



Polisario or a Sicario? A Model of the Terroristic Foreign Fighters

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Polisario Front as a model for understanding how separatist groups have transformed into foreign fighter terrorist networks, focusing on their alleged links to Iranian-backed militias and activities in Syria. It also discusses the implications of their potential designation as a foreign terrorist organization. Much evidence has highlighted their transnational networks with terrorist organizations linked to Iran and the former Syrian regime. The group is also deeply rooted in organized crime in the Sahel region. This article argues that to explore the prospects of designating the Polisario Front as a terrorist organization, it is necessary to understand its operating mechanism and objectives, which include gaining recognition in the context of its separatist demands and support, including obtaining weapons from Iran, particularly in the context of its threat to carry out hostile actions against Morocco. This article presents a descriptive empirical analysis of the "foreign terrorist fighter" framework and its application to the Polisario Front, based on a database and data related to its terrorist activities. The findings are expected to be useful to policymakers seeking to combat terrorist groups that threaten regional and international security.



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1 Introduction

The use of acts of terrorism by the separatist movement is not a new phenomenon (Ojo 2023). Separatist terrorism is understood here as the deliberate use or threat of violence against non-combatants by a sub-state organisation that claims to act on behalf of a territorially concentrated ethnic, national or regional community, and whose declared political objective is the detachment of that community's claimed territory from the existing state — whether through independent statehood or through irredentist union with a neighbouring state — rather than the capture or ideological transformation of the central government itself. The definition adopted here isolates separatist terrorism by its objective rather than by its repertoire of violence. Three features distinguish it analytically from other motivational categories. First, the objective is territorial and constitutive — secession or irredentist union — rather than regime change or systemic revolution, which places the claim in direct competition with the territorial integrity of the target state. Second, the violence is addressed to a dual audience: it seeks not only to impose costs on the state but also to render the ethnic or national identity of the claimed constituency politically salient and to discipline intermediaries within that constituency who might otherwise compromise on identity questions. Third, and consequently, targeting tends to be more selective than in the religiously motivated category, since indiscriminate casualties risk alienating both the constituency in whose name the organisation claims to act and the external audiences from which it seeks recognition. It should be added that the designation itself is contested: organisations pursuing separatist objectives characteristically reject the label “terrorist” in favour of “national liberation movement”, and the attribution of the label is therefore itself a stake in the conflict rather than a neutral description of it. Separatist groups often employ terrorism to intimidate the government in power to achieve their aims. The evolving nature of global terrorism has created complex intersections between national liberation movements, proxy warfare, and foreign fighter phenomena. Among the most controversial cases is the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro). This group has operated for decades in Western Sahara amid regional tensions between Morocco and Algeria. Once viewed primarily through the lens of decolonization and self-determination, the Polisario has increasingly been accused of transforming into a proxy force with terrorist affiliations—a transition that offers critical insights into the anatomy of foreign fighter networks. This article examines the Polisario Front through the dual framework of national liberation movement and

potential terrorist entity, analyzing its alleged connections to Iranian-backed militias and activities in conflict zones like Syria. The investigation addresses a central question: Can the Polisario Front be conceptualized as a model for understanding the metamorphosis of liberation movements into terroristic foreign fighter networks? why separatist groups choose terrorism? Although several theories have been advanced under different models, they are united by an approach that casts terrorism in utilitarian terms as a tactic whose benefits outweigh its costs. The strategic model posits that terrorism enables armed groups to achieve objectives that they cannot attain through conventional politics or on the battlefield. At its most basic level, the strategic model suggests that terrorism is chosen by armed groups because of a perception that it works to achieve their goals, even if the reality is more complicated.

In his study of the Afghan Taliban's links to al-Qaeda, Harpviken presents a conceptual framework through which to explore transnationalization, which he defines as “the process by which non-state groups integrate with transnational actors.” (Harpviken 2012, p. 205) He investigates transnationalization along four dimensions: organization (1), resource mobilization (2), tactical repertoire (3), and ideological framing (4). Regarding tactical repertoire, the article explores to what extent affiliate groups themselves carry out attacks across national borders, that is, engage in ‘transnational operations. As regards organization, the focus is on the issue of ‘transnational recruitment’, that is, the presence of foreign fighters within different affiliate groups. This leads to the question of how these two dimensions of transnationalization—operations and recruitment—affect the designation of the Polisario as a terrorist organisation.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its contribution to broader discussions on conflict evolution and terrorist designation. While the United Nations continues to recognize the Polisario Front as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, legislative bodies in the United States have recently considered designating it as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). This juxtaposition of perspectives reveals the complexities of distinguishing between legitimate resistance and terrorism in modern conflict zones. The phenomenon of foreign fighters—individuals who travel abroad to join armed conflicts—has gained increased attention since the rise of the Islamic State, with approximately 40,000 fighters from over 120 countries traveling to Iraq and Syria by 2015. Within this landscape, the alleged presence of Polisario fighters in Syria represents a potentially significant yet understudied dimension of the foreign fighter phenomenon.

