressional and Senate delegations have visited these camps and come away convinced that the promised referendum is the Sahrawi’s only hope of ever regaining their homeland and freedom. I first visited the camps fifteen years ago and my daughter served for about six months as a volunteer in them a few years later.

My concern for what I saw then and have learned since has led me to agree to work with the Algerian government on this and other issues of concern to Algiers because through the years Algeria, while eschewing any interest in the Sahrawi land, has hosted their refugees and worked with the parties to support their desire for the right to determine their own future.

Algeria realized early that a failure to solve the problem of the Western Sahara made it difficult if not impossible for the nations of the region to realize their economic potential and is a continuing cause of the regional destabilization that breeds terrorism and discontent.

If Americans knew more about what Jim Baker, John Bolton, and elected officials like Senator Inhofe have learned about the ongoing human disaster in the Western Sahara, all of Rabat’s lobbyists and diplomats would lose their ability to keep the U.S. from stepping up the pressure to force their country to live up to its promises.
The problem is that few Americans even know that Africa’s last colony exists. After discussing the issue recently during a radio interview, my host broke in to say, “I’ve never heard anything about this until today.”

He will hear far more about it in the future and with the U.S. taking a more aggressive stance, the Trump Administration and the man Morocco hopes it can continue to ignore may end up freeing Africa’s last colony.

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