

The Arab League and the Western Sahara Conflict: The Politics of a sheer neglect

Belkacem Iratni*

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Introduction

To dwell on the attitude of the Arab League towards the issue of the Western Sahara seems relatively easy since this organization has paid a little attention to this issue whether when this case was inscribed in the United Nations decolonization agenda or when this territory came under the domination of Morocco in 1975, after the demise of Spain to complete its mandatory duties that include the organization of a referendum for the Self-determination of the Saharawi people.

Such a neglect was not complicated to apprehend as the Arab League was relieved from being involved in a struggle of an Arab people against Spanish colonial rule that lasted from 1884 until 1975, since the issue of the Western Sahara has been handled by the United Nations. This league was also relieved that this territory came under the control of Morocco, an Arab country and an influential member of this organization. The satisfaction felt within the Arab league was, presumably, that the Arab world has avoided another fragmentation and dispersion of its vital forces.

The Sahrawi people and its representative, the Polisario Front did not have advocates for their cause among the Arab League. The only country that has staunchly and continuously backed the right of the Saharawi people for Self-determination was its neighbour Algeria. However, it was preferable for the Polisário not to seek the involvement of the Arab league in its conflict against Morocco because of the unofficial support the Arab league has given to the so-called Moroccan “historical” rights over the Western Sahara.

By contrast, the Polisário Front found a resounding support from the organization of the African Unity (OAU) and its successor the African Union (AU) as an African State, following the proclamation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976 which was recognized by the African continental organization in 1984 and also by a great number of countries. By obtaining these recognitions, the self-proclaimed Saharawi republic has achieved an international status which the Arab League has naturally denied to the Sahrawi people.

At one time or another, the Sahrawi cause received some support from certain Arab countries such as Libya, Syria or Yemen in the past or Saudi Arabia in recent months. This support was granted not because of a commitment to the achievement of the decolonization process of the Western Sahara, but mostly on the basis of the animosities of these States towards Morocco over issues related mainly to the Middle East geostrategic entanglements and ideological alignments.

* Faculty of Political Science and International Relations University of Algiers 3.

This paper contends that the neglect shown by the Arab league towards the Sahrawi cause may be explained by the fact that this issue does not fit the agenda of this organization which emphasized mainly the need to reinforce Arab solidarity in its natural regional context which is confined to the Middle East. Most of the influential members of the League come from this region while the unifying core of the Arab world still lays on the Palestinian cause and the vital geostrategic interests of the Arab world still remain located in the Middle East and not in the “far” Maghreb. In addition to geostrategic considerations proper to the Middle East, this confinement was strengthened by the increase of the role of the monarchies of the Gulf region, especially after the decline of the weight of countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Libya which were known for their opposition to the Western domination over the Arab affairs.

The attitude of the Arab league towards the Western Sahara issue was overshadowed by the individual and decisive support given by the Arab monarchies to Morocco. The evolution of this organization in the future will depend on the relations these monarchies will entertain with Morocco with regard to issues related more to the Middle East than to Maghreb politics and entanglements.

1. The Arab League’s deaf ears:

The Arab League was created in Cairo in March 1945 under the impulse of Egypt as a reaction to the project of the United Kingdom to favour the establishment of a gathering of some Arab States under its influence, known as the “Fertile Crescent”.¹

In its evolving process, the Arab League was divided along ideological lines between progressive States as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Libya, Yemen and Arab monarchies, mainly Saudi Arabia and Morocco and along temptations of the leadership over the Arab world such as the Egyptian-Saudi rivalry in the past and the Saudi-Qatari clash in recent years.

The Arab league has not been successful to solve the inter-Arab conflicts whether during the civil war in Syria in the Mid-1970s or during the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1993. The antagonisms among the member States of this league did not permit to promote the ideals of Pan Arabism or advance the Palestinian cause. By contrast, the Arab League was able to reach a consensus when it endorsed the intervention of the United Nations in Libya in 2011 and when it became involved in the engagement of a Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. But, both cases were unpopular among the Arab peoples who saw these interventions as detrimental to the Arab unity.

