



Explaining Algeria's Nationalist Foreign Policy on the Western Sahara Conflict

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Introduction

Many assumptions have been advanced to explain Algeria's involvement in the Western Sahara dispute. On one hand, some policy analysts have mostly assumed that the active role played by Algeria in this North African conflict is for reasons of rivalry with its western neighbour Morocco for regional dominance as well as for strategic factors. On the other hand, other observers assumed that Algeria's Western Sahara policy is a product of its national ideology which gave birth to a revolutionary foreign policy conceived to fight Western colonialism, denounce and oppose neo-colonialism and imperialism. This stance dominated and shaped Algeria's foreign policy conduct since its independence not only in Cuba, Palestine, Vietnam, but in the Western Sahara and in many other spots around the globe.

Beyond doubt, the two assumptions underlie Algeria's Western Sahara policy and, hence, they cannot be neglected. Jacob Mundy (2010) argues that both must be equally taken into account when explaining Algeria's involvement in the dispute (1). To him, "Motives derived completely from either ideology or material interests cannot sufficiently explain the complete pattern of Algerian behaviour in the conflict, yet both are impossible to ignore" (3). Yahia Zoubir (1997) sees the conflict between Algeria and Morocco following the latter's expansion in the Western Sahara as a struggle for hegemony (43-61). Given the ideological thinking that prevailed for more than five decades within the Algerian decision-making elite, this paper favours the ideological factor in explaining Algeria's Western Sahara policy.

Viewed as a whole, the foreign policy that Algeria followed from the middle of the 1970s especially towards the Western Sahara problem reflects a consistent conception of the country's national ideology. The latter was the product of the sad colonial experience which compelled the Algerians to perceive themselves as a revolutionary state with a moral obligation to fight Western colonialism, condemn and combat neo-colonialism and imperialism (Roughton, 1969: 433). In this logic, the Algerian foreign policy towards the Western Sahara problem can be understood only if one realizes that the principles and the factors that impacted modern Algeria's revolutionary foreign policy have their origins in an exceptionally violent anti-colonial struggle.

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Not too much scholarly work has been written on the ideological motives behind Algeria's backing and defence of the demands of the Western Sahara in its goal for independence from Morocco. Some of the chapters or papers that focus on Algeria's position on the Western Sahara conflict can be found in works such as Zoubir, Y. (2010) "The Western Sahara Conflict: Regional and International Repercussions", Zunes, S. and Mundy, J. (2010) *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict (Ir)resolution*, Michael D. Jacobs. (2012) "Hegemonic Rivalry in the Maghreb: Algeria and Morocco in the Western Sahara Conflict", Spector, Samuel J. (2009) "Western Sahara and the Self-determination Debate" and Jacob Mundy's "Algeria and the Western Sahara Dispute".

The evolution of Algeria's activist foreign policy behaviour towards the Western Sahara conflict remains insufficiently explained. The objective of the present work is therefore to fill in part of this gap by providing convincing answers to these questions: Why is Algeria involved in this dispute? And why have its leaders demonstrated a revolutionary nationalist anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist foreign policy where Algeria remained deeply attached to the idea of self-determination? Overall, the paper explains how Algeria's foreign policy ideological guiding principles have always underlined its position towards the conflict more than any other political or economic reasons. In the first place, however, the focus will be on the conflict between Morocco and the *Polisario* over the territory and how Algeria, which remained extremely fond of the idea of self-determination and widely supported subjugated peoples everywhere in the world, has challenged Rabat's expansionist interests.

Background to the conflict over the Western Sahara

Though many previous colonial territories got their independence in the 1970s, there is nowadays one colony in the African continent that has not got its independence, namely the Western Sahara. A former Spanish colony since 1884, the Western Sahara, which was declared as a non-self-governing territory in 1963 by the United Nations (UN), did not become independent when Spain retreated in 1975 (Spector, 2009: 35-37). The first UN Resolution 2229 on this territory was adopted by the United Nations in 1966 and called Spain to organize a referendum under UN auspices on the territory's right to self-determination (Marks, 1976: 3-13).

The issue of self-determination has been essential to the Western Sahara ever since the United Nations passed its Resolution on the territory in December 1966 (Schöldtz and Wrangle, 2006: 22). Turning a blind eye to this and later UN resolutions and pressures from African countries in particular, Morocco invaded the territory and has governed it ever since (Wohlgemuth, 2006: 9). From an Algerian point of view and human rights international organizations' stance, the occupation of the territory is both a breach of the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people and a violation of human rights and the cause of thousands of Saharawis living in refugee camps in Algeria.

