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The Western Sahara Peace Process, 2009–2020

A Lost Decade

UNDERMINING THE SAHRAWI SPRING

As MINURSO approached its third decade of existence in the spring of 2011, the international environment was evolving in such a way as to make a just and lasting resolution of the Western Sahara conflict even more difficult to bring about. The economic and political turbulence that, from 2008 onward, tore through North America, Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa further marginalized the Western Sahara issue. Civil wars and the concomitant rise of extremist groups in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Mali, and elsewhere also reinforced long-standing impressions that the Moroccan regime held a critically important role in a turbulent region as a bastion of stability and as a steadfast client of the North Atlantic powers in Africa and the Middle East. Polisario continued to remind the international community that the prolongation of the Morocco-RASD dispute and the prolonged exile of the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria could only serve to increase insecurity in the Maghrib and the Sahara-Sahel. Though the prospects of MINURSO actually fulfilling its mandate to hold a self-determination referendum became more and more distant, the mission's long-standing track record of keeping the peace in Western Sahara became the number one reason to maintain a UN presence in the territory, even in the face of a deteriorating peace process and an egregious human rights situation.

When face-to-face meetings had finally resumed between Polisario and Morocco in August 2009, albeit on an “informal” basis, the United States was the only country within the five-member UN Group of Friends for Western Sahara—also including France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Spain—to have had a significant change in leadership. The Obama administration had initially given little indication as to whether or not it would continue the pro-Moroccan drift in U.S. policy witnessed in the final years of the George W. Bush administration. Early on, Morocco's lobbyists in Washington had managed to gather the signatures of a bipartisan group of 229 members of the U.S. House

of Representatives for an April 2009 letter to the White House to encourage implementation of Rabat's 2007 autonomy proposal. However, Michael Posner, the new assistant secretary of state for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, along with members of the National Security Council and some key Democratic senators, convinced the White House to support the continuation of the more neutral UN peace process facilitated by the recently appointed personal envoy of the secretary-general to Western Sahara, former U.S. Ambassador Christopher Ross. There also appeared to be some early indications that the new U.S. administration was backing away from full-throated support for Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal. A July 2009 letter from Obama to King Mohamed drew much consternation from the Moroccan press for its failure to mention Rabat's proposal (WikiLeaks, 09RABAT585_a).

A month earlier, Obama had also given a major speech "to the Muslim world" at Cairo University. There he outlined a new vision for America's relations with the region, one that sought to distance his administration from the imperial overreach and highly militarized policies of his predecessor. In this context, speculation mounted as to whether or not Western Sahara would be a part of this "new beginning," as the speech was titled. These questions would soon be answered. Though the new U.S. representative to the United Nations, Susan Rice, was known to support self-determination for Western Sahara, her boss, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, had deep ties to the Moroccan monarchy forged during her husband's presidency in the 1990s. When finally pressed by Moroccan journalists on U.S. policy toward Western Sahara at an international conference in Marrakesh in early November 2009, Secretary Clinton insisted that there had indeed been no change, particularly with respect to Morocco's "serious and credible" autonomy proposal (BBC Monitoring Service, November 7, 2009). The new UN negotiation team, which had been banking on a more neutral U.S. position, suspected that Clinton's off-the-cuff remarks were an appeasement gesture, one made to secure Rabat's cooperation with the Obama administration's push to reanimate the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. As had been the case since the 1970s, Morocco continued to launder American priorities in Israel and Palestine into political dividends for its occupation of Western Sahara.

As negotiations between Morocco and Polisario resumed, the most visible challenge to Rabat's ongoing effort to colonize and annex Western Sahara was the Sahrawi human rights movement and the increasing levels of support it received internationally. Aminatou Haidar, having already won a series of prestigious awards and delivered dozens of speeches abroad in the wake of the 2005 Sahrawi Intifada (see chapter 9), also received the Civil Courage Award from the Train Foundation in New York City in late October 2009. Upon her return home to al-'Ayun on November 14, she was arrested, detained, and illegally expelled to the Canary Islands by Moroccan authorities, an act that had the effect of creating a weeks-long international humanitarian incident. These actions not only coincided with the anniversary of the 1975 Madrid Agreements (see chapter 1), but also came

immediately after Clinton's visit to Marrakesh, where she had endorsed Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal and praised the country's human rights record. During his annual speech commemorating the 1975 Moroccan invasion of the Spanish-controlled Western Sahara, Mohammed VI seemingly issued a warning to all Sahrawi rights activists: "One is either a patriot, or a traitor," he declared, adding, "Is there a country that would tolerate a handful of lawless people exploiting democracy and human rights in order to conspire with the enemy against its sovereignty, unity and vital interests?" (quoted in Human Rights Watch, "Reverse New Rule on Sahrawi Activists' Contacts," Nov. 16, 2009). These remarks by the king followed an unprecedented visit by a delegation of seven Sahrawi human rights activists from the occupied territory to the refugee camps near Tindouf the month prior. This delegation, which included veteran activists like Brahim Dahane, Ali Salem Tamek, and Ahmed Naciri, had been arrested upon their return on October 8. Dahane, Tamek, and Naciri were subsequently held for nearly eighteen months on charges related to threatening domestic security and receiving material support from an enemy of the state, charges that Moroccan prosecutors were eventually forced to drop.

In retrospect, it was clear that the Moroccan regime had intended to make an example of Haidar irrespective of the negative impact it would have on the peace process. Haidar's insult to the Moroccan authorities had been writing "Western Sahara" as her country of origin on immigration entry forms when she landed at the airport in the occupied territory—a small act of defiance commonly practiced by Sahrawi human rights activists returning from abroad. This time, however, Moroccan authorities used the perceived affront to enact a premediated plan. Haidar was held overnight for interrogation, her passport was confiscated, and she was declared *persona non grata* on the grounds—entirely fabricated—that she had renounced her Moroccan citizenship. Upon her arrival at the Lanzarote airport, Haidar drew widespread sympathy from longtime supporters and international solidarity networks as she embarked upon an unlimited hunger strike in protest. She was soon joined in the airport by scores of activists, actors, writers, and other prominent figures from Spain and elsewhere. Haidar's hunger strike, which lasted for over a month and nearly killed her, generated significant international media attention, particularly in Europe, resulting in unprecedented attention to Western Sahara's most prominent nonviolent activist and to the independence struggle in general.

As news of Haidar's protest spread globally, Morocco's actions—clear violations of its responsibilities as an occupying power under the Geneva Conventions—initially failed to elicit commensurate denunciation from key members of the UN Security Council. Leading watchdog organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch immediately criticized Haidar's treatment, but the State Department was initially silent on Haidar's illegal expulsion. Even with Washington's stake in a renewed UN-led peace process increased in being led by a former American ambassador, the extent to which Haidar's expulsion had placed the ongoing negotiations into jeopardy only became clearer as

Polisario's denunciations of Morocco's actions became more vociferous. During the second week of her hunger strike, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly finally expressed concerns about her health situation. But he also called for "a speedy determination of her legal status and full respect for due process and human rights" (quoted in *The Observer*, Nov. 28, 2009), a statement that seemed to endorse a precedent whereby Morocco, a country with no formal legal standing in Western Sahara except as an occupying power, could "determine" whether or not Sahrawis had a right to live in their homeland. Nonetheless, international pressure on Morocco increased as Haidar's hunger strike entered its fourth week and her health deteriorated due to a number of preexisting conditions stemming from her years of imprisonment, torture, and recent beatings by Moroccan security forces in Western Sahara. Both Spain and France also issued statements calling for a resolution of the situation. In the end, President Obama had to intervene personally to pressure the Moroccan government to relent. Haidar ended her hunger strike after thirty-two days and returned to Western Sahara with a hero's welcome from the Sahrawi community, having won back not only her Moroccan passport but also the passports of several other prominent Sahrawi activists who had been effectively barred from traveling abroad by the occupying authorities.

Needless to say, the Haidar incident—and the de facto house arrest Morocco imposed on her in the weeks that followed—soured the political atmosphere ahead of a second meeting between Polisario and Morocco in February 2010. It also strained relations between Morocco and its North Atlantic patrons, notably Washington and Madrid. The U.S. embassy in Rabat deemed Morocco's "belligerent handling of the case" as a case study in "stunningly maladroit diplomacy" that came close to "badly jeopardizing its relationships with Spain and other allies" (WikiLeaks, 09RABAT990_a). To address the fallout in Washington, Morocco's lobbyists worked with the Democratic Party establishment to shore up support for Rabat's 2007 autonomy proposal. A March 2010 letter cosigned by a bipartisan majority of U.S. senators, headed by the powerful chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, called for the Obama administration to endorse Morocco's autonomy plan. Suggesting that Moroccan annexation of Western Sahara would help to address the growing sense of insecurity across North Africa and the Sahara-Sahel region, Feinstein claimed that she and Secretary Clinton were "on the same wavelength" and that she had urged her to make this "a U.S. foreign policy priority" (quoted in *The Hill*, Mar. 26, 2010). Preying upon the ignorance and fears of American leaders by simply repackaging Cold War arguments for the Global War on Terror, Moroccan lobbyists had scored one of their most significant victories on Capitol Hill, albeit by helping to distract Washington from the real sources of insecurity in the region. The greatest threat to the regional security in North Africa and the Sahara-Sahel would soon emerge from entirely different sources: long-time U.S.-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, the subsequent power vacuum in Libya created by a NATO-Arab

League military intervention that same year, and finally the implosion of the regime in Mali in early 2012, a relatively democratic government previously considered the backbone of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Sahara-Sahel. Indeed, just prior to these events, Sahrawi protestors would also demonstrate the extent to which the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara was a source of regional insecurity rather than a solution to it.