As an organization, the Arab League did not play a decisive role in the process of decolonization of the Maghreb countries which were under the domination of European powers², albeit some diplomatic lobbying and despite the individual contributions of its members to end this domination, as it occurred in the case of Algeria which gained its independence in 1962. Since then, the only Arab territory which remained under the grip of colonialism has been the Western Sahara. This territory was ruled under the Spanish mandate until it was handed over to Morocco in 1975 in violation of the United Nations resolutions which affirmed the right of the people of the Western Sahara for self-determination ever since the proclamation of the UN renowned Declaration on the

¹ The Fertile Crescent project initiated in 1941 comprised Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Syria. The Arab league included all these countries, in addition to Egypt.

² In the wake of the emergence of anti-colonial movement in the Maghreb, a Bureau of the Maghreb was created by the Arab League in Cairo in 1948. Later, ideological and political dissonances among the representatives of Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan nationalist parties impaired the activities of the Maghreb bureau and did not lead to the coordination among these nationalist parties in their fight against French colonialism.

Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (UN Resolution 1514) which was adopted on 14 December 1960 (Iratni, 2015a: 235-271).

The Arab League did not play any significant role in solving the Algerian-Morocco border dispute that occurred in 1963, despite the fact that it did not grant Morocco its support for the efforts it displayed in the early 1960s for the idea of Greater Morocco³. It was the Organization of African Unity that obtained a cease-fire between the belligerents and not the Arab League, although this organization had the legal and moral duties to be involved in the settlement of inter-Arab conflicts.⁴

When the case of the Western Sahara became inscribed on the international agenda related to decolonization, the Arab League did not show a substantial interest in the fight of the Saharawi people for its rights for self-determination. It did not also express a determinant support for Morocco in the pressures this country exercised upon Spain in order to ensure its control over the Western Sahara territory. King Hassan's declared its plea to the Arab League on the basis of Arab nationalism and mutual solidarity, by asserting that: "*Morocco, which has never hesitated to express an active solidarity to the Arab nation in general and the Palestinians in particular, has today the right to expect from its brother countries, whether in the Mashreq or in the Maghreb, the same solidarity and the same display of efficient means, because the colonialists do understand only the language of the force*" (Oliver Vergniot, 1985).⁵ The implicit recall of the solidarity Morocco has shown towards the Arab cause such as sending troops to Sinai and Gaza during the Arab-Israeli wars of June 1965 and October 1973 remained unheard from the Arab League. Only some members of the League such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait and the Organization of the Liberation of Palestine (PLO)⁶ have expressed a formal support to the Moroccan attempts to bring the Western Sahara under its sovereignty. The other Arab States were cautious not to side publicly with the Moroccan stance, because of the alignments taken, at that time, in the framework proper to the East-West confrontation.

As the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front culminated in armed skirmishes, the Arab League attempted a timid mission of reconciliation carried out by its Secretary General, Mahmud Riad in 1976 with no much success and consequently, the Saharawi issue was completely ignored by the Arab League. Neither the Polisario Front nor Algeria were eager to see the Arab League debating the Western Sahara issue. Both seem convinced that the most appropriate framework susceptible to make progress in the Saharawi cause remains the United Nations which were believed to be more determined to achieve the decolonization process and assumed to have greater means and leverage to attain this objective.

The Arab League found it comfortable not to be entangled in the Western Sahara conflict, knowing that this issue has led to frictions between Morocco and Algeria. It ignored repetitive appeals of Morocco in 1976-77 to convene a session on the basis of the accusations of aggression this country made against the Polisario Front and Algeria. It declined the proposition of a joint meeting with the Organization of the African Unity to discuss the Western Sahara issue in December 1977. The Arab League-mandated mediation between Morocco and Algeria which was led by the Saudi Foreign Minister in 1978, failed because

³ In 1956, Allal Al Fasi, the leader of the nationalist Istiqlal party issued a map of a Greater Morocco that includes Mauritania (then under French colonial rule), the Western Sahara (then under Spanish mandate), and large swaths of western Algeria (then a French department). The map was not officially endorsed by the Moroccan authorities but until now, political parties, personalities and media in Morocco still claim these irredentist demands.

⁴ The Arab League tried to intervene, but Morocco rejected the League's call for the settlement of this conflict, El-Ayouti, Yassin and Brooks, C. Hugh, *Africa and international Organizations*, The Hague: Martinus Nihof, 1974, p. 176.