Subsequent to the Madrid agreement in 1975, the territory was ceded to Morocco and Mauritania, with the latter renouncing its acquisition in 1979. Claiming the territory through historical links, Morocco invaded, occupied, and annexed the Western Sahara despite the decision of the International Court of Justice that Morocco has no legal claim on the territory; and the request of the UN Security Council that Morocco must withdraw from the former Spanish colony (Maghraoui, 2003: 115). Since then, the *Polisario* engaged in a conflict with Morocco over the right of Western Sahara to self-determination and its illegal occupation (124).

The Popular Front for the Liberation of *Saguia al-Hamra and Rio de Oro* (*Polisario*) was founded in 1973 to declare the Sahrawi longing for independence. It established an independent government in exile from Algeria in 1976 that was recognized by many governments and gained a seat in the Organization of African Union (OAU) in 1982, which led Morocco to withdraw from the OAU in protest (Ben-Meir, 2010: 63-86). The Sahrawi leaders claim that under international law, as a former colony, the Western Sahara should have been granted independence. Established in and assisted by Algeria, which is highly motivated by a nationalist foreign policy, the Polisário launched constant attacks on Moroccan forces until a 1991 cease-fire was brokered by the United Nations (Boukhars, 2012: 11). The two belligerents signed an agreement that called for a concluding vote on independence, autonomy or some other form of governance supervised by the UN (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 25).

Yet, negotiations over the voting lists between the Polisário and Morocco in 1994 and 2000 thwarted any potential solution by means of vote. A further attempt to bring both parties of the conflict to an agreement on a solution by vote for integration, autonomy or independence was made in 2003 by former US Secretary of State James Baker, serving as a special UN envoy on Western Sahara. Again, despite the agreement of the Polisario and Algeria on the terms of Baker's proposal, Morocco totally rejected it (Simanowitz, 2009: 303).

Following Morocco's offer of autonomy for the Western Sahara in August 2010 and the country's July 2011 constitution (Boukhars, 2012: 11) which were seen as potential steps toward a solution, nine rounds of talks between the two sides were held in 2012 under the supervision of UN Envoy Christopher Ross to Western Sahara. The discussions, which meant to reduce differences over any kind of governance settlement with Algeria and Mauritania as observers, ended without any obvious agreement. Other talks were also held under the supervision of Horst Koehler as the Western Sahara envoy in December 2018 and March 2019 involving Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and the Polisário Front, yet again no practical lasting solution was reached.

Both, Morocco and the *Polisário*, remained committed to press on their own positions for a future solution (Arieff, 2013: 13). In the absence of any possible solution, the *Polisario* organized a number of insurgencies in 2005 and 2010 and during and after the Arab Spring Movement of 2011 as a new form of uprising against the Moroccan occupation and abuse of human rights instead of armed conflict (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 38). Morocco continued to push its agenda for integrating Western Sahara under its sovereignty because of the support it has constantly received from its allies in the United States and France. As an important ally to Morocco, Washington has always stood against a Polisario vote on independence because this would damage the Moroccan monarchy (Zoubir, 2009: 984). France also defended the Moroccan claims within the Security Council and advocated a solution allowing Sahrawi autonomy under Rabat's sovereignty with no option of self-determination (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 72).

Algeria saw the Moroccan takeover of the territory since 1975 as a violation of international law. Algerian officials firmly believe that the Western Sahara is not a part of Morocco and as such Rabat has no legal claim to it. They judge that the Sahrawi have the right to self-determination, and they are entitled to create a fully sovereign state. As a result, Morocco has no legal right to dispose of the natural resources of Western Sahara for its own benefit. Therefore, Algiers has always worked to challenge Moroccan claims on the Western Sahara territory and to back the *Polisario* and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as the legitimate power over the territory. It has constantly defended its support for the Polisario cause and helped the SADR to obtain admission to the OAU

and its successor the African Union. It also persuaded other countries to recognize the *Polisario* as the official representative of the Sahrawi (Benabdallah, 2009: 421). During all this time, the parties to the conflict have never been able to attain a commonly acceptable resolution. Morocco upholds its sovereignty over the territory. The Polisario continues to challenge the Moroccan occupation and to fight for independence, and its faithful backer, Algeria, prioritizes international law and the Sahrawi people's right for self-determination and supports a referendum on self-determination. Given the two adversaries' conflicting positions, reality suggests that they will not soon settle their divergences over the Western Sahara issue.