Roughly a year after Haidar's hunger strike, Sahrawi activists embarked upon an action of mass resistance that would come to mark a decisive turning point in the history of Western Saharan nationalism, the strategic nonviolent campaign for self-determination inside the occupied territory, and Morocco's repression of the Sahrawi human rights movement. In a location called Gdaym Izik, outside of al-'Ayun, Sahrawi activists began to enact a plan in October 2010 to protest the extent to which Moroccan authorities had made it nearly impossible for Sahrawis to gather in significant numbers since the 2005 Intifada, even for non-political reasons. These activists' plan was to establish a sustained protest encampment similar to the one built in 1999. This time, however, the camp would not be in central al-'Ayun, which would have been impossible, but in the desert. In doing so, the activists wanted to make three additional points about life under Moroccan occupation beyond freedom of assembly. First of all, the camp would symbolize Sahrawi social and economic exclusion from housing and jobs within an occupation that had become demographically dominated by state-subsidized Moroccan settlers. Secondly, the Gdaym Izik protest camp represented a symbolic return to Sahrawi cultural foundations, suggesting that Sahrawis can only be free in Sahrawi spaces in the open desert and outside of the Moroccan police state in the urban centers. In this way, the camp was lastly a vivid statement of solidarity with the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, whose prolonged suffering in exile was nonetheless a better fate than living under foreign domination inside Western Sahara. At the same time, these activists were keenly aware that the Moroccan authorities would use any pretext, including invented ones, to break up the growing protest camp. The number of Sahrawis who moved to the camp had swollen rapidly to well over ten thousand over the course of October and early November. Explicit political statements of solidarity with Polisario and calls for independence were initially prohibited, though journalists on the scene reported that such sentiments were lurking just beneath the surface (*The National*, Nov. 8, 2020).

Moroccan authorities would eventually use a falsified public safety rationale as a pretext to aggressively dismantle the otherwise peaceful Gdaym Izik camp on the morning of November 8, 2010. Up to that point, the camp's organizers and Moroccan political and security officials had in fact been in communication and regularly cooperated so as to keep the situation under control. But as events rapidly unfolded on November 8, a cloud of confusion and misinformation led Sahrawi activists, Polisario, the Moroccan press, and the occupying authorities to issue accusations of massacres against civilians and security personnel during the dismantling of the camp and the protests that followed. Such rumors

helped to whip up anger among Moroccan settlers, some of whom took to the streets in threatening mobs targeting Sahrawi property, businesses, and neighborhoods. The fiercest clashes were in al-‘Ayun as thousands of Sahrawis from the Gdaym Izik camp fled back to the city. Subsequent analysis by foreign organizations confirmed that nearly a dozen Moroccan police and soldiers had indeed been killed either in the raid on the camp or in the spontaneous street protests that followed, marking these events as the most violent in the history of the Moroccan occupation outside of the battlefields of the 1970s and 1980s. In effect, Morocco’s losses were also its first casualties since the 1991 cease-fire, a fact that Rabat did not take lightly as its forces embarked on a massive campaign to quell the uprising. For two days, Sahrawi protestors attacked various agents, infrastructures, and symbols of the Moroccan occupation while Moroccan forces engaged in violent repression, carting dozens of Sahrawi demonstrators and activists off to various detention centers, both public and clandestine. In the end, well over one hundred Sahrawis were held on charges related to the disturbances; two dozen were soon referred to a special military court in Rabat where they were held for over two years before facing trial. Among them were leading Sahrawi rights activists like Ahmed Sbaï, Mohamed Tahlil, and Naâma Asfari, who, along with eighteen other defendants, received sentences ranging from two decades to life imprisonment in February 2013.

The Gdaym Izik camp and its forcible dismantling by Moroccan forces exposed the growing impatience and anger of Sahrawis inside the occupied territory, especially the generation of youth that had come of age after the 1991 cease-fire. In the history of civil resistance to Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara, the forty-eight hours of mass Sahrawi protest and violent disturbances that followed the dawn crackdown on November 8 were unprecedented in terms of size and intensity. For this reason, some observers, including Noam Chomsky, would later conclude that the first mass uprising of the 2011 “Arab Spring” had actually occurred in Western Sahara in November 2010 rather than Tunisia the following month. In many ways, Western Saharans were indeed motivated by social, political, and economic pressures felt across the wider region, and they were likewise articulating their grievances through calls for revolutionary political change—the downfall of Morocco’s regime of occupation in the case of Western Sahara. Unfortunately, Western Sahara’s early contribution to the Arab Spring would go largely unrecognized within the region and internationally.

Despite some protests within Morocco beginning that February, the Moroccan monarchy would also emerge relatively untouched by the wave of uprisings that toppled four long-serving dictators across the Middle East and North Africa, uprisings that also helped plunge Syria, Libya, and eventually Yemen into protracted civil wars. Though the Gdaym Izik events brought unprecedented levels of international concern to the issue of Morocco’s repression of human rights in Western Sahara, those concerns had to contend with a rapidly evolving global context, one in which the Middle East, North Africa, and the

Sahara-Sahel regions were all marked by tumultuous political upheavals, metastasizing insecurity, and soon the ominous menace of the Islamic State movement in northern Mali, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Playing to these preexisting concerns, Morocco claimed to have dismantled a vast terrorist organization with operations in Western Sahara in January 2011. This disclosure not only seemed specifically designed to distract from the fallout over Gdaym Izik, it also served to remind Rabat's allies of its pivotal role in regional counterterrorism operations. Then, in October 2011, unidentified kidnappers managed to infiltrate Polisario's administrative center in Rabouni and abduct three Spanish and Italian aid workers. Through a series of intermediaries, the kidnappers eventually handed the hostages to an al-Qaida offshoot, who ransomed them to their home countries in mid-2012 for undisclosed sums of money.

If the Gdaym Izik protest camp would come to represent a highwater mark for civil resistance inside the occupied Western Sahara, it would also come to be known as a turning point in the ongoing peace process. Tellingly, the violent incursion of Moroccans into the camp coincided with the third round of Morocco-Polisario talks then taking place on Long Island, New York. Given the highly centralized and authoritarian nature of the Moroccan regime, it is unlikely that the decision to smash the Gdaym Izik camp in 2010—like the decision to expel Haidar in 2009—would have come from any authority below the level of the royal palace. Though clearly manufactured by Morocco, the Gdaym Izik crisis easily represented the greatest threat to the UN peace process since the escalation of tensions around the provocative route of the 2001 Paris-Dakar Rally (see chapters 1 and 9). In response, the UN Security Council convened an extraordinary meeting in mid-November 2010, issuing a formulaic statement of concern while ignoring calls for an international inquiry, as had been demanded by the European Parliament. Such willful provocations from the Moroccan monarchy were nonetheless suggestive of the extent to which Rabat had no intention of negotiating in good faith according to the framework set out by the Security Council. Rather, Morocco was seeking ways to delay and disrupt the new round of talks, as it was clear that Ross would not adopt the same conclusion as his predecessor, Peter Van Walsum, who had fatefully proposed taking independence off the table as the only viable way to resolve the conflict. Facing a more neutral UN envoy and a less overtly partisan U.S. administration, Moroccan obstruction of the peace process would only grow more intransigent in the wake of Gdaym Izik's massive display of Sahrawi opposition to the colonization of their lands.

“THE MOST MOROCCO CAN OFFER”

Widespread and growing instability in North Africa and the Sahel allowed Morocco to sabotage the Western Sahara peace process by leveraging its status as a key and stable ally of the North Atlantic powers. In April 2012, Rabat used its influence with France

to remove passages from successive drafts of the UN secretary-general's report pertaining to Moroccan efforts to impede MINURSO's cease-fire monitors, as well as language reminding the Security Council that the personal envoy's labors should ultimately lead to a referendum on self-determination (Reuters, Apr. 17, 2012). Indeed, Morocco grew visibly uncomfortable with the fact that neither Ross, the Secretariat, nor the Security Council had recommended imposing Rabat's 2007 autonomy proposal as the only framework for the ongoing negotiations, one that excluded independence *a priori*. In May 2012, the Moroccan government announced that it no longer had confidence in Ross. Though Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon was able to obtain Rabat's renewed cooperation several months later, the March 2012 meeting between Polisario and Morocco would prove to be the last face-to-face meeting of the parties for over five years.

Behind the scenes, Morocco's negotiators had been thrown off balance by an offer from Polisario to proceed on two separate tracks simultaneously. On one track, Polisario proposed talks covering the modalities of territorial power-sharing, and Morocco's 2007 proposal would be treated as a starting point for discussions. On the other track, Polisario suggested parallel negotiations that would address the means whereby Western Sahara's right to self-determination could be fulfilled. The Sahrawi delegation had even offered to provide substantive and constructive feedback on Morocco's autonomy proposal for the first time ever. Having already been burned by accepting the Baker II plan in 2003 (see chapter 9), the Sahrawi nationalist leadership understood the risks inherent in such an approach, as it put their right to independence up for negotiation. Polisario was nonetheless keen to be viewed as the cooperative party while Morocco continued to feel pressure on its human rights record in the aftermath of Haidar's expulsion and the repression of the Gdaym Izik uprising. Unsurprisingly, Morocco's negotiators proved unwilling—or unable, without prior directive from the Royal Palace—to reciprocate in any meaningful way. For Morocco, such an approach was equally dangerous: it would force them to move beyond their 2007 autonomy proposal and to engage in discussions of Western Sahara's right to self-determination. Whether or not Polisario was making a tactical concession in order to highlight Morocco's obstruction of the peace process (as it had in 2003 with the Peace Plan's demographically compromised final status vote), Rabat refused to take the bait. Another concern for Rabat was whether or not Ross would put forward his own plan to resolve the issue, one that would likely offer a far more advanced autonomy for Western Sahara, possibly in exchange for a removal of the independence option. Either way, Morocco's continued cooperation under either of those conditions—Polisario's two-track approach or a Ross Plan—would constitute two difficult admissions: that its 2007 proposal was insufficient and that the question of independence could not be avoided. Opting instead to oppose Ross's efforts, Rabat's increasing obstructionism forced the personal envoy to pursue a “new approach” involving three elements: engaging in confidential shuttle diplomacy, encouraging Algerian-Moroccan rapprochement,

and enacting confidence-building measures addressing humanitarian concerns, natural resource exploitation, and dialogue between loyalist and nationalist elements of Sahrawi civil society across the berms.