1.1 Conceptual Definitions and Operational Vocabulary

For analytical precision, the three core concepts deployed throughout this article are defined here in operational form. Terrorism studies have long suffered from terminological imprecision that constrains replicability across the field (Schmid 2013, pp. 39–57; Silke 2008, pp. 27–50); the present section therefore states explicitly the working definitions adopted, the literature on which each rest, and the analytical distinctions that they preserve (Margulies 2013).

Terroristic Foreign Fighter (TFF). The article adopts the definition codified in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), operative paragraph 6(a), S/RES/2178 (2014): “individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.” The qualifier “terroristic” is reserved here for cases in which the fighter operates within – or in declared support of – the command structure of an organisation engaged in conduct that meets the threshold of “terrorist activity” under domestic and international instruments such as Section 219 of the United States Immigration and Nationality Act and Article 1 of Council Common Position 2001/931/CFSP, U.S.C. § 1189. The category is analytically distinguished, following Malet (2013, pp. 5–9) and Hegghammer (2010, pp. 53–57), from (i) ordinary mercenaries; (ii) volunteers integrated into the regular armed forces of a recognised state; and (iii) diaspora combatants returning to declared national armies (UNODC). The defining feature is operational embedding within a transnationally linked clandestine organisation.

Terrorist Diplomacy. Building on the literature on the foreign policy of armed non-state actors (Darwich 2021; Coggins 2015), terrorist diplomacy is here defined as the rational management of foreign relations by a non-state armed group designated, or credibly susceptible of designation, as a terrorist entity, deploying state-like instruments – formal communiqués, diplomatic representation in third capitals, alliance maintenance, public diplomacy – to advance its strategic objectives without enjoying the recognised legal status of a state. The concept is distinguished from “state-sponsored terrorism” (which describes state instrumentalisation of non-state violence) and from “rebel diplomacy” sensu Coggins (2015), a term reserved for armed groups not themselves designated as terrorist actors. The conceptual utility of the term lies in capturing the phenomenon by which sub-state actors execute foreign-policy-like behaviour while simultaneously engaging in or supporting acts that meet the definitional threshold of terrorism.

Proxy Network and Proxy Warfare. The article uses the definition advanced by Mumford (2013, p. 1), namely that a proxy relationship is “the product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the

chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor’s weapons, training, and funding.” A “proxy network” in the present study refers to the resulting traceable chain of operational interdependence, identifiable through four observable indicators: (a) material support (arms, financing, training); (b) tactical coordination (joint operations, shared targeting); (c) shared adversaries; and (d) plausible deniability of the benefactor.

These three concepts are not synonymous and not co-extensive. A group may operate as a proxy without deploying its own foreign fighters; a group may deploy terroristic foreign fighters without operating as a state-controlled proxy; a group may engage in terrorist diplomacy without being formally listed. The analytical contribution of this article is to trace how, in the Polisario case, the three categories overlap empirically, and to assess that overlap against a transparent evidentiary record.

2 Literature Review

The academic discourse on terrorism has expanded dramatically over the past fifty years, with research accelerating particularly after the September 11 attacks. By September 2020, scholarly literature on terrorism had exceeded 18,651 items across multiple disciplines, predominantly political science and international relations (Haghani et al. 2022). Despite this wealth of research, the field has often been criticized for being “stagnant and speculative (Schmid 2013),” lacking rigorous empirical methods and well-conceptualized theories. The definitional challenges surrounding terrorism remain profound, with no internationally agreed-upon definition and over 150 academic definitions identified in scholarly work.

Research on foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) has typically focused on individuals joining explicitly jihadist organizations like ISIS. Studies have revealed that, contrary to popular perception, FTFs often originate from countries with high levels of economic development, low-income inequality, and highly developed political institutions (NBER 2016). This suggests that relative deprivation and difficulty with assimilation may drive radicalization more than absolute poverty. The literature on national liberation movements turning to terrorist tactics is less developed, though some studies have examined how groups like the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have navigated this transition.

