Sahrawi arab democratic republic electric vehicle range

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NEAR THE BERM, WESTERN SAHARA--Abwa Ali, the commander of the Polisario Front"s second district, is pleased with his latest rocket attack against Morocco. He is a grizzled man in his late 60s who has been fighting since the 1970s for the independence of Western Sahara, a territory disputed between Morocco and its indigenous Sahrawi people. He wears thick black sunglasses like an aging rock star and knows how to navigate the roadless, ever-repeating desert without a map or compass.

He speeds away from the site of the attack in a tan Toyota with a sawed-off top that the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi liberation movement, uses to blend into the desert. They remove the windshield so there is no chance that the sun will glint against the glass and give their position away to enemy surveillance. As the car bumps over the pebbled ground, the boom of a Moroccan reply sounds out, and plumes of sand bloom on the horizon. Ali counts off the number of shells discharged with increasing satisfaction: The more weapons Morocco wastes, the happier he is.

Ali has been fighting this war on and off for 50 years. A mottled scar on his stomach and pieces of shrapnel buried in his legs tell the story of the last time that this conflict was hot. He represents a generation that began as guerrilla fighters against the then-colonizer Spain, only to shift to squaring off against occupying Moroccan forces once Madrid pulled out in 1976. Morocco wanted (and still wants) to exploit the immense phosphate reserves within Western Sahara"s borders and viewed Sahara as part of a greater nationalist enterprise.

The Polisario Front"s fight against Morocco never technically ended. In 1991, after 15 years of war, the Polisario and Morocco declared a cease-fire with the understanding that the United Nations would soon hold a referendum on independence in the disputed territories. It never happened. Now the Polisario Front only controls around 20 percent of Western Sahara. Its headquarters are in refugee camps in the southwest of Algeria, which supports it partially to needle its regional rival, Morocco.

A month after the end of the cease-fire, former U.S. President Donald Trump declared U.S. support for Morocco"s sovereignty over Western Sahara in order to bring Morocco into the Abraham Accords, a series of deals aiming at normalizing relations between Arab-majority countries and Israel. Morocco used the decision--the first time a U.N. member state had recognized Rabat"s claims--as a launching pad to rally diplomatic support for its claim over Western Sahara, and simultaneously drew closer to Israel and especially its arms industry.

As a result, Algeria and Morocco"s already strained diplomatic relations came to a bitter end, and even Spain and France are getting drawn into a complicated battle, one of the last unresolved decolonization fights left from the 20th century. "For Algeria," said one former U.N. official with long experience in the dispute, "Western Sahara has enormous strategic importance. It keeps Rabat stuck fighting with Polisario at minimal

cost for Algiers. It is a delicate situation that risks spiraling out of control."

Ali first heard of the Polisario Front on a transistor radio that he would furtively listen to under the covers. In 1973, Western Sahara was still colonized by Spain, which after its discovery of phosphates (vital for fertilizer production) had started pouring money and settlers into the conflict. Ali, like many indigenous Sahrawi people, came from a family of nomads who traversed Western Sahara trading goods and looking for places for their goats and camels to graze.

The Polisario Front was formed in 1973 by a cadre of young Sahrawis, many of whom had been educated in Morocco and inspired by the decolonization movements there and in Algeria. They started out with "17 men and two camels," in the words of a senior military official in the Polisario Front, Sidi Owgal. They were led by a charismatic young Marxist, El-Ouali Mustafa Sayed, who sported long hair, a leather jacket, and a decided Che Guevara chic.

Another leader, who would go on to direct the Polisario"s army, was a young man with a thick handlebar mustache named Brahim Ghali, who today is the president of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the one-party state founded and governed by the Polisario Front. He still had the same mustache when Foreign Policy met him in the Presidency, a run-down building with peeling yellow paint and very little security, his office decorated by a massive map of Western Sahara on the wall. For a man who has been fighting since the 1970s, Ghali comes off as more avuncular than warrior.

Fighters like Ghali, Ali, and El-Ouali used their knowledge of the landscape to face the superior forces of the Moroccans, who rained down white phosphorus munitions and napalm on Sahrawi refugee camps in 1976. "My training was done in the field, especially on the battlefield," Ghali said in response to a series of written questions.

"Now you may ask why the decolonization of Western Sahara remains unfinished," said Sidi Omar, the Polisario representative to the United Nations, in a recent session for the U.N. Committee on Decolonization. "It is the indefensible inaction of the international community that has encouraged the occupying state of Morocco to continue, with complete impunity, to occupy by force parts of Western Sahara. It is as simple as that."

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