



Looking for a front!

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Since 1975, the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces (FAR) have been waging a long conflict in the face of the insurgency on the POLISARIO front. The author shows us their original adaptation to this very evolving conflict, thanks to the creation ex nihilo of real successive fronts.

Un elusive enemy: what to do in the desert?

As early as 1975, the FAR were confronted with a classic guerrilla warfare that was favoured by its experience and fine knowledge of the desert terrain. Supported logistically and financially by Algeria and Libya, the POLISARIO initially acted, in Mao's words, "like a fish in water". The initial raking operations organised by the FAR in the direction of Smara, Mahbas and Tifariti yield only very minor results for a debauchery of means and men. The forces of the POLISARIO are tailored to carry out an insurgent combat by making the most of the advantages that the desert offers them. Organised in small, stealthy and highly mobile units, they are above all well supervised. They ambush large scale support echelons and conduct harassment operations by systematically choosing the "where" and "when" of each attack. Benefiting from inaccessible safe havens, particularly in the Amgala area, the POLISARIO is an elusive enemy that neutralizes all RAF efforts and initiatives.

In response, RAF counter-insurgency tactics are far from effective. It advocates fixing the enemy in selected areas through large-scale cordon-and-search operations, without convincing success. Added to this is the disadvantage of terrain. Indeed, this western part of the Sahara desert is immense and above all very diversified (hamadas, regs, rocky massifs, deep valleys, sand deserts...). Some Moroccan officers who took part in the sweeping operations carried out during this period compared the POLISARIO's refuge areas to the underground cave networks of Tora-Bora in Afghanistan. For the RAF, the pursuit of enemy units is reduced to sword blows in the sand. Until the early 1980s, they

adopted T.E. Lawrence's aphorism: "Making war up on insurgents is messy, slow, like eating soup with knife".

A front out of nowhere or the reversal of the balance of power

In this particularly unfavourable context, the main tactical problem for the Moroccans is to answer the question: how can they still succeed in controlling this desert while at the same time taking effective coercive action against the POLISARIO? General Ahmed Dlimi, then Chief of Staff of the RAF, and his senior subordinates implemented a new approach which consisted in progressively conquering the terrain while at the same time sanctuarising each conquest. In short, the RAF will succeed in creating a major linear defensive obstacle after each major advance. Thus, the first defensive wall (in Arabic Samta and in English Berm) comes out of the sand and protects what can be called the useful triangle Laâyoune, the port of Boudjour and the phosphate mines of Boucra (map n°1). However, the idea of defending a border with a passive and linear defensive device is far from innovative. The "Morice Line" emanating from the Challe Plan in 1957 had already shown its relevance during the border battle in Algeria. The innovation in this tactical initiative was indeed the creation of a front and not a border. Indeed, between 1982 and 1986, no less than six walls were successively built in parallel with the operations to conquer the territory. Faced with this, the POLISARIO was obliged to change tactics and plan operations of attacks on defensive positions. This change causes their light and autonomous units to lose all their effectiveness. Most of them end up with heavy losses and a debauchery of energy for poor results. The initiative changed sides because the FAR, under the leadership of General Abdelaziz Bennani, the new Chief of Staff of the southern zone, improved their reaction capabilities. On every point of the wall, they are able to counter-attack with means far superior to those of the POLISARIO. Thus, Moroccan air superiority finally became an advantage and enabled them to deal decisive blows to the irregular forces. From then on, we move from an asymmetrical conflict to an asymmetrical conflict which turns in favour of the Kingdom of Morocco until 1991, the date of the signing of the cease-fire under the aegis of the UN.

What about 2014?

"Nothing new in the west' or almost! Indeed, since the deployment of observers from MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), the military apparatus deployed behind the last defensive wall (Berm) has not changed a bit. With a few exceptions, it is the same as it was after the end of the last fighting. Thus, eleven joint army brigades are deployed facing east and south on a linear front of more than 2,280 kilometres in the middle of the desert. The disposition of each brigade is almost identical. A^{1st} defensive echelon, on the main line of defence (sand wall, anti-tank ditches, AP and AC minefields), a succession, every five kilometres, of support points each armed by an infantry company (called sector infantry company). In the 2nd echelon, a reaction capability composed of armoured and motorized infantry battalions, supported and backed up by artillery groups and command and support battalions. Between 100,000 and 120,000 troops (according to UN estimates in 2014) are present on the western side of Berm. On Moroccan territory, where UN resolutions do not apply, Morocco has in parallel continued the modernization of its resources (heavy tanks, radars, vehicles) and the acquisition of new state-of-the-art equipment (drones, F16 fighter aircraft). The balance of power (even though the armed part of the conflict has been over for more than twenty years) is estimated to be twenty to one in theory (based on the estimated size of the POLISARIO

forces, between 3 000 and 6 000 combatants).

So is the POLISARIO moving towards its scheduled end as a movement with even a small armed force? In this perspective, two hypotheses can be put forward:

- Hypothesis 1: decay

Assuming the total suppression of Algerian support and taking into account the situation in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi, according to several Moroccan general officers met in "...southern zone", the armed forces of the POLISARIO could simply disappear in the sense that they would lay down their arms and return to their countries of origin (Mauritania, Algeria and even Morocco). This would lead to a dilution of the units in the regional space composed of Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria. This hypothesis would have little impact on the security of the area.

- Hypothesis 2: mutation

Given the loss of diplomatic ground in the political organisation of the POLISARIO, a radicalisation of the POLISARIO may occur and tip the armed forces into large-scale banditry (trafficking in arms, fuel and drugs) and/or terrorism within the Sahelian band. Erik Jensen (former Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and former head of the UN Mission in Western Sahara), in Threats in North Africa and the Sahel and Global Security in Europe, described this possibility quite clearly: "A resolution is more imperative now than ever. Events across North Africa have led to heightened aspirations among a predominantly young population and to unsettled conditions congenial to terrorists".

At present, the Sahel region, of which Western Sahara is the western fringe, is more than sensitive, particularly for French interests. The political future of Algeria's neighbour is uncertain and Algeria's current role is ambiguous. The Malian crisis and the lasting destabilisation of Libya give rise to fears of a possible large-scale destabilisation of the Sahel. Given this environment and assumption 2, it is preferable that Western Sahara does not become a new front zone.

After leaving Saint-Cyr in 2002, Battalion Chief Aurélien MOY chose the naval troops and served his command time at the 21st RIMa in Frejus. He served as military assistant to the MINURSO Force Commander from July 2013 to January 2014, before joining the War School.

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