The Polisario Front has received relatively limited attention in terrorism studies, with existing literature divided along political lines. Moroccan sources and Western think tanks often emphasize alleged connections to Iran and Hezbollah, while Algerian and sympathetic sources frame the group as a legitimate national liberation movement. This article contributes to the

literature by examining the Polisario through the theoretical lens of foreign fighter mobilization and proxy warfare, potentially bridging a significant gap in contemporary terrorism studies.

3 Methodology

This article employs a multimethod approach combining qualitative case study analysis with comparative historical research. Primary data is drawn from documented allegations of Polisario activities in Syria, official statements from governments and international organizations, and legislative efforts toward terrorist designation. Secondary sources include academic analyses of terrorism patterns and foreign fighter mobilization.

The remainder of this section sets out, in greater methodological detail, (i) the four-tier source hierarchy adopted for evidentiary weighting; (ii) the coding criteria applied to empirical claims about Polisario activity; and (iii) the structural limitations of the evidentiary base. This explicit protocol responds to the requirement that empirical claims in terrorism studies be supported by transparent, replicable evidentiary procedures (Silke 2008; Schmid 2013).

3.0 Source Hierarchy and Validation Protocol

To ensure analytical transparency, this study adopts a four-tier source hierarchy adapted from established protocols in terrorism studies and human rights documentation. Each tier is accorded different evidentiary weight, and every empirical claim concerning Polisario activity is tagged in the analysis by its tier of provenance.

Tier 1 – Primary documentary evidence. Original records produced by United Nations Special Procedures (joint allegation letters and urgent appeals), the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), Security Council resolutions, treaty body decisions, national legislative records (Congressional bills, hearings) and judicial decisions. These are accorded the highest evidentiary weight.

Tier 2 – Peer-reviewed academic literature. Articles in indexed journals subject to scholarly review (e.g., *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *International Area Studies Review*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*). These are used principally for theoretical frameworks, comparative analysis and methodologically-validated empirical claims.

Tier 3 – Policy and think-tank publications. Reports issued by specialised research institutions (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Hudson Institute, Jamestown Foundation, Royal United Services Institute,

DAWN MENA). These are clearly demarcated as non-peer-reviewed and admitted as supplementary or contextual evidence, never as standalone proof of contested allegations.

Tier 4 – Investigative journalism and open-source reporting. Articles in established media outlets (The Washington Post, The Arab Weekly, regional Arabic-language press) and statements by open-source weapons researchers. Tier 4 sources are admitted only when corroborated by at least one Tier 1, 2 or 3 sources, and are never used in isolation for claims of attributed terrorist activity.

3.0.1 Coding Criteria for Empirical Claims

Every empirical assertion concerning alleged Polisario involvement in foreign-fighter, proxy or transnational terrorist activity is coded prior to inclusion along three orthogonal axes: (a) source tier (1 to 4 as above); (b) corroboration status – confirmed (at least two independent sources at Tier 1 or 2), partially corroborated (one Tier 1 or 2 source plus Tier 3 or 4 corroboration), or uncorroborated (Tier 3 or 4 only); and (c) evidentiary nature – direct documentary evidence, eyewitness or intelligence-derived attribution, or circumstantial inference.

Where evidence falls below the threshold of dual independent corroboration at Tier 1 or Tier 2, the analysis explicitly flags the claim as “alleged” or “reported” and identifies the source category in the text. This protocol is consistent with best practice in the empirical study of clandestine armed groups, where direct primary access is structurally constrained.

3.0.2 Treatment of Specific Contested Sources

Two evidentiary items recur throughout the analysis and require specific methodological clarification:

– The Malian security services document titled *Al-Qaida dans les camps du Polisario*, referenced in Section 6.1, is not publicly available in its original archival form. The present study cites this document as reproduced and analysed by Boukhars (2012, p. 6) in a Carnegie Endowment policy paper. The chain of attribution is acknowledged: the citation is therefore Tier 3 (Boukhars, policy paper) reporting Tier 1 material (a national security services document) to which the author has no direct independent access. The claim is consequently coded as “uncorroborated by direct primary source” and is presented in the analysis as illustrative of allegations under examination rather than as established empirical fact.

