

## POLICIES OF THE MAGHREB COUNTRIES TOWARD WESTERN SAHARA: MAURITANIA'S PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Mauritania is the country considered closest historically and culturally to the inhabitants of Western Sahara. It also has the longest border with the territory of Western Sahara. This country's legal status is defined in Article 73 of the Charter of the United Nations, which indicates that it is a non-self-governing territory going through the process of decolonization. The border between Mauritania and Western Sahara is 1564 km in length, which constitutes 75% of all the land borders of Western Sahara. The area that Mauritania borders with is completely controlled by the self-proclaimed Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, which constitutes about 20% of the territory of Western Sahara. The remaining 80% of the territory is occupied and administered by neighbouring Morocco. The problem of Western Sahara, which has caused great divisions between Morocco and Algeria since the mid-1970s, is that POLISARIO's main supporter has also constituted a serious issue for Mauritanian foreign politics. Within this dispute, Mauritania is in quite a difficult position as it attempts to not become conflicted with either of its powerful neighbours, both of which are aspiring to be leaders in the region. At a press conference in November 2019, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mauritania, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, issued a statement indicating that Mauritania does not intend to remain just an observer any longer, but rather plans to become an active participant in addressing the Western Sahara issue to finally resolve the 46-year conflict. This conflict casts a shadow on the regional cooperation within the framework of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), which – if it actually functioned – could aid in the economic development of the region, especially important for the politically and economically weak Mauritania. This has become even more important in the most recent period with the global economy experiencing turbulence following the two-year COVID-19 epidemic and the current war in Ukraine.

### Keywords

*Western Sahara, Mauritania, Maghreb, de facto state, foreign policy*

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## Introduction

After Morocco gained full independence from France in 1956, Rabat put forward claims to the Western Sahara area, which at that time was an autonomous overseas province of Spain. In addition, based on historical premises, Morocco also did not acknowledge the independence of Mauritania (1960) but laid claims to these territories. From the beginning of the formation of Algeria (1962) and Mali (1960), the authorities of Morocco also claimed that these were artificial creations – countries formed by French colonialism (Ożarowski, 2012: 210).

The claims Morocco made about Mauritania and parts of Mali, which at that time were French colonies, were responded to in different ways in Rabat. The claims on the north-western lands of Mali did not have a sound basis and were treated as circumstantial. The issue of Mauritania was quite different. One expression of this might have been the creation of the Mauritania and Sahara Department in 1957, which was part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1963, the department became a separate ministry. King Mohammed V integrated nationalistic concepts into the construction of the Moroccan state, an important part of which became the concept of what was referred to as the “Great Morocco” (*al-Maghrib al-Kabir*), aiming to bring together the Arab and Berber societies around the throne. Great Morocco was supposed to extend from Gibraltar in the north to the Senegal River in the south. To the west, it was supposed to include areas of the Sahara from Tindouf Province to Béchar Province. In practice, this signified taking over all of the Spanish lands in Africa (*Sáhara Español*), including the Canary Islands, Ceuta, and Melilla, as well as the majority of the territory of Mauritania, the north-western region of Mali and the western region of Algeria. Meanwhile, no ruler of Morocco throughout history had ever controlled such a vast territory. The concept of what was referred to as “Great Morocco” was actually supported by all the Moroccan political parties and a great majority of citizens.

An important element is that the activities of the Army of Liberation (*Jish Ettehrir*)—inspired by the Moroccan authorities—was supposed to apply military means to reclaim the land that were not included into Morocco in 1956. This frequently appears in the argument put forward by Moroccan government in favour of their rights to Western Sahara and Mauritania. These units battled both against the Spanish armies in the Spanish Sahara and the French armies in northern Mauritania. Importantly, the nomads from the Spanish Sahara and Mauritania were numerous within these insurgent units. In 1958, the Army of Liberation entered the Adrar region through the Spanish Sahara, going as far as the town of Atar. The aim of the expedition was to hail the king of Morocco as the ruler of Mauritania and incorporate this area into the Moroccan state. At that time it was under the control of France. These aspirations were supported by part of the prominent Mauritanian politicians and tribal leaders. As a result of the Army of Liberation units being beaten by the French army, they were forced to withdraw from the territory of Mauritania. However, as of that time, Morocco considered the battles of the Army of Liberation in the Western Sahara and Mauritania and the battles of the Saharawi under the Moroccan

flag to be proof of the loyalty of the inhabitants of present-day Western Sahara and Mauritania to the Moroccan crown (Isidoros, 2018: 21-22).

