Self-Determination in the Western Sahara: Obstacles and Obligations

Léa Gervais Glaenzer
Bard College

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Self-Determination in the Western Sahara: Obstacles and Obligations

Senior Project Submitted to The Division of
Social Studies of Bard College

By
Léa Gervais Glaenzer

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Acknowledgements
Having dedicated this past year to researching the Morocco-Western Sahara conflict, it is difficult to imagine moving forward and onto other subjects. Thus, I would like to first and foremost, thank activists around the globe who spend their lives committed to the hope and optimism that they attach to the betterment of our world. None of this project would be possible without the hard work of those closest to this conflict, and the countless losses they have suffered.


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Dedicated to struggles for self-determination everywhere.
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In 1966, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution requesting that a referendum be
held by Spain on Western Saharan self-determination, post-decolonization. In line with the
global wave of decolonization, Spain relinquished administrative control of the territory in 1975.
This action would trigger Morocco’s first invasion into Western Sahara. Shortly after, as a
continuation of the Saharawi people’s anticolonial struggle against Spain, a war for Western
Sahara erupted between Mauritania, Morocco, and a Saharawi nationalist movement, the
Polisario Front—which proclaimed the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) with a
government in exile in Algeria. Morocco eventually secured de facto control over most of the
territory, including all major cities and natural resources.

The United Nations considers the Polisario Front to be the legitimate representative of the
Saharawi people, and maintains that the Saharawis have a right to self-determination. The
Polisario Front has been backed by Algeria and the African Union, as well as recognized by a
host of other nations. Morocco, with strong support from France and the Reagan administration
in the U.S., was able to occupy most of Western Sahara by the time the U.N. Security Council

After various decisions made by the International Court of Justice denying the validity of
Moroccan claims to the territory, the UN established the Mission for the Referendum in Western
Sahara (MINURSO) in 1991, which successfully (albeit temporarily) halted the conflict by
imposing a ceasefire. It also committed to organize a referendum of self-determination for the
Saharawis. This was a part of an agreement between the Polisario Front and Morocco, the
Settlement Plan. The efforts of U.N. Special Envoy and former U.S. Secretary of State James A.
Baker III had once resulted in an agreed-upon identification process for voters and a code of conduct for the long-awaited referendum.

Scheduled for December 1998, the referendum was meant to determine whether the territory would become independent or integrated into Morocco. The referendum did not occur. In 2003, the Baker Plan\textsuperscript{1} was launched to replace the Settlement Plan\textsuperscript{2}, but while accepted by the Polisario and unanimously endorsed by the United Nations Security Council, it was rejected by Morocco. Morocco insisted that all inhabitants of the territory should be eligible to vote in the referendum. This is a contested point, as following the 1975 Green March, Morocco has sponsored settlement schemes enticing thousands of Moroccans to move into the large Moroccan-occupied part of Western Sahara. By 2015, it was estimated that Moroccan settlers accounted for at least two thirds of the 500,000 total inhabitants. Furthermore, a suspected 40 percent of native Western Saharans live in Algerian refugee camps, where RASD operates as a nation in exile. The MINURSO mandate has been extended 47 times since 1991. This begs the question: how has Moroccan diplomacy managed to frustrate the referendum? Why, after more than twenty years of Security Council intervention, is the Western Sahara conflict still unresolved?

Perhaps in response to the lack of attention and resolution, on November 13 2020 the ceasefire was officially broken. Having blocked Moroccan trucks from using a road passing through Western Sahara to Mauritania, the Polisario Front is clearly unconvinced that waiting for the referendum is still the best option. Erupting from the blockade were the first shots fired in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The Baker Plan (formally, Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara) is a United Nations initiative to grant self-determination to Western Sahara. It was intended to replace the Settlement Plan of 1991. Details to come in Part I.
\item The Settlement Plan was an agreement between the ethnically Saharawi Polisario Front and Morocco on the organization of a referendum as an expression of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. It resulted in a cease-fire and the establishment of the MINURSO peace force to oversee the referendum.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
decades. Following this turn of events, President Donald Trump tweeted\(^3\) in December 2020 that Morocco was the fourth country to join the Abraham Accords\(^4\) (normalization with Israel)—in exchange for American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This unprecedented action, to say the least, leaves the watchful international community wondering if the Biden administration will confirm this commitment. What options are still feasible for a solution, and how should U.S. foreign policy respond to the recent developments in this longstanding conflict?

\(^3\) [@realDonaldTrump]: “Another HISTORIC breakthrough today! Our two GREAT friends Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations – a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East!” followed by the more concerning tweet, “Morocco recognized the United States in 1777. It is thus fitting we recognize their sovereignty over the Western Sahara.”

\(^4\) The Abraham Accords are a joint statement between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, reached on August 13, 2020. The statement marks the first public normalization of relations between an Arab country and Israel since that of Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 following the 1978 Camp David Accords.
During the second half of the 20th century, the world witnessed a wave of decolonization. Spain, which once ruled over most of Central and South America, still prevailed over a major portion of the Sahara Desert, an area encompassing what was at the time called Spanish Sahara, which included territory considered by Moroccans to be part of Morocco. The Spanish colonial period began in 1884 and ended when Spanish forces left Spanish Sahara in 1976. Before Spain’s departure, native Saharawi people had already begun rebelling against their colonizers. This is noted in the May 1975 U.N. visiting mission to Spanish Sahara, in which it acknowledged that the population was “categorically for independence and against the territorial claims of Morocco and Mauritania.”

The mission also noted that the Frente POLISARIO “appeared as a dominant political force in the Territory. The Mission witnessed mass demonstrations in support of the movement in all parts of the Territory” (U.N. General Assembly 1977, Annex, p. 7, par. 19, 21). The passing of Resolution 22295 by the U.N. General Assembly ten years prior, and that of Resolution 29836 in 1972, reaffirmed “the inalienable right of the people of the [Spanish] Sahara to self-determination and independence” (U.N. 1975, 580). Following these resolutions, the International Court of Justice upheld the Saharawi right to self-determination by continuously rejecting various Moroccan arguments brought to it, explaining in its final conclusion that “the court has not found legal ties...that might affect the application of Resolution 15147 in the

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5 “I have voted in favour of the Advisory Opinion because it states that there are no ties of sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity, and that the principle of self-determination should be applied to the said territory, thereby giving a correct, clear and conclusive reply to the real questions put to the Court.” Decision by Judge De Castro.
6 “To take all necessary steps to ensure that only the indigenous inhabitants exercise their right to self-determination and independence, with a view to the decolonization of the territory.” One of ten commitments to the decolonization of the Territory.
7 “All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”
decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory” (ICJ 1975, par. 129, 162).

Nonetheless, in the process of leaving the territory, Spain entered into a treaty with neighboring states Morocco and Mauritania: the 1975 Madrid Accords, which called for the end of Spanish presence in Spanish Sahara. The Madrid agreement suggested the territory be ruled under a temporary administration between Morocco and Mauritania, with no role for the Polisario Front or the Saharawi people. This agreement was in conflict with the Law on decolonization of Sahara, ratified only four days later by the Spanish Parliament. Furthermore, the Madrid Accords did not comply with the abovementioned U.N. resolutions on the right to self-determination and was never approved nor endorsed by the U.N..

Seizing the opportunity afforded by a slow and steady power vacuum, in late 1975, approximately 350,000 Moroccans marched into Spanish Sahara. This was called the Green March, and the event is celebrated annually by Moroccans. With the help of U.S. military aid, the invasion pushed out many Saharawis, forcing them to seek refuge in Algeria. At three in the morning on November 6, the Security Council called on King Hassan II to stop the march, an order that was ignored. It then passed Resolution 380, calling upon the Government of Morocco to “immediately withdraw from the Territory of Western Sahara all the participants in the march” (U.N. 1978, 182, 187). This was also ignored.

Thus began the War for Western Sahara, said to date from 1975 after Spanish withdrawal until 1991. By 1979, Polisario’s Ejercito de Liberacion Popular Saharaui successfully drove out Mauritanian forces with the help of Algeria. Up until that point, the Polisario and the Saharawi people had the advantage of knowledge of the landscape, subsidization of military and political
campaigns by Algeria, and successful guerilla military strategies. Morocco’s military suffered from a highly centralized command structure, a consequence of the military’s attempted coups against King Hassan II in the early 1970’s, and being spread too thin across the territory.

The tide began to turn, however, in the early 1980’s, due to two important factors identified by Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy: “Morocco’s strategic adaptation and a massive increase in foreign military and financial aid to Rabat.” The majority of Morocco’s arms came from France and the United States, its two strongest allies, and Saudi Arabia contributed generous financing. By the end of the war, more than fifteen hundred Moroccans would have visited U.S. military bases for training through the International Military Education and Training Program for combat flying, counterinsurgency warfare, military command and control, and the use of American-supplied hardware (Zunes and Mundy, 19). Undoubtedly, the major effect of foreign aid was to make Morocco’s war and occupation affordable—not fully winnable.