Following up on the events of Gdaym Izik, the issue of human rights was also put front and center by a series of high-level visits to the territory and a series of reports issued by the United Nations and prominent monitoring groups in 2012. In response, the U.S. representative to the United Nations, Susan Rice, with John Kerry as the new secretary of state, put forward a draft Security Council resolution in April 2013 that would have added human rights monitoring provisions to MINURSO's mandate, provisions similar to those of all other contemporary UN peacekeeping operations. A firestorm of diplomatic outrage was soon directed at the Obama administration from Morocco, which also happened to then be holding a rotating seat on the Security Council. In retaliation, Rabat canceled the Pentagon's annual Morocco-based African Lion joint military training exercise as it was about to start, and sent a stern letter from King Mohammed to the White House. Opposition to this U.S. initiative also emerged from an unlikely source: the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). Consistent with the observation that organizations will seek to perpetuate the problems for which they are supposed to be the solution, DPKO often made the most forceful—that is, fearmongering—arguments in favor of renewing MINURSO's mandate for the sole purpose of cease-fire monitoring, even in the total absence of any political dialogue between Polisario and Morocco. Since 1996, DPKO has been headed by former French diplomats, though it became unabashedly partisan in Rabat's favor on the question of Western Sahara under Hervé Ladsous (2011–17). This coalition of interests, along with pressure from the Pentagon and Morocco's allies in Congress, quickly forced the U.S. mission to the United Nations to withdraw the proposed modifications to MINURSO's mandate. When the resolution passed at the end of April 2013 without any human rights provisions, Western Sahara witnessed the largest demonstrations since Gdaym Izik as thousands of Sahrawis took to the streets in several cities to protests the United Nations' inaction.

Defenders of the Obama administration's half-hearted effort to add human rights monitoring to MINURSO's mandate suggested that Morocco had nonetheless been put "on notice" about its historical and ongoing abuses in the occupied territory. At the same time, Morocco was drawn more and more into U.S. efforts to confront the insecurity crisis engulfing the wider region since the 2011 Arab uprisings and the declaration of an Islamic State in the north of Mali in 2012. A November 2013 summit between President Obama and King Mohammed VI was a case in point. Not only did it serve to help mend fences after the acrimonious April Security Council resolution, it also underscored the extent to which the stability of the Moroccan regime trumped all other considerations. Two days before the meeting (November 20, 2013), Human Rights Watch issued a statement calling on the White House to condition American support for Morocco's post-Arab Spring

political reform process on there being actual, tangible, and substantive changes domestically and in the occupied Western Sahara, particularly with respect to protecting human rights defenders and ending impunity for agents of the state. While refusing to apply any kind of pressure on Rabat, these concerns were in fact more or less consistent with the Obama administration's own dismal assessments of the Moroccan regime's human rights record. In its annual reports on human rights in both Morocco and Western Sahara, the State Department continued to report severe violations. In the occupied Western Sahara, the U.S. government specifically observed "limitations on the freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association," as well as "the use of arbitrary and prolonged detention to quell dissent." Sahrawi civil society, the same report added, is ruthlessly suppressed by security forces that have, with impunity, "engaged in torture, beatings, and other mistreatment of detainees" (U.S. Department of State, Apr. 19, 2013). Nonetheless, Obama and Mohammed VI pledged to "work together to *continue* [emphasis added] to protect and promote human rights" in Western Sahara. The statement furthermore reiterated American support for Morocco's "serious, realistic, and credible" autonomy plan, as "a potential approach that can satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity" (The White House, Nov. 22, 2013).

Such endorsements of Morocco's autonomy proposal, especially from key members of the UN Security Council, only further encouraged Rabat to stonewall the peace process until an even more favorable international environment emerged. In order to help create this environment, Morocco continued to cultivate support in the U.S. Congress by spending some \$20 million on lobbying between 2007 and 2013, more than any other Arab state during the years of regional crisis before and after 2011 (*Foreign Policy*, Feb. 25, 2014). One of the key victories of the Moroccan lobby was the insertion of language by the House Appropriations Committee in 2015 allowing for U.S. development assistance funds to be used in the occupied Western Sahara. Though the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) had historically placed tight controls on the expenditure of civil and military aid to Morocco in the occupied Western Sahara, the Obama administration backed an effort to channel assistance directly to Sahrawi "civil society." For the Moroccan lobby, the political objective of such funding, though often defeated in the U.S. Senate, was to undermine the international legal consensus barring Morocco from exploiting Western Sahara's natural resources and conducting development activities in the occupied territory, as had been clearly stated in the 2002 opinion of the UN Office of Legal Affairs, confirmed following the passage of the 2004 Morocco-United States free trade agreement, and reaffirmed in 2018 by the highest court of the European Union. At the same time, the Moroccan lobby in Washington, D.C., also sought to question Polisario's popular support and effectively to deprive the Sahrawi refugees of international aid by challenging the official figures provided by the Sahrawi and Algerian Red Crescent societies for the population of the camps near Tindouf. Annual calls for a

Sahrawi refugee census inserted into U.S. congressional budgeting legislation at Morocco's urging were finally silenced in 2018. That year, the UNHCR published the results of the most comprehensive population survey ever conducted in the camps, with a reported total population figure of 173,600.

As the fortieth anniversary of the 1975 Green March approached, a political solution to the Western Sahara issue seemed further away than ever. Despite Polisario's willingness to discuss the modalities of power sharing and a final status referendum on separate tracks, two years of the personal envoy's new indirect approach, which included over a half-dozen visits to the region and several consultations with officials in Madrid, Paris, London, Moscow, and Washington, D.C., had failed to yield any reciprocation from Moroccan negotiators. Making matters worse, Morocco had unilaterally suspended MINURSO's peacemaking activities for most of 2014 by raising concerns about the mandates of the mission and the personal envoy. In his April 2014 report to the Security Council, the secretary-general had proposed giving Ross one more year to make progress using the new approach. If none could be demonstrated, Ban recommended to the council that it undertake "a comprehensive review of the framework that it provided for the negotiating process in April 2007" (UN doc. S/2014/258, p. 20). Though the council refused to take up the secretary-general's proposal, Rabat nonetheless viewed it as a threatening prospect for several reasons. By then it was utterly clear to Ban, Ross, and even the council that the inherently contradictory UN negotiating framework adopted in 2007—the pursuit of a negotiated compromise agreement that respects Western Sahara's right to self-determination—primarily served to perpetuate a status quo that Morocco found increasingly tolerable. Even if the Security Council had proven reluctant to endorse Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal as the only possible solution, the situation in 2014, from Rabat's point of view, was much more advantageous than it had been one or two decades earlier. The Security Council proved equally unwilling to suspend peacemaking activities or to contemplate the unthinkable—admitting failure and withdrawing MINURSO entirely. These parameters meant that the only other alternative to the fruitless 2007 negotiating framework was to return to the Baker approach, whereby the personal envoy would be given a mandate by the council to develop a UN compromise proposal in consultation with the parties, as opposed to simply facilitating dialogue between them in the hope that they would develop a proposal themselves. Indeed, there was some speculation during this period as to whether or not Ross already had in mind a compromise solution based on a more advanced form of autonomy, a modified version of the second Baker Plan, or a Morocco-Western Sahara confederation agreement (e.g., *Africa Intelligence*, Oct. 23, 2014). Rabat's final concern was the potential loss of control over the peace process that might come out of "a comprehensive review" by the Security Council. For over a decade, Morocco and Polisario had been granted effective veto power over the peace process. During the contentious Security Council debate over Baker's 2003 Peace Plan, Russia had

introduced the idea that voluntary and mutual agreement was a necessary condition for any UN solution to the Western Sahara dispute. Though Baker and Ross had both come to the conclusion that the Security Council would inevitably have to compel one or both of the parties to make compromises, the Council persisted in its historical refusal to take such action.

On the ground in Western Sahara, Morocco's withdrawal of cooperation with MINURSO in mid-2014 had two important effects. First, the new special representative of the secretary-general, Kim Bolduc, was unable to take up her position as head of MINURSO in al-'Ayun until February 2015, half a year after her appointment. Second, Morocco's boycott also shut down the United Nations' only humanitarian confidence-building measure in Western Sahara, the UNHCR's family visit exchange program between the Sahrawi refugee camps and the occupied territory. Originally launched in 2004 and having benefited over twenty thousand Sahrawis divided from their families, the program, already incapacitated due to disagreements between Morocco and Polisario over the list of beneficiaries, was effectively shuttered in 2014.

In November 2015, King Mohammed took the opportunity of the fortieth anniversary of the Moroccan invasion of Spanish Sahara to give his annual speech commemorating the Green March from occupied al-'Ayun. In it, he reiterated the Moroccan position that the 2007 autonomy proposal was a take-it-or-leave-it deal, "the most Morocco can offer," a proposal that left no room for independence. Moreover, Nasser Bourita, a deputy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, though widely understood to be the King's right hand in external relations, had also informed Ross during a meeting in Rabat in September 2015 that Morocco would allow the UN peace process to go forward so long as it continued to operate under something he called the "2004 understanding." For the Moroccans, this understanding was that the personal envoy must assume—and not question—Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as a basis of negotiations, not as a possible outcome (UN doc. S/2016/355, par. 10, 20). This insistence was as much a stern reiteration of Morocco's long-standing position as it was an explicit rejection of the framework ostensibly guiding Ross's labors, the Manhasset framework (i.e., good-faith negotiations without preconditions). It also seemed to be a thinly veiled threat, one that reminded Ross of Morocco's successful intransigence vis-à-vis the first personal envoy, Baker, who resigned in 2004.

The Moroccan monarchy and its officials had also returned to old talking points, especially their assertion that the question of Western Sahara was fundamentally a dispute between Algiers and Rabat. As had been the case for years, the Algerian regime was willing to improve relations with Morocco so long as Rabat was willing to disaggregate the issue of Western Sahara from all other aspects of their foreign relations. Morocco nonetheless continued to frame the question of Western Sahara as a bilateral matter, one in which a solution could only be found through direct negotiations with Algiers, not

Polisario. Algerian-Moroccan tensions were also heightened by Algiers's aggressive efforts to modernize its military after two decades of relative neglect. Riding a wave of increasing global oil prices, Algeria's economy surged in the 2000s, allowing the government to increase social spending. This welfare regime, coupled with a reluctance among Algerians to risk destabilization following the horrific civil conflict of the 1990s, meant that Algeria witnessed little social unrest related to the 2011 "Arab Spring." Algeria's international revival in the 2000s finally began to sour when President Bouteflika, already weak in terms of health, became severely debilitated in the aftermath of an apparent stroke in 2013. The Algerian regime's galling but unsurprising insistence on running Bouteflika for a fourth presidential term in April 2014 was suggestive of the growing crisis of indecision within the opaque civil-military power structures then guiding Algeria through a period of internal political deadlock, unprecedented regional insecurity in Libya and the Sahel, and bracing economic turbulence when global oil prices suddenly and dramatically collapsed in 2014. With the growing sense of a power vacuum at the very top of the Algerian regime, Bouteflika's second decade in office (2009–19) was hardly an opportune moment for Rabat-Algiers rapprochement.

