

## What's Next for the Western Sahara Conflict?

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Recent U.S. recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara territory grants Morocco a significant diplomatic win, albeit one with an uncertain future, and opens a new and unpredictable chapter in the conflict.



A Sahrawi refugee camp in Tindouf, Algeria. (EU Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid, <https://flic.kr/p/bxuHsR>; CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>)

On Dec. 10, Morocco scored a long-dreamed-of foreign policy victory. After decades of international impasse and intense lobbying, the United States recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara territory, which Morocco has occupied since 1975. The U.S. recognition, in exchange for Morocco normalizing relations with Israel, opens a new chapter in an issue that has long been static. And it has implications not only for Morocco and the Polisario Front—which represents the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the government in exile that aims to govern Western Sahara—but also for those indirectly involved: Algeria, the United States and the European Union.

The deal does not end the conflict, nor will it affect the broader international status of Morocco's claims. However, it does give Rabat a key practical victory. In gaining recognition for its annexation of Western Sahara, the kingdom achieved a

central foreign policy objective without having to define the political terms of that annexation. The status of the Polisario Front, the rights of Sahrawi refugees in Algeria and the terms of the territory's political status all remain unsettled. While these questions need to be resolved for a permanent solution, Morocco is able for now to bypass these thorny issues.

For the Polisario Front, the U.S. decision weakens its military and political position further—in what had already been a lopsided struggle. It diminishes opportunities for negotiations as Morocco, with the United States on its side, will have little incentive to compromise. For Algeria, the deal forces questions about the utility of its support for the Polisario. The quid pro quo aspect of the deal, which undermines Sahrawi and Palestinian rights, brings greater salience to Algeria's ideological opposition to Morocco's occupation. For Europe, the efforts to balance important Morocco-EU relationships with concern for Sahrawi human rights and support for their self-determination will become more difficult. And for the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and the incoming Biden administration, the announcement leaves few options but to stay the course.

### **Entrenched Views**

The tangled history of the Western Sahara conflict goes back to colonial Spain. In November 1975, Spain moved ahead with plans to withdraw from the Spanish Sahara—later to be called Western Sahara. Shortly after that, Morocco moved in. Spain then granted shared control of the territory while the international community was calling for self-determination for the local Sahrawi population. In 1976, armed conflict arose between Morocco and the newly formed Polisario Front. The clashes initially engaged Mauritania, too. But by 1979, Mauritania, severely weakened by the armed struggle, abandoned its claims to the territory, leaving Morocco and the Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, locked in armed conflict.

Divergent postcolonial lenses still frame the conflict. Morocco sees Western Sahara as a question of arbitrary borders imposed by former colonial powers. Amid Spanish withdrawal from the region, Morocco moved to incorporate the area within its post-independence borders, claiming historical ties between Moroccan kings and the region's tribes. Morocco's pursuit of this "territorial integrity" became closely tied to the monarchy in the 1970s and 1980s, granting a sense of purpose—a unifying national struggle. This strategy was a direct result of the growing opposition to King Hassan II, who by 1975 had survived coup attempts in 1971 and 1972. The capture of Western Sahara marked the monarchy's reassertion of control. The Polisario Front, however, which had fought to end Spanish colonial rule, views Moroccan occupation as another unlawful usurpation of their land by an outside power.

For Algeria, the issue is one of both ideological conviction and national security. Algeria, which fought its own long and bloody battle for independence, supports the principle of self-determination across postcolonial Africa. Western Sahara is no exception, and Algeria has hosted thousands of Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf and provided military and political support for the Polisario Front and the government currently in Tifariti. In terms of security, the Algerian military's posture was shaped in part by its 1963 border war with Morocco. Algeria's support for the Polisario Front served the practical purpose of keeping Moroccan expansionism in check. Algeria is not alone—some African states share the view that the issue of Western Sahara is an example of unfinished decolonization and support SADR in its pursuit of self-determination.

### **Morocco's Gains**

Untangling the history of the Western Sahara conflict demonstrates how much circumstances and clever diplomacy have favored Morocco over the years. The U.S. announcement adds to a string of incremental wins. After years of fighting, the U.N. brokered a cease-fire between Morocco and the Polisario Front in 1991. The cease-fire is still monitored by the U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, whose Security Council-defined mandate includes holding a referendum to determine the area's future. A referendum was intended to take place following a process of identifying who has the right to vote in such a referendum. However, Morocco was always wary that the vote would crystallize the region's independence, despite years of trying to tip the population balance in its favor by encouraging migration south from other parts of Morocco and investing heavily in the territory.