In 1981, the Polisario reported that it had engaged with Moroccan forces constructing a large “earthwork defensive system.” Having switched to an entirely defensive strategy, Morocco’s Western Sahara barrier effectively kept insurgents out and protected vital interests, significantly decreasing the cost of what they predicted would be a long war. Built from sand, dirt, and stone embankments, the berms were heavily mined on the Polisario side, topped with barbed wire, heavily monitored by electronic sensing devices, and guarded by Moroccan soldiers. The berms were also heavily subsidized through foreign aid, a subject that will be elaborated on in Part II. This tactic denied the Polisario its key asset: freedom of movement, an especially common asset for otherwise disadvantaged insurgent groups. Moreover, the berm completely cuts off Saharawis from the Western Saharan coast, which removes their access to economically-profitable fishing and offshore natural resources such as phosphate reserves. The
wall now stretches across fifteen hundred miles, allowing Morocco absolute control over 80 percent of Western Sahara. These barriers largely contributed to the growing stalemate of the war from the 1980’s until the U.N. ceasefire in 1991.

The decreased intensity of armed conflict allowed space for diplomatic actions and political moves. In 1984, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was accepted into the Organization of African Unity (OAU), or soon-to-be African Union (AU), and was formally recognized by multiple African states. Morocco entered into treaties with some of the same countries in an attempt to solidify its claims over the territory.

The relative calm also led to a series of unsuccessful cease-fires, starting with a temporary cease-fire to allow for a U.N. fact-finding mission in late 1987, followed by another cease-fire for Morocco and Polisario’s first direct talks in January 1989. This truce was off again by March. The 1990’s began with yet another cease-fire, followed by the creation of the U.N. referendum mission in April 1991. After Morocco launched what would be its last series of attacks to destroy Polisario facilities in occupied Western Sahara, the U.N. Secretary-General decided unilaterally to declare a cease-fire to keep the conflict from escalating. Both sides have chosen to respect this cease-fire since September 6, 1991, and until November 13, 2020.

The war in Western Sahara had lasting effects that would significantly shape the subsequent peace process. The Moroccan regime discovered during the war that it would not be punished internationally for its intransigent behavior in Western Sahara. Since its 1975 invasion, its actions have been variously tolerated and even supported by its allies. Assured of his bases of support, King Hassan II entered into a U.N. peace process predicting that his two friends on the Security Council would protect him. From that point on, a war of arms had turned into a war of diplomacy, or lawfare. The U.N. created the Mission des Nations Unies pour l’organisation d’un
référendum au Sahara Occidental (MINSURO, United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), in pursuit of holding a referendum on the fate of the disputed territory. Yet on almost every issue of the 1991 Settlement Plan, Polisario and Morocco were at odds.

The most contentious issue was the voter list for the referendum. The criteria for determining relations of blood and land were hotly debated. The Polisario proposed using a 1974 Spanish census, but Rabat argued that this census was severely incomplete. When Morocco offered a number twice that of the 1974 census, which counted about seventy-four thousand Saharawis in Western Sahara, Polisario accused Rabat of stacking the vote in its favor by counting the large numbers of Moroccans who had settled in Western Sahara. The process of sorting through the tens of thousands of applicants to the referendum broke down by 1996 only to be picked up again and completed in 1999, this time with former U.S. secretary of state James Baker at the mediation frontline.

Everything seemed to be in place to finally hold the referendum promised to the Western Saharans since 1991. A prominent American analyst of the Western Sahara conflict, who was close to the political process on this issue, described Baker’s plans to change the existing policy of King Hassan II. Baker had him gotten on board with such a political compromise. Still in the making, the Baker Plan of 2001 would envision a form of autonomy for Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty, before a final status referendum. Three days before his death, King Hassan II, with Algerian President Abdelaziz Budaflika in office, had decided that he would choose an “African solution” over a “Texas two-step solution.”

King Hassan II died in mid-1999, and his son, Mohammed VI, was not so keen on proceeding with the referendum. This was not the only referendum on self-determination set to take place that year, for halfway across the globe, Indonesian-occupied East Timor held a

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8 Referring to exercising diplomatic negotiation over more aggressive tactics and armed conflict.
referendum which resulted in an unexpectedly large majority in support of independence. The vote in East Timor exemplified to the new king the risks of a winner-take-all vote, and with increasing pro-independence demonstrations in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara in late-1999, Morocco’s chances were looking slim. It’s allies on the Security Council successfully abandoned the referendum in February 2000. Madeleine Albright visited King Mohammed VI in March, where he confirmed Morocco’s commitment to instead pursue the Baker Deal of autonomy/sovereignty. King Mohammed VI made a statement in Tangier that same month expressing this, including the priority of protecting Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.

James Baker, working for the U.N., stepped in from 2000 to 2004, presenting two new proposals to settle the conflict once Morocco showed willingness to consider a compromise between independence and integration after several rounds of negotiations. The first of Baker’s proposals was called the Framework Agreement, unveiled in early 2001. The proposal suggested Western Sahara autonomous self-governance under Moroccan sovereignty for a period of five years, to be followed by a final-status referendum (not explicitly offering independence). Polisario and Algeria would not discuss this plan despite Morocco’s ready disposition. With Algeria out of the deal and King Mohammed VI unsatisfied, Baker and President Budaflika meet in 2002, where Baker makes four additional proposals:

i. Hold the referendum
ii. Western Sahara autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty deal
iii. Partition the land (12 regions proposal)
iv. Walk away and stop U.N. funding

In 2002, the Security Council told Baker that it would accept any proposal which provided for self-determination. Thus, Baker revised the plan and in mid-2003 proposed the Peace Plan. This solution offered Western Sahara an even broader degree of autonomous
self-governance under Moroccan sovereignty for a period of four years, punctuated by a referendum on independence, integration, or continued autonomy.

The Peace Plan was accepted by Polisario and Algeria, though Morocco requested more time to examine it. Baker attempted to work on a counter-proposal with Morocco, but claiming he had done all he could, resigned in June 2004. From this point on, the peace process effectively disintegrated. In May 2005 the most intense and massive pro-independence demonstrations erupted in Western Sahara, yet by late-2005, Morocco’s suppression coupled with the international community's indifference led the Polisario’s exiled leadership to despair in the camps of Tindouf and the streets of al-’Ayun.

As will become clear below, the conflicting ideas behind the conflict stem from mutually exclusive differences in the foundations which ground Moroccan and Western Saharan legitimacy and nationality (Zunes and Mundy, xxii). The cost of compromise pales in comparison to the cost of waging war, so neither side has had the incentive to make fundamental concessions. This is evident through Morocco’s ruling elite and the clientelistic networks that underpin the current system of power, politically fragmented populations, and weak states poorly equipped to cope with the demands of late global capitalism. The international community has practically forgotten the conflict, if not for the recent outburst of violence. Even with so much apparently at stake, literature on the Western Sahara conflict and its political history is slim. This conflict not only affects the lives of Saharawis, but has come to define Moroccan-Algerian relations and shaped Western relations with the Maghreb. The interests of the United States and France are also directly implicated in this issue, further discussed in Part II, aside from being significantly impactful on their close relationships with Morocco and other relations in the region. Advocacy for basic international norms of behavior and their counterparts of law, rights,
and ethics is unavoidable in discussing this conflict. What precedents will be set in reaction to territorial violations? Can Western Sahara be taken seriously at the negotiating table after decades of international neglect?

The Security Council currently holds closed meetings on Western Sahara, where briefings by Bintou Keita, Assistant Secretary-General for Africa, and Colin Stewart, the Special Representative and head of the U.N. Mission for the Referendum on Western Sahara (MINURSO), are presented.
The formation of the State of Morocco is key for comprehending the full scope of the Western Saharan conflict. After the Arab conquest of the late 7th century, the broader area of North Africa came to be known as the Maghreb (المغرب), meaning “the west” in Arabic, and the majority of its people accepted Islam. Moroccan kingdoms enjoyed major political influence, and in the 11th century the first native Amazigh dynasty of North Africa, the Almoravids, gained control of an empire stretching from southern Spain to sub-Saharan Africa.
In the 16th century, Ottoman invaders from Algeria attempted to add Morocco to their empire. These attempts were successfully thwarted, leaving Morocco as one of the only Arab countries never to have experienced Ottoman rule.

The royal house, the ’Alawite dynasty, has ruled since the 17th century, basing its claim to legitimacy on descent from the Prophet Muhammad (النبي محمد). As such, the royal family is revered by many Moroccan Muslims due to this prophetic lineage. It remains the only monarchy in North Africa.

In the late 15th century, Europeans also attempted to establish permanent footholds in Morocco which were again largely repulsed, but the country would become the subject of Great Power politics in the 19th century and onwards. Morocco withdrew into a period of isolation during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, while Europe was preoccupied with revolution and continental war. Morocco also contained a fairly large minority population of Jews until the mid-20th century, though after the foundation of Israel and the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict, many felt compelled to leave the country.

Morocco became a French protectorate in 1912 and did not regain independence until 1956. France, in establishing their protectorate over much of Morocco, had the experience of conquering neighboring Algeria and instituting a protectorate over Tunisia. The Moroccan protectorate was established only two years before the outbreak of World War I, and was quickly introduced to the existing relationship between Morocco and Spain.

Thus, the northern parts of the country, with both Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, together with the desert province of Tarfaya in the southwest adjoining the Spanish Sahara, were excluded from the French-controlled area and treated as a Spanish protectorate. The Spanish took Ifni while the French occupied southern Morocco in 1934, and then appointed a khalifa/viceroy,
chosen from the Moroccan royal family as symbolic head of state. This enabled Spain to conduct affairs independent of the French Zone.