⁵ Oliver Vergniot, *Le conflit du Sahara Occidental dans les Relations Interarabes*. Available at: http://aan.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/Pdf/AAN-1985-24_33.pdf.

⁶ The PLO was aware of the role of King Hassan in the Arab -Israeli negotiations, its strong links with the Gulf monarchies, regarded as its main financial contributors and close ties with the United States and France.

Algiers was adamant that the conflict opposes Morocco to the Polisario Front. Algeria also affirmed that its support to the Saharawi right for self-determination stems only from its ideological principles and experience of a former colony that had fought hard to recover its independence from France. Finally, the Arab League proved reluctant to hold an extraordinary session devoted to this Western Sahara issue. However, it did not fail to express its support for Moroccan territorial integrity when Morocco took over the Western Sahara territory and favoured the plan of autonomy which Rabat has advocated since the early 1980s in order to avoid the independence of the Western Sahara.

By contrast, the Arab League was poised to reject the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1993, describing this attempt as a coup de force and as an aggression to one of its Member States.

The Arab League declared its support to Morocco on May 02, 2019 when this country has decided to sever its diplomatic relations with Iran which the Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita accused of “*delivering arms to the Polisario Front through the Lebanese Hezbollah party and with Algeria’s complicity*” (Al-Jazeera News, 2018).⁷ The Spokesman of the Arab League Mahmud Afifi explained that the Moroccan decision was due to: “*the dangerous interferences of Iran in the domestic affairs of the kingdom which are refutable and condemnable*” (Morocco World News, 2018).⁸ The Moroccan Foreign Minister has previously asserted that: “*Morocco has in its possession irrefutable evidence of names and precise facts that show the support of Hezbollah to the Polisario in order to harm the supreme interests of the Kingdom*” (Huffpost Maghreb, 2018).⁹ This evidence remains questionable as until now, Morocco has not been able to disclose the evidence it believes it has in its possession. This equation reminds of the arguments displayed by the US president George Bush to intervene in Iraq on the pretext that this country detained weapons of massive destruction and that the US authorities have irrefutable evidence of Iraq’s military potential.

The objective sought by Morocco consisted in trying to obtain the support of the Western powers and the Arab league in a context marked by the pressures of the United States to force Morocco and the Polisario Front to look for a settlement of their conflict and amid mounting accusations against Morocco’s treatment of human rights in the Western Sahara.

2. Reverberations of inter-Arab relations on the Western Sahara issue

Many Arab States defined their attitude towards the Western Sahara issue on the basis of their contentions and frictions with other Arab “brothers”.

This image of the split of Arab ranks was mostly highlighted when Egypt, under the leadership of President Anwar Sadat, signed the David Camp agreements in September 1978 and recognized the State of Israel. This move led to the division of the Arab States, to the exclusion of Egypt from the Arab League and to the removal of its Headquarters to Tunis.

⁷ Morocco accuses Algeria of supporting Iran in Western Sahara feud, Al-Jazeera News, May 13, 2018. [Consult. 21. Mar. 2019] Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/morocco-accuses-algeria-supporting-iran-western-sahara-feud-180513073052685.html>.

⁸ Morocco WorldNews, Arab League, GCC Reaffirm Support for Morocco’s Decision to Cut Ties with Iran, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2018/05/245704/arab-league-gcc-reaffirm-support-for-moroccos-decision-to-cut-ties-with-iran/>.

⁹ Nasser Bouarita demande au Chargé d’affaires de l’Ambassade de l’Iran au Royaume à Rabat de quitter immédiatement le Royaume sans délai, Huffpost Maghreb May 01, 2018. Available at: https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/nasser-bourita-demande-au-charge-daffaires-de-lambassade-diran-a-rabat-de-quitter-le-royaume-sans-delai_mg_5ae89f4ee4b055fd7fdo.

In retaliation for the firm support given by Morocco to Egypt, the relations of Rabat with Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchies of the Middle East suffered serious setbacks. As a result, only Egypt and Mauritania voted for the resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1978 which was relatively in favour of the Moroccan strategy in Western Sahara.

