

Israeli Recognition of Moroccan Sovereignty in Western Sahara

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On July 17, 2023, the Royal Palace in Rabat announced that Israel has officially recognized Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. This significant step aligns Israel with the United States on a cornerstone of Moroccan foreign policy. The recognition is expected to substantially improve Israel-Morocco relations and overcome barriers that have hindered their progress, particularly in the diplomatic sphere, by upgrading their liaison offices to permanent embassies, and boost other facets of the relations as well. At the same time, this development might have implications that go beyond the bilateral relations, particularly in view of the criticism directed at Israel with respect to its policy toward the Palestinians.

On July 17, 2023, the Royal Palace in Rabat [published an official statement](#) announcing Israel's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This development comes two and a half years after Israel and Morocco signed a normalization agreement in December 2020 as part of the Abraham Accords. While the [agreement](#) did not require Israel to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the area, the issue received prominent mention in the third paragraph, with the United States declaring its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara – indeed, one of the main incentives for Morocco to renew relations with Israel. The importance of the issue for Morocco was further elucidated by Moroccan King Mohammed VI in August 2022, who stated that Morocco gauges its relations with other countries through the prism of the Saharan question.

Rapid developments have marked Israel-Morocco relations since their renewal under the Abraham Accords. Over the past two years the volume of bilateral trade has increased significantly, new collaborations have sprung up in research, culture, and sports, and hundreds of thousands of Israelis have visited Morocco. Security cooperation between the countries has also been strengthened. Morocco continues to enhance its military capabilities to address threats from the separatist Polisario Front, which receives support from Algeria and Iran, and does so partly with Israel's assistance. In the last year alone, high-ranking military personnel from both countries exchanged public visits, agreements were signed

on security and cyber cooperation, and arms deals were reached, including the sale of drones and air defense systems.

In spite of these impressive developments, relations between the countries still lack significant elements: the upgrade of the liaison offices to full embassies – a move that was [agreed upon](#) but not yet realized – and summit meetings between the respective leaders. Israel's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara is expected to facilitate the removal of obstacles and pave the way to further progress. The move is also significant for other aspects of bilateral relations as well as within the broader context of the international arena, presenting potential implications for which Israel must be prepared.

Western Sahara: Background

Western Sahara is located on the northwest coast of Africa. Covering 250,000 square kilometers, it is largely deserted, with a population of roughly 640,000 inhabitants. This populace includes the Sahrawi people, as well as Moroccans who relocated to the area with government encouragement. The number of Moroccans living in the region reportedly outnumbers the indigenous population, although this point is contested.

Until 1975, Western Sahara was under Spanish colonial rule for about ninety years following the Berlin Conference in 1884, when Western powers regulated their control and trade in Africa. As the de-colonization era began, both Morocco and Mauritania claimed sovereignty of Western Sahara. Meanwhile, the UN General Assembly recognized the inhabitants' right to self-determination. As a result, a series of resolutions from 1965 onward mandated Spain to take immediate steps to release the territory from its colonial rule. These resolutions stressed the need to hold a referendum on the subject of self-determination – offering a choice between independence or assimilation into another country.

In 1974, Spain conducted a census in preparation for the referendum and its subsequent withdrawal from the region. In October 1975, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion, asserting that no sovereignty ties existed between the territory and either Morocco or Mauritania, and therefore there was nothing to prevent the region from applying the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the territory. The Moroccan King rejected the ICJ opinion, and in November 1975, the Moroccan government organized the "Green March," in which hundreds of thousands of Moroccan citizens marched to Western Sahara. A week later, on November 14, 1975, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania drew up the Madrid Accords to regulate the end of Spanish colonial rule. Subsequently, in early 1976, Spain relinquished

control of the area to Morocco and Mauritania. The two countries divided the region between themselves: Morocco took control over the northern two thirds and Mauritania took control of the southern third.