In the French zone, the sultan and his sovereignty were maintained as figureheads, but the real authority was the government in Paris. In late 1954, France’s protectorate was further complicated by the outbreak of the Algerian war for independence, and soon a conference of Moroccan representatives was summoned to meet in France. There, agreements were made to readjust the political structure in Morocco while a guerrilla liberation army began to operate against French posts near the Spanish Zone.

*Independent Morocco*

Spurred by a public declaration made by Thami El Glaoui, the Pasha of Marrakesh from 1912 to 1956, that only the restoration of Mohammed V could bring harmony to Morocco, the French government agreed to allow the sultan to form a constitutional government. On March 2, 1956, independence was proclaimed.

The sultan formed a government that included representation from various elements of the indigenous population, while the government ministries were headed by Moroccans. During the time political parties were occupied splitting and forming various factions, Moḥammed V assumed the role of an arbiter who was above party politics. He continued preparations for the creation of a parliament until his unexpected death in 1961, when his son succeeded him as Hassan II. Elections were then held in 1977, bringing a landslide victory to the king’s supporters, though the vote was widely considered fraudulent. King Hassan’s forceful policies to absorb Spanish Sahara and unify a “Greater Morocco” increased his national popularity in the mid-1970s. This served to maintain royal control, but did not solve the issues arising in Morocco.
As is the case in many former African colonies, the Moroccan economy remains highly dependent on the exportation of raw materials. Since the mid-1980s, the Moroccan government has undertaken a rigorous program of privatization and economic reform, heavily encouraged by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Some restructuring measures have included selling state-owned enterprises and devaluing local currency. This heavy-handed economic restructuring program coincided with several bad harvests and the continued financial drain of the war in Western Sahara. The sluggish economy and rising unemployment increased domestic strains, embodied in the violent riots in Casablanca of June 1981. The Moroccan military massacred more than five hundred demonstrators protesting against the economic effects of an IMF structural adjustment program. Despite an initial growing GDP per capita, a falling budget deficit, and increasing exports in early 1990’s, there were still strong indications of an economy in trouble: “real wages had decreased; the gap between rich and poor had widened; and unemployment, inflation, and national debt had risen, the latter going from $8.47 billion in 1980 to $20.66 billion in 1993” (Zunes and Mundy, 48).

The need for political reform was pressing, especially as external lending agencies began turning their attention towards Morocco’s troubled state of affairs. Those lenders saw an opportunity. As is noted by Zunes and Mundy, “Despite such ongoing repression, international lenders, impressed with Morocco’s resolve, reschedule[d] more than $1billion in debt.” (Zunes and Mundy, 48). Neoliberalism and Western interests provoked further harm to the situation through damaging irrevocable agreements and by providing positive feedback and support for Moroccan authoritarianism.

This was intensified in early 2011, as a series of popular uprisings swept the Middle East and North Africa. Many claim that the Arab Spring began in Western Sahara in late 2010, at
Gdein Izik, a Saharawi Resistance Camp. Moroccan forces invaded on November 8th, 2010, destroyed the camps and killed, injured, and captured many Saharawis. Even outside of Western Sahara, Moroccan pro-democracy demonstrators staged rallies in major cities across the country, calling for economic and political reforms. There were reports of violent clashes between police and demonstrators during these rallies. In March, Hassan II’s successor, Muḥammad VI, responded by vowing to advance political reforms such as establishing an independent judiciary and strengthening the role of the parliament in government.

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with two legislative houses: the House of Councillors and the House of Representatives. A prime minister heads the cabinet, which forms the executive. Despite the existence of a constitution, a legislature, and political parties, the king wields broad political authority, holding absolute authority over the judiciary, religious affairs, the armed forces, and national security policy. As a result of internal and external pressures, attempts have been made to limit the power of the king. In July 2011, Moroccan voters approved a new constitution proposed by King Muḥammad VI, which he claimed would curb his powers and strengthen representative government. Although the new constitution expanded the powers of the parliament and the prime minister, it still left the king with significant authority over all branches of government, preserving his final authority in all areas of government.

This is far from the end of unrest in Morocco. Protests began in its long-neglected Rif region (one of the most impoverished areas of the country) in late 2016. These were directly in response to a local fish seller being crushed to death while trying to retrieve fish from a garbage truck. The fish had been confiscated by police who said it had been procured illegally. For many, the incident resounded as an example of how the government contributed to widespread poverty. Then again, in late 2017, protests broke out in the city of Jerada after miners died from poor
working conditions. Both protest movements were severely repressed by use of force and by arresting organizers. This pattern of suppression against protest movements is especially prevalent towards pro-Western Saharan Independence protests in occupied Western Sahara.

Much of this continuous oppression is documented in Democracy Now!’s “Four Days in Western Sahara: Africa’s Last Colony”. The title is an attribution to Carne Ross and Anthony Jean’s writing on Western Sahara which uses the same title. The documentary features a group of journalists venturing into the disputed territory, attempting to complete as many interviews as possible before being deported. The hostile attitude towards reporting is made obvious in a secretly filmed interview with Yahdih Bouchaab, the Wali (governor) of Laayoune and former member of the Polisario Front. While speaking with the reporters from Democracy Now!, Bouchaab states that it is “not allowed to practice journalism in Western Sahara.” This experience is widely shared, and Angelos Barcelo, a famous Spanish journalist, has similar experiences of being prohibited from entry and reporting in Western Sahara. The same goes for Bernard Millet and various human rights representatives. It becomes clear why there is limited freedom of press in Western Sahara, as dictated by Morocco, through the interviews that Democracy Now! manages to conduct before leaving the territory. Each interviewee recalls an experience almost more horrific than the last, detailing forced disappearances, police brutality, torture, and murder. Much of the torture and disappearances lead to a prison in southern Morocco called Agdz. Saharawi activists recount torture in the form of chemicals, dogs, beating, waterboarding, electrocution, and being stripped naked. Much of the time, Saharawi protesters are majority women, leading to scenes of police cornering and isolating women in narrow alleys where they are beaten and sexually assaulted. Hans Morten Haugen corroborates these accounts, of which I will discuss in more detail in Part II, when speaking of setbacks for the U.N. charter:
“There are instances where Saharawi demonstrators have been taken from inside the MINSURO headquarters in El Aaiun, and then severely tortured, without MINSURO seeking to prevent this” (Haugen 21). From this, it is not difficult to conclude that institutional oppression and abuse from Morocco is still actively reigning upon occupied Western Sahara and Saharawis, to which the international community has turned a blind eye.

Morocco receives this blind eye with the benefit of her allies, the most important of which are the United States and France. The two powerful nations have long supported the Moroccan monarchy, in part due to a persisting fear that without the monarchy, Morocco would slide into chaos or be taken over by elements which may not protect Western interests.

These ‘elements’ take many forms, from left-wing nationalists to political Islam. Located at the mouth of Mediterranean, stability in Morocco is prioritized over all else. As noted in Part I, both have contributed to arming and providing critical diplomatic support for Morocco in the Western Sahara conflict. One such example was the watering down of the U.N. Security Council’s response to the Green March. Confirmed by then U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “the United States wished things to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about” (1978, 247).

On November 10, 1975, a meeting between President Gerald Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissenger, and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft was held in the Oval Office to discuss the Green March. According to notes from the meeting, Kissinger told the others, “It has quieted down, but I am afraid Hassan may be overthrown if he doesn’t get a success. The hope is for a rigged U.N. vote, but if it doesn’t happen…” (quoted in Mundy 2006, 300, ellipses in original). Kissinger, here, is vocalizing concerns on the stability of the Moroccan regime that
would follow the U.S. presidency for decades to come, tinted with the promise to do whatever it would take to maintain that stability:

President Jimmy Carter’s State Department gave Morocco $230 million in military aid, in addition to two million U.S. dollars to create an advanced intrusion detection system for the berms, including seven million landmines. President George Bush designated Morocco a major non-NATO ally. Morocco donated twelve million dollars to the Clinton foundation before the 2016 election. Furthermore, Environmental Protection Agency administrator Scott Pruitt took a $100,000 trip to Morocco in 2017 to meet with the head of a State-owned mining company—a trip arranged and accompanied by lobbyist Richard Smotkin. Few congressional liberals questioned the looming implications of U.S. policy in Western Sahara for international law, human rights, and, more generally, relations with the Global South. “Morocco attempted to counteract these voices by hiring the public-relations lobbying firms DGA International in late 1978 for $900,000 for six months’ work, and Hill and Knowlton at $100,000 per year” (Houser 1980, 50). As is noted by *The New York Times*, “If the United States suddenly unleashes a cascade of Cabinet members on a friendly Arab nation, two possibilities suggest themselves. One is that the country is extremely important. The other is that its regime is in trouble” (Dec 20 1981). In the case of Morocco, both apply.

Although there had been ties made with Polisario during the Carter administration, these were cut off by the Reagan administration. A House Committee on Foreign Affairs Staff Study Commission to the region criticized this move in 1982, as contact with the Polisario was prohibited and focus was shifted to the military component in United States-Morocco relations (U.S. House 1982). Furthermore, U.S. Colonel Albert Zapanta (deputy military commander of MINSURO’s peacekeeping force and the highest-ranking U.S. soldier in the mission) was barred
by the State Department from testifying that Morocco was preventing MINSURO from carrying out its mission before a congressional committee. As is suggested by the dramatic actions taken to protect Moroccan stability, the United States gains much more than Morocco’s geostrategic face value. The monarchy has also proven itself in terms of instrumental value, to not only support but further U.S. interests in Africa. More caution is applied to the Middle East, as to balance Arab-Islamic and Western concerns, but nonetheless Morocco has been considered one of Israel’s closest contacts in the Muslim world.