FROM BREAKDOWN TO COLLAPSE

In a last-ditch effort to save the Western Sahara peace process from total breakdown, Secretary-General Ban visited the region in March 2016. This was the first visit from the head of the United Nations in nearly two decades. Instead of salvaging the peace process, the secretary-general's visit inadvertently made matters worse. The tour got off to a bad start when Ban was unable to secure an audience with Mohammed VI, ostensibly because the palace and the UN Secretariat were unable to come to an agreement on timing and protocols. Without an invitation to Morocco, the secretary-general was effectively denied a visit to MINURSO's headquarters in al-'Ayun. His tour was instead limited to the refugee camps in Algeria and then a peacekeeping team site near Bir Lahlou, a small settlement also serving as the provisional capital of the RASD on the Polisario-controlled side of the berms. During a stop in Algiers, the secretary-general gave a statement in which he used the term "occupation" to describe the Moroccan presence in Western Sahara. Immediately, the Moroccan regime licensed an onslaught of diplomatic protests, media outrage, and popular protest against the UN secretary-general. The Secretariat in New York quickly tried to walk back the issue, suggesting that Ban had misspoken, though this designation—Morocco as an occupying power—was entirely consistent with resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the UN Commission of Human Rights, not to mention resolutions, statements, and opinions issued by the Organization of African Unity, the European Parliament, the African Union, and the European Court of Justice. Rabat

nonetheless insisted that the use of such “unacceptable” terms negated the neutrality of the secretary-general—and by extension his personal envoy.

To drive the point home, Rabat expelled almost all of MINURSO’s civilian staff from Western Sahara, as well as the AU representatives to the mission, a move that mainly impacted the mission’s headquarters in al-‘Ayun. By the end of the month, only a skeleton crew of some two dozen UN officials remained in the territory, with support from personnel relocated to the Canary Islands. In response, the secretary-general’s spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, denounced these actions as being “in clear contradiction” of Morocco’s international obligations as a UN member state and as a challenge to the authority of Security Council, under whose auspices MINURSO operates. By contrast, the U.S. mission to the United Nations, then led by Samantha Power, a self-described champion of human rights and multilateral institutions, merely issued a boilerplate statement of support for Morocco’s autonomy plan and ongoing peace process through Twitter (Reuters, March 19, 2016).

When it was time for the United States to submit its draft resolution on Western Sahara to the Security Council for the annual renewal of MINURSO’s mandate, the initial text simply expressed “concern” that the mission was not able “to fully carry out its mandate,” without naming who was responsible for the situation or calling for its immediate rectification. When other Security Council members pressed for stronger language, the resolution’s “concern” was upgraded to “regretting.” This was still far less than the condemnation some countries on the Council had wanted vis-à-vis Morocco’s insistence that the expulsion of MINURSO’s civilian staff was now permanent. The resolution went on to ask the secretary-general to report within ninety days as to whether the mission’s operations had been restored “to full functionality,” and if not, “to consider how best to facilitate achievement of this goal” (UN doc. S/RES/2285).

Though traditional Moroccan allies like France, Spain, Egypt, and Senegal had helped to shield Rabat from criticism on the council, the final vote to renew MINURSO in April 2016 drew rarely used abstentions from noteworthy members (Angola, New Zealand, and Russia), as well as even rarer votes *against* the resolution from two Latin American allies of Polisario, Uruguay and Venezuela. For their part, New Zealand and Russia decried the council’s unwillingness to call for the immediate return of MINURSO’s political staff. Venezuela, Angola, and Uruguay went further, decrying the opaque manner in which the Resolution—hardly changed from 2015 to reflect the current crisis—was drafted by a small group of members, with the United States as the “penholder,” only to be handed to the rest of the Security Council on a take-it-or-leave-it basis (UN doc. S/PV.7684). New Zealand’s ambassador to the United Nations further elaborated on his dissent: “The resolution should have stated the reality, that the expulsion of the civilian component has seriously compromised the mission and its ability to discharge its mandate” (quoted in Associated

Press, Apr. 29, 2016). This being the last Security Council resolution spearheaded by the Obama administration, its legacy on the question of Western Sahara was a mixed picture. Though some pressure had been brought to bear on basic issues of civil and political rights in Western Sahara by the outgoing U.S. administration, this largely came at the expense of undermining the most fundamental human right of all, that of self-determination.

The historical and ongoing shielding of Morocco from any opprobrium by key patrons on the Security Council meant that Rabat could continue to pursue its strategy of indefinitely stalling the peace process with almost total impunity. In his final year as the secretary-general's personal envoy, Ross's efforts to resume talks with the parties in any form were effectively stonewalled by Rabat. Though Morocco allowed some of MINURSO's civilian component to return to al-'Ayun in the weeks that followed the April 2016 Security Council resolution, Rabat's ongoing refusal to meet with the personal envoy corresponded with a significant change in Polisario's leadership and increased military tensions between the Moroccan army and ELPS forces in the summer of 2016.

After a struggle with cancer, Polisario's long-time secretary-general and RASD president, Mohammed Abdelaziz, died at the end of May. Brahim Ghali, an early member of Polisario and one of its most experienced military leaders, was quickly named the new RASD president. Abdelaziz had been an effective leader in holding the various factions of Polisario together, avoiding the splits that had weakened some other nationalist struggles in Africa and elsewhere, as well as fending off growing demands to resume the armed struggle. However, despite his being a cofounder of the Polisario and serving thirty-eight years as RASD's president, the Polisario's tradition of collective leadership made it so Abdelaziz never became a defining figure of the revolution, such as Fidel Castro was to Cuba or Ho Chi Minh was to Vietnam. Nonetheless, this loss compounded the growing sense that the founding generation of Sahrawi nationalists was leaving the stage. In addition, in 2010, Mahfoud Ali Beiba, a driving figure behind the formation of Polisario who had held several high-level posts in RASD and frequently helped lead their negotiation teams, passed away. Then in 2018, Polisario's long-standing representative to the United Nations, Ahmed Boukhari, also died, followed two years later by Emhamed Khadad, Polisario's UN coordinator and one of its most important negotiators.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2016, Rabat continued to present numerous reasons to keep Ross from resuming his shuttle diplomacy, though Ross was able to meet Bourita on the sidelines of the General Assembly in September. There the Moroccans told Ross that, though they welcomed talks on its autonomy proposal when the domestic political timing was right for Rabat, the real dispute was with Algeria, not Polisario. The secretary-general even attempted to convince Mohammed VI to let the peace process resume at a UN climate change summit in Marrakesh in November. Soon thereafter, the UN Secretariat was informed that, in the eyes of Morocco, the personal envoy had lost all credibility because of alleged favoritism toward Polisario and Algeria.

Meanwhile, the Royal Gendarmerie, in an effort to boost overland trade between Morocco and West Africa, launched an effort in August 2016 to pave the desert road on the southernmost end of Western Sahara linking the Moroccan-controlled border post near the village of Guerguerat with Mauritania. This effort, however, would take Moroccan forces across the berms and illegally into the UN buffer zone, an area nominally under Polisario control. Polisario quickly met this military incursion into the MINURSO-mandated buffer zone with diplomatic protests and new ELPS force deployments in the area. The armed wing of the Sahrawi nationalist movement also began to create its own semipermanent installations between the Moroccan and Mauritanian border posts, as well as in the Atlantic-facing side of the Ras Nouadhibou peninsula that the RASD shares with Mauritania. With the total collapse of political dialogue and Morocco's sidelining of Ross, there was no mechanism for Rabat and Polisario to discuss security and border issues bilaterally as tensions rose. By February 2017, Polisario began asserting that the question of its new troop presence in this economically sensitive corridor was not a technical peacekeeping matter but was rather inseparable from all other issues to be addressed in final status talks on self-determination. By then, Ross had already tendered his resignation to the new UN secretary-general, António Guterres, in the face of Morocco's refusal to cooperate. Around the same time, Rabat had also shifted to a new diplomatic front in its four-decade-old war on Western Saharan nationalism: the African Union.

MOROCCO AND ALGERIA: REFORM AND REVOLUTION DENIED

Morocco's long-standing boycott of the African Union and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), had been premised on the RASD's status as a full member state within those bodies since 1984. Though King Hassan II had tried to push the OAU to the brink of collapse rather than sit side by side with Sahrawi leaders, the organization went ahead without Morocco, one of its founding members. The OAU and African Union had always held the door open for Moroccan reentry, though Rabat had long insisted it would not come back to the organization unless RASD was removed, a possibility that does not exist within the Constitutive Act of the African Union. The prospects of Morocco gaining enough support to effect such a fundamental change in the African Union, so as to vote out Western Sahara, are still very distant. Internationally disenfranchising RASD nonetheless represents an important objective of Rabat's strategy to weaken Polisario around the globe, particularly in Africa. That this would be an uphill battle for Morocco was fairly certain. As recent as 2015, the African Union's Peace and Security Council had requested its UN counterpart stop Morocco's illegal exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources while also calling for a "global boycott" of all companies involved in such practices (Communique of the African Union, Mar. 27, 2015).

Morocco finally rejoined the African Union unconditionally in 2017, but continued its efforts to woo African states from their support for Western Sahara. This recent charm offensive across the African continent has stood in sharp contrast with its dismissive, if not derogatory, attitude toward the African Union in the preceding years. A 2012 fact-finding mission of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, for example, was denied access to the Moroccan occupied territory and so visited only the refugee camps. Since rejoining the African Union in 2017, Morocco is still the only member-state not to sign the body's core human rights mechanism, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (aka the Banjul Charter). Morocco has likewise gone to great lengths to keep the African Union out of the peace process despite the OAU's historical role in creating the settlement framework that led to the creation of MINURSO in 1991. In 2014, the AU special envoy for Western Sahara, Joaquim Chissano, former Mozambican president and founding member of FRELIMO, approached the UN secretary-general offering to help advance the stalled peace process. The Moroccan government's response was to assert that the African Union had long ago lost all credibility on the matter and that, because Western Sahara does not exist, its special envoy to Western Sahara was illegitimate. Following Rabat's ejection of MINURSO staff in 2016, Morocco also continued to bar the return of the OAU/AU observer delegation that had been part of the UN mission since day one.