### **Mauritanian-Moroccan relations on the eve of independence**

In January 1960, Mohammed V embarked on a month-long journey to a few Arabic countries to gather support for incorporating the Western Saharan and French Mauritanian lands into Morocco. With the exception of Tunisia, the majority of the leaders of the countries he visited supported the claims put forward by Rabat. In addition, the same occurred during the meeting of the country leaders of what was referred to as the Casablanca Group, which took place January 3-7, 1961. As can be found in the report by a journalist covering the Summitry in Casablanca: "A similar moral victory was achieved by Morocco on the subject of Mauritania – which, she [the Conference] claims, is a part of Morocco and should never have been given independent existence. Mauritania's independence is denounced by the Conference, as a French plot to 'encircle the African countries, ensure for herself bases to which she can retreat, and increase the number of her satellites'; and the Conference resolved to approve any action taken by Morocco on Mauritania for the restitution of her legitimate rights" (Roberts, 1961: 73).

The actions taken by Rabat towards Mauritania supported by France led to relations with France becoming increasingly tense, culminating in Mauritania declaring independence on 28 November 1960. However, those in power in Rabat did not plan to give up. They did not acknowledge Mauritania's independence or establish diplomatic relations, conspicuously boycotting the country on the international stage and taking certain actions to prevent the United Nations from acknowledged its existence (Malinowski, 2001: 57-61). In the context of the approach taken by those in power in Nouakchott in regards to the Western Saharan issue, it is worth mentioning that in 1966 the Mauritanian delegate to the Special Committee session of the United Nations in Addis Ababa demanded the full independence for Western Sahara (Kosidło, 2012: 34). Following a deadlock in the mutual relations between Rabat and Nouakchott that lasted a few years, an improvement in their relations was only achieved after the six-day war between the coalition of Arabic countries and Israel in June 1967, which consolidated the North African countries. Initiated by an invitation by Mohammed V's successor, the King of Morocco Hassan II requested the president of Mauritania Mokhtar Ould Daddah to participate in the first Islamic conference scheduled to take place in Rabat. This resulted in Morocco acknowledging Mauritania's independence nine years after it was achieved by Nouakchott (Pazzanita, 2008: 205-208).

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## **Mauritania in the Western Saharan conflict**

Undoubtedly, Mauritania has the closest historical and cultural ties with the inhabitants of Western Sahara. They are linked to the population of Mauritania (especially the White Moors – Beidane) through a common language (a dialect of Arabic called *hassaniya*), traditional costumes, and the past of the nomadic pastoralists (Mormul, 2021: 163-164). It should be remembered that the POLISARIO Front was created within Mauritania in the town of Zouérat on 10 May, 1973. Already 10 days later, its unit attacked the Spanish El Khanga post in the territory of Western Sahara, which was the Spanish Sahara at the time. Concern about Moroccan expansionism led Nouakchott to enter into a secret agreement in October 1974 in which Western Sahara was divided with Morocco. On 14 November, 1975 in Madrid, the representatives of Spain, Morocco and Mauritania signed what is referred to as the Madrid Agreements – a pact concerning Western Sahara, within which Madrid agreed to decolonize the territory and withdraw its armies by the end of February 1976. During the transitional period, power was supposed to be gradually handed over to Moroccan and Mauritanian administrations (Madrid Accords, 14.11.1975). Some researchers think that the earlier claims put forward by Morocco and not recognizing the independence of Mauritania over several years may have influenced the decision of the Mauritanian authorities to occupy Western Sahara. This led to the latter being somewhat forced to make defensive diplomatic countermoves and laid claim to Western Saharan lands based on ethnic kinship with the Saharawi inhabiting the areas. To some extent, from the beginning of the Western Saharan conflict the Mauritanian approach was more defensive than expansionistic, as the granting of part of Western Sahara under the 1975 Madrid Accords was treated by Nouakchott more as a bargaining chip used in its debate with Rabat. This goal was more about strengthening its position than desiring to expand into new territories (Szczepankiewicz, 2010: 61-62). It should also be mentioned that in the first years after the formation of the POLISARIO Front, its leaders considered the possibility of establishing a federation between Mauritania and Western Sahara. A similar solution was used by the UN in the case of Eritrea and Ethiopia. By the decision of the UN General Assembly in 1950, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia as an autonomous province, which had its own parliament and government (Kłosowicz, Mormul, 2018: 41). Fearing Rabat's expansionistic approach and to prevent being dominated by their northern neighbour, they preferred to choose Mauritania because they considered it closer culturally and ethnically (Shelley, 2004: 43). However, the Mauritanian president at the time, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, believed that Morocco was too strong and determined to occupy Western Sahara. He was also of the opinion that by acting against Rabat, Mauritania could risk not only losing the possible benefits of occupying the southern part of Western Sahara, but also entering into a conflict with its powerful neighbour that might endanger Mauritania's independence. Moreover, the Mauritanian president believed that the International Court of Justice would also support Morocco's claim to Western Sahara, which further prompted his decision to cooperate with Rabat (Besenyő, 2017: 25).