In 1973 the Polisario Front was formally constituted, with the aim to drive out foreign forces and achieve independence for Western Sahara. In 1976, the movement proclaimed the independence of the territory and the establishment of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Since 1979 the UN has recognized the Polisario Front as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. The Polisario Front launched a guerrilla war against Morocco and Mauritania, supported by Algeria in the form of arms and funding and indirect aid from Iran. In 1979, Mauritania withdrew from its section of the territory, and the majority of the area was then seized by Morocco. Consequently, hostilities persisted against Morocco. As a result of the fighting, many Saharawis fled the area; most settled in refugee camps in Algeria, where they continue to reside to this day.

In 1991, the UN brokered a ceasefire agreement between Morocco and the Polisario Front. This pact stipulated that a referendum would be held within two years, allowing residents to choose either independence or integration into Morocco. In response, the Security Council set up a UN force, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to oversee the execution of the referendum. However, the referendum was stalled due to disputes over voter eligibility.

In the early 2000s, several proposals were raised to resolve the ongoing dispute. In 2001, US Secretary of State James Baker produced a draft framework agreement known as Baker Plan I, proposing autonomy in Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. Morocco supported this idea and since then has declared its opposition to a referendum or to any proposition that might lead to an independent state in Western Sahara. The Polisario refused to even consider it. In 2003 Baker proposed an updated plan, known as Baker Plan II, which included holding a referendum after four years of self-rule, allowing people in the refugee camps to participate and vote as well. This time, the Polisario Front accepted the plan while Morocco rejected it. In April 2004, the Security Council passed a general resolution emphasizing the need for an agreed solution, effectively diluting its support for Baker Plan II. The original mandate of MINURSO – organizing a referendum on independence – was essentially replaced by the role of overseeing the ceasefire and a fruitless search for an agreed political solution.

In 2007 Morocco proposed a plan for the establishment of a local regional administration – the Saharan Autonomous Region (SAR) – under Moroccan sovereignty. Morocco would be responsible for the territory’s foreign relations and security, while an independent government elected by the inhabitants would have some measure of autonomy on other matters. This plan was rejected by the Polisario Front. Since then, there have been several outbreaks of violence in the territory, although the ceasefire was essentially maintained until 2020. In November 2020 the Polisario Front declared an end to the 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire and resumed armed attacks against Moroccan forces in Western Sahara and southern Morocco, after Moroccan armed forces [crossed](#) the armistice line on November 13 and entered the demilitarized UN buffer zone, which is inside de facto SADR territory.

International Stances

Most countries do not recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara; some recognize the independence of the SADR.

The UN considers Western Sahara area as non-self-governing territory, where decolonization is yet to be completed. The European Union shares a similar view, maintaining that Morocco controls the area as an occupying power and is therefore subject to the international laws of occupation. In several judgments the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has held that agreements between the EU and Morocco do not extend to Western Sahara. This includes, for example, the trade and fisheries agreements.

In 1984, SADR was recognized as a full member of the African Union – a move that prompted Morocco’s withdrawal from the Union, until its re-entry in 2017. Approximately eighty countries, mostly in the Global South, have recognized SADR, although in recent years about half of them have either suspended or rescinded their recognition. This is indicative of Morocco’s diplomatic success in garnering international support.

On the other hand, most Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and Yemen, have expressed support for the Moroccan position and the Kingdom’s “territorial integrity.” Moreover, over twenty countries have opened consulates in the region, most of them from west Africa, along with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Jordan. By contrast, Morocco’s neighbor Tunisia maintains a neutral position on the issue, although in August 2022 Tunisia’s President extended an invitation to the Polisario Front’s leader to attend an international conference in the country. This led to a diplomatic crisis with Morocco, resulting in both countries recalling their ambassadors.

