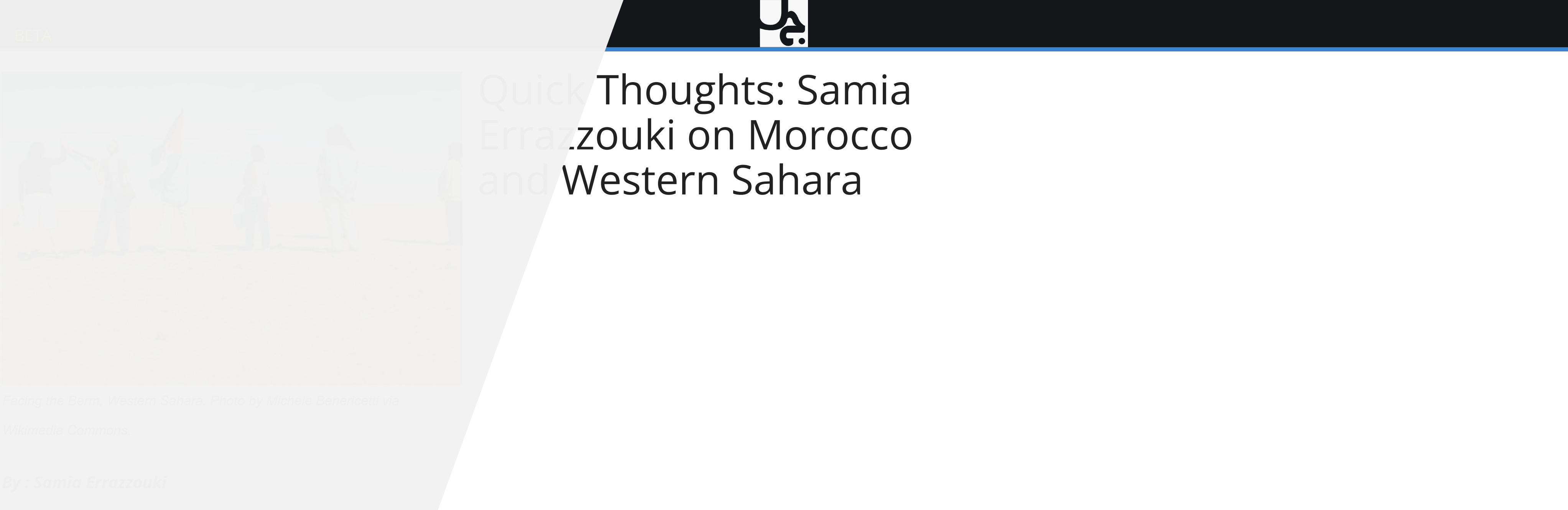




Quick Thoughts: Samia Errazzouki on Morocco and Western Sahara

Photo by Samia Errazzouki. Photo by Samia Errazzouki.

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On 10 December 2020, the United States announced that Morocco and Israel had reached an agreement to normalize their relations, which was followed on 22 December by a joint Moroccan-Israeli declaration confirming the specifics of their upgraded relationship. Simultaneously, Washington recognized Morocco's internationally-rejected claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara. The latter initiative came as the ceasefire between Western Sahara between Morocco and the Polisario Front, in force since 1991, collapsed into renewed hostilities. Mouin Rabbani, editor of Quick Thoughts and Jadaliyya Co-Editor, interviewed Samia Errazzouki, Jadaliyya Co-Editor and former Morocco-based journalist, to get a better understanding of the context and implications of these developments.

Mouin Rabbani (MR): Why did the ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario, in force since the early 1990s, break down in late 2020?

Samia Errazzouki (SE): The roots of last year's ceasefire breakdown can be traced back to August 2016, when Morocco sent armed forces to Guerguerat, an area considered a buffer strip between the southern part of Western Sahara and the Mauritanian border. According to Moroccan officials, these forces were deployed for a "road-clearing operation," but the [United Nations](#) considered the action a violation of the ceasefire. In response to the Moroccan armed presence in Guerguerat, the Polisario Front mobilized its forces just meters away, prompting an armed standoff. The standoff, which was the closest the two sides have ever come to armed hostilities since 1991, came to a brief end in February 2017 following [calls](#) with United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres.

The year's demonstrations in support of the Polisario Front staged a protest in Guerguerat, blocking the circulation of traffic in the area, which is a key point of transit for commerce between Morocco and West Africa. In response to the demonstration, which lasted several weeks, the Moroccan army carried out operations to clear out the protest, claiming that the demonstrators were harassing UN peacekeeping troops, which the [UN denied](#). It was in response to these Moroccan military operations that the Polisario Front officially [declared](#) an end to the ceasefire. Thus far, both sides have claimed victories and losses. Due to the significant reductions to the UN peacekeeping operation, known as [MINURSO](#), and the Moroccan military's tight control over access to Western Sahara, it has been difficult for independent organizations and journalists to verify these reports.

MR: To what extent is the Moroccan claims over Western Sahara a factor in Rabat's normalization agreement with Israel?

