



## Cuba and the Polisario Front

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Robert M. Holley has been intimately involved in international affairs his entire career. After Vietnam era service as an Army helicopter pilot, Mr. Holley joined the U.S. Foreign Service, where he devoted 21 years to a variety of assignments in Washington, Europe, Latin America and North Africa. He retired from the State Department in 2002.

Mr. Holley is well-versed on North Africa and the Maghreb. He is particularly knowledgeable about Morocco and the Western Sahara conflict, having served as the principal U.S. Government interlocutor between the Moroccan Government and the Polisario from 1998 to 2001.

Mr. Holley is the recipient of an impressive variety of military and civilian awards for his service to his country with the United States Army and the Department of State, to include the Secretary of State's Career Achievement Award and the Silver Star.

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## **I – Introduction**

At the height of the East-West confrontation, Morocco's role as a U.S. ally provoked resentment among Eastern block countries, notably those like Cuba, which were actively supporting, on a global basis, what were termed at the time "peoples' revolutionary struggles." Motivated by the Cold War ideology of the "anti-imperialist struggle," the Cuban military and security services provided continuing training and logistical support to the Polisario Front as an element of Cuba's global effort against the West and its allies. Some of this training and support took place in Cuba and some in Saharan territory under the control of the Polisario Front.

In one form or another, and at the request of Algeria, Cuban assistance to the Polisario Front has been continuous since 1976. It has taken on a variety of forms over the years, to include:

- providing instructors and advisors for training and to assist in planning military actions against Morocco;
- providing education and indoctrination to thousands of Sahraoui children who were separated from their parents for extended stays in Cuba;
- providing medical and cultural assistance;
- training high-ranking government employees;
- training "officers" to act as "battalion leaders" giving strong diplomatic support to the Polisario's position in the international community.

## **II – Establishing Long-Term Strategic Relations**

In 1980, Cuba officially recognized the Polisario-established state in the Sahara, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, more commonly known by the French initials of its acronym "RASD." Diplomatic relations were established and an

exchange of Ambassadors was made. Castro's Cuba, again at Algerian request, offered its know-how in various areas and provided the Polisario with continuing diplomatic and logistical support.

In May 1977, a high-level secret meeting took place in Havana attended by Fidel Castro, members of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee, Cuban military officials and high-ranking members of the Polisario leadership. The principal objective of the meeting was to establish the parameters of Cuban/Polisario military cooperation.

### **III – Cuban Military Support**

Also in 1977, an important military cooperation agreement was signed in Algiers by Cuba, Algeria and the Polisario Front in the presence of high-ranking Cuban military and civil authorities as well as senior Algerian and Polisario leaders. The agreement sought to strengthen the Polisario's cause through a set of initiatives aimed at providing the necessary technical and logistical aid to train Polisario combatants. The signing of this agreement paved the way for an intensive phase of military training of the Polisario's new recruits in Cuba.

A Cuban military delegation went to Tindouf, Algeria, in 1988 to study the Moroccan army's defensive perimeters and develop tactics for the Polisario to help them breach the defensive wall that had been constructed by Morocco as a counter-measure to repeated Polisario incursions into the more populated areas of the Moroccan Sahara. Cuban military advisors conducted simulation exercises for the Polisario and helped plan Polisario military actions against Morocco.

Elements of the Cuban Navy also provided logistical support for the Polisario off the waters of the Spanish Canary Islands. On June 12, 1980, Moroccan war

planes opened fire on two Cuban ships, the *Moroboro* and the Guillermo Pico, which were inside Moroccan territorial waters off the Sahara conducting support operations for Polisario infiltration efforts. On December 11, 1980, the Moroccan Coast Guard intercepted and arrested the Cuban crew of the *Golfo de Tonkin*, a Cuban vessel, on the edges of Moroccan territorial waters arriving from Guinea and transporting communications and monitoring equipment intended to track the movements of the Moroccan army.

During the years of the war in the Sahara, from the end of 1975 to September 1991, Cuba was also actively engaged in an arms delivery program for the Polisario. A military cooperation agreement signed in 1989 between the Polisario Front and Cuba provided terms for the delivery of various armaments, principally assault rifles, mortars, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and munitions. Reported deliveries were completed by July 1989.