In parallel, the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front which was set up in 1977 by countries most hostile to Egypt's agreements with Israel, such as Algeria, Syria, Libya and Yemen, in addition to PLO, quickly moved to grant official recognition to the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic at their meeting convened in Tripoli in April 1980¹⁰.

However, with the exception of Algeria, the support of Arab States to Morocco or their recognition of the right of the Sahrawi people for self-determination proved to be tactical, and thus ephemeral and provisional. Indeed, some of the countries that had backed up the Saharawi cause have quickly moved to resume their support to the plan of autonomy which Morocco intended to implement in Western Sahara. Libya moved from opposing to supporting the Western Sahara cause and vice-versa for regional ambitions or pragmatic considerations. Mauritania followed the same swinging attitudes because of internal politics and worries of keeping a balance between Algeria and Morocco.

As of March 2019, only four members of the Arab League have officially recognized the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic: Algeria (February 1976), Syria and Libya (April 1980) and Mauritania (1984).

When Morocco decided to break off its diplomatic relations with Iran in May 2019 on the basis of accusations related to presumed implications of this country in arming the Polisario Front through the Lebanese ally of Teheran, the Hezbollah party (Al-Jazeera News, 2018)¹¹, the Gulf monarchies hailed this decision and affirmed their active solidarity with the "*sisterly Kingdom of Morocco*", as stated in the declaration of the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel Al Jubeir in June 2018. He emphatically stated that: "*what Iran has done to the Kingdom of Morocco through its proxies (Hezbollah) training the so-called Polisario Front is solid proof of Iran's interference*" (Cherkaoui, 2018).¹²

The United Arab Emirates emulated its Saudi ally by recalling the long-standing close ties that exist between the Gulf monarchies and the Moroccan Kingdom. The UAE Foreign Minister declared that: "*our policy and support for Morocco has a well-established historical legacy. Our attitude towards Morocco is constant both in good and bad days*" (Cherkaoui, 2018)¹³. In contrast, his Qatari counterpart was more pragmatic by asserting that Qatar "*stresses the importance of respecting the principles governing relations between States, foremost among them the respect for the sovereignty of states, non-interference in their internal affairs and the resolution of disputes through dialogue and peaceful means and internationally recognized methods.*"¹⁴ This nuanced statement in comparison to the declaration of the UAE Foreign Minister highlights the reverberations of the clash of rivalry that opposed Qatar to Saudi Arabia.

¹⁰ The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was proclaimed by the Polisario Front on February, 27, 1976. SADR has been a member of the African Union (AU), formerly the Organization of African Unity (OAU) since 1984. Morocco withdrew from the OAU in 1984 in protest of the inclusion of the Saharawi republic in the membership of OAU. It joined AU in 2017.

¹¹ Morocco's Foreign Minister Nasser Bouarita declared to the Qatari TV channel Al Jazeera that his country has evidence that incriminates Iran on the basis of assisting Hezbollah by assisting Hezbollah in providing financial as well as logistic support through its Embassy in Algiers, News/Iran: Morocco cuts its diplomatic ties with Iran over feud with Iran. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/morocco-cuts-diplomatic-ties-iran-western-sahara-feud-18050173220190.html>.

¹² Mohamed Cherkaoui, Political Calculations ... from the Western Sahara to the Arabian Gulf. [Consult. June.04.2018]. Available at: http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/political-calculationsfrom-the-western-sahara-to-the-arabian-gulf/i.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cherkaoui, Mohamed, Political Calculations... Op. cit.

The Saudi-Qatari rift certainly explains why the Gulf States issued statements to support Morocco on an individual basis and not on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization that includes the monarchies of the Gulf which became impotent as a result of the Saudi Arabia-Qatari dispute. This Council has, previously, invited Morocco to become one of its members in order to assert active solidarity among Arab monarchies.