French policy toward Morocco and Western Sahara has largely complimented U.S. policy, though founded upon a much richer and more direct historical experience with the region. By 1912, France had colonized the majority of North and West Africa, with Algeria considered an extension of mainland France. One hundred thirty-two years after the invasion of Algiers, most of these territories had achieved independence: Tunisia and Morocco in 1956, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal in 1960, and finally Algeria in 1962. President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing was generally opposed to “the multiplication of microstates,” so was opposed to the creation of an independent Western Sahara even though he had supported independence for the Comoros Islands that year and would do so for Djibouti in 1977 (quoted in Naylor 1987, 211).

More than any other permanent member, France has most adamantly used its position to defend Morocco to the Security Council, and in doing so blocked any effort to endorse the 2003 proposal. President Jacques Chirac (1995-2007) maintained a personal relationship with the Moroccan royal family, and this sentiment went unchanged by his successor, Président Nicolas Sarkozy. During his first visit to Morocco in October 2007, Sarkozy declared that “France will stand shoulder to shoulder” with Morocco on the question of Western Sahara (Zunes and Mundy, 79).
As the former colonial power in Western Sahara and Morocco’s closest European neighbor, Spain holds a special position in relation to the conflict. Although Madrid attempted to wash its hands of Western Sahara in 1976, following an incomplete decolonization process, Spain has never fully extricated itself from the Western Sahara conflict. Despite sharing an interest in Morocco’s stability, a large portion of Spanish civil society and politics strongly support Western Sahara’s right to self-determination.

A 1978 Spanish parliamentary inquiry attempted to solve the mystery of Spain’s abandonment of the Saharawis, to whom they had promised self-determination. It concluded that during the chaos following Franco’s collapse in 1975, a small group of pro-Moroccan “ultraconservatives” led by Prime Minister Carlos Arias Navarro cut a secret deal with King Hassan II behind the backs of other figures who favored U.N. mediation.

Since the abandonment of the Polisario, Spain has supported the Saharawi’s struggle for independence. Spanish politician Javier Ruperez attended the Polisario’s fourth General Congress and in his capacity as a representative of Spain’s ruling Union del Centro Democratico, agreed to recognize Polisario as the legitimate representative of Western Saharans. In July 2003, Madrid used its seat on the Security Council to fully support the Baker Plan.

Another member of the Security Council and member of the council’s Group of Friends for Western Sahara, Russia, has sometimes played a tiebreaker role in issues involving Morocco and Western Sahara. Morocco was previously one of the Soviet Union’s most important trading partners in Africa, a role which manifested in the Soviet-Morocco 1978 “deal of a century” (Harrell-Bond 1983). This was a thirty-year agreement to supply phosphates to the Soviets in exchange for two billion dollars in investments for a new mine (Zoubir 1993, 109).
Russia has sided with France and against the U.S. in 2003 to oppose the Baker Plan, as well as countered French and U.S. votes made on the behalf of Morocco.

The Organization of African Unity, and its successor, the African Union, have played a significant role in the effort to resolve the Western Sahara conflict. For many African states, Morocco’s Western-backed violation of self-determination has provided reason enough to back the Polisario, alongside its disrespect for colonially inherited boundaries. The African Union continues to recognize RASD as the legitimate government of Western Sahara, and so Morocco continues to boycott that African forum as well.

This is not to say that Rabat has been unsuccessful in convincing several African countries to rescind their recognition of RASD since the 1991 cease-fire. Any possible African mediation role has been largely disabled by South Africa’s 2004 recognition of RASD, reminding Morocco that Western Sahara still had powerful friends on the continent. Morocco receives the most sympathy from other Arab states, due to King Hassan’s close ties with the powerful monarchies of Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and Jordan. King Hassan II has served as the head of the Arab League more often than any other Middle Eastern leader, and sent Moroccan troops to fight on the Syrian front during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war (Stork 1990, 4).

More recently, Morocco has made moves to become a more dominant economic power in North Africa. The 2019 International Franchise Attractiveness Index ranked Morocco 39 out of 131 states, making it the number one attractive business hub for US-based franchises in Africa and the second in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) after the United Arab Emirates. These results support the 2019 Investment Climate appraisal from the U.S. State Department, announcing that “Morocco’s political stability, geographical location, and efforts to build a robust infrastructure, contribute to its emergence as a regional manufacturing and export base for
companies.” The same report also mentioned Morocco’s newest strategy for attracting investors, including facilitating foreign investment in export-oriented sectors like manufacturing. As established in the country’s 2030 National Ports Strategy, the Moroccan government has initiated the formation of a Dakhla Atlantic Port committee to oversee the construction of a port project that includes a wide range of infrastructure projects, with a value of over $1 billion. According to the Morocco World News, the project is expected to take some seven years (2019). King Mohammed VI has proclaimed that the port will make Dakhla a strong link in Morocco’s outreach to business in Africa.

Economic Motivations

Most often, Western Sahara’s significant phosphate reserves are cited as Morocco’s primary motivation for invading Western Sahara. King Hassan II has rejected this suggestion, and there are many credible reasons to believe him (Hassan II 1978, 163).

At the time of the 1975 invasion, Morocco was already the world’s primary exporter of phosphates and is home to more than half of the world’s known phosphate reserves—a key ingredient for modern agriculture. Western Sahara’s isolated Bukra’ mine is difficult to connect to the port of al-’Ayun and, by 1977, the Polisario’s attacks managed to stop all production, which only returned to normal service in 1982. Furthermore, Morocco’s state-owned phosphate company, Office cherifien des phosphates, did not turn a profit until 1996. Revealed by 2007 satellite imagery from the U.N. Environmental Program, Morocco has expanded the size of the Bukra’ mine over three times.

According to the Europe-based organization Western Sahara Resource Watch, exports from the Bukra’ mine earn from $80 to $150 million each year. Note that the United States is the world’s largest consumer of phosphates.
Western Sahara’s fisheries are just as important, and are considered some of the richest grounds in all of Africa. They are suspected to contribute around two-thirds of the $1 billion earned by Rabat annually from this sector (Shelley 2006, 18). The Moroccan Government controls all trade in Western Sahara, and heavy subsidies have created a state-dominated economy in the Moroccan-controlled parts of Western Sahara, with the Moroccan government as the single biggest employer.

The EU holds trade agreements with Morocco that allow European fisheries in the waters off the coast of Morocco, including in the disputed waters off the coast of Western Sahara. However, the European Court of Justice ruled in early 2016 that trade agreements with Morocco cannot be applied to the territory without the consent of its legitimate representatives. Thus, the EU fisheries deal should not apply to the waters off the coast of the disputed Western Sahara territory, and agriculture agreements between the EU and Morocco do not cover Western Sahara. This dispute caused a diplomatic crisis to which Moroccan authorities responded by severing all contact with the EU until the ECJ reversed that judgment in late 2016. This EU fisheries agreement expired in 2018. The Polisario is increasingly attempting to use such legal challenges to disrupt Moroccan economic activity in the territory.
The Saharawis descended from nomadic Berber tribes and are a matriarchal society which existed long before Spanish colonization and pacification. In the history of Western Saharan nationalism, Mohammed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri is recognized as the first activist to press publically for independence and organized the first Saharawi Nationalist movement in the 1960’s. This was the Harakat Tahrir Saqiyyah al-Hamra’ wa Wadi al-Dhabab, notably inspired by contemporary Arab and African liberation movements.

The movement's first demonstration was on June 17, 1970, in al-Zamlah Square in al-’Ayun (the occupied capital), where Spanish forces killed a dozen protestors on the spot. The Harakat Tahrir was quickly suppressed and Bassiri arrested, never to be seen again. As a result of ongoing violence through counterinsurgency campaigns, invasions, and oppression, the majority of Saharawis are refugees, either living in southern Morocco, southwestern Algeria, or Mauritania. Western Sahara is largely occupied by Morocco, leaving only twenty percent of the territory to its native population--none of which includes its coastline.

Almost three years after the Zamlah massacre, a small group of poorly armed Saharawi insurgents attacked a Spanish outpost at al-Khanga on May 20, 1973. Without a drop of blood spilled or a bullet spent, the guerillas took the garrison, freed their captured comrades, confiscated all Spanish weapons they could find, and fled.

This new independence movement, composed of young Saharawi refugees, called itself the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio de Oro--The Polisario Front. Founded in 1971 by El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed, his brother Bachir Mustapha Sayed, Mohammed Lamine Ould Ahmed, Mohammed Salem Ould Salek, and Mohammed Ould Sidati, the group was able to mount a series of raids on Spanish forces between 1973 and 1975. During this time,
Frelisario, as the group first called itself, also carried out diplomatic activities abroad and propaganda work within the territory.

After the May 1975 UN visiting mission witnessed the growing support for the Polisario through dramatic and unexpected nationalist displays, the Spanish cabinet admitted that “Polisario is a reality.” The colonial administration then moved to reconcile the fate of the territory as Madrid ceded several small settlements to Polisario that summer.