– Joint Allegation Letter JAL DZA 2/2019, sent on 18 October 2019 by the Working Group on Arbitrary

Detention and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances to the Government of Algeria, referenced in Section 6.1, is a Tier 1 instrument of the United Nations Special Procedures system. It is accessible via the OHCHR Special Procedures Communications Database at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TmSearch/Results>. It is cited in the present study under its original archival reference and is treated as primary documentary evidence.

3.0.3 Acknowledged Limitations of the Evidentiary Base

The author acknowledges three structural constraints that apply uniformly to any terrorism-studies analysis of the Polisario Front: (i) the Tindouf refugee camps are a restricted environment for independent field research and human rights monitoring; (ii) source production is politically polarised between Moroccan and Algerian institutional perspectives, requiring triangulation against United Nations and Western scholarly outputs; and (iii) attribution of acts committed in Syrian or Sahelian theatres frequently depends on intelligence-derived material that is rarely fully declassified. These limitations are not unique to the present case but characterise the broader literature on foreign terrorist fighters and

clandestine armed groups (Hegghammer 2010; Malet 2013).

3.1 Data Collection

Data was gathered through extensive review of:

- Official documents from UN bodies, national governments, and security agencies
- Academic literature on terrorism studies and foreign fighter phenomena
- Media reports from international and regional sources
- Think tank analyses and policy papers

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis applies a theoretical framework combining:

- Radicalization theory to examine potential pathways from liberation struggle to terrorist affiliation
- Geopolitical theory to situate the Polisario within broader power struggles between Morocco-Algeria and West-Iran/Russia
- Organizational theory to understand how group dynamics might facilitate transformation.

Research dimension	Data source	Analytical framework
Historical evolution	UN documents historical records	Historical institutionalism
Alleged terrorist ties	Government reports, security analyses	Network theory
Foreign fighter activities	Syrian conflict reports, witness accounts	Conflict sociology
Designation debates	Legislative proposals, policy papers	Critical policy analysis

Table 1. Methodological Approach

3.3 The Organizational Approach to Terrorism Theory:

This approach analyzes terrorist groups from the perspective of organizational theories. As in other areas of the social sciences, the primary explanations for terrorist groups are based on the organizational perspective. The organization's purpose, actions, and internal dynamics are explained through their relationship with internal and external organizational processes. The organizational approach suggests that the primary goal of a terrorist organization is "survival," like any other organization, such as a government institution or a business (Özdamar 2008). This approach therefore explains terrorism

as a result of the organization's struggle for survival, usually in a competitive environment.

For example, this theory posits that the incentives offered to an organization are crucial to understanding why its members engage in terrorism. This is particularly true in the case of the Polisario Front, which relentlessly seeks recognition and military support from states such as Iran and Syria under the former Assad regime. Another fundamental argument underlying this approach is that terrorist organizations are similar to businesses. The economic theory of organizations can be used to explain the organization's survival in a competitive environment. This line of research suggests that terrorist organizations are more like companies competing in an environment where they are constantly striving for survival.

Another element of this typology that is important to consider is how armed groups may relate to each other in different ways than the literature suggests. For example, it is well-known that armed groups will sometimes seek to outbid each other for greater levels of political support among their self-ascribed constituency. Equally, research shows that terrorist

groups can make alliances with states and other terrorist groups for a wide variety of benefits, including legitimacy, funding, weapons, and political support. But there has been comparatively less attention paid to cases where these alliances are loose, offering little or no tactical or organizational benefit, and cases in which alliances are rhetorical but have virtually no formal or material grounding (Boyle 2023). These latter cases open up the possibility that terrorist groups in the same milieu may act as if they are allies, hoping to advance the fortunes of similarly-focused armed groups or make a fertile international environment for their activities, but without drawing any direct strategic and organisational benefits from doing so.

3.4 Operationalising the Harpviken Four-Dimensional Framework

Harpviken (2012, pp. 203–209) introduced a four-dimensional framework for the analysis of transnationalisation, defined as “the process by which non-state groups integrate with transnational actors,” distinguishing between (1) organisation, (2) resource mobilisation, (3) tactical repertoire and (4) ideological framing. Although the framework was originally developed to assess the Afghan Taliban’s relationships with Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani state, it has been shown to be portable across cases in which a sub-state actor is alleged to integrate with transnational networks (Krause 2022, pp. 24–28).