Mauritania's occupation of the southern part of Western Sahara immediately led to the severance of previously good diplomatic relations with Algeria and the launching of military operations against Mauritania by the POLISARIO Front. Repeated attacks on trains carrying iron to the Mauritanian coast and the mining town of Zouérat, as well as an assault on the state capital Nouakchott in April 1976, demonstrated the Mauritanian army's weakness and lack of proper preparation for military action. The dispatch of Moroccan troops to Mauritanian territory temporarily assuaged fears of another attack on the capital by the POLISARIO Front, but in turn aroused concern among those who had not forgotten the ambitions of the Kingdom of Morocco towards Mauritanian lands. It is also worth noting that the occupation of the Western Sahara area was unpopular with a section of Mauritanian society from the beginning (Kowalska-Lewicka, 1976: 94). Thus, from the outset, President Mokhtar Ould Daddah had to take into account the strong opposition within the country against the incorporation of the northern neighbour's lands, which meant that the government lacked not only external but also internal legitimacy. This situation eventually led to an internal crisis and consequently to overthrowing the incumbent president in a military coup in July 1978 and outlawing the ruling Mauritanian People's Party (*Parti du peuple mauritanien*). The Military Committee for National Recovery took power in Mauritania and decided to withdraw from the occupation of Western Sahara. In August 1979 at a meeting in Algiers, Mauritanian representatives signed a peace agreement with the POLISARIO Front in which both sides renounced their mutual claims. Mauritania thus withdrew from the occupied area, which was immediately occupied by the Moroccan army. In 1984, the subsequent military regime under Mohamed Khoun Ould Haïdallah decided to officially recognize the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The Mauritanian authorities took the position that the legal authorities of Western Sahara and a large part of the Saharawi population were located in the refugee camps in Tindouf, making it a de facto extraterritorial state-in-exile. It is worth noting that to this day the SADR maintains control over one-fifth of the territory of Western Sahara, allowing it to partially meet the requirements of declaratory statehood. This decision has drastically worsened Mauritania's relations with Morocco. During the reign of Mohamed Khoun Ould Haïdallah, Mauritania supported the Saharawi cause and consequently maintained close relations with Algeria and Libya, ruled since 1969 by Colonel Mu'ammad al Gaddafi. This resulted in economic support for Mauritania from the above countries, such as Algeria modernizing Mauritania's oil refinery in Nouadhibou (Faria and Vasconcelos, 1996: 43).