Explaining Algeria's concern in the Western Sahara Dispute

Regardless of the different assumptions of rivalry and ambitions of hegemony between Algeria and Morocco (Jacobs, 2012: 1-73), Algeria's role in the conflict can be attributed to its deep-rooted nationalist foreign policy, in particular the principle of self-determination of colonized peoples that Algerian policymakers have always championed under successive post-independence Algerian governments. Writing on Algeria's position in the conflict, Jacob Mundy (2010) says: "Algerian leaders [saw] in Polisario clear parallels with their struggle for independence". He adds that "Support to Western Saharan resistance is thus not only consistent with Algeria's national values, but also its history" (3-4). To understand Algeria's position in the conflict, it is significant to provide an analysis of the country's radical and anti-imperialist foreign policy practised following its independence.

An overview of Algeria's Foreign Policy

It is commonly held that a compelling explanation of the foreign policy orientation of any country cannot be well understood without an examination of its determinants and guiding principles. Such an examination must, if only by way of background, take into consideration the past, for history itself often determines the boundaries within which current politics evolve. In the case of Algeria, colonial history gave rise to many determinants which still exercise significant influence on Algerian foreign policy: factors whose origins lie in the past but which continue to impact contemporary policy.

The roots of independent Algeria's foreign policy are commonly attributed to the impact of the extremely revolutionary national ideology acquired as a result of the sufferings endured by the Algerians in their resistance to and struggle against the French occupation. It is also an effect of the experience acquired by the Algerian diplomacy during wartime, as well as to the indifference of Western powers, particularly the United States, towards Algeria's revolutionary war against the French (Stone, 1997: 228 – 229).

Algeria's foreign policy constants include the right to decolonization, non-intervention in domestic affairs and sovereign equality of states and the struggle against the domination of the colonialist and imperialist powers worldwide (Ait-Chaalal, 2002: 66). It was also based on the rejection of the Cold War rigid bipolar structure, the mobilization of support for self-determination, and the integrity of borders (Grimaud, 1984: 146-50). Taken together, these attributes contributed to shaping Algeria's foreign policy orientation and the motives that influenced its efforts in establishing its political and economic sovereignty and leadership in a world dominated by Cold War concerns as well as Third World activism.

From 1962 and under successive governments, Algeria shaped its image as the emblem of revolution, giving aid and diplomatic backing to national liberation movements in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia (Rocherieux, 2001: 31). Its position in international

and regional summits was often friendly towards China and the Soviet Union and aggressive towards the West which represented colonialism, imperialism and economic dominance of Third World underdeveloped countries (Nelson, 1986: 87).

The early foreign policy activism, under the governments of Ben Bella and Boumediene, was driven by the struggle against Western colonialism and imperialism, and by great efforts to assert Algeria's national sovereignty and achieve its socio-economic development (Naylor, 2000: 47). Under Bendjedid, however, the economic and political constraints that Algeria faced in the mid-1980s accelerated the country's diminished global ambitions, restricted its diplomacy on its immediate neighbourhood, and made Algeria's foreign policy less ideological and less confrontational (Belkaid, 2009: 337-340).

In the 1990s, however, it became evident that Algeria could not continue to conduct its foreign policy on the same ideological principles it embraced since it gained independence in 1962. Several factors led to a weakened commitment to an activist foreign policy in Algeria's international relations. The end of colonial occupation in Africa, the fragmentation of the Non-Aligned movement, the opposition of the industrialised world to the new economic order championed by Algeria, and the failure of its own economic paradigm led to an obvious change in the country's foreign policy course (Haddad, 2012: 328).

Moreover, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, on which Algeria relied for much-needed economic, military, and political support, the near financial bankruptcy of Algeria and its descent into a bloody internal conflict, all stood for new challenges for the Algerian foreign policy. All of a sudden, the Algerian authorities were deprived of the financial means or even the time to deal with global affairs (Cavatorta, 2012: 16-21).

Regardless of the differences in their foreign policy orientations, the successive Algerian leaders pursued the same ideological commitment towards the Western Sahara issue since its illegal occupation by Morocco in 1975. The option that the Algerian leaders like Boumediene and Bendjedid had in common is the perception of Morocco as an expansionist state and the support of a referendum on self-determination of the Sahrawi and the Polisario movement in their struggle to create an independent Sahrawi state (Zoubir, 2007: 160-1). Moreover, despite the obvious vigour and high measure of pragmatism that marked Algeria's foreign policy under Bouteflika and despite the rapprochement with many Western nations, Algeria's diplomacy remained to some extent structured on some ideological components that guided its foreign relations since independence (Spencer, 2012: 4).