To meet the standards of analytical rigour required, and to address the methodological concern that frameworks borrowed from terrorism studies are too often invoked without being operationalised, each dimension is here defined in operational terms with measurable indicators traceable in the evidentiary base. The framework is then applied systematically across the analytical sections that follow (Sections 5 and 6) and revisited in the conclusion (Section 7), where the cumulative score across the four dimensions is used to assess the overall depth of the Polisario’s alleged transnationalisation.

Dimension	Operational definition	Empirical indicators in the Polisario case	Application in this study
(1) Organisation	Presence of transnational recruitment; foreign fighters within the affiliate’s ranks; cross-border command structures.	Alleged deployment of approximately 120 Sahrawi fighters to Syria; reported meetings between Polisario leaders and Hezbollah representatives in Beirut (January 2011); cross-border representation in Damascus and Beirut.	Sections 5.3, 5.4
(2) Resource mobilisation	Flow of weapons, funding, training and logistical support from external benefactors.	Allegations of Iranian-supplied munitions and drone training; reported use of the Iranian embassy in Algiers as a transit channel; financial and material support from Algerian state and Iranian proxy networks.	Sections 5.3, 6.2
(3) Tactical repertoire	Adoption of transnational operations; cross-border attacks; involvement in trafficking, kidnapping or proxy violence.	Reported Sahel-based criminality and trafficking; alleged coordinated kidnapping operations involving AQIM (as reported by Boukhars 2012, citing Malian security services); cross-border arms flows.	Sections 6.1, 6.2

(4) Ideological framing	Convergence, hybridisation or pragmatic alignment of doctrinal narratives between the group and its transnational partners.	Originally secular African-socialist separatist movements ; alleged pragmatic alignment with Shi'a Iranian and Hezbollah networks despite the group's Sunni composition; selective rhetorical convergence with anti-Western and anti-normalisation narratives.	Section 6.3
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Table 2 — Operationalisation of the Harpviken Four-Dimensional Framework for the Polisario Case

This matrix is invoked at each relevant point in the analysis below: where the empirical record speaks to a specific dimension, the analysis flags the dimension in question and weighs the evidence against the operational indicator. The cumulative assessment is then presented in Section 7.

4. Historical Context and Evolution of the Polisario Front

The Polisario Front emerged in 1973 with Algerian assistance to battle Spanish colonial rule in Western Sahara. The group initially adopted Marxist and African socialist liberation ideology common among independence movements during the Cold War era, but abandoned Marxism at a 1991 congress following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Spain relinquished its Saharan colony in 1975, the Polisario Front proclaimed the independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), though this was immediately challenged by both Mauritania and Morocco, igniting a 16-year war for independence.

A 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which was intended to organize a referendum on self-determination. However, this referendum never materialized due to disputes over voter eligibility, leaving the conflict frozen for decades. During this period, approximately 90,000 Sahrawi refugees settled in camps in Tindouf, Algeria, which became the base for Polisario's political and military operations.

The year 2020 marked a significant turning point when the Guerguerat incident—a Moroccan military operation against Sahrawi protesters at a border post with Mauritania—led to the Polisario's withdrawal from the ceasefire and return to armed struggle. This move cost the group significant international support but aligned with increasingly aggressive posturing from both sides.

Importantly, 2020 also saw the Trump administration recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco's normalization of relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords. This dramatic shift in U.S. policy altered the geopolitical landscape and potentially influenced the Polisario's strategic calculations.

5 The Polisario as Foreign Fighter: Evidence and Allegations

5.1The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee approach

The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee's Global Survey of 2024 mentioned that North Africa continues to face multiple types of terrorist threats (UNSC/CTED 2024). One of these is the presence of terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on the territory of several North African countries. However, the impact of these groups appears to be relatively limited in terms of the number of attacks and casualties, and their capabilities differ compared to those of terrorist groups in other regions of Africa. The twelfth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIS, for example, noted that ISIS in Libya has continued to decline, but it still maintains a presence in the south of the country, in addition to " sleeper " cells in some northern coastal cities. In Egypt, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (which pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2014) has an active presence in northeastern Sinai and continues to carry out attacks, but its capabilities may be more localized, and the extent of its connection to ISIS remains unclear. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) also continues to "atrophy in Algeria, with its center of gravity steadily shifting toward the Sahel (UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, Global Survey 2024)." Nevertheless, various groups regularly carry out deadly attacks in their areas of operation, primarily targeting state authorities

(especially the military and security forces), but also targeting civilians in Western countries.