Numerous attempts by the U.N. to broker a solution since the 1990s have consistently failed, largely due to disagreements over voting eligibility in the looming referendum. The latest of these in 2018 stalled quickly despite high-level engagement, reaffirming how entrenched each side is in its position. Over the years, Morocco has been clear that it would never accept full de jure Western Saharan independence. Instead, the kingdom championed autonomy for the territory under Moroccan sovereignty. However, Morocco still has to work out socioeconomic and human rights redress, as well as political reforms for which the country, despite its rhetoric, is not prepared. The U.S. recognition of its position, however, allows the kingdom to gain legitimacy to bolster its claims and continue its investment in the area and use of its resources, while sidestepping the challenges that would be required for a full resolution.

Notably, Morocco's gradual gains have been coming from varied sources. With the EU, Morocco has been able to push back against a 2015 Polisario challenge at the European General Court over Morocco's use of Western Saharan resources, particularly in fisheries deals with the European Union. The court challenge in the EU illustrated viable legal avenues through which the Polisario Front could draw attention to the unsettled nature of the conflict. However, Morocco's successful appeal of the ruling essentially codified EU support for its control of the resources of an area that is not internationally recognized as its lawful territory.

At the same time, Morocco was turning to the African continent with a formal return to the African Union in 2016, which Morocco had left 32 years prior in protest of growing diplomatic support for and recognition of SADR. Through dogged diplomatic, economic and even religious outreach, Morocco was able to convince several African countries to either reverse their recognition of SADR or acknowledge Morocco's control of the area. Finally, perhaps foreshadowing the White House deal, in November the United Arab Emirates opened a consulate in Laayoune—Morocco's administrative capital and military headquarters in the area—another major diplomatic win. Bahrain soon followed, and Jordan will join next. While Gulf countries have always rhetorically supported Morocco in the conflict, recent actions grant Morocco official recognition.

### **Domestic Challenges**

These diplomatic wins—especially the U.S. recognition—still do not shield Morocco from one of the biggest domestic challenges it faces. The way Morocco has governed the parts of Western Sahara under its control have effectively and consistently projected the sense that the kingdom is there to stay. However, these policies created significant social and economic imbalances leading to a combustible social situation. Since the annexation, Morocco has pushed to create a sedentary population within newly secured cities. This new population included Moroccans who migrated to the Western Sahara region in search of opportunities given booming investments, Sahrawis who were encouraged by Morocco to move to the area in the late 1980s to help shape a referendum outcome in Morocco's

favor, and Sahrawis who had either been there prior to Morocco's annexation or returned from camps in Algeria to take advantage of Morocco's policy of reintegration in favor of recognition. The presence of these different groups created a fragmented local population. The state had incentivized these groups—through tax breaks, subsidies and even cash payments—to remain in the area. Gradually, the process of populating and investing heavily in the area became a way for Morocco to show that after so long it has no intention of leaving the territory. But the prolonged manipulation of populations created anger and antagonism between the different groups and between the groups and the state. Furthermore, Morocco has a terrible record of human rights violations particularly in the region, where it has stifled dissent and quashed support for the Polisario Front and calls for independence. All of this is layered on top of the region's status, fanning inbred grievances and feelings of inequality. While U.S. recognition grants Morocco's position greater legitimacy, it leaves this domestic issue unresolved.

Though U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty has largely remained the focal point of the agreement in Morocco, normalizing relations with Israel has generated opposition. Despite Morocco's new ties to Israel, a full normalization would have faced significant popular opposition. However, doing so in the context of a Western Sahara quid pro quo lessens the potential for a popular backlash. The strongest condemnation in Morocco of the normalization with Israel has come from leftist and Islamist actors. Both are united in their championing of the Palestinian cause. The state has blocked planned protests, and a heavy security presence remains throughout the country. For domestic actors, the challenge lies in how to separate their opposition to normalization with Israel from supporting the U.S. recognition part of the deal.

#### **A Lack of Options for the U.S.**

The agreement—part of the Trump administration's Abraham Accords—is advantageous for Morocco and Israel, but it generates additional challenges for the United States. Historically, Morocco's involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian question has been relatively limited. Normalized relations with Morocco, a nation with which Israel already had quiet but effective business and security cooperation, adds to Israel's regional standing. It shows that peace with Arab states is achievable, and it allows Israel the option of avoiding negotiation with the party at the center of the conflict—the Palestinians.