### **The years of political instability**

After coming to power following another coup in Mauritania in December 1984, Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya officially adopted a policy of neutrality in the Western Sahara conflict and re-established diplomatic relations with Morocco. During the 1990s, although Mauritania officially remained neutral in the conflict between the POLISARIO Front and Algeria on the one hand, and Morocco on the

other, it unofficially supported the Saharawis. However, the Mauritanian authorities' diplomatic balancing act between the feuding parties has been difficult. It is also not without significance that Morocco has particularly close relations with the United States and France, which are the most powerful external players in the Maghreb region. This became particularly important after the 11 September, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, when the United States government made the fight against Islamic terrorism one of its top foreign policy priorities. A series of attacks and kidnappings in the Sahel region— most notably the 11 March, 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, which demonstrated the attackers' links to al-Qaeda—caused US politicians and military officials to direct their attention at the threat of Islamic terrorism in the Sahara. This situation was deftly exploited by Rabat in its dealings with the Americans. Algeria, Mauritania, and Mali were described as weak states unable to ensure effective control in the area, which could become the Afghanistan of Africa. Using the threat of terrorism, Moroccan politicians succeeded in disavowing the states involved in the Saharawi affair and demonstrating to American politicians that the control of Western Sahara by Moroccan armed forces was the remedy for the infiltration of the area by terrorists. The argumentation proved so effective that this theme also began to appear in the statements of leading American politicians and military officials:

Were the deadly Madrid train bombings plotted by Muslim terrorists in the Sahara? The answer, quite probably, is yes. The Moroccan daily *Al-Ahdath Al-Maghribia* has reported that those March 11 attacks were conceived and launched from the 'terrorism triangle,' a desolate zone encompassing parts of Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali (...) Such 'ungoverned areas' are becoming the 'melting pots for the disenfranchised of the world - terrorist breeding grounds,' warns Marine Corps Gen. James L. Jones, the NATO commander who heads US European Command (...) 'We need to drain the swamp,' adds Air Force Gen. Charles F. Wald, deputy commander of EUCOM. 'The United States learned a lesson in Afghanistan—you don't let things go'. (*Air Force Magazine*, 2004, November 1)

Mauritania was indicated by Rabat as an extremely weak link, which was confirmed by facts related to the country's internal instability because Mauritania was the scene of successive military coups in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2008 (*BBC News, Mauritania 'foils' coup attempt*, 2003, June 6). After the failed putsch of some young officers in June 2003, the president declared that the putschists and the Islamists had divided their roles between themselves, trying to take power. In this way, he positioned the opposition and all movements unfavourable to him as Islamists, trying to prove to the US that his rule would guarantee the fight against Islamist extremism (de Salies, 2012: 160). Moreover, in many documents, Mauritania, as the westernmost Sahel state in Africa, was usually mentioned in the context of the Sahel-Saharan terrorist threat, and its name was negatively perpetuated in this context, such as: "the al-Qaeda



network stretched from Horn of Africa across the Sahel to Mauritania”; “so-called African arc of instability that runs from East Africa to Mauritania” (Steinberg and Weber, 2015). It is also important that this vast territory is 80% desert, where terrorists can effectively keep themselves hidden (Kłosowicz, 2017: 9-10).

### **The new opening in Mauritanian policy**

After decades of political instability, the desert state entered a peaceful era under the leadership of former army general Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who both limited the activities of the POLISARIO Front within Mauritania and maintained official relations with the SADR. This was reflected in the fact that he received official visits from POLISARIO Front representatives in Nouakchott.

For example, in 2016 the president received the special envoy of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, M'Hamed Khaddad, who was invited to the presidential palace in the Mauritanian capital, which was taken very badly by Moroccan authorities (*Sahara Press Service*, 2016, August 1). Following the August 2019 presidential election, former Defence Minister Mohammed Ould el-Ghazouani came to power, and it was the first peaceful change of government in the country's history. Shortly after taking office, the new president took a stand on the Western Sahara issue, postulating that it was time for a just and lasting solution to the conflict that would be accepted by all parties and end the suffering of civilians. Mauritanian observers and political analysts believe that the choice of the president to appoint Cheikh Ahmed as the new foreign minister is not a coincidence, as this politician has repeatedly expressed the position that Mauritania must stop being hostage to the Saharawi foreign policy issue and move from a policy of balancing between Algeria and Morocco to one that is proactive in its initiatives regarding the Western Sahara problem. Indeed, Nouakchott can play an active and important role in the negotiations because it has open channels of communication with the POLISARIO Front, good relations with the Saharawi tribal leaders, and important contacts with both Rabat and Algiers. Additionally, politicians in Nouakchott do not forget that Mauritania is also an integral part of the myth of “Greater Morocco”, a fact that nationalist Moroccan politicians refer to from time to time. This was the case in December 2016 when the Secretary General of the Istiqlal (Independence) Party stated in an official statement that Mauritania lies on Moroccan soil. Despite the tensions that arose at the time, three months later in March 2017 King Mohammed VI arrived in Mauritania on an official visit to ease tense relation and discuss security issues on the southern border related to the activities of the POLISARIO Front (Igroupane, 2017, March 2).