On 24 September 2014, at a meeting held at the level of Heads of State or Government the Security Council unanimously adopted its resolution 2178 (2014) to address the acute and growing threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). The resolution defines FTFs as "individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict", and further notes that FTFs increase the intensity, duration, and complexity of conflicts and may constitute a danger to their States of origin, transit, destination, as well as neighbouring zones of armed conflict in which they are active.

Many terrorist entities, such as the Polisario Front, seek to evade the designation of an external armed group within a state or of their fighters as foreign terrorist fighters, to avoid suspicion of involvement in transnational terrorist acts. Many countries face extremist organizations with varying degrees of affinity for al-Qaeda in various regions. Some have argued that al-Qaeda's relationship with these groups is typical of "a union of like-minded comrades, many of whom are engaged in separate armed conflicts in different regions of the world (Krause 2022)."

5.2 Government Designations of Terrorist Organizations

The main advantage of government lists of Terrorist Organizations is that they are transnational and well-resourced (Meserole and Byman 2019). Unlike academic and civil society organizations, governments do not rely on external funding sources and therefore have greater resources to vet terrorist organizations. In addition, many have access to classified information that can provide valuable insights into the group's purpose and activities. For example, consider the major designation lists of the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. These countries, known as the "Five Eyes," all have similar values, political institutions, and definitions of terrorist groups. Their intelligence services also routinely share information about terrorist groups globally. Furthermore, the number of groups espousing a particular ideology is also expected to be roughly proportional to the level of violence perpetrated by adherents of that ideology. In the context of designating the Polisario Front as a terrorist organization, Republican Representative Joe

Wilson introduced a bill to the US Congress in June 2025 calling for designating the Polisario Front as a terrorist organization and imposing sanctions on it, including freezing its assets and banning its members from traveling (Keenan 2020). The bill cited allegations of support from entities considered hostile by Washington, such as Iran and Hezbollah (United States Congress, H.R. 4119).

Pursuant to Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act in the United States, the Secretary of State is authorized to designate an organization as an Foreign Terrorist Organizations FTO if such an entity meets three criteria (CRS, report IF10613): the suspected terrorist group must (1) be a foreign organization; (2) engage in "terrorist activity," "terrorism," or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism; and (3) threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national defense, foreign relations, or economic interests of the United States.

The designation of an organization has three principal consequences. First, it makes it possible for the government to prosecute individuals who provide material support to the organization. Prosecution for material support for terrorism has become one of the U.S. government's most powerful tools in its counterterrorism strategy. Using the material support statute, prosecutors may charge an individual with providing support for terrorism for virtually any assistance to a designated organization. The second consequence of designation is that the Secretary of the Treasury may freeze the designated organization's assets and block its financial transactions. This essentially closes the U.S. financial system to the organization and makes it illegal for individuals to conduct transactions with the organization. Finally, individuals associated with designated organizations face travel bans or other restrictions. They are barred from entering the United States and non-citizens face removal if they are in the United States.

Council Common Position 2001/931/CFSP of the Council of the European Union on the application of specific measures to combat terrorism, adopted on 27 December 2001, provides in Article 1(2) that for the purposes of that Common Position, 'persons, groups and entities involved in terrorist acts' means the following:

— persons who commit, or attempt to commit, terrorist acts or who participate in, or facilitate, the commission of terrorist acts,

– groups and entities owned or controlled directly or indirectly by such persons; and persons, groups and entities acting on behalf of, or under the direction of, such persons, groups and entities, including funds derived or generated from property owned or controlled directly or indirectly by such persons and associated persons, groups and entities.

In parallel, under the Terrorism Act 2000 c. 11 of the United Kingdom, the Home Secretary may proscribe an organisation if they believe it is concerned in terrorism (UK Government, proscribed groups), and it is proportionate to do. For the act, this means that the organisation:

- commits or participates in acts of terrorism
- prepares for terrorism
- promotes or encourages terrorism (including the unlawful glorification of terrorism)
- is otherwise concerned in terrorism

Section 3(6) of the Terrorism Act 2000 allows the Home Secretary to specify by order that an alternative name or alias is to be treated as another name for a proscribed organisation listed in Schedule 2 to the act. The Home Secretary can make an order where they believe the proscribed organisation is operating under that alternative name or that an organisation operating under a name not included in Schedule 2 is for all practical purposes the same as the proscribed organisation.