Growing goodwill between colonial authorities and the Polisario led to prisoner exchanges and a meeting in September 1975 between Spanish foreign minister Pedro Cortina y Mauri and Polisario secretary-general El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed. According to El-Ouali, they reached an understanding at said meeting whereby Madrid would hand over control of the territory to a Polisario-led government in exchange for economic concessions on phosphates and fisheries. In late-October, the governor-general of Spanish Sahara, Federico Gomez de Salazar, agreed to let some Polisario leaders move into al-’Ayun in preparation for the territory’s independence.

Spain would, however, abruptly turn its back on the Polisario less than a week later, abandoning its colony to Morocco and Mauritania (Hodges and Pazzanita 1994, 49, 103, 133, 166). On November 28, 1975, the Polisario unveiled the Galtah Zammur declaration, signed by the vast majority of native representatives from colonially-instituted bodies (PUNS and Jama’a), and dozens of Saharawi leaders. The declaration named Polisario as “the sole legitimate authority of the Saharan people” (quoted in Hultman and Larkin 1985, 32). Three months later, on February 27, 1976, at Bir Lahlou, the Polisario declared Western Sahara an independent, albeit largely occupied, nation. (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 110).
Since the very beginning of the conflict, nearly half of the native population of Western Sahara has lived in refugee camps, most concentrated in southwestern Algeria. After visiting the camps, African specialist George Houser raved,

“They have turned to other countries for food and clothing, to be sure, but politically they are independent of outside control. Their camps are not administered by Algerians, the United Nations, or technicians from other countries--the people have organized themselves according to their own way of life. In the camps, I had a feeling I was visiting a nation in exile” (1989, 309).

This feeling may have been inspired by the Saharawi government in exile, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD/SADR), whose first government was announced in early March 1976. In tandem with their traditionally matriarchal society, Saharawi women today sit in the Saharawi parliament, administer the refugee camps, and train in the Saharawi military.

RASD is described by the United Nations as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi people, and as being remarkably democratic in organizational structure. The Secretary General is elected by the General Popular Congress (GPC), regularly convened every four years. The GPC is composed of delegates from the Popular Congresses of the refugee camps in Tindouf, which are held biannually in each camp, and of delegates from the women's organization (UNMS), youth organization (UJSARIO), workers' organization (UGTSARIO) and military delegates from the Saharawi People’s Liberation Army (SPLA).

All residents of the camps have a vote in the Popular Congresses, and participate in the administrative work in the camp through base-level 11-person cells, which form the smallest unit of the refugee camp political structure. These typically care for distribution of food, water and
schooling in their area, joining in higher-level organs (encompassing several camp quarters) to cooperate and establish distribution chains.

On the executive committee sits Batal Sidi Ahmed, Omar Hadrami (Mohammed Ali Ould El-Ouali), Ayoub Ould Lahbib, Mohammed Lamine Ould Bouhali, Ibrahim Ghali, Mahfoud Ali Beiba (Mahfoud Laroussi), Mohammed Lamine Ould Ahmed, Bachir Mustapha Sayed, and Mohammed Abdelaziz. Abdelaziz has also served as secretary-general from 1976 until his death in 2016. Since then, Khatri Addouh followed by his successor Brahim Ghali have taken on the role of secretary-general.

Despite its impressively democratic structure, the RASD has experienced its share of internal issues. For the refugees, the problem was authoritarianism within the Polisario. In the early 1990’s, as the war subsided and the expectation of a referendum mounted steadily, serious discrepancies between Polisario’s egalitarian rhetoric and the reality of an established elite was a
problem that had to be addressed. Following large protests in the camps, reformers won a series of victories in the eighth General Congress, held from June 18 to June 20, 1991.

This congress was the largest to date and the first to include Saharawi representatives from the Moroccan-occupied territory. It successfully overhauled the RASD and eliminated the Executive Committee and Political Bureau, replacing them with an elected National Secretariat. A new constitution was adopted with checks and balances, including a bill of rights that guaranteed freedom of expression, association, and movement, alongside the rights of privacy, private property, and equal justice before the law— including presumption of innocence until proven guilty, and explicit prohibitions against torture and unlawful detention (Lippert 1992, 644, see also Zunes and Mundy 2010, 120). Unfortunately, deep structural political reforms can do little to subdue a nation in exile, still awaiting a referendum on their independence.

With the world beginning to appear as though it had forgotten about Western Sahara, RASD became increasingly factionalist. In 2004, an anti-ceasefire and anti-Abdelaziz opposition faction, the Front Polisario Khat al-Shahid, announced its existence. This was the first break with the principle of "national unity" (i.e. working in one single organization to prevent internal conflict) which is so important to a government in exile.

The Khat al-Shahid called for reforms as well as resumption of hostilities with Morocco. Its existence remains of little consequence to the Western Sahara conflict, as the group split in two factions and Polisario has refused dialogue with it, stating that political decisions must be taken within the established political system. Nonetheless, the increasing frustration is encapsulated in the Khat al-Shahid, and it represents an important group of young Saharawis grown restless in wait. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon acknowledged this growing heatsink, affirming Morocco’s presence as an occupation in February 2016. Ban Ki-moon has
expressed concern about the “potential danger” that Saharawi youth could be radicalized by Islamic extremists, given the protracted nature of the refugee crisis. In the month following this statement, Morocco expelled all U.N. officials from Western Sahara.

This is far from the only instance in which the Moroccan government has threatened the wellbeing of Saharawis, including those residing in refugee camps. Perhaps the worst atrocities of the war took place in February 1976 near the towns of Galtah Zammur and Um Draygah, where thousands of refugees had congregated. It was there that Moroccan air forces bombed civilian refugee encampments, and on four known occasions, used napalm against Saharawi refugees. By that time, the International Committee of the Red Cross claimed that tens of thousands of Saharawis had fled their homes in Spanish Sahara, the majority of them heading for Algeria (Hodges 1983, 232). “Polisario and its supporters claimed that most of the Saharawis had voted with their feet. The Moroccan government would claim and still does so today that most of the refugees are detainees held against their will by Algeria and Polisario”(Zunes and Mundy 2010, 114).

Despite these struggles, the occupied territory is not to be mistaken as politically inactive, but rather is home to some of the bravest activists in the world. The Saharawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH), for example, works to track Saharawi forced disappearances by the Moroccan state and police. Democracy Now! interviewed the Vice President of the organization, Elghalia Djimi, and many political prisoners during their short time in Western Sahara. Through these interviews, political prisoner Hmad Hammad was able to share his experience of being tortured by Morocco in prison, urging the international audience, “We are a people, we have a homeland, we have a culture, we have all these things that constitute a country. We are very different from the
Moroccans, it’s impossible for us to be Moroccans. We have no common history.” Sultana Khaya, a protestors from the 2007 demonstrations who was tear gassed in Marrakesh alongside five hundred university students, explains the attitude of Saharawi activists, “There are no alternatives to self-determination.” The brother of late Polisario leader Mohamed Abelaziz, Saharawi lawyer Mohamed Lahbib Erguibi, recounts the sixteen years he was held in a Moroccan prison. Hamma el-Qoteb mourns his disappeared family. Despite the media blockade enforced by Morocco in the non-self-governing territory, Saharawi activists have risked their lives again and again to reach the global audience.

Saharawi Voice is a Saharawi activist group of filmmakers founded in 2011, who work in the refugee camps in southwest Algeria. They organize projects that provide a platform for the Saharawi to speak out and share their challenges, experiences, perspectives, and hopes to an international audience. Video activist group Equipe Media is another Saharawi organization that shares day-to-day information on the Western Sahara conflict and Moroccan government’s atrocities towards Saharawis. Working in Western Sahara, where their activities are considered illegal, Equipe Media works under a constant threat of being detained. While some members are public spokespersons for the group, others work underground to make it more difficult for Morocco to target the collective. Their objective is to quickly spread their films to the world through social media in order to “raise awareness about the situation and the illegal occupation which the richest countries of the world are complicit in maintaining” (3 Stolen Cameras website). In 2017, Equipe Media partnered with film collective RâFILM to create “3 Stolen Cameras”, a documentation of their members fighting to keep their cameras. They captured police and military attacks on peaceful demonstrations as well as testimonies of violence that Saharawis are regularly exposed to. Taking place where the Moroccan authorities have
implemented a near-total media blockade, the film breaks the absolute censorship with unique footage from the occupied area. This is not without punishment. “The filmmakers demand Moroccan authorities to release the 3 imprisoned members of Equipe Media immediately,” reads the last line of description on the documentary website. Filmmaker Banbari Mohamed was sentenced to 6 years of prison, Bachir Khada sentenced to 20 years of prison, and Lekhfãouni Abdaiahi sentenced to life in prison.

The documentary is inspired by “5 Broken Cameras”, a film about the struggle in Palestine made by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi. The occupations of the two countries are in many ways similar and often compared, but the most significant difference is the lack of media coverage of the occupation of Western Sahara--making it far less known worldwide. The historical relationship between Morocco and Israel make this comparison especially haunting, as the United States’ reaction to the Israeli invasion of Gaza Strip in 2008 mimicked the same silence heard after Morocco’s 1975 invasion of Western Sahara.

