

US diplomat visits Western Sahara after Morocco-Israel deal

David Schenker's visit comes ahead of the expected opening of provisional US consulate in the contested desert region.

Washington's decision to recognise Morocco's claim over Western Sahara unnerved the pro-independence Polisario Front [File: Zohra Bensemra/Reuters]

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A top United States envoy has visited contested Western Sahara after Washington recognised Morocco's sovereignty there in exchange for Rabat normalising ties with Israel.

The US embassy in Rabat called the trip on Saturday by David Schenker, assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs, and the highest-ranking US diplomat for North Africa and the Middle East, "a historic visit".

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Schenker's visit comes before the expected opening of a provisional US consulate in the desert region on Sunday, according to diplomatic sources in Rabat.

Western Sahara is a disputed and divided former Spanish colony, mostly under Morocco's control, where tensions with the pro-independence Polisario Front have simmered since the 1970s.

Last year Morocco joined the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan in agreeing to normalise ties with Israel under US-brokered deals.

In return, US President Donald Trump fulfilled a decades-old Moroccan goal by backing its contested sovereignty over the barren but phosphate-rich region, which lies next to rich Atlantic fishing zones.

UN peacekeepers in Western Sahara are mandated to organise a referendum on self-determination for the region, and despite Washington's move, the UN insists its position is "unchanged".

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‘Virtual’ US presence

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a Christmas Eve statement that Washington plans initially to establish a “virtual” presence in Western Sahara to be managed from the US Embassy in Morocco, focused on promoting economic and social development.

A “fully functioning consulate” is to follow, the statement said. It did not indicate whether the diplomatic post would be in Laayoune or Dakhla.

Joe Biden, who will replace Trump as president on January 20, has not publicly commented on Western Sahara.

“Every administration has the prerogative to set foreign policy,” said Schenker, speaking in a previous stop in Algeria, but ruling out US military presence in Western Sahara.

But, he said, “Let me be clear: the US is not establishing a military base in the Western Sahara.”

More than a dozen countries have already opened diplomatic offices in the territory, including the UAE and several African and Arab nations.

The Algerian-backed Polisario Front, which fought a war for independence from 1975 to 1991, considers such moves violations of international law.

While Western Sahara is home to fewer than a million people, it offers Morocco rich phosphate resources, fisheries and a key highway to Mauritania and the rest of West Africa.

In November, the Polisario announced it regarded a 1991 ceasefire as null and void after Morocco sent troops into a UN-patrolled buffer zone to reopen the

road.

Washington's decision to recognise Morocco's claim over Western Sahara was a significant policy shift. The move unnerved both the Polisario Front and Morocco's neighbour Algeria, where the Polisario Front is based.

Schenker on Saturday also visited the headquarters of the UN peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, known as Minurso.

He was in Algeria a day earlier, reiterating there that Morocco's plan for Western Sahara's autonomy should be the framework for negotiations, the online TSA-Algeria news site reported.

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