5.3 Alleged Connections to Iranian Proxy Networks

The most significant allegations concerning the Polisario's transformation into a foreign fighter network center on its relationship with Iranian-backed militias. In 2018, Morocco severed diplomatic relations with Iran after Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita accused Algeria of facilitating Iranian and Hezbollah military and logistical support to the Polisario (The Arab Weekly 2025). According to these allegations, Tehran used its embassy in Algiers to send arms shipments to the Polisario, though concrete evidence remains contested.

6 Theoretical Framework: Modeling the Terroristic Foreign Fighter

The case of the Polisario Front offers insights for developing a theoretical model of how national liberation movements might transform into or affiliate

Iran's support has reportedly advanced from training to the provision of lethal hardware. In a 2022 livestream, Polisario Interior Minister Omar Mansour stated that his fighters were training on assembling and operating armed drones. A year later, images disseminated via Polisario-controlled social media channels showed Iranian-type munitions, as confirmed by open-source weapons researchers.

Recent reports suggest more direct involvement in regional conflicts. According to multiple sources, including a Washington Post article citing regional and European officials, fighters from the Algeria-based Polisario Front were present in Syria and received training from Iran. A document discovered at the headquarters of Syrian intelligence services allegedly confirmed the presence of 120 Sahrawi fighters from four brigades in Syria, integrated into units of the Syrian Arab Army. The document also mentioned talks between Polisario leaders and Hezbollah in Beirut in January 2011, during the early stages of the Arab Spring.

5.4 Operational Patterns in Syria

Evidence suggests that Polisario fighters in Syria followed patterns similar to other foreign fighter contingents. According to researchers interviewed for this study, Polisario militants traveled to Syria primarily to receive military training from Hezbollah rather than to engage in sustained combat (Netjes 2025). The training reportedly occurred in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, while the Polisario maintained a "political office" in Damascus for coordination purposes. This operational distinction between political and military functions aligns with the typical structures of proxy networks. The collapse of the Assad regime led to the dispersal of Polisario fighters, with some fleeing to Lebanon while others were reportedly detained by emerging Syrian authorities. In February 2025, Algerian Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmed Attaf allegedly visited Damascus to request the release of Algerian military personnel and Polisario fighters, but Syrian Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa reportedly declined, stating that approximately 500 soldiers from the Algerian army and Polisario militias would be put on trial with terrorist foreign fighter networks. This transformation appears to follow several interconnected pathways:

6.1 Geopolitical Opportunity Structures

As a separatist group advocating for independence, the Polisario operates in a context marked by frustration with a futureless struggle and the psychological exhaustion of its youth base, who are drawn to profit motives. Since the beginning of this decade, the organization has weakened significantly. The completion of the "defense wall" in 1987, coupled with the withdrawal of recognition by several states and the intransigence of its leadership, have exacerbated the Polisario's isolation on the African and international scene. As a result, fighters are re-affiliating, and hundreds of young people detained in the Tindouf camps are escaping, increasing the number of recruits from smuggling and organized crime in the Sahel region and joining terrorist organizations (Tamekamta 2021).

The Polisario's alleged involvement in Syria must be understood within broader geopolitical realignments. Morocco's deepening ties with the Arabian Gulf states and the United States created incentives for adversarial states like Iran to leverage existing conflicts to pressure Rabat. As one analyst noted, "As Morocco deepens ties with Israel and the U.S., the Iran-Hezbollah axis sees (the Western Sahara) as the perfect place to retaliate (Riboua 2025; McGregor 2025)". This pattern aligns with proxy war theory, where secondary conflicts become theaters for larger power competitions.

Going back to the last decade, the partnerships between Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and elements of the Polisario may not be based on ideological affinity, but they do exist and constitute a major security threat to the Maghreb and the Sahel. The fear has always been that the frustration that leads to criminality might also lead to militancy and criminal terrorism. "Powerful terrorist organizations like AQIM are experts at detecting persons showing signs of vulnerability," said Michael Braun, a former director of operations of the Drug Enforcement Agency. "Thus, the camps of Tindouf represent a potential gold mine for recruiters from groups like AQIM (Boukhars 012)." With the significant amount of loose Libyan weapons and the

proliferation of skilled and angry fighters, the potential for destabilization is real. Mali accuses the Polisario of being a major player in the region's drug trafficking industry. According to a document penned by the Malian security services and titled "Al-Qaeda in the camps of the Polisario," elements within the Polisario are engaged with AQIM in kidnapping operations and are using Malian territory for drug trafficking.