These incidents are not unrelated, given recent events that will be further discussed in Part IV. Nonetheless, King Mohammed VI has repeatedly communicated Morocco’s “consistent, constant and unchanged” support for the Palestinian cause. Most recently, the sentiment was confirmed by the country’s African Union representative emphasizing Rabat’s “unwavering support” for Palestinians. On a phone call with Palestine’s Mahmoud Abbas on December 10, 2020, King Mohammed VI assured him that “Morocco always places the Palestinian issue in the rank of the Moroccan Sahara issue, and that Morocco’s work to consolidate its Moroccanness will never be, neither today nor in the future, at the expense of the Palestinian people’s struggle for their legitimate rights” (Dumpis in Morocco World News 2021). The acknowledgment of
hypocrisy underlying Morocco’s actions in Western Sahara against its verbal commitments to Palestine is cause for concern to say the least.

Aside from other nationalist movements that survived and succeeded without strong backing of neighboring states, such as that of Eritrea and East Timor (through referendum, no less), the comparison with Palestine can produce an image of independent Western Sahara, as accepted and integrated through international bodies of law. On September 28, 2018, the State of Palestine instituted proceedings against the United States before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the principal judicial organ of the U.N.. The proceedings were with respect to a dispute concerning violations of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of April 1961. In 2020, the International Court of Justice’s MENA Programme Director, Said Benarbia, stated:

“Palestine is a State under international law, satisfying recognized international law criteria for statehood, displaying and effectively exercising State authority over parts of the Palestinian territory and demonstrating capacity to enter into relations with other sovereign States and exercise treaty-making powers. Israel’s decades-long occupation of the Palestinian territory has no bearing over the ultimate question of Palestine’s sovereignty and statehood, and, thus, over the ICC’s jurisdiction.”

The potential implications of this decision may include Saharawi nationals eventually falling under the ICJ’s jurisdiction for any crimes committed against them anywhere in the world, due to their recognition from several states and the African Union. This may allow future diplomatic initiatives to recover Western Sahara’s right to self-determination. As will be elaborated in the conclusion, this prospect comes with various hurdles and frightening precedents set by the Israel-Palestine peace processes.
Beyond self-determination, there is perhaps a case to be made against Morocco’s control over and profit from the disputed territory’s natural resources. As noted by Western Sahara Resource Watch, “occupied Western Sahara possesses some of the world’s highest quality phosphate reserves, rich fishing banks, and a potential for generating enough renewable energy to power the entire Maghreb region.”

Morocco's illegal use of the territory's wealth contributes to prolonging the conflict and the suffering of the Saharawi people. Moreover, it is ethically, legally, and politically problematic when commercial interests cooperate with Moroccan authorities to do business in the occupied territory.

Phosphate is used as a fertilizer and is important to worldwide agriculture, additionally, Western Saharan coasts are some of the richest fishing waters on the planet, and even Saharawi sand is sold to external buyers. Morocco and foreign companies such as Sanleon Energy have benefited greatly from the occupation and exploitation of Western Sahara, grounds on which Saharawis can potentially mount a case to the ICJ. The most notable of which is the recently renewed E.U. fisheries agreement with Morocco, a questionable extension of the original 1995 agreement. Although the agreement was previously restricted to waters off the shores of Moroccan territory, explicitly excluding the disputed, non-self-governing territory, the 2019 Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement between the EU and Morocco has extended to include Western Saharan waters.

The European Parliaments claims that “the European Union launched a consultation with the populations concerned by the new Agreement and included in the protocol provisions for the expected socio-economic impacts to benefit these populations proportionally for the entire financial contribution of the Union and its operators” (European Commission 2019). Whether or
not Morocco will uphold its obligation to report on these benefits has yet to be seen. Shown in photos from Western Sahara Resource Watch, Saharawis are seen protesting the fisheries deal. Morocco's exports of goods out of the territory via the Guerguerat passage is directly linked to the resumption of war in the territory in November 2020.

Let us imagine an independent Western Sahara. Given that the occupied territory includes some of Morocco's richest fish stocks, in addition to onshore phosphate reserves and offshore oil resources, an independent Western Saharan nation may be quite economically prosperous. Prosperity would be further bolstered by the relatively low population in the territory, and allow for returning refugees to experience a higher quality of life. Western Sahara is also believed to have untapped offshore oil deposits that have the potential to create heavy export income. The imagined life for Saharawi refugees and activists, which have so long been abandoned by the international community, is rich and plentiful, and should be explored in earnest by the countries with the most to lose from their independence.
Morocco cannot sell our fish.
The Rishinouh water is ours.

I'm Zainuha No fisheries in Western Sahara.

No puede la pesca.
La nieve la ca no es desco es de Shaw.

THE fishing Agreement is not just!
Photos courtesy of Western Sahara Resource Watch.
"In October 2010, Sahrawi activists erected tents at Gdeim Izik, not far from the capital of Western Sahara. Within weeks, 20,000 protesters had descended on the makeshift camp—the largest display of civil disobedience since Morocco annexed Western Sahara in 1976."

-Carne Ross
"Schoolgirls between the ages of ten and twelve in El Ayoun, a refugee camp in Algeria. According to the United Nations, one in four young children in the camps suffer from stunting caused by malnutrition. The girls wear t-shirts bearing the flag of the Sahrawi Republic."

-Carne Ross
"Women in the Dakhla camp perform a traditional dance to celebrate the republic’s founding. The Sahrawis are a matriarchal society, descended from nomadic Berber tribes in which women handled household finances and ran local communities."

-Carne Ross
“Five hundred Sahrawi women march in a military parade to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of Western Sahara’s struggle for independence from neighboring Morocco.”

-Carne Ross
The conflict’s long standing nature has produced the widespread impression that it is frozen, locked into a stalemate by stubbornness. Due to disagreements over voter eligibility requirements and periodic eruptions of violence, the promised referendum never took place, but MINURSO’s deployment continued.

In 2007, following various unsuccessful rounds of negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario, Rabat proposed a plan to grant Western Sahara autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, building off the Baker Deal from the years before. The United States deemed this initiative “serious, realistic, and credible,” but the Polisario and Algeria rejected it. In the ensuing decade, the UN continued to renew MINURSO’s mandate, calling on the parties to refrain from any action that would change the status quo.

In the years after the Arab Spring, international focus drifted further away from Morocco and to less stable conflicts in the North African and Middle Eastern region. Despite the lack of diplomacy and initiative in solving the issue, and no UN envoy in Western Sahara, 2018 saw a new attempt to tackle the conflict after close-calls two years prior. In August 2016, Morocco sent armed forces to Guerguerat, a trade route extending from Mauritania into Western Sahara, deployed for what Moroccan officials called a “road-clearing operation,” but the United Nations definitively considered the action a violation of the ceasefire. In response to the Moroccan armed presence in Guerguerat, the Polisario mobilized its forces, prompting an armed standoff. The standoff, which was the closest the two sides had come to armed hostilities since 1991, came to a brief end in February 2017 following calls with United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Gutteres.
In December 2018, new UN envoy Horst Kohler hosted a meeting in Geneva with representatives from Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and the Polisario. These were the first round of direct talks in six years. The talks were followed by a second meeting in March 2019, though it yielded little progress, in part because Algeria was engulfed in a domestic political crisis following mass demonstrations against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

When Kohler resigned in May 2019 for health reasons, Western Sahara was again left without a UN envoy. In line with its pattern of behavior over the years, the Polisario sent civilians to disrupt traffic and protest Morocco’s presence in late October of 2020, days before the UN Security Council’s scheduled vote on MINURSO’s renewal. As noted by the Washington Institute’s Saraf Feuer, “The UN’s reduced diplomatic capacity to mitigate the fallout paved the way for a more forceful Moroccan response.” This, and the decades-long buildup, served as the catalyst for the events of November 2020.

On November 13, Morocco launched a military operation to unblock the flow of goods along the Guerguerat passage. The move came three weeks after the Polisario Front blocked the road and prevented several hundred trucks from entering Western Sahara via Mauritania. The next day, the Polisario declared that the thirty-year ceasefire had effectively ended and the group was, once again, at war with Morocco.

Coming on the heels of former defense secretary Mark Esper’s trip to the region, Feuer worries the hostilities could draw Morocco and Algeria into war. As the Polisario is not a formidable military opponent (although Algeria presents a considerably more serious threat, the nation’s domestic turmoil may restrict their ability to intervene), and the kingdom already enjoys relatively broad international support for its territorial claims after years of diplomatic advancements, Rabat appears to have the upper hand. The African Union—which Morocco
recently rejoined after thirty years in protest of the body’s decision to recognize Saharawi independence—issued a surprisingly neutral statement on Morocco’s latest military operation, merely calling for restraint. Several Gulf Arab states also came to Morocco’s defense, a rare expression of unity from a normally fractured group. But Rabat’s true advantage came along with a deal struck by the Trump administration in December 2020 involving the Abraham Accords Declaration.

According to The New York Times, the deal between President Trump and King Mohammed VI was aided by businessman Yariv Elbaz, who has acted as an intermediary between Rabat and Washington since 2017. Elbaz’s mediation had the aim of reaching an agreement on the issues of Israeli-Arab relations and the Western Sahara conflict simultaneously.