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Mauritania has made it clear in recent years that it hopes to resolve the Western Sahara issue that has divided Morocco and Algeria since the mid-1970s. The authorities in Nouakchott are between the proverbial hammer and anvil in this dispute, trying not to enter into conflict with either neighbouring country. In a press conference on 9 November, 2019, Mauritanian Foreign Minister Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed said that Mauritania is active and wants to find a solution to this conflict that will be accepted by all parties involved in the regional dispute that has paralyzed the Arab Maghreb Union (*The Arab Weekly*, 15.11.2019). It also seems that the timing of the Mauritanian Foreign Minister's statement was not coincidental. It came as the leaders of the POLISARIO Front were preparing for their rally, which took place December 19–22, 2019. The group has consistently demanded an end to the occupation of Western Sahara and full independence, while Morocco is only willing to negotiate a form of extended autonomy (*Sahara Press Service*, 2019, December 25). The planned convention took place a week after the presidential elections in Algeria on 12 December to allow the POLISARIO authorities to get some idea of what the policy of the future president of their only ally at the time would be, and thus what course Algeria would take in foreign policy. Would it continue to consistently support the Saharawi cause or would it open up to dialogue with Rabat. The election was won by former prime minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a 74-year-old politician from the elite ruling class that had previously held power in Algeria (*Al Jazeera*, 2019, December 13). The new president has not changed Algeria's position on the Western Sahara problem. In his speech after the inauguration ceremony, he made it clear that "(Yabiladi.com, 2019, December 19)." Tebboune added that the territorial dispute is being settled "under the auspices of the United Nations and the African Union." "(Yabiladi.com, 2019, December 19). He also expressed hope that his country's position would not affect relations with Morocco. This did not come as a major surprise, as he had already made a similar statement during the campaign for the 11 November, 2019 election, stressing that the dispute over the territory of Western Sahara was a "decolonization question that must be settled by granting the right of self-determination to Sahrawis and allowing them to have a say on whether they want to be Moroccans (...) or free" (Yabiladi.com, 2019, December 19).

### **The Guerguerat crisis and its consequences**

The Western Sahara issue made a comeback to newspaper headlines and news outlets in mid-November 2020, when exchanges of fire occurred between Moroccan and POLISARIO troops in Guerguerat and several other places along the truce line dividing Western Sahara into one region occupied by Morocco and another controlled by the POLISARIO Front. Guerguerat is a village located in the southern part of Western Sahara, five kilometres from a four-kilometre strip of unpaved desert terrain leading to the Mauritanian border. This buffer zone, known as "No Man's Land", is a narrow slice of what the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic considers "liberated territories" (Drury, 2019: 325). A Moroccan army post in Guerguerat patrols a road built by the Moroccans in 2016. Under the terms of a 1991 UN-supervised truce, the