Thus, though President Bouteflika made some concessions to espouse new pragmatic ways of political thinking and acting, he nonetheless persisted in the ideologies of non-interference, and sovereignty. For a man like Bouteflika, a veteran of the war of independence and a celebrity in the Third World camp, self-determination and non-intervention remain closely linked. Algeria's views on self-determination, for instance, remained constant as was reaffirmed by its persistent refusal to compromise on the Western Sahara conflict (Belkaid, 2009: 341-344).

Explaining the influence of ideology on Algeria's Foreign Policy

Alexis Arieff (2012) assumed that: "The legacy of Algeria's anti-colonial struggle contributes to Algerian leaders' desire to prevent direct foreign intervention, their residual scepticism of French intentions, and Algeria's positions on regional affairs, including a non-interventionist stance" (1). Building on this assumption, one can admit that no far reaching variations in the Algerian foreign policy could be expected from Boumediene, Bendjedid, Boudiaf, Kafi, Zeroual or Bouteflika. Being among the chief architects of Algeria's nationalist foreign policy

during the Algerian revolution and after independence, their known attitudes to foreign policy suggested continuity in “the doctrines, principles and practices that drove the foreign policy of the government since independence in 1962” (Boukhars, 2013: 21).

Therefore, how can we explain these leaders’ ostensible activism in their foreign policymaking? It appears to be logical to admit that the conduct of the Algerian officials’ foreign policy cannot be explained without reference to their formative years and political socialisation, their personal beliefs and goals as well as their past experience, and the evolving national and international circumstances in which they ruled. Taken together, these factors may provide a reasonable and an objective elucidation to the underlying motives behind the continuity in these Presidents’ conduct of a nationalist foreign policy.

Formative years and political socialisation

All the presidents who ruled independent Algeria were born and lived through the colonial years. Their formative experiences happened under the same constraints, and were the product of the trauma of the French colonization of Algeria, and of the Algerian revolution. It was particularly the French occupation of Algeria that would mould their personalities. War life implanted in them the inclination to determination, self-reliance and persistent struggle. This period ingrained in them the roots of their later attitudes of deep suspicion and long-lasting antagonism toward France and also toward the United States and the Western establishment as a whole.

These presidents’ revolutionary nature is the product of a combination of elements derived from their early experiences as revolutionary militants in the Algerian War of Liberation in the 1950s and early 1960s. Undoubtedly, for them the war years were an insightful experience, comprising many years as young soldiers under arms in a harsh environment. They fashioned their viewpoints of the world and especially moulded their visions of the purpose of political power and state-building.

Given these experiences, the development of a revolutionary character and resultant beliefs toward the political world seems predictable. These presidents’ formative experiences and revolutionary credentials partly explain why under their leadership Algeria’s foreign policy remained somewhat committed to anti-Western policies. These attitudes were confirmed when Algeria continued to reject Western meddling in its own affairs, and interference in other independent countries’ sovereignty even under the umbrella of humanitarian assistance. It also explains why Algeria remained totally committed to the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination.

Conclusion

There is no reason to totally vilify the assumption that Algeria’s stake in the Western Sahara dispute is to prevent Morocco from controlling the Western Sahara territory to see its main rival remain weak. Equally important is the supposition that Algeria’s support for the SADR is basically a matter of principle, that of helping a liberation movement. Seen from this angle, it is logical to assert that the Algerian officials’ formative years and political socialisation are contributing factors in Algeria’s foreign policy behaviour in the Western Sahara issue.

It is an illusion to believe that the determinants of Algeria’s foreign policy will considerably change with the upcoming generational change in the Algerian military and political leadership. The reason is that patriotism, love and pride of one’s country are characteristics that are deeply entrenched in the Algerian personality and mentality of even post-independence generations.

One may, therefore, venture to assume that even forthcoming administrations will remain strongly committed to the established uncompromising stance over the principle of self-determination; otherwise the Algerian foreign policy will lose one of its significant components. Thus, frictions with Morocco in respect to the Western Sahara dispute will not be settled as long as the Sahrawi people remain attached to their right of self-independence; and Rabat continues to treat Western Sahara as its protectorate and the Sahrawi people as its colonial subjects.

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