The New York Times also reveals that there was an American investment project in Morocco made to the tune of $3 billion in its banking, tourism and energy sectors. According to a member of the Trump administration interviewed by The New York Times, the investment should not be linked to the re-establishment of relations between Morocco and Israel. Nonetheless, the move is the culmination of a successful 12-month period of Arab-Israeli relations, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visiting Chad and Sudan and taking steps to further normalize ties after various diplomatic missions. Encompassed in this effort to stabilize the region is the warming relations and cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, in addition to a handful of other Arab states which have also signed the Abraham Accords Declaration.

Reports had been circulating from as far back as February 2020 that the United States was considering recognizing Morocco’s claims over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco normalizing ties with Israel. Despite numerous statements from Moroccan officials denying the Axios report, they turned out to be accurate. On December 10, 2020, Donald J. Trump tweeted
from his account (@realDonaldTrump): “Another HISTORIC breakthrough today! Our two GREAT friends Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations – a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East!” followed by the more concerning tweet, “Morocco recognized the United States in 1777. It is thus fitting we recognize their sovereignty over the Western Sahara.”

All indications suggest that the U.S.’s recognition of Morocco’s claims over Western Sahara was transactional, provided in exchange for Morocco normalizing ties with Israel. Under the agreement, Morocco will establish full diplomatic relations and resume official contacts with Israel, as well as establish direct flights to and from Israel for all Israelis. Although the normalization deal is a win for Israel and a significant achievement for President Trump, the recognition of Western Sahara as part of Morocco is a major shift in U.S. policy, and an unprecedented diplomatic achievement for Morocco.

However, there are some key nuances, most notably the U.S. recognition appearing in the form of a tweet from Donald Trump. Departing from concrete legal instruments or institutional acts, such as the formal signing of the Abraham Accords between the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, there is no precedent for the diplomatic validity of President Trump’s decision by tweet.

While there exists considerable bipartisan congressional support for the Abraham Accords, Democrats and Republicans alike vocally opposed President Trump’s decision with respect to Western Sahara. Republican Senator Jim Inhofe, who also serves as the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, the president pro tempore of the U.S. senate, penned a letter signed by twenty-five senators urging President Joseph Biden to “reverse this misguided decision and recommit the United States to the pursuit of a referendum on self-determination for the Saharawi people of Western Sahara.” Even
President Trump's former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, wrote an opinion piece in Foreign Policy condemning the decision and urging President Biden to reverse it.

Unsurprisingly, both the Polisario Front and Algeria rejected President Trump’s statement. There have been numerous reports of Moroccan authorities cracking down on Saharawis protesting in Al-’Ayun. Meanwhile, in Rabat, authorities prevented protests against the normalization of ties between Morocco and Israel. Activists, like Sion Assidon, a Moroccan-Jewish anti-Zionist activist and founder of Morocco’s Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, have been on the frontlines speaking out against the decision. But for the most part, it appears that the international community is waiting to see the Biden administration’s next steps.

As of the end of February 2021, there has yet to be an official phone call between President Biden and King Mohammed VI. Nor has there been any news of a call between Moroccan foreign minister Nasser Bourita and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. Morocco is usually one of the first countries to congratulate the winner of U.S. presidential elections, but as it stands, not only has Morocco yet to issue a statement congratulating Biden for his electoral victory--on January 15th it awarded President Trump the Order of Muhammad, its highest decoration. This came just five days before Biden’s inauguration and over a week after Trump’s incited January 6 Capitol insurrection.

One may expect those factors to influence President Biden’s engagement with Morocco, but Secretary of State Blinken has had little to say about their next moves thus far. When asked directly at a press briefing, “and with Morocco, does the United States still recognize, and as the previous administration said, Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara?” Secretary Blinken responded by first reiterating support for the Abraham Accords, followed by, “We’re also trying
to make sure that we have a full understanding of any commitments that may have been made in securing those agreements, and that’s something we’re looking at right now.” It appears from this statement that further announcements will soon be made regarding the U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty. Allegedly, Morocco is holding back on moving ahead with Israel until the Biden administration confirms this.

The acquisition of territory by military force is illegitimate, and this standard is made very clear in the United Nations Charter. Trump has already set a dangerous precedent through the recognition of Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights of Syria. However, taking over an entire country brings this to a new level, especially since Western Sahara is recognized by the African Union as a full member state.

As noted previously, over 80 countries have recognized the independent Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. In these terms, Trump’s deal is essentially an endorsement of the takeover of one recognized African country by another.

Washington’s priority should have been to make clear to Morocco that continued violence would kill any chance for American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Many experts agree that it would be “practically costless” for the United States to withdraw recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, not to mention the simplicity of the task given its unofficial nature. Furthermore, Morocco had been making multi-billion dollar arms deals with Washington since well before its most recent embrace of Rabat.

Theoretically, the Moroccan government could respond to a U.S. reversal by revoking its commitment to diplomatic ties with Israel, but it would pay a bigger price for such a move than would the United States. The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index polls show a meager four percent of Moroccans in support of normalized relations with Israel. Still, Morocco and Israel have
previously enjoyed covert trade relations for decades, and its formalization will provide an economic boon for Rabat. It is unlikely that Rabat would jeopardize these valuable assets only to punish the Biden administration for returning to neutrality in its conflict with the Polisario, despite claims that U.S. withdrawal of sovereignty would cause the Morocco-Israeli normalization process to collapse.

What remains clear is the strong possibility of a return to war brought about by a toxic status quo and dangerous transactional agreements. In deciding his next moves, President Biden will have to contend with the reality that no other major world powers have followed President Trump’s lead in recognizing Morocco’s claims over Western Sahara. After all, the U.S. supported the reappointment of MINSURO in October.

Proclamations or presidential decrees, depending on their purpose, do not necessarily have the force of law and can be overturned by the Supreme Court or revoked by Congress. Should President Biden uphold Trump’s decision, it would further isolate the United States diplomatically, at a time when the new administration has been trying to pull the United States back into the international fold.

Simultaneously, some of the most staunchly pro-Israel voices in the Senate are likely applying a significant amount of pressure on the Biden administration. President Biden has already reiterated that the United States will continue to send billions of dollars of unconditional military aid to Israel regardless of its violations of international legal norms; Whether or not the same immense and unconditional support is available to Morocco has yet to be determined. For lack of action from President Biden, the battle may shift to the UN, where the UNSC will have to take up the issue, as in the end it is the only body with the authority to endow Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara with international approval.
Despite the triumphant wave of Arab states recognizing Israel in exchange for things like massive arms sales, Stephen Zunes points out that it is not really a step towards peace since “the fundamental problem, the reason there isn’t peace, is not because of nonrecognition *per se*, but the fact that the Palestinians are still under occupation and have not been allowed an act of self-determination, just as the people of Western Sahara have not been allowed an act of self-determination” (2021). Therefore, simply revoking sovereignty will not solve the pervasive issue of the Western Sahara conflict. The region as a whole can ill afford another conflagration, especially given the continuing political and economic crisis undermining Algeria’s stability and the ongoing conflict in nearby Libya.

A full blown war would also draw Morocco and Algeria’s attention and resources away from security tasks that the United States has a strong interest in preserving, such as containing regional threats of political violence and managing migrant flows bound for Europe. In terms of mitigating the growing agitation in the territory, Washington should urge Morocco to exercise restraint, perhaps through a personal appeal by Secretary of State Blinken, and ask Algeria to prevent any further Polisario mobilization. While U.S. leverage in Algeria is more limited than in Morocco, there is potential to capitalize on the government’s expressed desire to cultivate deeper relationships with partners besides its longtime ally in Moscow. Finally, the latest eruption underscores the need to appoint a new UN Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, as it has been four years since Kholer’s resignation.

In recognizing Moroccan sovereignty, President Trump allegedly "reaffirmed his support for Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory,” as confirmed in a White House statement on the phone call between President Trump and the king of Morocco. “As such the
president recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory,” the statement claims, followed by another tweet from President Trump reading: “Today, I signed a proclamation recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal is the ONLY basis for a just and lasting solution for enduring peace and prosperity!” But the proposal leaves much to be desired, and cannot be assumed as the default whether or not President Biden retracts the sovereignty recognition.

The existing Moroccan autonomy proposal was slow in the making, though autonomy as a solution to the Western Saharan conflict has been floating around for decades. Its first official expression was in the Baker Plan I of 2001, which envisioned a form of autonomy before a final status referendum. The adapted Baker Plan II of 2003 proposed a “very robust autonomy under the direct control of native Western Saharans” during the interim before the proposed referendum.

As a response to the Baker Plan II, Morocco unofficially floated a “draft autonomy status”, which was considered inadequate by James Baker. According to Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, the Moroccan side did not wish to make any robust changes to its plan. After some years of pressure from France and the U.S., the Moroccan government finally presented the Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region in 2007. Wikileaks obtained State Department cables which reportedly showed scepticism among states favoring an autonomy solution: “a candid conversation in March 2007 among political counsellors from Spain, the US, Britain, France and Germany suggests a consensus that the proposal does not offer autonomy at all, insofar as ‘Rabat would retain full control’.”

Expert Anna Khakee has written extensively on the shortcomings of the autonomy-sovereignty proposals, underscoring key elements that need to be established before
considering this policy’s implementation. Analysts of autonomy arrangements generally agree that democracy is key in their success. Of this, two facets must be distinguished: democracy within the autonomous region, and democracy of the state within which the autonomous area is located. That the autonomous area itself should be governed democratically is already recognized in the Moroccan proposal for Western Sahara, because democracy is seen as a key condition for the fulfilment of “internal self-determination.”