According to the mechanism of urgent appeal related to UN special procedure, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances sent at 18 October 2019 to Algeria the hosted country of the Polisario, an urgent appeal concerning allegations against Polisario of using arbitrary arrests and detentions and torture toward Mr. Fadel Breika and Mr. Moulay Abba Bouzaid which are working on the issue of enforced disappearances in the region, and on cases of human rights violations during refugee protests in the Tindouf camp. This means that the Polisario Front lives in a situation outside the rule of law, characterised by impunity and gross human rights violations.

6.2 Organizational Incentives

For liberation movements facing diplomatic stagnation or military disadvantage, foreign engagements can provide several benefits: recognition, training opportunities, weapons, financial resources, and enhanced political standing.

The Polisario's return to Hostilities in 2020 after the collapse of the ceasefire may have created organizational imperatives for seeking new sources of support and operational experience.

6.3 Ideological Flexibility

While the Polisario began as a secular separatist movement, its alleged collaboration with Shiite Iran and Hezbollah suggests significant ideological pragmatism. This aligns with observations that terrorist networks often form across ideological lines based on strategic convenience rather than theological alignment. The Polisario's Sunni Muslim composition makes it an unlikely religious proxy for Shiite Iran, suggesting that practical geopolitical considerations outweigh theological concerns.

6.4 Transnationalization of Conflict

The alleged movement of Polisario fighters to Syria represents a broader pattern of conflict transnationalization, where localized struggles become interconnected through shared networks, training pipelines, and operational cooperation. This phenomenon challenges traditional distinctions between national liberation movements and international terrorism. Terrorist groups often focus on achieving their goals internationally, emphasizing terrorism and insurgency, especially with the proliferation of proxy conflicts in the 21st century.

Terrorist organizations are operating across borders, and they often adopt state-like goals at the regional and international levels. Like the Polisario, which maintains a network of foreign relations with its allies and conducts a foreign policy based on “terrorist diplomacy”, which is defined as a terrorist group’s rational management of international affairs to advance its specific strategic objectives. Like this, the terrorist group institutes a foreign policy. This implies that, although the nation-state has lost its preponderance in the international system, its operational structures and mechanisms remain relevant and are revalidated by the actors that have assumed a leading role in the globalized world. Therefore, diplomacy, understood generically from a state-centric vision, a state’s management of foreign affairs in regards to other states or international organizations to protect its interests, is assumed as a device used effectively by other actors, such as terrorist organizations, to interact with possible allies, amplify their radius of action, and achieve their goals.

7 Conclusion and Implications

The case of the Polisario Front presents a complex interplay between national liberation and terrorist designation, between local struggle and transnational armed networks. Much evidence suggests some Polisario members have engaged in foreign fighter activities in Syria.

This analysis suggests that the Polisario Front represents a potential model for how separatist movements might be co-opted into broader terrorist networks through geopolitical expediency, organizational incentives, and ideological flexibility. The case illustrates the blurring lines between national

liberation struggles and proxy warfare in an increasingly interconnected conflict landscape.

7.1 Policy Implications

The potential designation of the Polisario Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by U.S. legislators would have significant implications. Such a designation would:

1. Forming international pressure on Algeria, which supports the Polisario Front, considering it a state sponsor of a terrorist group.
2. Designating it as a terrorist organization by other countries, which would isolate it internationally and nullify its legitimacy.
3. Encouraging other countries to recognize Morocco's autonomy plan as a final solution to the Western Sahara conflict.
4. Potentially criminalize humanitarian aid to Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf.
5. Impact counterterrorism cooperation across North Africa and the Sahel.

7.2 Research Implications

This article identifies several areas for future research:

1. Comparative studies of other national liberation movements that have transitioned toward terrorist or foreign fighter activities.
2. Network analysis of the alleged connections between Polisario fighters and Iranian proxy networks.
3. Field research on radicalization processes in Sahrawi refugee camps.

The Polisario case illustrates the continuing evolution of terrorist foreign fighter phenomena beyond the jihadist context that has dominated academic and policy attention since 9/11. As conflict becomes increasingly transnationalized, understanding these complex intersections between separatist groups and global networks becomes ever more crucial for both scholars and policymakers seeking to address the root causes and manifestations of political violence in the 21st century.

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