The Polisário Front rejected Morocco's accusations and "*defied Rabat to present evidence of these false allegations,*" according to the declaration made by M'hamed Khadad, its Coordinator with the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (Minurso) on May 03, 2018 (Cherkaoui, 2018)¹⁵. Morocco's accusations of links existing between the Polisário Front and terrorist organizations are not new. This country has in the past denounced presumed ties between this movement and some groups of Al-Qai'dah in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operating in the Sahel-Sahara region as well as accused the Polisário guerillas of being implicated in terrorist-affiliated network of drug smuggling (Boukhars, 2012).¹⁶

The Secretary General of the Hezbollah also denied Morocco's allegations by asserting that his party has "*no relations with the Polisário Front*" and that the evidence presented by the Moroccan Foreign Affairs "*were unfounded*" (Middle East Monitor, 2018)¹⁷. Algeria vehemently refuted Morocco's accusations by describing them also as "*totally unfounded.*" (APS, 2018)¹⁸.

Many political observers regarded Morocco's move as an attempt from the Kingdom to participate in the demonization process initiated by the United States which aimed at justifying the decision of Washington to revise the nuclear agreement which was struck with Iran in 2015 (Sputnik, 2018)¹⁹. But it seems, however, that the objective of Morocco aimed at alleviating heavy pressures from the United States to urgently strike a settlement to the conflict over the Western Sahara with the Polisário Front. Morocco aimed also at tempering European criticisms of its treatment of the population of the Western Sahara under its domination. Once again, as it did when it cut off its diplomatic relations with Teheran in 2009 in retaliation of Iran's criticism of Bahrain, Rabat played an anti-Iran card to strengthen its ties with the monarchies of the Gulf. Indeed, Morocco sought to secure the important financial endowments it regularly obtained from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (Morocco World News, 2016).²⁰

Morocco participated quite reluctantly with the Polisário Front in the roundtable meetings convened under the United Nations auspices in Geneva in December 2018 and March 2019 (United Nations Secretary General, 2019).²¹ To avoid direct dialogue and negotiations with

¹⁵ The Frente Polisário denies Morocco's allegations after breaking off its diplomatic relations with Iran. Available at: <https://www.spsrasd.info/news/fr/node/15220>.

¹⁶ Two young Saharawis were assumed to have kidnapped two Frenchmen in Hambori in North-Eastern Mali at the end of October 2011 under the influence of the legend of Hakim Ould Mohamed M'Barek, alias Houdeifa, "a major figure in Polisário AQIM," in Boukhars, Anwar, *Simmering Discontent in the Western Sahara*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

¹⁷ Speech delivered on May 28, 2018 on the occasion of celebrating Lebanon's Resistance and Liberation Day, Memo Middle East Monitor, May 29, 2018, Hezbollah denies Morocco's claims of its ties with the Polisário Front Middle East. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180529-hezbollah-denies-moroccos-claims-of-its-ties-with-polisario-front/>

¹⁸ Rupture des relations diplomatiques Maroc-Iran: L'Algérie réagit aux propos «infondés» de Rabat, May 02, 2018. Available at: <http://www.aps.dz/algerie/73469-maroc-iran-l-algerie-rejette-les-propos-totalement-infondes-du-mae-marocain>.

¹⁹ Interview of Muhamad Nourredine, an expert of the Cairo Center of Strategic Studies to the Russian media on May 02, 2019, Le Maroc et la Ligue Arabe, deux épisodes du meme scénario de diabolisation, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/international/201805031036202404-iran-maroc-ligue-arabe-diabolisation/>.

²⁰ A military and technical agreement was signed between Saudi Arabia and Morocco in Riyadh in December 2016 through which the Saudi Kingdom accepted to finance the implementation of an industrial military project in Morocco, worth \$22 billion. Morocco World News: Saudi Arabia to provide \$22 billion to Morocco's military industry. Available at: <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2016/01/176944/saudi-arabia-to-provide-22-billion-to-moroccos-military-industry/>.

²¹ These roundtable meetings were convened by Horst Kohler, the personal envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations and included Algeria and Mauritania as "interested" parties, in addition to Morocco and the

the Polisario Front which may alter its grip on the Western Sahara territory, Morocco moved to depict Algeria as a part in the conflict over the Western Sahara. Therefore, it displayed intense diplomatic efforts to prove that this issue was the object of a bilateral dispute with its neighbour. Algeria replied, on many occasions, that the Western Sahara conflict concerns exclusively Morocco and the Polisario Front and that its support to the Saharawi cause stems from its ideological doctrine that exalts an “uninterested engagement” to contribute to the fight waged by colonized peoples to recover their independence.

