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During ten days in July 2008, around fifty students and a dozen professors from twelve different European universities met at the University of Coimbra for the Fifth Intensive Seminar of the European Directorate for the Enhancement of Peace and Conflict (EDEN) and discussed the new dimensions of peace and security studies. Their contributions reflect the research agendas of a new generation, who continue to address enduring themes in peace and conflict studies, but whose formative influences are those of a complex post Cold War world.

Rethinking Peace and Security: New Dimensions, Strategies and Actors

Paula Duarte Lopes and Stephen Ryan (eds.)
**Rethinking Peace
and Security**
New Dimensions, Strategies and Actors

**On-going Research
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Delegitimisation of Identity as a Political Strategy: The Moroccan Official Discourse about the Polisario Front

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Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is on how the Moroccan official discourse addresses the identity of the Polisario and implications of that. The main argument is that the categorisation of Polisario's members as (potential) terrorists that is prevalent in the Moroccan official discourse intends to disqualify and delegitimize this actor not only domestically but also in the realm of international politics. This subject of inquiry is important as it shows how discourses, often uncritically accepted and replicated by media, policy makers and academic institutions, have social and political implications that go beyond establishing an understanding. Indeed, in this chapter language is not considered neutral nor natural, but always as an exercise of power.

The chapter is structured in four sections. The first one outlines the foundations of the analysis of the Moroccan public discourses on Polisario. On the theoretical level, it is argued that language has a constitutive and powerful role on the construction of identity. Methodologically, it is based on a textual analysis embedded in a wider social and political context. This context is set in the second section with a description of the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the sovereignty of Western Sahara. The third section analyses the Moroccan discourses related to Polisario, focusing on the linkages that these discourses attempt to establish between Polisario and terrorism. The fourth section addresses the issue of the wider implications of such labelling of the Polisario Front's members as (potential) terrorists in the Moroccan domestic scene and at the international level. The concluding section provides a summary of the preceding sections and a discussion of the key conclusions that emerge from the research.

Theorising the Moroccan discourse with regard to Polisario

Reality can be perceived in different ways because it can be approached by different social and cultural representations and so, in a way, it is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1980). This construction is an inter-subjective task, realised through sharing, discussing, contesting, disputing the meanings by which we try to make sense of reality. These meanings are not merely descriptive; on the contrary, they always convey values, norms and beliefs which, at the same time, are a reflection of and reflect upon social and political structures, that is, relations of power. Thus, language is an instrument of power (Bourdieu, 2001).

One of the ways by which language conveys power is through labelling. When labelling, one sparks processes of 'typification' which in its radical form can produce social stigmatisation. This process of 'typification' happens when it succeeds in isolating and underlying a trait of identity affecting the way that such being views itself and its position in the world, the way it acts, and the way others will view it and act towards it (Berger and Luckmann, 1980). This process can stigmatise that being when the social designation produced implies depreciation of its identity by reference to the dominant norms (here in the sociological sense of the prevalent expectations towards the behaviour of a being) and by that way it distorts the interaction of the others with the stigmatised one (Goffman, 1988). All of this outlines a picture of identity as something deeply embedded in symbolic interaction, and thus a view of identity as much as a construction by the self and an attribution by the others (an hitherto construction) each one resulting in what Goffman defines as 'real' identity and 'virtual' identity (*apud* Ferreira *et al*, 1995: 307). In relation to the question of power, it can be argued that the relative weight of the self (real) identity and of the attributed (or virtual) identity in the overall identity of a being at stake in its interactions with others is much a result of the power that structures the relations of the being with these other ones.

Departing from this theoretical framework, this chapter analyses the Moroccan discourse about Polisario in its attempt to attribute a 'virtual' or supposed terrorist identity to this nationalist movement and by that way to delegitimise and disempower its performance both in the international and the domestic political realms for what concerns the resolution of the dispute over the sovereignty of Western Sahara. Giving the impossibility to carry out field work, data has been uniquely collected through documentary review. Access to official documents has sometimes proved difficult. This reflects how delicate issues such as

terrorism and the dispute over Western Sahara are. Primary texts are reported as they were actually presented, without any correction or modification. The exception is the emboldened words in the quotes, which has been done to indicate the focus of analysis.

Socio-political context

The dispute over the sovereignty of Western Sahara has to do with two main principles that have been ordering international society since World War II: self-determination and the prohibition of aggressive territorial expansion.¹ Notwithstanding, the dispute over Western Sahara has mainly been considered has a self-determination case and it is still in the agenda of the United Nations (UN) as a decolonisation case.

This dispute gave rise to a violent conflict between Morocco and the nationalist movement known as the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and the Rio de Oro), internationally recognised as the representative of the Saharawis. The UN recognised the right of self-determination for the people of the Spanish Sahara in the 1960s and demanded Spain to provide for it. At the same time, Morocco started to claim that it was entitled to that territory under the principle of territorial integrity.