The United States is the only Western country that has fully adopted the Moroccan position. After decades of maintaining neutrality on this issue, on December 10, 2020 the Trump administration [announced](#) its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, in return for Morocco joining the Abraham Accords and normalizing its relations with Israel. The [declaration](#) asserts, inter alia, that an independent Saharawi state is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict, and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution. Despite reports that the Biden administration re-assessed this position in the early months of his presidency, the declaration has not been withdrawn and still appears on the State Department's website. Other official websites – for example, [the CIA website](#) – include Western Sahara as part of Morocco's sovereign territory. This situation is gratifying for Morocco, and indeed, also to Israel, which had concerns that a retraction of the declaration might jeopardize its burgeoning relations with the country. However, [recent American references](#) to the issue in April 2023 specify United States support for Morocco's autonomy plan and UN efforts to promote a solution, but do not explicitly reaffirm recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. Moreover, the United States has refrained from implementing its promise to open a consulate in Western Sahara. According to reports, it also opposed Morocco's request to hold the next meeting of the Negev Forum in this territory, leading to a postponement of the meeting.

United States recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara has sparked renewed determination in Morocco to intensify its efforts to garner international support for its position. In January 2021, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita [urged](#) the European Union to follow the United States and express clear support for Morocco's stance. Although the appeal did not yield immediate results, it eventually led to declarations from Spain, France, Germany, Portugal, and the Netherlands in support of Morocco's autonomy plan as a solution to the conflict.

The shift in Spain's position is particularly interesting. Since its withdrawal from Western Sahara, the former colonial power has endeavored to maintain neutrality on the issue. Thus, following the Trump administration declaration in December 2020, Spain did not rush to express support for Morocco. Moreover, in April 2021, Spain even [allowed](#) the Polisario Front leader, Brahim Ghali, to receive medical treatment in a Spanish hospital when he contracted COVID-19. Spain's efforts to maintain neutrality, together with its would-be discreet provision of medical care to Ghali, enraged Rabat. In response, Rabat summoned the Spanish ambassador

for rebuke and recalled the Moroccan ambassador in Spain. While overt support for Morocco could damage Spain's relations with Algeria, until recently its primary gas supplier, it seems that Morocco insisted on this as the price for the renewal of relations. Ultimately, Spain announced its support for the Moroccan position in March 2022, with the Spanish Prime Minister [writing](#) to King Mohammed VI that Morocco's autonomy plan was the "most serious, realistic and credible" solution to the conflict, leading to the resumption of relations.

The Significance of Israeli Recognition

Israeli recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara aligns it with the United States. However, the Biden administration has not highlighted recognition, and it is eminently possible that it would not have provided such recognition in the first place. Meanwhile, other Western countries maintain more ambiguous positions. Therefore, this move might attract international criticism, compounding existing criticisms of Israel over its actions in the Palestinian territories.

The recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara aligns with Israel's position vis-à-vis the Palestinians, and could potentially serve as a precedent for implementing the right to self-determination for a national minority within a framework that does not involve an independent state. However, since this step contradicts resolutions passed by the UN and the European Union it could bring to the forefront questions in the international discourse concerning annexation, occupation, and the right to self-determination, at a time when Israel already faces [severe condemnation](#) of its conduct toward the Palestinians in similar contexts.

Moreover, some [within the Arab world](#) perceive the resumption of relations between Morocco and Israel as a strategic move that serves the Israeli goal of establishing a stronger foothold in Africa, and accuse it of scheming to exacerbate rifts in the Arab world. Proponents of this conspiracy theory could view Israeli support for the Moroccan position as meddling in the internal affairs of an Arab country. However, many countries in the pragmatic Sunni camp support Morocco's position, while the primary opponents of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara – Iran and Algeria – are already hostile to Israel.

Conversely, acknowledging Moroccan sovereignty could offer significant advantages of bolstering ties between Israel and Morocco and advance Israel's interests in broader contexts. It is likely that Israel expects to receive some benefits from this move, considering its importance to Morocco.