As far as I know, as [February 2020](#), reports had been circulating that the United States was considering recognizing Morocco's claims over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco normalizing ties with Israel. Despite numerous statements from Moroccan officials denying the reports, they turned out to be accurate. The first signal in this respect was when the United Arab Emirates (UAE) became the first foreign power to [open](#) a consulate in the Western Saharan town of Laayoune, which amounted to de facto recognition of Morocco's claims over the territory. The UAE's announcement came in September 2020, one [month](#) after it had along with Bahrain normalized ties with Israel.

Even when we now know, all indications suggest that the United States' recognition of Morocco's claims over Western Sahara was transactional, and provided in exchange for Morocco normalizing ties with Israel. There are, however, some noteworthy nuances. The US recognition came in the form of a tweet from Donald Trump. Unlike the formal signing of the "Abraham Accords" between the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, there has been no concrete legal instrument or institutional act confirming Trump's decision. While there was a considerable amount of bipartisan congressional support for the "Abraham Accords," along with diplomatic scaffolding from the State Department, Democrats and Republicans alike vocally opposed Trump's decision with respect to Western Sahara. Ironically, one of the most critical voices came from within Trump's Republican Party, namely Senator [Jim Inhofe](#), who also serves as the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Even former Trump's former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, penned an opinion piece in [Foreign Policy](#) condemning Trump's decision and urging President Biden to reverse it.

It is also worth noting that prior to the normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel, both countries had long maintained and benefited from warm and friendly ties dating back to the reign of King Hassan II. The Mossad notoriously helped King Hassan II carry out the [assassination](#) and disappearance of nationalist and leftist leader Mehdi Ben Barka in 1965. It has also been widely reported that Hassan II bugged an Arab League summit held in Casablanca in 1965, and provided the transcripts to Israel, which some have [argued](#) was critical in assisting Israel's victory in the 1967 War. Moroccan and Israelis have long been able to freely travel [back and forth](#), especially since Morocco is an important site for Jewish pilgrimages. So in many respects, the normalization of ties between Morocco and Israel was a simple and minor formality.

MR: What is the Biden administration's position on the Trump commitments to Morocco regarding Western Sahara?

SE: So far, the Biden administration has deflected any and all questions about whether or not it will uphold Trump's move. In response to a question on the matter during a [press conference](#) on 22 February, State Department spokesperson Ned Price stated: "I don't have any updates for you." A few days prior, on 17 February, a bipartisan group of senators addressed a [letter](#) to the Biden administration urging him to reverse Trump's decision. It stated: "We respectfully urge you to reverse this misguided decision and recommit the United States to the pursuit of a referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara." The letter goes on to argue that, "The United States owes it to the Sahrawi people to honor our commitment, to help ensure the Moroccans live up to theirs, and to see this referendum through. The Sahrawi people deserve the right to freely choose their own destiny. We hope that we can count on you to be a partner in this effort."

It goes without saying that the Biden administration is under a significant amount of pressure from both sides of the aisle, including some of the most staunchly pro-Israel voices in the Senate, who appear to reject the transactional nature of Trump's decision. Biden will also have to contend with the reality that other major world powers, spanning from the European Union to Russia and China, have not followed Trump's lead in recognizing Morocco's claims over Western Sahara. Should Biden uphold Trump's decision, it would leave the United States isolated diplomatically at a time when the Biden administration has been trying to pull the United States back into the international fold.

MR: How have Polisario and Algeria responded to the US initiative?

SE: Both the Polisario Front and Algeria have [rejected](#) Trump's move. Since November, the Polisario Front [claims](#) to have carried out a number of military operations against Moroccan posts, resulting in a number of casualties, but Morocco has denied this. The tight restrictions around press coverage in Morocco and Western Sahara has made it difficult for foreign media to investigate these reports. There have also been numerous [reports](#) of Moroccan authorities cracking down on Sahrawis protesting in Laayoune. Meanwhile, in Rabat, authorities [prevented](#) protests called to express rejection of Morocco normalizing ties with Israel. Activists, including [Sion Assidon](#), a Moroccan-Jewish anti-Zionist activist and founding member of Morocco's Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, have also been on the frontlines speaking out against the decision.

For the most part, it appears that the international community is waiting to see what steps the Biden administration will take. As of the end of February, there has yet to be an official phone call between Biden and King Mohammed VI, nor has there been any news of a call between Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Moroccan foreign minister Nasser Bourita. Morocco has always touted itself for being the first country to recognize US independence in 1777, and it is usually one of the first countries to congratulate the winner of US presidential elections. On this occasion, however, not only has Morocco yet to issue a statement congratulating Biden for his electoral victory, but on 15 January of this year, it [awarded](#) Trump the Order of Muhammad, its highest decoration, just five days before Biden's inauguration and more than a week after Trump's incited the 6 January Capitol insurrection to prevent the final confirmation of Biden's election. Those factors are likely to influence Biden's engagement with Morocco—whenever that ends up happening.