

# Why Western Sahara matters to Morocco



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Moroccan FM Nasser Bourita (C) and David Schenker pose for a picture after a meeting in Dakhla, in Morocco-administered Western Sahara. (File/AFP)

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Events in the tiny Spanish enclave of Ceuta last month focused minds on the issue of illegal migration and the role of Morocco. However, the diplomatic fallout from 8,000 migrants entering Spanish territory unobstructed highlights a much larger disagreement between Morocco and Spain over the southern Moroccan territory known as Western Sahara.

For some years a Spanish possession known as Rio de Oro, this vast expanse of desert is central to Moroccan territorial integrity, and the US decision to recognize its right to the area has greatly impacted Rabat's relationships with its European allies.

Approximately the size of Britain, Western Sahara is by far the largest of the world's UN-recognized non-self-governing territories. In 1975, Spain relinquished administrative control of the territory to a Morocco-Mauritania joint administration. However, Mauritania withdrew its claim in 1979 and

Morocco secured de facto control, with the tacit support of both the US and France. However, Polisario Front rebels continued to call for self-determination at the behest of Algeria, which has its own set of territorial qualms with Morocco.

This situation remained until last year, when the US recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for Rabat normalizing relations with Israel. With many other countries, including the UAE, Jordan and Bahrain, following suit by opening diplomatic missions in the territory, Moroccan diplomacy has been relentless. With each plaque unveiling and ribbon cutting, the armed struggle of the Polisario Front and its left-wing guerrillas have been consigned ever further toward the ambiguous fate of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

Despite its recent diplomatic coups, Morocco struggles to have its rights to the territory recognized in Europe. The expectation that major European countries — including many long-standing Moroccan allies — would follow the US example has given way to increasingly fraught relations. To Moroccan policymakers, the failure of certain European countries to support its claims has highlighted a complete lack of recognition of Morocco's efforts concerning European security, shipping and anti-migration efforts. Given that all other North African countries have experienced recent popular uprisings, Morocco's status as an island of stability in an increasingly troubled region would seem to have escaped European policymakers, who have chosen to remain on the fence regarding Western Sahara.

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The recent withdrawal of Morocco's ambassador to Germany and the fallout with Spain over Ceuta are indicative of Rabat's growing exasperation with its European allies. In covertly accepting the arrival of the leader of the Polisario Front, Brahim Ghali, under a fake name and passport, Spain last month deliberately exacerbated the problems in its relations with Morocco. Rabat has taken issue with the relations Madrid enjoys with a guerrilla leader accused of war crimes.

For Morocco, which has for decades sought to be a reliable partner to Europe, the current circumstances cloud what is essentially a clear-cut matter of international law. Spain, despite being the former occupying power, has never sought to advance the intractable issue of Western Sahara, but is rather accused of undermining Morocco by supporting the Polisario Front. By claiming that the area was terra nullius (land that is legally unoccupied or uninhabited) before it became a Spanish protectorate and then calling for a referendum in an area where it has no jurisdiction, Spain has sought to compromise Morocco's efforts at territorial consolidation.

Morocco's view is that its historic treaties with Britain, Spain, France and Germany recognized that Moroccan sovereignty extended over the Western Sahara and are adequate evidence of their historical recognition of its claim. It is, therefore, unsurprising that their modern-day hesitancy has aggravated Rabat.

Following the opening of a US consulate in Western Sahara by the Trump administration, new President Joe Biden's officials have reassured Rabat of their intention not to reverse that policy for now, but rather to push for a new UN special envoy to resolve the issue. Given that Biden has previously stated that "Morocco holds a very special place in the hearts of Americans, it was the first nation in the world to recognize the United States of America in December 1777," any diplomatic backtracking is unlikely.

Morocco will this week host US Africa Command military games alongside personnel from the UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Brazil, Italy, Tunisia and Senegal. In a nod to the recent wrangling, Rabat claimed some of the exercises would take place in Western Sahara, but the US has denied this.

Concerning Morocco's European allies, it is essential that current disagreements do not affect the strong partnerships that have been built in recent years. It would be prudent for Rabat to seek a lasting solution while working alongside its allies, and for its European partners to understand the centrality of the Western Sahara issue in their dealings with Morocco.

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