The issue of the Western Sahara lied also behind the relations between Saudi Arabia and Morocco which became seriously strained in early 2019. This issue became surprisingly an object of contention between two countries which share so many features: being two monarchies that have close ties with the Western powers and a common position towards the Arab-Israel conflict. Most significant, Saudi Arabia has been one of the most fervent advocates of Morocco’s autonomy plan in the Western Sahara-dominated territory and its most important financial supplier. Morocco withdrew its Ambassador from Riyadh in February 2019 as a reaction to a broadcasting video report released by Al Arabiya TV Channel which was regarded by the Moroccan authorities as detrimental to “*the territorial integrity of the kingdom of Morocco and as an indication of Saudi support for the Sahrawi independence cause*” (Middle East Monitor, 2019)²². The Saudi move came after Morocco decided to withdraw its troops from the Saudi-led coalition which wages a war against the “rebels” in Yemen and after that Morocco has hinted of its deception over the Jamal Khashoggi affair, the Saudi journalist believed to have been killed in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Morocco’s anger to Saudi reversal of position towards the question of the Western Sahara was confirmed by the refusal of Rabat to receive the visit of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman during his Maghreb tour of November 2018 (Morocco World News, 2018).²³

As it appears, the issue of Western Sahara came to represent an issue of dispute in the fluctuation of the relations Morocco entertains with other Arab countries. Except with Algeria, this question did not lead to a serious crisis between Morocco and other members of the Arab League. In some cases, the Western Sahara became “a collateral issue” when the relations of Morocco with other Arab countries came to deteriorate on other issues. This was precisely, the case of drifts confronting Morocco to Mauritania in the past or to Saudi Arabia, more recently.

3. What impact the evolution of the Arab League would have on the future of the Western Sahara conflict?

The impact of the “Arab Spring” wave may be a significant indicator that the Arab League may also evolve into a more responsible regional gathering in the sense that this organization may give more attention to:

- settling conflicts between its member States (Saudi-Qatar rift);
- participating in solving intra-Arab crises (Libya and Lebanon);

Polisario Front designated as the “concerned” parties of the conflict, United Nations Secretary-General, March 18, 2019, Note to Correspondents: Second Roundtable Meeting on Western Sahara. [Consult. 21.Mar.2019]. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2019-03-18/note-correspondents-second-roundtable-meeting-western-sahara-scroll-down-for-french>.

²² Saudi-Morocco relations hit all-time low, Memo News. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190212-saudi-morocco-relations-hit-all-time-low/>.

²³ King Mohammad VI snubs Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, Morocco World News. Available at: <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2018/11/258877/king-mohammed-vi-morocco-mohammed-bin-salman/>.

- advocating issues in conformity with the international legality (Palestine and the decolonization of the Western Sahara);
- promoting the State of law (Tunisia, Algeria and Sudan) and encouraging the respect of the rights of individuals (Khashoggi affair) and;
- advancing the principle of “Living Together in Peace” (Iratni, 2019c),²⁴ for instance between Shia and Sunna.

It is noteworthy to recall that the early premises of the Arab Spring appeared in the protests carried out by the pro-independence Saharawi militants at Gdaim Izik camp located near the city of Dakhla in the occupied Western Sahara territory in October 2010, as many political scientists have depicted, notably Noam Chomsky in his interview to Qatari Channel TV Al-Jazeera conducted on February 02, 2011 (Democracy Now, 2011).²⁵ The incidences of the “Arab Spring” have resulted in the exacerbation of Islamist terrorism (Daesh or Islamic State), the decline of the role of Egypt in the Middle East affairs, the fragmentation and instability of the Arab world (crises in Syria, Yemen and Libya), the Shia-Sunna divide in Iraq and in the Gulf States and the Saudi-Qatar rivalry over regional leadership.

Most notable consequence of the so-called Arab revolutions on the Arab League may be the evolution of this organization as an extension or as an appendix of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The weakening of the Arab republics, once led by more secular and progressive or liberal regimes such as Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia and Libya has paved the way to the supremacy of the Gulf monarchies on Arab affairs. The economic potential of these monarchies was considerably consolidated by the rise of oil prices for the period extending from 1999 to 2014.