On October 16, 1975, the International Court of Justice issued an Advisory Opinion on the case stating that the territory was inhabited by tribes that had their own social and political organisation, with some legal ties of allegiance with Morocco and Mauritania which, should, under any circumstances, hinder the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.²

That same day, King Hassan II announced that he had a dream inspired by God: the Green March. On the November 6, about 350,000 Moroccans cross into Western Sahara inspired by the idea of the 'Great Morocco'. The Spanish army did not resist the invasion and withdrew. The territory was invaded, two-thirds at North under Moroccan administration, and the rest under Mauritania's. During the subsequent years, the invasion led thousands of Saharawis to flee to Tindouf in the

¹ In this section it will only be outlined a brief description of the case, resumed from BARATA, 2008: 97-101. A very good chronology can be found at POINTIER, 2004; and more detailed assessments at ARTS and LEITE, 2007; ICG, 2007; OHAEGBULAM, 2004; SHELLEY, 2004; SOLÀ-MARTÍN, 2007; THEOFILOPOULOU, 2006.

² All the documents on this case are available at www.icj-cij.org/docket/index.php?p1=3&p2=4&code=sa&case=61&k=69, accessed July 11, 2008.

Southwest of Algeria where some refugee camps remain until today (San Martín, 2005: 588).³

Following the invasion, the Polisario Front initiated a 'national liberation' war and in 1976 declared the formation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic that has been recognised by around a dozen of countries, mainly African and Latin American. In the late 1980s, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the UN started to mediate the conflict, and in 1991 the parties finally signed an agreement on a peace plan that envisaged a ceasefire and a *referendum* in which people would choose between independence and integration with Morocco. A peacekeeping mission (MINURSO-United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) was established to implement the plan.

The dispute ended and since then the conflict can be seen as "a long, drawn-out diplomatic war of attrition" (Mundy, 2007). A series of problems concerning the eligibility to vote on the *referendum* were the pretext and the starting point of a tortuous process of successive delays that hampered its realisation until today. This has been arguably facilitated by the ambivalence of the UN Security Council towards this case, which has to do with the support that Morocco has been receiving from the US and France.

The Peace Plan was more and more being perceived as a zero-sum game, and in 2000 the UN Secretary-General declared that it would be very difficult for the *referendum* to happen and that even if it would, there could be no way of imposing the result (UNSG, 2000). In this context, James Baker, Special Representative of the UNSG for Western Sahara, got involved in conversations with the parties to find a 'third way' of resolving the conflict that was orientated more to a political solution rather than to the application of the 1991 Peace Plan. However, the two Baker plans proposed were rejected firstly by Polisario and then by Morocco.

In 2007, the parties started direct negotiations for a political solution under the auspices of the UNSG but until now the issue has not evolved.⁴ The Moroccan position is to negotiate an agreement on autonomy to be subject to *referendum*. However, it does not consider in-

³ It is not easy to rigorously estimate the number of people dislocated. Estimates point to about 40 to 50 per cent of the population resident in the territory of Spanish Sahara in 1975, and to a number of refugee people today in south of Algeria between 150,000 and 200,000.

⁴ There have been already four rounds of negotiations in Manhasset, New York, in 18-19 June 2007 (Manhasset I), 10-11 August 2007 (Manhasset II), 7-9 January 2008 (Manhasset III) and 16-18 March 2008 (Manhasset IV)-official documentation can be found at www.arso.org/UNnegociations160308.htm. For an analysis of the non-productivity of these negotiations see, for instance, THEOFILOPOULOU, 2008.

dependence an option that can be included in the *referendum*. On the contrary, the Polisario's position is that the option of independence is non-negotiable and its intentions are to negotiate the terms of the relations between the two countries after a potential independence. The situation is presently on an impasse.

Despite the fact that the parts continue to respect the ceasefire, this situation can still be considered as a conflict on the basis of the irreducibility of both parties in their contradictory positions towards the possible ways to the resolution of the dispute; the existence on the side of the nationalist movement of tendencies that push forward to a resumption of armed struggle (ICG, 2007: 16; Mundy, 2006: 159; Solá-Martín, 2005); the high levels of militarisation, social control, coercion and intimidation, and censorship in both parties (Solá-Martín, 2005); the serious violations of human rights, mainly from the part of Morocco upon the Saharawi population in the territory under its control (illegal detentions, beatings, torture and disappearances); finally, the emergence, from 2005 until today, in the territories under Moroccan control and also in Moroccan cities, of a relatively non-violent resistance movement (the self-defined 'Intifada Saharawi') that is violently repressed (Mundy, 2006: 263; San Martín, 2005: 583; Shelley, 2004: 115; Stephan and Mundy, 2006).