In fact, the African Union accepted Rabat's application to join the organization with the proviso it should lead to the peaceful resolution of Rabat's dispute with the RASD over Western Sahara, a stipulation Morocco had no intention of following. Shortly after being admitted, Morocco's UN delegation wrote to the UN secretary-general "to reiterate that the Western Sahara conflict lies within the exclusive competency of the United Nations Security Council," and to express "the categorical opposition of Morocco to any involvement of the African Union in the political process" (quoted in UN doc. S/2018/277, p. 4). Then, at the end of March 2019, Morocco convened a ministerial meeting of three dozen African states in Marrakesh on "the African Union's support to the United Nations political process on the regional dispute over the Sahara." The final declaration of this meeting made no mention of self-determination, the RASD, or "Western Sahara," yet it seemed to suggest that the historic role of the OAU and African Union in the peace process had been entirely abdicated to the United Nations. In an effort to counter this move, South Africa convened a "solidarity conference" on Western Sahara under the auspices of the South African Development Community the very next day, an event that included long-standing supporters of Polisario from outside of the continent, countries like East Timor, Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.

Complementing Morocco's multilateral effort to erode African support for Western Sahara, Rabat also continued to work bilaterally in pursuit of the same objective. Since 2010, several African states had joined the list of countries to withdraw or suspend their recognition of the RASD, notably Zambia and Africa's newest state, South Sudan. By 2020,

Morocco had convinced over a dozen African governments to open “honorary consulates” in the occupied cities of al-Ayun or Dakhla (DW, Mar. 31, 2020), soon to be followed by the United Arab Emirates shortly after Abu Dhabi established a formal relation with Israel under the auspices of the Trump administration in September 2020. Though Polisario was quick to highlight the absurdity of impoverished African governments opening consulates in remote cities where few, if any, of their citizens lived, Morocco’s diplomatic offensive in Africa coincided with an investment push to win hearts and minds across the continent. Over the previous decade, Moroccan finance and business, both private and public, moved aggressively into African markets to the tune of \$3–4 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) per year (or roughly seven-eighths of Morocco’s annual FDI). Beyond the imperative to undercut African support for Western Saharan nationalism, Morocco’s African investments also took advantage of the political and economic vacuum created by the collapse of the Qadhdhafi regime in Libya in 2011, particularly in the Sahel region. Moroccan banks’ and businesses’ high tolerance for bribery, particularly among France’s sub-Saharan client regimes, those derisively known as *La Françafrique*, also allowed Moroccan finance and investment to be an opaque intermediary vehicle for foreign capital coming primarily from Europe and the Gulf. Building on its successful return to the African Union, Morocco then attempted in 2017 to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an application that was still being considered three years later, in part due to stronger Nigerian support for RASD under President Muhammadu Buhari, who took office in 2015.

This politically motivated investment drive in Africa coincided with efforts to transform the Moroccan economy and, in so doing, to enhance the legitimacy of the monarchy and to expand the fiscal mechanisms of domestic rule and foreign diplomacy at its disposal. In other words, the monarchy would no longer be seen as simply the mediator of an implacably corrupt political system, but more so as the facilitator of an economic renaissance. Much like the petroleum-rich monarchies of the Gulf, Moroccan economic policy focused on making the country attractive to foreign investment by embarking on major infrastructural projects (ports, rail, roads, etc.) to enhance Morocco’s capacity to absorb and circulate international capital domestically, while also enhancing the country’s ability to project Moroccan capital into other regions of the world, especially Africa. Through its fifty-billion-dollar holding company-cum-pan-African investment vehicle, Al-Mada (the ex-*Société Nationale d’Investissement*), the monarchy remained at the heart of the Moroccan economy and its new financialized foreign policy. But as with most other “emerging economies” pursuing a neoliberal version of defensive developmentalism, the dividends of Morocco’s uneven growth continued to flow to entrenched elites and new upper classes in the already established urban centers. The country’s ranking on the UN Development Program’s global index also began to stall as the economic growth achieved in the first decade of Mohammed VI’s rule proved increasingly difficult to replicate in his

second. By 2020, Morocco still ranked as North Africa's most unequal country, Egypt included.

The monarchy's efforts to reinvent the political economy of its rule naturally generated popular opposition to the enrichment and entrenchment of elites who seemed more and more indifferent to the plight of the masses. When Tunisia and then Egypt erupted into mass uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011, tens of thousands of Moroccans also took to the streets in 2011 in dozens of locations between February and July. A telling difference, however, was the relative absence of the main revolutionary slogan seen elsewhere across the region: "The people want the downfall of the regime" (*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*). The inherently reformist demands of the majority of Morocco's protests—less corruption and police brutality, more political accountability and participation—revealed the extent to which most Moroccans fundamentally wished to retain the monarchy, or at least feared the consequences of demanding otherwise. It was also an index of the extent to which the Moroccan regime had succeeded in socially and ideologically marginalizing, if not eliminating, almost all forms of Leftist, Arab Nationalist, and Islamist republicanism that could articulate a viable democratic alternative to the rule of the monarchy and the Makhzan.

The 2011 Arab uprisings in fact offered Mohammed VI an opportunity to push through constitutional changes that, while putting more limits on his executive authority vis-à-vis the Prime Minister, left his other supreme political, military, and religious powers untouched. The Tamazight (Berber) language and the Hasaniyyah dialect of Sahrawi Arabic were also given official recognition. Efforts to address corruption, however, had failed to increase Moroccans' confidence that the issue was being sufficiently addressed. By 2019, Transparency International noted that Moroccans' highly negative perceptions of corruption in their country remained unchanged. In Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and elsewhere, corruption, police brutality, and elite indifference toward the lives of everyday people fed a growing sense that there was much unfinished business left over from the uprisings of 2011.

Interestingly, the predominantly Tamazight-speaking region of the Rif Mountains, an area coinciding with former Spanish Northern Morocco and one of the most economically marginalized in the country, gave birth to the most significant challenge to the Moroccan state since the Gdaym Izik protest camp of 2010. In an echo of Tunisia's uprising five years prior, the Rif Hirak (movement) erupted suddenly in October 2016 when an impoverished fish seller was killed in a horrible accident after authorities confiscated his catch and threw it in a dumpster. What followed was a months-long mass protest movement demanding more cultural rights, regional autonomy, and even independence. The flag of the short-lived Rif Republic (1921–26) even reappeared as one of the uprising's main symbols. True to form, the Moroccan regime detained over one hundred protest leaders, particularly those espousing ethno-nationalist claims for Rifi autonomy or independence. Otherwise,

the monarchy deployed its boilerplate response to the Hirak in the Rif: shifting blame to local officials for failing to serve the people while simultaneously promising more development projects to address the region's high rates of poverty and youth unemployment.

In neighboring Algeria, a massive nonviolent social movement exploded onto the streets in February 2019 when it was announced that President Bouteflika would be seeking a fifth mandate in elections set for April of that year. For nearly a decade, Bouteflika's health had been in serious question, and he had served his entire fourth term (2014–19) in a visibly debilitated, wheelchair-bound state. In 2011, Algerians had not taken to the streets in significant and sustained numbers. At that time, Bouteflika—credited with rescuing Algeria's economy and international reputation in the aftermath of the “dark decade” of civil conflict, the 1990s—still had relative democratic legitimacy from elections in 2009, albeit diminished from his decisive victory in 2004. Owing to historically unprecedented oil prices, the Algerian state also benefited from a massive surplus in 2011, which allowed it to address some of the economic shocks that had rattled Tunisia and Egypt.

The Algerian regime's most significant security concern at the time was not the political mood of the Arab world but rather the country's vast southern Saharan interior, whose vulnerability to transnational armed actors escalated following the disintegration of the Libyan state in 2011. Then, in early 2012, Malian forces retreated from the north of their country as armed factions of Tuareg nationalists and jihadists took control, the latter declaring the region an “Islamic State.” A significant French military intervention was then dispatched under UN auspices in early 2013 to help the Malian government reassert central authority over its expansive northern hinterland. In response, another al-Qaida offshoot took several hundred workers hostage at a joint British-Norwegian-Algerian owned oil facility near In Amenas, Algeria. The crisis ended when Algerian forces stormed the premises, killing several dozen hostages and, allegedly, all the attackers. France's peacekeeping force in the Sahel eventually transformed into a multilateral counterterrorism operation spanning from Mauritania to Chad, an initiative that complemented the ongoing U.S. counterterrorism and training operations in the Sahel and North Africa dating back to 2002. The largest of these, the U.S. Africa Command's annual African Lion training exercise, continued to be staged in southern Morocco.

With the Algerian economy undermined by the collapse of oil prices in 2014 (despite massive yet quickly dwindling cash reserves), and then the regime's audacity of running an incapacitated Bouteflika for a fifth term in 2019, many Algerians had had enough. The Algerian protests of early 2019 also coincided with a similarly buoyant massive nonviolent uprising in Sudan which eventually ousted the long-standing military-Islamist dictatorship in Khartoum. Algerians settled into a weekly ritual of holding unimaginably large protests every Friday after prayers, filling the streets of central downtown Algiers entirely. Despite police provocations, the protests maintained an impressive level of nonviolent discipline that allowed for persons of all ages and backgrounds to participate. On

Tuesdays, Algerian students held their own protests, reinforcing the growing power of Algeria's *Hirak*. By April 2019, Bouteflika had resigned, giving way to a caretaker government. Several high-profile officials, including former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and the seemingly omnipotent ex-head of the military intelligence, Mohamed "Tewfik" Medienne, found themselves in prison on allegations ranging from corruption to plotting to subvert the state, alongside Bouteflika's brother, Said, someone who was once considered the real power behind Bouteflika during his final two terms in office. The *Hirak* was entirely unsatisfied with these largely symbolic gestures, which were clearly being coordinated behind the scenes by Algeria's long-standing elites in politics and the security forces, the very elite many Algerians wanted to see purged from the state. Even after lackluster elections for a new president were staged in December 2019, the Friday protests continued until the global COVID-19 pandemic allowed Algerian authorities to ban public gatherings in early 2020.