However, the deal upends decades of U.S. support for the U.N.-led process to broker a solution in Western Sahara. It could also affect U.S.-Algerian security cooperation. U.S.-Algerian ties have deepened as a part of the war on terror and help facilitate U.S. access to intelligence and cooperation on key North African and Sahelian security challenges. While the practical factors that shape the cooperation—terrorism threats and regional instability—remain unchanged, the announcement will at the very least require the incoming Biden administration to try to mend the United States's relationship with the Algerian military. Even in terms of bilateral relations with Morocco, the agreement forces the U.S. into a single position. If the Biden administration backtracks on the deal, it would face an uproar in Rabat. Tensions would weaken or even halt economic and security cooperation; the latter is particularly important for U.S. security engagement in the Sahel.

A related issue is the U.S.'s potential sale of MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones to Morocco. The drones are an upgrade from the ones Morocco currently has. This arms deal would further cement U.S.-Moroccan bilateral relations and military cooperation, but it would face Sen. Jim Inhofe, chair of the Senate's Armed Service Committee. Inhofe, a supporter of Sahrawi rights, made his opposition to the

White House's announcement clear. This deal would fix U.S. interests in Morocco to make it much more difficult for the incoming administration to backtrack on the Trump administration's deal(s).

### **Active Conflict Resumes**

On Nov. 13, a month before the Trump administration's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty of Western Sahara, Morocco and the Polisario resumed fighting after a standoff at the Guerguerat crossing into Mauritania. Since then, the Polisario Front has continued to report clashes and attacks along the berm (a 1,700-mile sand wall) between the areas Morocco controls and those the Sahrawi Republic controls. Neither side has reported any injuries or casualties.

The return to active (albeit low-level) conflict has so far allowed Morocco the strategic advance of taking control of the Guerguerat crossing. The government announced the army had extended the berm to the Mauritanian border and secured the area. With no U.N special envoy—the position has been vacant since April 2019—there is no one to facilitate quick action on the issue or even to shape international opinion, which remains consumed by the coronavirus pandemic.

### **A New Chapter**

The U.S. deal with Morocco opens a new and potentially unpredictable chapter for all stakeholders. The Polisario Front must now focus on the question of whether its basic survival is best achieved through maintaining active conflict or shoring up its lobbying efforts at the U.N. and with the EU. The Polisario Front was driven back to conflict in part by the disappointment and frustration of generations of Sahrawis who have lived in exile, in camps, or under Moroccan control. In Morocco, many Sahrawis face inequality and ongoing crackdowns on freedom of expression. In the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, the extent of social and economic struggles is backbreaking and exacerbated by the pandemic.

At the same time, the Polisario is grappling with the future of Algerian support. The Algerian military—whose aged leadership fought in the 1963 war with Morocco—has kept up support for the Polisario. But it remains unclear if the rising generation of the Algerian military corps shares this priority. However, even without a change of ideological conviction in the military—whether on the account of the Polisario Front or support for Palestinian rights—the Algerian military faces a challenging domestic situation. For well over a year, Algerians have taken to the streets demanding a new political system with a limited role for the military as the economy faces the impact of collapsing oil prices and diminishing currency reserves—and now the effects of the pandemic.

So far, Algeria has predictably condemned Moroccan-Israeli normalization, and said that the U.S. recognition increases the potential for instability, but Algeria has few practical options. It could increase its support to the Polisario, but an escalated conflict at its border is not in its interest. It is also unlikely that Morocco and Algeria would engage in direct confrontation. It would destabilize both the individual countries and the region. Equally unlikely, the Algerian military could decide to withdraw support for the Polisario, but this would mark a significant shift that signals greater focus on domestic, or more pressing external, security issues. Or it could focus on limiting Morocco's gains by maintaining the same levels of support for the Polisario. This would allow the group to maintain its ability to provoke Morocco but likely not escalate the conflict further.

Morocco, apparently also unsure which direction the Algerian military might go, has projected magnanimity in victory. King Mohammed VI sent a warm message to the Algerian president on his recovery from the coronavirus infection that kept him ill for nearly two months.

Morocco won a key victory this round, but the kingdom has its work cut out for it. Domestically, Morocco has to address pressing social challenges in the Western Sahara areas under its control. Regionally, Morocco needs to find a way to manage and respond to whatever steps the Polisario and Algeria take next. And internationally, Morocco will need to show that, even if it can sidestep the thornier issues of the conflict now, it will be able to resolve them in the long run. Whether and how well Morocco can manage those challenges will define how much of a win this is.

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