Analysing the Moroccan discourse with regard to Polisario

The issue of Western Sahara has been dominant in the Moroccan discourse since at least four decades. Immediately after the end of the French protectorate, Hassan II started building its internal legitimacy and hegemony in great measure upon the project of a 'Great Morocco' (which claims Ceuta, Melilla, the Spanish Sahara, Mauritania, some parts of Algeria, Mali and Senegal) and makes the question of Western Sahara a factor of national unity internally, and an argument of political stability in the international realm (Lacoste, 1988: 81; Pointier, 2004: 52; Shelley, 2004: 53). Despite the fact that Moroccan governments, since the mid-1970s, tried to label the Polisario as a terrorist organisation, it is only recently that the Moroccan official discourse seems to address the issue of Western Sahara more specifically in the wider contexts of international terrorism, and related (counter-)terrorism discourses, seemingly trying to connect it with the main concerns of US international agenda.⁵

⁵ For an analysis of the implication of terrorism and counter-terrorism discourses see BARTOLUCCI, 2008.

In March 2007, the Moroccan Ministry of Justice at the time, Mohamed Bouzoubab, accused the Polisario Front of being in collusion with Al Qaeda with the aim of destabilising the Sahel region. He stated: "There are, now, **cooperation and coordination between Al Qaida**, specifically the Algerian GCPs and the Moroccan Salafia Jihadia, that engage in a common action **with the Polisario Front**" (Algerie.dz, 2007, emphasis added). Bouzoubab argued that this linkage is "corroborated by some reports of the international intelligence services", in particular the American. And he added:

If we allow this situation to continue, the entire Sahel region will be in danger, because **the separatists (the Front Polisario) help terrorist groups** at every level for acts of sabotage that would threaten the Moroccan stability" Jihadia, that engage in a common action **with the Polisario Front**. (Algerie.dz, 2007, emphasis added)

This linkage between terrorism and the Polisario Front expressed by Bouzoubab is far from being an isolate or marginal position. On the contrary, this trend of assuming a connection between the two has recently grown up to the point of having the Polisario's members labelled as "terrorists".

This discourse has been replicated by media. That has been seen as a source of concern for instance by Camacho, a Spanish journalist that in April 2008 wrote: "Until now, its role as **the Sahrawi people's liberation movement** has never been disputed, but now they have been **downgraded to no more than a vulgar terrorist group**" (Camacho, 2008, emphasis added). This trend of linking Polisario and terrorism is clearly emerging from a review of Moroccan media articles and reports. ICG (International Crisis Group) reports that Morocco has often pointed out that the Polisario Front is following a radical Islamist ideology and that the linkages between the Polisario and jihadist networks are clear. However, Moroccan authorities never offer evidences (ICG, 2007a).

The Polisario Front, strongly reacted against Mohamed Bouzoubab's allegations of a coordination between the Polisario's activities and Al Qaeda. The Swiss newspaper *Rédaction de Liberté* reported that: "Following the Moroccan attempts to assimilate it to a 'terrorist movement', the Polisario Front denounces a '**manipulation grossière**'" (*Rédaction de Liberté*, 2007, emphasis added). One of the main repercussions of this in Polisario's position has to do with a putative resume of hostilities. The frustration with the impasse of the political process is growing in the refugee camps as well as in the occupied territories,

and this has been sparking pressures among the nationalist movement to a return to political violence. However, the pro-international law faction (that considers the legal way as the main possibility to resolve the conflict), which since 1988 dominated the Polisario, is now subject to further concern with the potential of it being connected with international terrorism in case of a resume of hostilities, considering the ever more explicit support of the US to the Moroccan position.

Implications of labelling Polisario as "terrorists" at the international level

As clearly emerges from the previous analysis, the issue of Western Sahara has given rise to a politicised and controversial vocabulary. Thus, whereas the Polisario speaks of 'Western Sahara' and it considers it a territory 'occupied by the Moroccans', Morocco refers to a 'Moroccan Sahara'. Similarly, whereas Polisario's members call themselves 'freedom fighters', 'heroes of liberation', and alike, the Moroccan official discourse considers them 'rebels', 'criminals', and even 'terrorists'. And again, if the issue of Western Sahara is a matter of 'self-determination' for the Polisario, it is, on the contrary, a 'rebellion', an 'Algerian tool' for Morocco. These differences of vocabulary reflect not only the inevitable verbal confrontation present in any conflict, but they are also a sign of the very different ways of portraying history and identity by the two parts: Morocco and the Polisario Front.⁶

Camacho argued that the Moroccan rulers have been trying to benefit from Western Sahara through several means. One of them consists in airing a certain connection between Polisario and Islamist terrorism — something filtered in the middle of the Casablanca bombings (Camacho, 2008). Nowadays, the stigma of terrorism has become a powerful way to discredit opponents, carrying serious political and legal consequences. Labelling the Polisario Front as such is one of the most desired objectives after sought by King Mohammed's friends (Camacho, 2008). Morocco has often emphasised the risk of having a newly established unstable state in the region, and recently it reiterated that possibility in stressing the threat of Islamic jihadism. ICG reports