BOLTON'S GAMBIT

Upon assuming office at the start of 2017, the new UN secretary-general inherited a Western Sahara dossier with Moroccan and Polisario forces engaged in their tensest military standoff in years. These tensions undoubtedly added to the impetus within the United Nations to find a lead negotiator as soon as possible. The new personal envoy turned out to be a high profile European political figure with a background in banking and finance from a country that had traditionally been less visible within the geopolitics of the Western Sahara conflict: Horst Köhler, a former German president and ex-head of the IMF. Köhler would in fact resign less than two years after his August 2017 appointment, officially for health reasons. It seems as if he had taken on the task without understanding the depths of the political impasse, particularly the extent to which Morocco had no intention of abiding by over a decade of Security Council resolutions calling for good-faith negotiations on a final status agreement that could satisfy Western Sahara's right to self-determination. Indeed, Morocco continued to double down on its various insistences that the only other party to the dispute was Algeria, that MINURSO's sole function was cease-fire monitoring, and that negotiations could only proceed under the assumption that Western Sahara belonged to Morocco. In recent years, Polisario had seemingly adopted an equally recalcitrant position: references to Polisario's 2007 final status guarantees and the 2003 Baker Plan were fewer as officials with the nationalist movement increasingly called on the United Nations to implement the 1991 Settlement Plan—i.e., a referendum on independence—as soon as possible.

There were also no apparent alterations to the geopolitical context of the Western Sahara conflict to suggest that Köhler would be able to resurrect the moribund peace process. The respective leaders of the governments representing the Group of Friends—Russia,

the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and Spain—had evidenced little change in their thinking on the matter. That said, the incoming Donald J. Trump administration in Washington was an enigma for both Morocco and Polisario, though Rabat had clearly hedged its bets in favor of his opponent, Hillary Clinton, an old friend of the Moroccan monarchy. The kingdom's lobbyists in Washington had in fact developed a close working relationship with Clinton when she was secretary of state and they later donated to her 2016 presidential campaign. When she was replaced by Kerry in 2012, who had previously gone on record in support of Western Saharan self-determination, the Moroccan foreign ministry did not hide its disappointment: "It is clear that with the departure of Ms. Clinton, Morocco loses an ally who will be difficult to replace" (quoted in the *Intercept*, Apr. 22, 2015). The Moroccan regime's ties to the Clintons nonetheless grew even deeper following Hillary Clinton's departure from the Obama administration. Among the various minor scandals that plagued her 2016 run for the White House, there were last-minute revelations from the WikiLeaks website that the Moroccan monarchy had donated \$12 million to the Clinton Foundation and the Clinton Global Initiative in exchange for Hillary Clinton's presence at a Clinton Foundation event being organized in Marrakesh in 2015, though former President Bill Clinton and their daughter, Chelsea, went in the former secretary's place. As much as \$5 million of these donations were from the Moroccan state phosphate company, the OCP Group (formerly the Office Chérifien des Phosphates), the firm responsible for the illegal extraction and exportation of Western Saharan phosphates (the *Atlantic*, Oct. 22, 2016; see also *Politico*, Apr. 8, 2015). A longtime supporter of Polisario in the U.S. House of Representatives, Joe Pitts of Pennsylvania, denounced the fact that the Clinton Foundation had accepted donations from a corporation involved in the illegal exploitation of what he termed "blood phosphates." Both Pitts, then chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the House of Representatives, and Representative Christopher Smith of New Jersey, a senior member of the House's Foreign Affairs committee, sent a letter to the Clinton Foundation calling on it to return any donations from OCP and to discontinue collaborating with a company whose activities in Western Sahara were in clear violation of international law (*Al-Monitor*, Apr. 10, 2015).

Given the vindictive nature of Trump's approach to business and politics, it was not unthinkable that his administration would view with some disdain the Moroccan monarchy's deep ties to the Clintons and its overt support for Hillary's 2016 presidential campaign. Officials in Rabat were indeed disturbed by the fact that the Trump administration waited almost a year before picking an ambassador to Morocco, and that the nominee, David Fischer, an automobile sales executive and major donor to the Trump campaign with no diplomatic experience, was only confirmed by the Senate in December 2019. Mohammed VI's early efforts to approach the Trump administration through the graces of the Saudi monarchy were initially rebuffed as ham-fisted. Rabat then experienced increasing tensions with the Saudis from mid-2017 onward. Though Morocco had contributed some

of its fleet of F-16 fighters in 2015 to the Saudi monarchy's brutal military intervention in the Yemeni civil war, Rabat attempted to maintain strong ties with Qatar during Saudi Arabia's campaign to isolate Doha diplomatically and economically. Morocco's ongoing relationship with Qatar came up against the increasingly aggressive and often brazen leadership of Saudi crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, which sought to counter Qatar's pursuit of a foreign policy independent of Saudi efforts to build a regional coalition against Iran and to assert monarchical hegemony across the Middle East. Saudi displeasure with Morocco reached its peak in February 2019 when Al-Arabiya, a Saudi state-sponsored Arabic satellite channel, was allowed to broadcast a documentary on Western Sahara that was highly critical of Morocco's occupation (Middle East Institute, Mar. 5, 2019).

Meanwhile, support for Western Saharan self-determination among some elements of the conservative establishment in the United States, including the powerful Republican senator Jim Inhofe from Oklahoma and soon-to-be National Security Advisor John Bolton, also represented possible pathways for Polisario to forge better relations with the new administration in the White House. Morocco's desperation to get Trump's attention and to mend fences with Saudi Arabia—without damaging ties with Qatar—was perhaps best exemplified when Rabat staged a break in relations with Tehran. On May 1, 2018, Morocco issued factually baseless and logically preposterous allegations that the militant Lebanese Shia organization Hezbollah had been training Polisario fighters in Algeria for over two years with Iranian backing (Reuters, May 1, 2018). Morocco's claim, which was roundly denied by all the accused and ridiculed by knowledgeable observers, came seven days before Trump formally withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the EU-UN treaty that aimed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Morocco's allegations were also made a few weeks after the United States pushed through a contentious Security Council resolution on Western Sahara, one that clearly aimed to put pressure on Morocco and Polisario to resume negotiations and find a solution, or otherwise face the withdrawal of MINURSO.

Morocco also made good use of arms purchases in an attempt to woo the Trump White House and to align itself with Washington's new foreign policy priorities. The Trump campaign had won office promising a radically different foreign policy from his two predecessors, a policy that would allegedly question the logic of America's enduring military commitments and wasteful arms spending. As soon as his administration came to office, however, Trump quickly opened the Congressional floodgates for even more profligate military outlays, reversing the Obama administration's efforts to moderate Pentagon budgets after years of growth during the first decade of the Global War on Terror. Nor did the Trump administration take any drastic actions to curtail direct U.S. involvement in conflicts around the globe. The new U.S. president more or less accelerated Obama-era trends in U.S. strategy, though the Trump administration's threat inflation vis-à-vis China seemingly knew no boundaries. Otherwise, America's post-Iraq War foreign policy

mirrored that of its post-Vietnam predecessor: the Nixon Doctrine. Given widespread and bipartisan opposition to the use of enduring expeditionary force for so-called “forever wars,” especially in the Middle East, the Trump administration pivoted toward outsourcing security to traditional allies and regional proxies who would then be heavily armed by sophisticated U.S. weaponry while simultaneously enriching American arms manufacturers and slightly easing the trade deficit.

Unsurprisingly, the Middle East and North Africa absorbed the lion’s share of U.S. arms exports under the Trump administration, reaching levels not seen for nearly a decade. In this context, Morocco became the region’s leading procurer of U.S. arms in 2019, inking over \$10 billion in deals to acquire new Lockheed F-16 jets and Boeing AH-64 “Apache” helicopters (*Forbes*, Dec. 16, 2019). The following year, one that would prove critical in U.S.-Moroccan relations, Rabat sought to purchase an additional \$1 billion in arms, including advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (Reuters, December 10 and 11, 2020). Deals like this were highly lucrative for the U.S. government and American arms companies because they locked Morocco into a dependent relationship: sophisticated weapons systems of these types, though often irrelevant to the contemporary battlefield, would nonetheless require ongoing parts, maintenance, and training that only the Pentagon and U.S. manufacturers could provide. Further reinforcing these arrangements was a ten-year military cooperation agreement reached between the United States and Morocco in October 2020 (Associated Press, Oct. 2, 2020).

For Morocco, this military dependency was mutually beneficial: such a large commitment to purchase U.S. weapons systems would not only raise Rabat’s security profile in the White House, but it would also give Morocco significant leverage, especially in Congress and the Pentagon, leverage that had helped Morocco head off challenges during the Obama administration. And while such weaponry would have clear uses against Polisario forces in a new guerrilla war in Western Sahara, the official justification for Morocco’s increased arms imports was to counter Algeria. As oil prices climbed during the first decade of the new century, Algeria used the ensuing revenue windfall to upgrade and modernize its armed forces after years of low petroleum revenues and international isolation in the 1990s. Between 2009 and 2019, Algiers imported over \$10 billion in arms, more than double Morocco’s \$4.5 billion confirmed military imports during the same period (SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, accessed Aug. 2020).

Indeed, the timing of these purchases in 2019, like Morocco’s allegations of Polisario collaboration with Iran in 2018, coincided with growing pressure from the United States to restart the negotiation process. On April 27, 2018, just a few weeks after Bolton’s White House appointment as Trump’s third national security advisor, the United States pushed through a Security Council resolution (2414) that contained two new provocative features. First of all, it limited MINURSO’s mandate to six months rather than the long-standing norm of one year. Second, and more importantly, the resolution called for the “strategic

focus of MINURSO” and the “resources of the United Nations” to be redirected “toward a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution to the question of Western Sahara based on compromise.” In response to these changes in MINURSO’s mandate, Ethiopia, Russia, and China abstained, citing a lack of transparency in the resolution drafting process, a refusal to consider amendments, and an unbalanced final text. At the same time, the resolution also received support from both supporters of Polisario (e.g., Bolivia) and Morocco (e.g., Côte d’Ivoire), while Russia was the only member of the Group of Friends to voice dissent. As Moscow pointed out, an ambiguous language of “practicable” (i.e., “the need to make progress toward a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution to the question of Western Sahara based on compromise”) had been added to the resolution. On the one hand, this new language resonated with certain of the council members’ long-standing support for Morocco’s autonomy proposal as “serious and credible,” as well as other council members’ endorsements of it as “realistic,” most notably the United States since 2011. On the other hand, as Russia argued, this language of “practicable” and “realism” suggested a shift in the mission’s long-standing mandate to hold a referendum on independence given Resolution 2414’s emphasis on “the importance of aligning the strategic focus of MINURSO and orienting resources of the United Nations to this end”—“this end” being “a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution” (see UN doc. S/PV.8246).