The geostrategic value of these monarchies in the designs of the great powers in the Middle East was considerably enhanced by Iran’s growing nuclear ambitions. Thus, these monarchies became courted by the Western powers and were given military support in order to contain the spread of the influence of Iran, particularly in the Arab countries which have sizeable Shia communities, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain.

The Arab league has certainly contributed in the increase of the role of the Arab monarchies in the decision-making of this organization through the exclusion of Syria, the blessings it gave to NATO’s intervention in Libya and through its campaign which aimed at demonizing Iran. All these decisions have enhanced the status of conservative Sunni schism and boosted the ambitions of Saudi Arabia and Qatar for regional leadership. There is a little doubt that the outputs of internal changes in many Arab countries will impact the evolution of the Arab League. The process of democratization or at least the growing appeals for political changes in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and even in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain will inflate a democratization trend in the functioning and decision-making of the Arab League. Such a democratization process may pave the way to the efforts that have been displayed in order to restructure this organization. Under the impulse of Algeria,²⁶ the other Arab States which have suffered from the domination of the Gulf monarchies over the League, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon

²⁴ Belkacem Iratni, *The Living Together in Peace, Dialogue on Cultures: Developing exemplary Euro-African Relations*, the Berlin Research Institute, January, 16, 2019.

²⁵ Democracy Now, February 07, 2011. The genie is out of the bottle; Assessing a changing Arab world with Noam Chomsky and Al Jazeera’s Marwan Bishara. [Consult. 10.Mar.2019]. Available at: https://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/17/the_genies_are_out_of_the.

²⁶ Algeria made officially a list of demands to reform the Arab League General Secretariat in 2015. Among the most important propositions was the turnover of the post of General Secretary of the League among its member States.

and Egypt, in particular, may join forces to introduce reforms in order to enhance the operative mechanisms of the League, democratize its decision-making process and ameliorate its mechanisms devoted to crisis management.

Such reforms may incite the Arab League to treat issues in conformity with international law and in this conceptual framework; this organization may support the efforts of the United Nations and the African Union to hasten the settlement of the Western Sahara conflict.

One striking change in the behavior of the Gulf monarchies towards the question of the Western Sahara occurred when only eight member States of the Arab League walked out of the summit which this organization jointly convened with the African Union, in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in November 2016, in a protest to the participation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (Morocco World News)²⁷. More striking is that the statement issued by the Moroccan Foreign Ministry to express its disappointment to the position of Kuwait did not include Egypt (Moroccan World News, 2016)²⁸. Both countries did not boycott the Malabo summit. Seemingly, Kuwait was not willing to relinquish the prospects of investments in Africa for a simple solidarity with Morocco, while Egypt was eager to express an autonomous position in order to increase its credentials in the African Union and compensate its diplomatic isolation in the Middle East affairs.

The Saudi-Moroccan rift shows also an evolution in the political calculations of the members of the Arab League, due to pressures of their public opinion. Morocco decided to withdraw from the Saudi-led coalition that intervened in Yemen and declined an audience to Saudi Crown prince in November 2018, because of the accusations of the implication of the Saudi Kingdom in the Khashoggi affair. Indeed, the Moroccan throne was, at that time, under mounting pressures from the rebel region of the Rif region²⁹. Therefore, it appears that worries of regime's surviving were more important for the Moroccan ruler than the substantial subsidies it used to obtain from Saudi Arabia.

The progress of the democratization process in Tunisia may push this country to line up with Algeria in demanding reforms of the Arab League. The post-Caid Essebsi era may bring to power young leaders more aware of international legality. It may be, therefore, possible for the young Tunisian leaders to support the Saharawi cause for instance. The recent push of Tunisian political class to revive the Union of the Maghreb Arab through the appeals made in February 2018 by the UMA³⁰ General Secretary, a Tunisian diplomat, may stand as a good impetus for building the Maghreb of peoples, and why not the League of the Arab peoples, or at least regional organizations that would work more for the interests of their populations.

The recent popular discontent that has taken the form of huge street demonstrations Algeria has witnessed since February 22, 2019 against the extension of the fourth mandate of President Bouteflika and the maintaining of the regime, may impulse a wave of democratization not only in the Maghreb but also in the Middle East.