stretch was supposed to be controlled by the POLISARIO Front. However, Rabat, disregarding the terms of the truce concluded 30 years earlier, expanded the road, which increased tensions between the POLISARIO Front and Morocco. On October 21, a peaceful demonstration by the Saharawis began and they blocked the roadway, causing a complete stoppage of vehicular traffic between Morocco and Mauritania. In response, the Moroccan military used force to disperse the demonstrators on 13<sup>th</sup> November, although Moroccan troops were not allowed to cross the truce line under the 1991 agreement. A day later, Western Sahara President Brahim Ghali officially broke the truce and announced the resumption of the war (*Reuters*, 2020, November 13). According to Rabat, the road was covered by a Moroccan military cordon, allowing unrestricted traffic. The Moroccan authorities accused the POLISARIO Front troops of starting a blockade of the Mauritania road on October 21 in order to paralyze communications between Morocco and Mauritania. Nouakchott's only response to this tense situation was to reinforce its positions along the Moroccan border with additional troops (*Middle East Online*, 12.11.2020). Rabat, in an effort to win over Mauritanian public opinion, publicized the fact that food (mainly vegetables and fruits) was being sent from Morocco to Mauritania by sea in response to the road blockade by the Saharawis. The Mauritanian politician Kane Hamidou Baba, leader of the *Coalition Vivre Ensemble* (CVE) and former 2019 presidential candidate, considered the blockade unacceptable and in a press conference declared that "the blockade is an attempt to stifle the Mauritanian economy and the economy of neighbouring countries" (*Middle East Online*, 12.11.2020).

Nevertheless, the situation became very troublesome and difficult for Mauritania, especially considering the fact that there was an official announcement from the White House in early December 2020 that during a telephone conversation with King Mohammed VI of Morocco, President Donald Trump had reached an agreement according to which, in exchange for Rabat establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel, the United States would change its position on the occupation of Western Sahara and recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. In addition, the US pledged to open its consulate in the Western Saharan territories controlled by Morocco, in the city of Dakhla (Proclamation on recognizing the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara. The White House, 2020, December 10). In the event of a possible conflict, the Mauritanian authorities may face unrest from the Saharawi diaspora, who primarily live in the Mauritanian area bordering Western Sahara. Since the 1960s, the Saharawis have been coming to work in the industrial centres around the Tazadit iron mine near Zouérat and Nouadhibou, which is the largest city and port in northern Mauritania. Later, camps for Saharawi refugees were established in the area, and many of these refugees settled permanently in the territory (Isidoros, 2018: 220-221).

Although the economic relationship between Mauritania and Morocco is strengthening with every year, Morocco is not Mauritania's leading economic partner. In 2018, Mauritania's exports to African countries stood at only 10%, with Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria as its main customers. Nevertheless, trade has been

growing steadily in recent years and Rabat is looking to increase its investments in the neighbouring country. Large Moroccan corporations with government support are investing in Mauritania. One such example would be *Ittisalat al-Maghrib (Maroc Télécom)*, which acquired a controlling stake in Mauritania's Mauritel telephone company. The Moroccan *Office National des Hydrocarbures et des Mines (ONHYM)* owns a stake in Mauritania's largest mining company, *Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière de Mauritanie (SNIM)*, which mines iron ore (Al Mouahidi, 2018, July 26). The Moroccan company *Dragage des Ports – DRAPOR* has signed a contract to dredge the port of Nouakchott. Moroccan companies are also involved in infrastructure construction projects in Mauritania, such as the 470-kilometre stretch of the Nouakchott – Nouadhibou road and agreements between Mauritanian and Moroccan companies for fuel distribution and refinery construction. Morocco is particularly interested in investing in the Mauritanian region bordering the Western Sahara occupied by Rabat, as exemplified by investments in the Nouadhibou Free Economic Zone (*Zone Franche de Nouadhibou, ZFN*). Moroccan investments in this area have reached the sum of 40 million euros, which, according to ZFN authorities, makes Morocco the second largest investor in this venture (Al Mouahidi, 2018, July 26). A visible sign of the expanding political and economic relations between Nouakchott and Rabat can also be seen in the fact that in December 2017 Mauritania appointed Mohamed Lemine Ould Aboy as the new ambassador to Morocco, filling a vacancy that had existed since 2012. As a further step in strengthening their relations, Morocco and Mauritania signed a bilateral cooperation agreement for regional and local administration between the two countries in January 2020. According to Moroccan news outlets, "Although Morocco and Mauritania have taken opposing sides on the Western Sahara issue in the past, Mauritania's official 'neutrality' on the matter has allowed for cordial relations with Morocco. Mauritania is a key player in the ongoing UN-led negotiations on Western Sahara, and Morocco is keen on gaining Mauritanian support for its Autonomy Plan" (Hekking, 2020, January 15).