Nevertheless, despite a United Nations sponsored ceasefire that went into effect in September 1991, Cuba has continued to provide various forms of military training and assistance to the Polisario in addition to programs in health and education. In 2003, the last known class of Polisario combatants graduated from Cuban military schools

Recent resumption of military cooperation between Cuba and the Polisario Front has focused on special operations tactics. The training is reportedly being provided to groups of 40 Polisario combatants in a course which lasts six months per cycle. At this point, it remains unclear whether Cuba has agreed to provide material, arms or logistical support in association with this special operations training.

Although the leaders of the Polisario remain reluctant to acknowledge their relationship with Cuba or the extent of Cuban military support and training for the

Polisario's military efforts (likely out of concern that public knowledge of the relationship could cause political trouble for the Polisario in the United States), Cuba, on the other hand, speaks openly and often about this cooperation. Since January 1980, Cubans have regularly voiced their public support of the Polisario cause. While it is increasingly difficult to ascertain the entire extent of the relationship between Castro's Cuba and the Polisario Front today, it is clear that the relationship is one that remains robust and ongoing. For example, even today, each year between 350 and 500 young Sahraoui children between the ages of 9 and 11 are still being separated from their parents and sent to Cuba for periods up to 15 years or more. Classes in communist ideology remain mandatory for these children who get a steady diet of Cuban ideology and anti-American and anti-western propaganda as part of their "educational experience."

#### **IV – Health and Educational Support**

The Cuban Minister of Health, Mr. Carlos Dotres, noted during the Polisario Front leader Mohamed Abdelaziz's official visit to Cuba in January 2002, that "from 1977 to the present, more than 477 Cuban physicians have worked in the Tindouf Camps." He also noted that 300 Sahraoui health specialists had graduated from Cuban training programs.

Prominent Polisario leader, Bachir Mustapha Sayed, also affirmed, during the January 20, 2004, meeting of the 8th session of the Joint Cuban-Sahraoui Commission in Havana, that "more than 2000 of his compatriots, who currently hold important political and professional positions within the RASD governing structure, have been educated in Cuban universities and institutes (in the last 29 years more than 8000 Sahraouis reportedly have received civil or military education and training in Cuba and several thousand others are reportedly still in training at this time). Bachir Sayed added in those same remarks that "this represents invaluable aid and constitutes an expression of generosity *on behalf*

*of Cuba which is enduring an unfair economic embargo imposed by 'the imperialist enemy'.*"

## **V – The “Brigada Cubana” in the Polisario Front’s Rabouni Camp**

To strengthen the already enormous support provided by the bilateral cooperation agreements, a team of Cuban medical specialists called the "Brigada Cubana," with reported ties to the Cuban intelligence services, has been set up in the Rabouni refugee camps outside Tindouf. According to first-hand reports, each member of the Cuban medical team, in addition to their regular duties, creates a monthly report on the general conditions of the Polisario Front and provides it to the Cuban team leader. The team leader then creates a summary of these reports which is given to the Polisario Front's leader, Mohamed Abdelaziz.

## **VI – The Deportation of Sahraoui Children from the Tindouf Camps to Cuba**

Within the framework of Cuban/Polisario relations, one of the major aspects of cooperation is the deportation of Sahraoui children from the Tindouf camps to Cuba primarily to be “educated.” However, this educational cooperation also comes with a very substantial dose of Cuban propaganda.

Since 1976, thousands of Sahraoui children, as young as nine years old, have been separated from their families by the Polisario and sent to Cuba, initially under the guise of a short “educational visit.” In fact, these short educational visits routinely turn out to be long-term separations from their parents and other family members. Most of these children remain in Cuba for as many as 15 years or more with only limited contact with their parents through letters (always monitored by Polisario political officers who supervise the children’s education and stay in Cuba).

In the past, the trips to Cuba have gone through both Madrid and Moscow. However, the government of Spain has reportedly requested within the past two years that these trips to Cuba no longer pass through Spanish territory. The UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) was also reportedly involved in providing transportation for many of these trips but it is unclear whether this practice continues today.