²⁷ Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Yemen and Somalia quitted the Summit along with Morocco.

²⁸ Morocco World News, Africa Arab Summit, Morocco disappointed by Kuwait. Morocco World News, November, 2016. [Consult. 14.Feb.2016]. Available at: <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/11/202276/africa-arab-summit-morocco-disappointed-kuwait-decision/>.

²⁹ The Rif province, a region situated in the eastern Mediterranean coastal parts of Morocco and inhabited by Berbers, was known for its fierce resistance to French colonial rule and for its resentment to the Monarchy which it accused of political marginalization and discrimination in the development projects of the country. The main instigators of the attempted coup against the Hassan II in 1971 were Berbers originating from the Rif region and so was General Oufkir who tried unsuccessfully to topple the Moroccan King from power in 1972.

³⁰ The Union of the Maghreb Union was set up through a Treaty signed by Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania in the Moroccan city of Marrakech in February, 1989. Its objective was to promote the political and economic integration of the Maghreb region.

The popular mobilization, through social networks, has led to the organization of huge demonstrations that have forced the Algerian regime to make gradual concessions. The anger and the determination of the Algerian youth, in particular, may finally result in a radical change of the home polity. The peaceful and disciplined features of the protests that have occurred in Algeria since February 2019 were hailed by many politicians and political scientists. Therefore, they may be a good example for other Arab peoples to follow in order to participate in the national decision-making and contribute in the conduct of public affairs.

Ultimately, the democratization process may have a positive impact on the functioning, decision-making and missions of the Arab League. One of the big challenges this organization may face in the future would be the contribution in settling the question of the Western Sahara along the resolutions adopted by the United Nations which favour the right of the Saharawi people for Self-determination.

Conclusion

The Arab League has not inscribed the question of the Western Sahara on its agenda ever when this territory was under the Spanish mandate or when it came under Morocco's control in violation of the UN resolutions urging the implementation of the right of the Saharawi people for Self-determination.

This neglect signifies a failure of the Arab League to conform to the international legality, as this organization came under the control of countries which supported the autonomy plan Morocco has implemented in order to maintain its hold over this territory on the basis of the so-called historical claims and with the blessings of the Western powers. The solidarity towards the Moroccan stance over the Sahara issue shown by the Gulf monarchies in particular, has prevented any move of the Arab League to support the initiatives taken by the United Nations or the African Union to favour the decolonization of the Western Sahara. More than that, this League has become the "*League of the Arab monarchies*" as a journalist has depicted, after the weakening of countries that have advocated Pan-Arabism as a result of the "Arab Spring" revolutions (Ghezali, 2018).³¹

The swinging in attitudes towards the issue of the Western Sahara adopted by certain members of the Arab League did not mean a formal recognition of the right of the Saharawi people for self-determination, but only a temporary leverage to upset Morocco in retaliation for the hostility this country has occasionally shown towards its Arab partners. It is still precocious to apprehend the incidences on the Arab League of the internal changes which are affecting many member States of the Arab League. What is certain, however, is that the functioning and the potency of the League are only the output of what these States have been willing to make out of this regional organization.

The future of the Arab League may also depend on the balance of power between the monarchies and their Arab partners and on the societal and political mutations that are occurring in the Arab countries. Yet, this League has moved from the politics of Pax Britannica to Pan-Arab ideals under the impulse of Egypt and the Baathist regimes of Iraq and Syria and then to monarchies whose model still stand as an anachronism in the face of modernization, liberal thought and the prospects of democratization that may be waged by social forces thanks to popular protests which are sweeping the Arab World.

³¹ Ghezali, Abdelkrim. L'organisation a fait plus de mal que de bien: La Ligue arabe est devenue une ligue des monarchies. [Consult. 28.Feb.2019]. Available at: http://www.alterinfo.net/La-Ligue-arabe-est-devenue-une-ligue-des-monarchies_a138379.html.R

These prospects of change that may occur in the Arab world would probably alter the negative attitude the Arab League has followed towards the issue of the Western Sahara. The efforts made by the African Union and the recent forcing displayed by the United Nations to find a solution to the Western Sahara on the basis of the respect of the right of the Saharawi people for self-determination may incite the Arab League to follow suit.

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