

SPEAKER

John Damis is a professor of Political Science and International Relations and Director of the Middle East Studies Center at Portland State University. Damis has conducted extensive fieldwork on the Western Sahara, and from 1993-94 served as a consultant to the Identification Commission of the United Nations Mission for a Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO). Previously, he worked as a foreign affairs analyst for the Department of State. He is the author of four books and monographs and over thirty articles and chapters on the politics and international relations of the Middle East and North Africa, including *Conflict in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Dispute*. Professor Damis earned degrees at Harvard University, where he also taught as a visiting professor, and a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. ■

FINDING A WAY OUT: THE CRISIS IN WESTERN SAHARA

On April 28, Professor John Damis urged Morocco to articulate a realistic and forthcoming plan to settle the long-simmering dispute over the Western Sahara. Damis, who spoke at the CSIS Middle East Program's sixth Maghreb Roundtable, argued that international support was crucial to resolving the conflict, although doing so remained a low priority on the international agenda. The United Nations Secretary General's recent report reflects a more favorable position toward Morocco, Damis argued, yet bold Moroccan action remains vital.

The territory of the Western Sahara was in dispute even before Spain ended its colonial occupation in 1975. Local Sahrawi tribes called for independence and created an armed movement which became known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro, or Polisario. Morocco also claimed sovereignty over the territory, arguing that Spain was occupying Morocco's southern provinces. When King Hassan II of Morocco launched the Green March in 1975 in the days after Spain's hurried departure, the Algerian-backed Polisario launched a guerilla war against Moroccan forces. A low-scale war ensued until the Polisario and Morocco agreed to a UN-imposed cease fire in 1991.

Decades of migration, exile, births, and deaths have complicated efforts to hold a referendum on self-determination for the region. In the meantime, the issue has become an emotional one, especially in Morocco, making its resolution more politically fraught. The continuing conflict has posed obstacles to a growing range of U.S. and international policy objectives in the region, as it has obstructed North African economic integration, enfeebled the Arab Maghreb Union as a political entity, and complicated efforts to promote greater regional security cooperation through the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI).

The last major attempt at solving the Western Sahara issue came in 2003, when the United States, Great Britain and Spain pushed the UN Security Council to adopt the plan put forward by special envoy and former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker III. Baker's plan—his second to resolve the conflict—proposed a referendum to determine the permanent status of the Western Sahara. Most observers saw Baker's plan as more favorable to Algeria, yet they

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THE MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Maghreb Roundtable in November, 2005 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in North Africa and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Maghreb as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of North African energy, the effects of emigrant communities in Europe, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. ■

saw the Security Council decision to express support for the Baker plan while declining to endorse it formally as a victory for Morocco. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's April 2006 report on the Western Sahara crisis was a further win for the Moroccans, Damis said. In a nod to political realism, Annan's report acknowledged that Morocco would never abandon its claim to the Western Sahara.

By 2004, Morocco had clearly rejected the Baker plan and announced that it would spell out its own plan for the Western Sahara in early 2006. If the Moroccan government has already formulated such a plan, Damis said, it has yet to share it with the general public or the international community. Though the Polisario will likely reject any Moroccan plan outright, Damis argued that it was nonetheless in Morocco's interest to put forward a genuine plan for autonomy in the Western Sahara immediately. As time passes, it will only become more difficult for Morocco to convince the United Nations, the United States and European powers of its case, he said, and Morocco will improve its standing in the eyes of the international community if it puts forward a credible plan while the Polisario refuses to negotiate.

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Damis envisioned three ways to solve the crisis in the immediate future, although he conceded that each is unlikely. First, the Security Council could decide to use force or impose sanctions to compel the Polisario and Morocco into finding a mutually acceptable solution. Second, the Polisario could resume hostilities against Morocco to heighten international concern over a brewing crisis. Third, Morocco and the Polisario could resume negotiations. In negotiations, Morocco would likely link autonomy in the Sahara to Morocco's own nation-wide processes of decentralization and political reform. Under this rubric, the Sahara would enjoy growing autonomy concomitant with increasing autonomy for all of Morocco's provinces. Damis thought that the third option was the most realistic, but he acknowledged that it, too, was flawed; a slow process for integrating the Sahara erroneously assumes that the situation on the ground in the Western Sahara will remain relatively static through a potentially long and uncertain process of Moroccan political reform.

Damis called for the United States, Spain, France, and other interested members of the international community to sharply heighten their engagement in the resolution of this conflict. The United States, for example, could push Morocco to put its plan forward quickly and might also work with Algeria to involve it in negotiations. Indeed, Damis suggested that any peace plan in the

Western Sahara should involve not only Morocco and the Polisario, but should also include a second track of negotiations that would fully normalize bilateral relations between Morocco and Algeria.

Damis recognized that building international support for a solution would be difficult, especially since violence between the Polisario and the Moroccan government ceased in 1991. The United States and European governments enjoy strong bilateral ties with both Algiers and Rabat despite perpetually cool Algerian-Moroccan relations. Pushing for a solution to this conflict may even run counter to U.S. and European interests in the Maghreb, as both are concerned with maintaining the stability of the Algerian and Moroccan governments, he said.

In reality, even the Moroccan and the Algerian governments have only a limited interest in bringing a quick resolution to the 30-year conflict. Maintaining the Western Sahara conflict does not pose a high human cost to either country, nor does it represent a mortal threat to the security of any state, whether in the Maghreb, Europe or the United States. Ironically, those who suffer most from the conflict—refugees in camps—are also those most detached from the political process. Failure to solve the conflict could condemn another generation of Sahrawis to the misery and despair of camp life. Though negotiations between Morocco, the Polisario and Algeria represent the only way to solve the conflict, Damis conceded that no party feels an urgent need to negotiate. ■ -MJB 05/12/06

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