When they arrive, the children's passports are confiscated by RASD diplomatic representatives in Havana. The children are then sent to special camps set up for Sahraoui children. Sahraoui children who have been through this experience themselves report that during the early years there were also separate camps for other third-world nations aligned with Cuba such as Angola, Mozambique or Vietnam. Cuban and Sahraoui instructors teach Spanish and Marxist-Leninist ideology as well as a standard academic course of study. Military instruction was initially mandatory for boys until after high school, but some recently returned Sahraoui young people report that this is no longer the case for all males. The children reportedly receive no education in their own language or culture and have told investigators that there are no mosques or places of worship and no religious instruction is available.

Children report that a regular schedule of work and class is mandatory for most Sahraoui children until the completion of high school. The program consists of a half day of class, either morning or afternoon, and a half day of agricultural work in the sugar cane fields to teach the "virtues of work."

Children of ranking Polisario officials are reportedly housed separately but attend class with other Sahraoui children. These "special" children also are able to visit with their parents in Spain, Algeria, or the camps outside Tindouf, when school is not in session. However, for other Sahraoui children, there is only limited contact

with parents and family by carefully screened mail. Following graduation from high school, most Sahraoui children, who are qualified, attend various courses of study at the University of Pina de Rio.

Following completion of university studies, most children are sent back to the camps in Tindouf. For years, it was apparently the practice of the Polisario to confiscate the diplomas of returning students as a means of controlling against the possibility that these children would want to slip away from the camps and make a life for themselves elsewhere. First-hand reports indicate that many children began hiding their diplomas and now, the practice of confiscation is rarely done.

Returning Sahraoui young people report a widespread and profound sense of dislocation and cultural shock upon returning to the camps. These young people have been wholly out of touch with both their families and life in the camps for a dozen years or more. Their native language skills have deteriorated and they are unaware of the customs and practices of their various Sahraoui tribal groupings. Many of these young people have sought to leave the camps and return to Morocco or make a life elsewhere. However, leaving the camps is a very difficult undertaking and usually must be accomplished through deception and trickery. Additionally, the difficulties are compounded by the task of trying to ensure that all members of the family who want to leave are able to do so.

The children themselves report that the practice of sending children away for long years of separation from their parents is systematic in the camps. Some go to Cuba, some to Algeria and some to Libya. The practice serves as an effective means of control of the behavior of both the parents and the children. The fact that it constitutes a systematic undermining of family life and ties seems of little consequence to the Polisario who, consistent with their leftist revolutionary roots and continuing commitment to their goals, evidently deem family values and

loyalty more a hindrance to their objectives rather than an element of social and community solidarity and good citizenship.

Today, as many as 5000 Sahraoui children reportedly still live in Cuba.

However, there are also signs of recent resistance to this anti-family practice, even among some of the Polisario leadership. Certain Polisario leaders have reportedly insisted that their family members be returned from Cuba. Unhappy with this practice and the increasing number of young Sahraouis who seek to flee the camps after returning from long years abroad may be forcing a re-evaluation of this practice among some Polisario elements. Many young people, especially men, are reportedly refusing to return to the camps and many have chosen to remain in Cuba. This situation has forced the Polisario Front leaders to go to Havana to try to bring back some of the young people who live in Cuba and refuse to return to Tindouf. These young people often prefer to stay and prolong their studies, rather than return to an uncertain future and a lack of an active life in the camps outside Tindouf.

## VII – Images of Fidel Castro and Mohamed Abdelaziz

The following images of rebel leader Mohamed Abdelaziz's January 22, 2002, visit to Cuba were obtained from [granmai.cubaweb.com](http://granmai.cubaweb.com).





## **VIII – CONCLUSION**

Originating during the Cold War, the partnership with Cuba's communist government and the Polisario Front continues to this day. Sahraoui families are torn apart with children sent to Havana; military training and arms are provided by Cuba to the Polisario Front; and Sahraouis are forced to undergo communist indoctrination. Aside from perpetrating gross human rights abuses and contributing to mass deprivation of those Sahraouis in the camps and in Cuba, the partnership between these two renegade forces contributes to the stagnation and stalemate over the Western Sahara conflict and destabilizes North Africa.

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