Though the alleged opacity of the drafting process was not enough to push Russia and China to veto the resolution, it did raise questions about Washington’s intentions in Western Sahara. A possible indication of a new policy could be found in the official U.S. justification for the resolution, as it positively cited Bolton’s 2007 memoir from his time as the U.S. representative to the United Nations in 2005 and 2006 when Bolton last confronted the Western Sahara issue as a senior White House official. Secondly, the U.S. representative to the United Nations highlighted the demonstrable lack of movement in the Western Saharan peace process since then to suggest that “It is time to see progress toward a political solution and, after 27 years, to stop perpetuating the status quo.” “Should that fail,” the same U.S. delegate nonetheless warned, “we will then need to take a hard look at our work and our responsibilities when the Mission again comes up for renewal in six months” (UN doc. S/PV.8246, pp. 2–3).

The significance of this moment was perhaps easy to miss. For the first time in the history of MINURSO, a permanent member of the Security Council seemed willing to use their veto power to bring the conflict to quick resolution. In the nearly two decades since Morocco abandoned its commitment to allow a UN referendum on independence, one of the only mechanisms by which the Council could meaningfully exert pressure on the parties under Chapter VI of the UN Charter—that is, when sanctions or other forms of UN authorized coercive intervention are not an option—was to threaten the termination of MINURSO. Given the appearance of peace and stability provided by the presence of

UN peacekeepers in Western Sahara since the early 1990s, MINURSO had become part of a status quo that few, if any, stakeholders in the conflict seriously questioned, the Security Council's Group of Friends above all others. For the UN Secretariat, MINURSO had become part of a global constellation of effectively permanent—and permanently ineffective—UN missions whose primary function was to help justify the bureaucratic largesse and *raison d'être* of UN peacekeeping in the first place.

For different reasons, Morocco and Polisario had likewise come to depend on the continued existence of MINURSO, even if they regularly broadcast signals to the contrary. Morocco had originally viewed the UN mission as an unwelcome international intervention, one that Rabat begrudgingly accepted insofar as it could be manipulated to legitimate its annexation of Western Sahara by rigging the outcome of the original referendum process in the 1990s. Since then, MINURSO's peacekeeping functions have provided vital international cover for Rabat's ongoing colonization effort in Western Sahara, while never-ending rounds of fruitless negotiations created the illusion of diplomatic progress. The silence of the United Nations on Rabat's long-standing effort to create infrastructural and demographic facts on the ground, in clear violation of the Geneva Conventions, meant that MINURSO was effectively complicit in Rabat's project to make Western Sahara socially, politically, and economically inseparable from Morocco. For the Western Saharan nationalist movement, UN intervention had been the "superman" they had long hoped would come rebalance the scales of power and ultimately force Morocco out of the territory. Even as hopes for a referendum slowly diminished after the Security Council refused to impose either the 1997 Houston Accords or the 2003 Baker Plan, the presence of MINURSO in Western Sahara has always represented a powerful international reminder that the sovereign status of territory is in fact undetermined in the eyes of the United Nations.

The parties' and the Security Council's dependency on MINURSO had become an important pressure point. Exploiting it, however, would mean entering into a high-risk game of chicken. This strategy could also backfire were Morocco or Polisario to call the council's bluff, as Rabat did in 2004 vis-à-vis Baker and his Peace Plan or Polisario vis-à-vis Van Walsum and his call for a political solution without an independence option. In both cases, Morocco and Polisario's assertions of veto power over the entire peace process went without reprimand, as did the constant impediments and disruptions Morocco threw in the way of Ross over the course of his entire eight-year tenure as personal envoy. For this reason, coupled with the limitation of MINURSO's mandate under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, no previous UN envoy, special representative, secretary-general, or member of the Security Council had called for MINURSO to be terminated in the face of the ongoing Morocco-Polisario diplomatic impasse, whether that impasse was in relation to voter identification in the 1990s or the search for a negotiated political solution—the "third way"—from 2000 onward. Even Baker, known as a tough negotiator, never once

presented this as an option to the Security Council; at most, he recommended to the council a suspension of the political process, as one of four options, until the parties willingly came back to the secretary-general in the spirit of mutual compromise. Prior to Baker's appointment, the Security Council had only gone as far as to suspend the voter identification process in the mid-1990s in order to send a signal to Polisario and Morocco that they needed to work out their differences on the question of voter enfranchisement (see chapter 8).

There were also a number of reasons why Bolton would be willing to steer U.S. policy toward such high stakes brinksmanship on an issue as seemingly marginal as a forgotten UN mission like MINURSO and a frozen conflict like Western Sahara. Bolton not only had a historical connection to the issue of Western Sahara dating back to the mission's inception and the Houston Accords (see chapters 8 and 9), he also harbors a well-known antipathy toward the United Nations in general and a long-standing critique of the organization's tendency toward "mission creep" in particular. As seen in the controversial passage of Security Council resolutions on Western Sahara in 2018 and 2019, the U.S. delegation seemed quite willing to move ahead without consensus for the first time since 2000, even at the expense of alienating a traditional member of the Group of Friends, Russia. This new approach nonetheless seemed to have its desired effect when it came to sparking a new round of negotiations, and Bolton suggested as much in a speech at the Heritage Foundation in December 2018 as he unveiled the Trump administration's new policies toward Africa. By the time MINURSO came up for renewal in October 2018, Köhler had secured commitments from Rabat and Polisario, along with Mauritania and Algeria, to roundtable meetings in Geneva in December and then again in March 2019. To reduce tensions, Polisario halted plans to relocate more RASD government functions to Bir Lahlou and Tifariti, a move that Morocco had repeatedly threatened to counter with military intervention in recent years. Polisario also withdrew its "civilian" security presence near the primary Western Sahara-Mauritanian border crossing at Guerguerat. Even then, Guerguerat's transformation into a critical economic, political, and military flash-point was again highlighted by the self-immolation of a Sahrawi youth activist, Ahmed Salem Laroussi, on February 3, following his two-week sit-in protest against Moroccan border controls that he accused of discriminating against Sahrawi merchants.

With heightened pressure coming from the Security Council amid increasing tensions inside the territory, Morocco and Polisario finally met face to face in December 2018 for the first time in six years under UN auspices. The Sahrawi negotiating team was reflective of the high-level losses within the movement in recent years, with RASD speaker of the parliament Khatri Addouh and UN representative Sidi Omar respectively filling the shoes of Mahfoud Ali Beiba and Ahmed Boukhari. They were joined by Khadadd (as UN coordinator), Fatima Al-Mahdi (president of the National Women's Union), and Mohamed Ali Zerouali (an advisor to Polisario's national secretariat). Morocco's delegation was headed

by Bourita, a protégé of royal advisor Fassi Fihri who was promoted to Foreign Minister in 2017, along with UN representative Omar Hilale. Provocatively, the Moroccan delegation also included Sahrawi collaborators, as had been the case in previous rounds. Köhler's choice of a roundtable format likewise played to Moroccan efforts to portray Algeria as an equal party to the conflict. Following the first introductory meeting, Bourita reiterated Morocco's position that a "referendum is not on the agenda," but that Western Sahara could satisfy its right to self-determination "by negotiation" (quoted in Reuters, Dec. 6, 2018). Following the second round in March 2019, Bourita went so far as to make the legally nonsensical statement that Western Sahara could achieve self-determination so long as there was no discussion of a "referendum" or "independence" (quoted in Reuters, Mar. 22, 2019).

Tellingly, the secretary-general's account of the March 2019 meeting in Geneva was very light on details, apart from conveying the parties' willingness to continue face-to-face talks. In reality, Moroccan officials, working hand in hand with the French government, were already seeking to undermine Köhler's effort to reach an agreement in a timely manner. Ahead of the second Geneva meeting, Köhler had invited the parties to meet him individually in Berlin in February 2019 to help lay the groundwork for a productive round of talks grounded in a discussion of concrete technical matters—the kind of discussions that had been almost entirely absent from the Western Sahara peace process since 1997. While Polisario accepted the offer, Rabat instead asked Köhler to meet its negotiators at the Moroccan embassy in Paris. And while Köhler received high-level American support, particularly from the fourth most senior official in the U.S. State Department, David Hale, the undersecretary for political affairs, Köhler was never invited to meet French government officials of equally senior standing. There was also an opportunity for Morocco to take advantage of the growing political turmoil in Algeria as the weekly street protests against the Bouteflika regime escalated. Indeed, Algeria's foreign minister, Abdelkader Messahel, who had been present at the first round of Morocco-Polisario talks in 2018, was sacked in a government reshuffle in mid-March 2019, with Ramtane Lamamra briefly replacing him for the second round of talks before he was also replaced at the end of the month.

By the time Morocco and Polisario finally met for the second round of talks in Geneva on March 21 and 22, 2019, Bourita no longer felt compelled to treat the new personal envoy deferentially, accusing Köhler of rushing the peace process in an explosion of anger that led to a tense exchange between the Moroccan foreign minister and the former German president. Morocco's growing discomfort with the new round of talks was rooted not only in the pressure coming from the personal envoy and Washington, but also in Köhler's apparent unwillingness to impose Rabat's 2007 autonomy proposal as the parameter of the negotiations. Moreover, indications suggested that Köhler would soon put forward his own bridging proposals, if not a framework for a comprehensive agreement, at the

proposed third round of talks to be held in the summer of 2019. As had been the case with the previous envoy, the tabling of a new UN plan would effectively undermine Morocco's twelve-year effort to present its 2007 autonomy proposal as the only possible solution to the conflict. What little comfort Rabat could derive from the new Security Council language calling for "a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution to the question of Western Sahara based on compromise"—language imposed by the United States and supported by France—had to be tempered by the fact that "compromise" is a two-way street (see UN doc. S/2019/2468).