Heading the list of potential rewards, of course, is the opening of permanent embassies in both countries, which would significantly boost relations, diplomatically and symbolically. This could be particularly significant given the current challenges faced by Israel in its relations with other Arab nations with whom it has signed peace and normalization treaties, due to tensions in the Palestinian arena.

The second reward, which is also mutually beneficial, would be exchanges of visits and meetings at the highest political level and with King Mohammed VI, a move Israel [has sought](#) several times over the past couple of years. The last official meeting between a Moroccan King and an Israeli Prime Minister took place in July 1999, when then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak attended the funeral of King Hassan II. During the visit, Barak met with King Mohammed VI, shortly after his ascension to the throne. A meeting with the King 25 years later would be a significant political milestone for Israel.

The third expected reward, which would be advantageous for both countries, involves the expansion of economic ties. A first step that could be implemented relatively quickly would be to sign the treaty on investment protection, which has been under negotiation for approximately two years. This treaty would provide legal protections for Israeli investors in Morocco and could facilitate access to international arbitration in cases of investment disputes, similar to the investment treaty signed with the United Arab Emirates in 2021. An additional step could involve the signing of a free trade agreement, which has been [mentioned](#) as a possible development.

A fourth potential benefit lies within the realm of multilateral relations, in the form of Moroccan support for Israel in international forums and assistance in expanding the circle of normalization. Israel should clarify its expectation of support in forums such as the African Union and the UN. Even more crucial is diplomatic assistance in its dealings with sub-Saharan African countries, particularly those in the western part of the continent, where Morocco holds political influence as well as a significant business and financial presence.

However, there is concern that despite Israel's fulfillment of its part of the deal, Morocco may not uphold its end of the bargain, or that actions taken would prove to be temporary and reversible. This apprehension stems from Morocco's domestic and inter-Arab considerations, especially its longstanding commitment to the Palestinian issue, which garners significant popularity among many in Morocco and across the Arab world.

Morocco's commitment to the Palestinians and the Muslim residents of Jerusalem – frequently reiterated by senior officials, including the King himself – limits its ability to expand relations with Israel during periods of escalating Israeli-Palestinian tension. Thus, in recent months Moroccan officials have frequently criticized Israeli statements and actions toward the Palestinians and on the Temple Mount. This includes the [condemnation](#) by Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita of remarks by Israeli Finance Minister Smotrich in March 2023, when he denied the existence of the Palestinian people.

There is heightened sensitivity regarding Jerusalem, and the Temple Mount in particular, as demonstrated by Morocco's [strong criticism](#) following clashes there. King Mohammed VI chairs the al-Quds Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, whose aims include protection of Jerusalem's cultural and religious heritage and support for its Muslim communities. In this vein, since its establishment in 1995, the Committee has funded various projects in the city benefitting its Muslim residents in areas such as education, culture, and welfare. This position plays an important role in the King's efforts to strengthen his religious legitimacy, both domestically and in the Muslim world. Thus, while the advancement of relations between Israel and Morocco could bring about many benefits, it might lead to Morocco demanding a greater presence on the Temple Mount, adding the interests of an additional actor to an already sensitive arena.

It is plausible that Israel's policy of extending its control in the West Bank, coupled with the likely inability of the Israeli government to make progress toward resolving the Palestinian issue, could pose challenges for Morocco in promoting relations through high-profile actions – such as inaugurating an Israeli embassy in Rabat. Such measures could amplify existing criticism of Israeli-Moroccan relations, which is already heard in some quarters – including by [the Islamist party](#) that was in power when the normalization agreement was signed. Furthermore, there is considerable hostility toward Israel among the general Moroccan public. According to a [poll](#) published by the Arab Barometer in September 2022, 64 percent of respondents were opposed or strongly opposed to normalization between Israel and Arab countries.

Therefore, Israel's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara should be linked to a set of understandings that facilitate a meaningful improvement in relations between the countries. Such understanding should be supported by commitments from Morocco that are not easily reversed in the future.