## Conclusions

It seems that President Donald Trump's policies on Western Sahara were beneficial for Mauritania because it freed it from the moral dilemma of balancing between Rabat, Algiers and the Saharawis represented by the POLISARIO Front. If the greatest superpower in the world thinks that the formula for solutions other than autonomy for Western Sahara within Morocco has been exhausted, then Nouakchott has no choice but to sign. In fact, during fieldwork conducted in Mauritania in February 2019 and in meetings with representatives of the country's political elite in Nouakchott, a tone of fatigue was obvious among the Mauritanian politicians. They were frustrated with the unresolved Western Sahara issue and the situation that held Mauritania hostage. In addition, when talking to random people in Nouakchott or Nouadhibou about the Western Sahara issue, one could feel their sympathy and compassion for the Saharawi people and their situation. However, few believed that the problem would ever be solved. Moreover, Mauritania's economic stagnation is also

blamed on the unresolved Western Sahara problem. According to the interviewees, this does not allow for greater economic cooperation between the countries of the Maghreb region to which Mauritania wants to belong, but also causes political instability resulting from the Western Sahara problem that scares away foreign investors (author's field research in Mauritania, February 2020).

It is also worth mentioning that threats exist for tensions escalating between Algeria and Morocco, whose relations were exacerbated after Rabat announced plans to build a military base on a 23-hectare area in the Jerada province, only 38 kilometres from the Algerian border. In response, Algeria also announced the construction of a military base near the border, "strengthening security measures on the western borders of the country" (Hernández, 2020, June 26). On top of the tensions between the main rivals in the region, there is also turmoil among the Saharawi population in the refugee camps located in Algerian territory. Young Saharawis are raring to fight, and the sense of bitterness they feel at being betrayed by the international community could lead to renewed fighting between the POLISARIO Front and Morocco. If Algeria were to become involved militarily in this conflict, Mauritania could find itself in serious trouble (author's field research in Algeria, June 2019). This is all the more dangerous as Mauritania's army is small (16,000 soldiers), poorly trained, and weakly armed (the air force has only four aircrafts capable of combat missions). According to experts, Mauritania's armed forces are only capable of ensuring internal security and do not have sufficient capacity to defend the territory. The morale of the military is also not high due to low pay, lack of training, and ethnic tensions that also exist within the armed forces. The fact that the Mauritanian army has been involved in political disputes since the country's inception and has been used six times to stage coups is also of some significance. The modernization of the army carried out in recent years has been slow and focused on purchasing equipment that would be most useful in the fight against terrorist groups, with training by French and American instructors implemented to meet these objectives. (Królikowski, 2018:183-284).

The extent which Rabat is determined to forcibly end the conflict with the POLISA-

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RIO Front remains uncertain, though this would have enormous political and economic consequences for Mauritania. It should be noted that in recent years the Moroccan army has been heavily modernized and trained by American, French and Israeli instructors. Until a few months ago, it seemed that Morocco might follow the example of Azerbaijan, which decided to settle the issues with Armenia surrounding some disputed territory in Nagorno-Karabakh (internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan) using military means, counting on the fact that the international community has primarily been focused on combating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic the past two years. At that moment it seemed for some that it became easier than before to achieve political goals through the use of force because global public opinion has a negligible amount of interest in “peripheral conflicts”. However, in the current situation, when the world has become highly sensitized to the use of force and any forms of aggression as a result of the war in Ukraine, this scenario seems to be rather outdated. In addition, in recent months, another factor has come into play, which may significantly influence the situation in the region, especially Algeria’s position. Successive sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia as the aggressor state and the resulting progressive embargo on Russian raw materials (oil and gas, which financially fuel President Vladimir Putin’s war machine) have reinforced that these countries may be capable of replacing Russia as a supplier of raw materials in the global economy. Undoubtedly, one such country is Algeria, which has now become the focus of attention not only among European countries such as France, Spain, and Italy that are potential consumers of raw materials, but also the most powerful player in the West, the United States. The extent to which this will affect the Western Sahara issue and the situation in Mauritania will become apparent in the coming months. ☀

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