According to the Moroccan position, such internal self-determination would replace external self-determination (the right to choose statehood) in the Western Saharan case. This obstacle also emphasizes one of the reasons why Morocco has been able to gain support for its position internationally: without Western Sahara, no stable, monarchic Morocco. It is not a stretch to claim that when and if this equation changes, so might the chances for breaking the deadlock on Western Sahara.

Another key element stressed by the OSCE-sponsored Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life is that the judicial resolution of conflicts “requires that the State possess an independent, accessible, and impartial judiciary whose decisions are respected”—something Morocco does not possess. Even after a decade of real but hesitant reform, Morocco remains a monarchy where the king effectively holds all levers of power: executive, legislative, judicial, military, and spiritual. Therefore, Khakee suggests that genuine democratization in Morocco would be a necessary precursor to the smooth functioning of a potential autonomy solution for Western Sahara. It would address the current obstacles of: an otherwise difficult imbalance between a democratically self-governing Western Sahara and an authoritarian Morocco; the problems surrounding Western Saharan interest representation and conflict resolution vis-à-vis a non-democratic Moroccan state; the lack of rule of law and full
respect for human rights in the country; and the clientelistic networks that underpin the current system of power and which are also entrenched in Western Sahara.

The revival of armed conflict has escalated since the November confrontation, as on April 11, 2021, the Polisario Front announced that its police chief Addah al-Bendir had been killed “on the field of honor” in a separatist-controlled part of the occupied territory. It was revealed that Bendir had been killed by a Moroccan drone after a military operation near a sand barrier separating Moroccan and Polisario-controlled zones. The use of drone strikes elevates the conflict significantly, and is a sign to the world that this issue is pressing.

For many of the reasons that Western Sahara and the Polisario have been abandoned by the international community, this forgotten conflict emphasizes the privilege that it is to live in a world of ethics, rights, and laws. Basic norms should be treated as central, not peripheral or incidental, to world affairs, and the United States should feel the weight of the world’s eyes on it as the next steps are decided.

As of April 22nd, 2021, 73-year-old head of the Polisario Front, Brahim Ghali, has been hospitalized in Spain for treatment of COVID-19. Ghali assures Saharawis that there is no cause for concern as his condition improves steadily. In one of Ghali’s last public appearances, at the end of February, he visited the Saharawi refugee camps in Tindouf to mark the 45th anniversary of the declaration of the Saharawi Republic. In a speech, Ghali called on the Biden administration to find an “urgent democratic solution to the Moroccan-Saharan conflict” to allow the Western Saharan people “to enjoy their inalienable right of freedom and independence.” This call for action should not fall on deaf ears.
Dating from the Green March in 1975 to the ongoing suppression of speech and organizing in Western Sahara, Morocco has received a clear message of indifference and complacency from its allies. Zunes and Mundy, in analyzing Morocco’s actions, concluded that “During the war, the Moroccan regime discovered that it would not be punished internationally for its belligerent and intransigent behavior in Western Sahara. Since 1975, its actions have been variously tolerated, condoned, and even supported by its allies” (Zunes & Mundy, 25).

We may conclude from this tolerance that King Hassan II entered into a UN peace process likely feeling assured that his bases of support in the West and on the Security Council would never hold him accountable for attempting to subvert the referendum. The same has held for King Mohammed VI.

Bolstered significantly by tensions from the Cold War era, Morocco remains an important and longtime ally of the United States, having been the first country to recognize it in 1777. In exchange for its role as an ally in the crucial region of North Africa for France and the United States, Morocco has received sizeable economic rescue packages from the IMF, substantial financial and military aid, and the unspoken promise of using their influence to scrap the impending referendum process. Although President Trump took this a step further in December 2020, by tweeting the first international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory, the process-free informality of this proclamation and its divergence from U.S. policy precedent may allow the Biden administration leeway to walk back its predecessor’s action.

Not unlike President Trump’s other brokered deals abroad, there are many reasons for the Biden administration to retract this quid pro quo agreement. King Mohammed VI is reportedly awaiting confirmation from Biden’s administration to proceed in normalizing relations with Israel. But the two countries have enjoyed a longstanding informal relationship, largely due to
Morocco’s deep Jewish history and its present Jewish community. An estimated 50,000 Israelis travel to Morocco each year to learn about the Jewish community and trace their family histories. Thus, we can assume that Moroccan-Israeli relations can still thrive without the American commitment to Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Outside of the Abraham Accords, recognizing Morocco’s sovereignty over the non-self-governing territory deviates from international policy that has been aligned with U.S. foreign policy for decades. Furthermore, the action violates key American principles of self-determination and democracy.

Due to the lack of political precedent in President Trump’s claims and the existing Morocco-Israel relationship, the Biden administration can potentially revoke the recognition and realign the U.S. with the global norm. If possible, rescinding the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty while re-emphasizing the need for MINSURO’s referendum will not only 1) re-introduce the United States as a bold, value-driven nation whose new administration is unafraid to remedy the faults made by the previous one, 2) act as a rejection of violations of international law customs, and 3) re-center international attention on the Saharawi national liberation movement’s fight for independence in “Africa’s Last Colony”. The U.S. should also be wary to avoid mistakes made during the Israel-Palestine peace process, which it was witness and mediator to. A lack of transparency, bias, and legitimation of Israel’s violations of law plagued U.S. foreign policy during this process, and cannot be repeated if tangible progress is to be made.

Nonetheless, this announcement by Donald Trump has already echoed across the world. With Rabat advocating for France and the E.U. to mirror the declaration and pro-Western Saharan independence and human rights groups catching wind of this, the decades-frozen conflict has returned to the attention of news reports around the globe.
An otherwise active player in the conflict, Algeria, has been struggling to stabilize as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Having fully recovered from the virus, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has returned to Algeria and issued a decree setting June 12 for early legislative elections after he dissolved parliament in February, his office said. As a part of wide scale reforms, President Tebboune has called for polls to be held before the end of the year. Algeria saw oil revenues collapse in 2020, with the International Monetary Fund predicting a 5.2 percent recession. Therefore, although Algeria is pursuing democratic reform after the Hirak protests which ousted President Tebboune’s predecessor Abdelaziz Bouteflika, it will likely require close collaboration with other nations to negotiate a resolution. The Biden administration must coordinate its position, more transparently, with other members of the Group of Friends of Western Sahara, namely France and Algeria. Only joint international pressure can push Morocco and the Polisario Front to resume talks.

Without a doubt, the UN should appoint a new special envoy for Western Sahara--a post left vacant for almost two years. Further escalation would only serve to destabilise North Africa, with unforeseeable consequences for U.S. and European interests. Given the persistent rejection of Moroccan claims over Western Sahara by not only the International Court of Justice but also Saharawis native to the territory, unanimous or even majority international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara is unlikely. This fact leaves two options for the disputed territory: for Western Sahara to be autonomous under Moroccan sovereignty (2003 Baker Peace Plan), or for Western Sahara to become a sovereign nation pending a referendum. Neither of these are without caveat or great difficulty.

Autonomy, in particular, faces various important obstacles including: the potentially difficult imbalance between a democratically self-governing Western Sahara and an authoritarian
Morocco, the lack of rule of law and full respect for human rights in the country, the clientelistic networks that underpin the current system of power, and the nonexistence of a key piece to the smooth functioning of an autonomy solution: an independent judiciary.

Although Morocco and the Security Council may vouch for the autonomy-sovereignty deal, this will likely only fan the flames burning in Tindouf and across Western Sahara. Saharawi youth are becoming increasingly restless given the frigidity of the conflict, and will no doubt have strong reactions to a subversion of the long-awaited referendum. Based on the precedent set by Israel, Morocco’s next moves in the diplomacy arena may include similar claims of exceptionalism, which would allow them to continue their occupation of Western Sahara by claim of the lands Moroccan settlements exist on. If not this, at the very least we should expect Morocco to establish civilian jurisdiction over Moroccans living in the settlements. It would not be surprising to see Morocco’s new approach be to ensure its enduring control of the majority of the occupied territory and let Saharawis govern themselves in very limited areas--none of which would include their resource-plentiful coast. Moroccan settlements should be one of the first issues addressed in a peace process, as well as the relocation of the thousands of Saharawi refugees in Algeria.

The United States should see the highly anticipated resolution of the Morocco-Western Sahara conflict as an opportunity to right the wrongs of historical participation in neocolonialism and set remarkable new precedents for the role of the U.S. in global politics. This conflict is of significantly less importance to the U.S. than the Israel-Palestine issue, and can be a game-changer for international perceptions of the progressiveness and honorability of the United States.
Confining policy options to what seems “realistic” is an imagined obstacle that the U.S. should strive to overcome--what is realistic is contingent on political will and determination. If U.S. policy makers can match the feverous passion of Saharawi activists who have been forced from their homes and oppressed to the highest degree, the creation of the State of Western Sahara may very well be a realistic and feasible solution.
Bibliography
Alongside usage of published journals, documentary films, and research papers on the subject, many of the sources applied to my project are from reputable news outlets, press releases, and interviews, given the current events unfolding in the issue of concern.


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