⁶ Actually, history, not as objective facts but as collective memory, is very important in this case and both parts make real efforts to reconstruct the past in ways consistent with the legitimisation of their aims. About the historical roots that Moroccan and Saharawi nationalisms built in reference to the territory of Western Sahara cf. LACOSTE, 1988, POINTIER, 2006 and SAN MARTÍN, 2005.

that: "Since the 11 September 2001 attacks and renewed US focus on this threat, Rabat has emphasised this aspect, underscoring the possibility that the region might be infiltrated by Al Qaeda or its followers" (ICG, 2007a).

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the manipulative use of terrorism is not an exclusive prerogative of Morocco. Indeed, while Morocco accuses the Polisario Front of having links with Al Qaeda, Algeria argues that the Moroccan government finances its own Islamist movements. This labelling has repercussions that go beyond the Moroccan national borders. Thus, in pointing out a "coordination and cooperation" between Al Qaeda and the Polisario Front, some observers argue that Mohamed Bouzoubab aims to obtain the inscription of Polisario in the global terrorism lists managed by Washington, D.C. (Ré-daction de Liberté, 2007).

Morocco is taking advantage of his privileged relationship with the US. Morocco is the main ally of the US 'war on terror' in the region and it is considered the most valuable bulwark against terrorist violence. The geo-strategic value of Morocco has mainly to do with its location at the jugular of the Mediterranean Sea that provides access to the control of one of the most important maritime routes of the world. Moreover, Morocco is a privileged interlocutor for the US as well as for Israel, within the Arab world. In this context, the question of the stability of the Alaouite dynasty is considered of the utmost importance by the US. In this way, the Moroccan attempt to manipulate for its own interests the US's concerns related to terrorism are double faced: Morocco frames the question of Western Sahara as a question of national unity; at the same time the Moroccan's strategy of linking the issue of Western Sahara to internal stability and of labelling Polisario as a terrorist group stresses upon what mostly concerns the US.

However, the most important implication of that language manipulation against Polisario is the attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Polisario Front, in Morocco and beyond. What Morocco has been achieving with this strategy is US support (direct support as well as through the UN Security Council) to a political negotiated solution of the dispute, instead of the application of peace plans that envisaged a *referendum* with the option of independence and, more recently, an explicit support to its own proposal of an autonomy plan for the region. Indeed, in 2007, some US diplomatic officers have considered "serious and credible" the Plan for the Autonomy proposed by the Moroccan government (Theofilopoulou, 2007), and this view was reproduced in the UNSC Resolution 1754 of the April 30, stating that it "welcomes (sic) serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move

the process forward towards resolution" (UNSC, 2007). Similarly, 180 members of the US Congress had expressed their support to the Moroccan proposal (Theofilopoulou, 2007). More recently, some US officials and the UNSC went further stating that the Moroccan proposal was the only 'realistic' base for a resolution of the dispute.

Conclusion

The issue of Western Sahara is of extreme importance for Morocco. As Shelley pointed out, "any outcome in the Western Sahara will have consequences for the nature of the Moroccan state" (2004: 4). In fact, in Morocco, it is often argued that an exit from Western Sahara would imperil the monarchy. Furthermore, Morocco is the main ally of the US-led 'war on terrorism' in the region and it is really keen in promoting and maintaining an image of moderation and stability, in particular in front of the West. Morocco often emphasised its unique role in providing a privileged channel of communication between the Muslim World and the West. In this context, the framing of the Western Sahara dispute is of great importance. As already pointed out, this issue can threaten not only the legitimacy of the King, but also the internal stability of the country. As international law does not favour its aims, Morocco has envisaged a double strategy: to retain the support of the Great Powers as well as preserving the military and civil occupations of the territory.

As a result of the construction of Polisario as a potential terrorist organisation, Polisario finds itself under tight and contradictory pressures. The UN Security Council and the US strongly pressure it to compromise with Morocco. At the same time, however, the rising of Saharawi nationalism during these latest years has been growing stronger and stronger (Mundy, 2007; Pointier, 2004; Shelley, 2004). The present situation is extremely complex. Pressures to resume violent hostilities are growing among the nationalist movement and by that way the Polisario position and legitimacy inside the movement is being questioned.

This chapter aims at opening a space of reflection on the performative role of language. Its aim is to stress the power within language and the implications of that. Particular attention has been devoted to the implication of labelling, too often considered an innocent act. However, this chapter is only the first step in the direction of a deeper understanding of the socio-political construction of Polisario members as (potential) terrorists and its conclusion are only tentative.

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