Given that the UN Secretariat and Council publicly refused to acknowledge and address the growing tensions between Morocco and the new personal envoy, Köhler's sudden resignation on May 22, 2019, ostensibly for health reasons, came as a surprise to many. Few believed that Köhler's rationale was the entire story, and the unwillingness of the Security Council and Secretariat to take Morocco to task for its increasingly obstructionist behavior was likely a factor in his decision, as had been the case with Baker and Ross before him. Polisario soon responded in the ensuing months with increasingly bellicose rhetoric. Both President Ghali and RASD Prime Minister Mohamed Al-Wali Akeik described war as likely, if not "inevitable." Polisario also declared its intent to review its ongoing commitment to working with the United Nations and its adherence to the 1991 cease-fire. High level U.S. interest in the Western Sahara issue likewise dissipated soon after Köhler's resignation. National Security Advisor Bolton was removed from the Trump administration on September 10, 2019, and, without such backing from the White House and with no peace process to speak of, Undersecretary Hale quickly downgraded State Department involvement. Meanwhile, as noted above, Morocco had embarked upon a U.S. arms buying spree in 2019 and 2020, one that would pay handsome dividends in the final weeks of the Trump administration. When the Security Council returned to MINURSO at the end of October 2019, the mission's mandate reverted to a twelve-month cycle. By the time that mandate came up for renewal in October 2020, the Secretariat had yet to install a new envoy, thus marking the longest absence of a UN mediator to lead the Western Sahara peace process in over two decades.

RETURN TO WARFARE AND WASHINGTON'S RECOGNITION

Nearly fifty years after the founding of Polisario and almost thirty years after the creation of MINURSO, the Western Saharan independence movement found itself at a critical juncture in the waning days of 2020. On November 13, Polisario finally made good on its threat to end its commitment to the 1991 UN cease-fire by launching attacks against Moroccan military positions along and near the berms in the occupied Western Sahara. As noted previously, tensions had been mounting around the Guerguerat border crossing for several years, though particularly in the lead-up to the UN Security Council's renewal

of MINURSO at the end of October. An ongoing Sahrawi civilian protest, launched in mid-October, was blocking all commercial traffic from leaving or entering the occupied Western Sahara. Their goal was first to draw attention to Rabat's ongoing exploitation of the territory's natural resources. Secondly, the demonstrators, drawn largely from the refugee camps, also sought to highlight the extent to which Morocco's plans to ease the passage across the frontier through new roadworks would constitute violations of the UN cease-fire agreements and RASD sovereignty. As the protest continued into early November, the economic cost, particularly to wasted agricultural and fisheries products, began to accumulate as trucks queued up for miles on either side of the Guerguerat crossing. Deeming the situation intolerable, the Moroccan government declared its intent to remove the protestors by military force if they did not voluntarily withdraw. Polisario responded to these threats by issuing an ultimatum of its own: were Moroccan forces to cross into the UN buffer zone, Polisario would consider the cease-fire void and Sahrawi forces would respond accordingly. As had been the case for several years, the Security Council simply restated its ritual call on the parties to adhere to the cease-fire and their military agreements with MINURSO.

Few should have been surprised by such bellicose rhetoric coming from the Sahrawi independence movement. For years, voices in the camps, and increasingly inside the occupied territory, had been clamoring for a return to armed struggle, particularly young Sahrawis born after the 1991 cease-fire. In the face of the United Nations' unwillingness to confront Morocco's efforts to stall and subvert the peace process following the Council's abandonment of the Houston Accords in 2000 and Baker's Peace Plan in 2006, the arguments for a return to war increasingly gained credibility among the nationalist movement, as witnessed in Polisario's national congresses of 2011 (Thirteenth), 2015 (Fourteenth), 2016 (extraordinary, to elect a new secretary-general and RASD president), and 2019 (Fifteenth). From the camps, Sahrawi refugees had witnessed Morocco's brutal quelling of the once vibrant nonviolent civil resistance within the occupied territory through the intensification of Moroccan forces' security presence coupled with constant surveillance of Sahrawi civil society figures and an increased prohibition on foreign monitoring, especially MINURSO. The ongoing imprisonment of key Sahrawi activist leaders, like the nineteen members of the Gdaym Izik group, also helped to prevent a repeat of events like the 2005 Sahrawi Intifada or the 2010 Gdaym Izik protest camp. Within Polisario itself, there was also the passing of important leaders who had put their faith in the UN process, from President Abdelaziz to Emhamed Khadad and Ahmed Boukhari. Thus, when a Moroccan military detachment illegally crossed into the UN buffer zone and RASD territory in order to expel the Sahrawi protestors on November 13, 2020, Polisario considered itself no longer bound by the UN cease-fire. In taking such a bold move, Polisario leaders well understood that they ran the risk of jeopardizing what sympathy they had in places like London, Washington, Paris, and even Madrid, as a new war in Western Sahara would only

contribute to the fears of wider instability and insecurity that had framed North Atlantic policy toward North Africa and the Sahara-Sahel since at least 2001. That Polisario resumed armed operations against Morocco nonetheless was suggestive of the profoundly broken state of the UN peace process, yet these attacks did little to spur greater international interest in the issue, even within the Security Council.

What did bring the Western Sahara conflict to unprecedented levels of international scrutiny was the outgoing Trump administration's sudden decision on December 10 to recognize Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara. In an apparent quid pro quo, one that Moroccan officials were quick to deny, Rabat joined the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan by offering to normalize relations with Israel. Washington, in exchange, would break with forty-five years of U.S. policy toward Western Sahara by offering full U.S. recognition of Morocco's attempted annexation of the contested territory. While the United Arab Emirates and a few small African states had previously implied recognition by opening up consulates in occupied Western Sahara, Trump's proclamation, issued a mere six weeks before leaving office, was nonetheless the most explicit recognition given to Morocco's illegal attempt to annex Western Sahara by any government. Though the Trump administration had also taken the unprecedented step of recognizing Israeli sovereignty over Syrian territory in the Golan Heights in March 2019, this was a far cry from legitimizing the wholesale annexation of an entire country by another. As critics quickly pointed out, this move, were it allowed to stand, would obliterate any pretense of U.S. neutrality on the question of Western Sahara's final status. It not only endorsed the conquest of one recognized African state by another, thereby putting U.S. relations with the African Union in legal and political jeopardy, but it also established an ugly precedent that other governments could cite in their efforts to expand their national territory through coercive means.

The White House's recognition of Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara also further imperiled a peace process already in tatters. As with other impactful yet ill-conceived decisions of the Trump administration in international matters, particularly those taken in its frantic final weeks, traditional procedures for revising foreign policy had been entirely circumvented by a small clique of figures and family members close to Trump. Credible reports of an Israeli initiative to strike such a deal with Morocco and the Trump administration first appeared in early 2020 (see, e.g., *Middle East Eye*, Feb. 4, 2020), though these reports were easy to dismiss given the moderating role played by the State Department and U.S. Senate. When viewed from the perspective of America's long-standing support for the Moroccan regime, however, Trump's proclamation seemed like a distinction without a difference. As with United States policy vis-à-vis Israel in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, Morocco's similarly illegal presence in Western Sahara has benefited from strong bipartisan backing through providing unconditional arms transfers

to reinforce the occupation, to limit UN involvement in the conflict, and to insist on a negotiated political solution without addressing the steep asymmetry of power between the occupier and the occupied. Where Trump's proclamation broke with forty-five years of U.S. policy toward Western Sahara was its flagrant disregard for the dangerous legal precedent that formal recognition would set in terms of Morocco's blatant violation of the international order established after World War II, as well as the fact that it would only make the conflict more difficult to resolve by further marginalizing the Western Saharan independence movement while robbing U.S. policy of the most important incentive Washington could offer either Morocco or Polisario—sovereign recognition.

Blindsided by the decision, senior officials in the State Department suggested that the U.S. could simultaneously recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and continue to push within the United Nations for a negotiated political solution that would provide for self-determination. Arguments such as this implied that the United States was still willing to derecognize Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara should negotiations lead to that outcome, but they also failed to recognize the extent to which Trump's proclamation would embolden Rabat to reject any peace initiative that was not premised on Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Over a decade of bipartisan U.S. support for Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal as "serious, realistic, and credible" had only served to justify Rabat's campaign to stall and subvert negotiations with Polisario since 2009. Going well beyond the Bush and Obama administrations' encouragement of the Moroccan autonomy plan as one viable option toward a peace settlement, Trump's Western Sahara proclamation reframed Morocco's 2007 proposal as "the *only* basis for a just and lasting solution" (*Federal Register*, Dec. 14, 2020; emphasis added). This new policy thus put the United States at odds with over a decade of Security Council resolutions that Washington had drafted and supported. In so recognizing Morocco's claim on Western Sahara, the Trump administration had seemingly driven the final nail into the coffin of the UN peace process.

In the weeks that followed Trump's proclamation, several Western countries and the United Nations were forced to reaffirm their neutrality on the question of Western Sahara, and even France, Morocco's most important ally, refrained from likewise offering to recognize Morocco's claim. Secretary-General Guterres quickly reaffirmed that "the solution of Western Sahara does not depend on recognitions by individual States," but rather on "the implementation of Security Council resolutions" (Press Conference, Dec. 12, 2020, UN doc. SG/SM/20499). Germany, having called for a UN Security Council meeting on recent developments in Western Sahara, questioned whether or not the United States could continue to serve as the "penholder" (i.e., the drafter of council resolutions on an issue as the head of the Friends Group for Western Sahara). Such a role, the German delegation explained, "has to come with a strong commitment to resolve an issue, it has to be

equitable, it has to be evenhanded, it has to have a legitimate interest of all parties in mind and it has to act within the framework of international law” (Statement by Ambassador Christoph Heusgen, Dec. 22, 2020).

Both Americans who served as UN personal envoys to Western Sahara, James Baker and Christopher Ross, broke their silence and criticized Trump’s move as entirely inconsistent with the search for peace and foundational American values. Bolton and other former senior U.S. officials did so as well. In Congress, even some of Israel’s strongest supporters, such as Senate Armed Services Committee chair Inhofe, a Republican, and House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Eliot Engel, a Democrat, criticized the dangerous precedent set by President Trump in recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, one of the very few times since the signing of the United Nations Charter that any government has formally recognized one country’s attempt to expand its territory through the forceful annexation of another country.

With the world’s most powerful nation recognizing Morocco’s attempt to annex Western Sahara illegally, the Security Council refusing to pressure Rabat to respect Western Sahara’s right to self-determination, the diplomatic process going nowhere in the absence of a UN mediator for nearly two years, the continued Moroccan colonization of the occupied territory and rapacious exploitations of its natural resources, the improbability that a resumption of Polisario’s armed struggle would alter the strategic balance, and the obstacles faced by a nonviolent movement where the indigenous population is badly outnumbered by settlers, the prospects for a just and peaceful resolution to the Western Sahara conflict were even dimmer in 2021 than they had been at the start of the decade.