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Morocco underpins diplomatic recognition of Western Sahara with Israel

A total of 28 countries have opened consulates in the former Spanish colony and a dozen European states are looking favorably on Morocco's autonomy proposal



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Dakhla Lighthouse, the former Villa Cisneros, in Western Sahara, in a 2022 image. M. SILVESTRE

Israel's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara has [given Rabat a new diplomatic boost](#) to shore up its administrative control over the former Spanish colony, which is considered a “non-self-governing territory” by the United Nations. The normalization of relations between the two countries was forged two and a half years ago, sponsored by the United States, through the catalyst of a formal declaration of Morocco's authority over the Sahara. Since then, in the last days of the Republican presidency of Donald Trump, 28 African, Arab, and Latin American countries have opened consulates in Laâyoune and Dakhla, and more than a dozen European states, including Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands, are looking favorably on Morocco's proposal for autonomy for the Saharawi territory (of which it controls 80%), as opposed to the case for independence put forward by the Polisario Front (which controls the remaining 20%, according to the United Nations).

After celebrating the “irrevocable” shift on the Sahara announced Monday by Israel as a new diplomatic success, the Moroccan press has been quick to point the finger at France, former colonial power and first country to back the autonomy proposal in 2007, for not going along with the Americans and Israelis in recognizing Moroccan sovereignty. This Tuesday, the [digital portal Hespres](#) anticipated a foreseeable increase in pressure on Paris to declare its position once and for all on “a conflict invented by the Algerian military regime.” Algeria militarily supports the Polisario Front and hosts camps where tens of thousands of Saharawi refugees live in the region of Tindouf, bordering Western Sahara. The Polisario Front's representative to the United Nations, Sidi Mohamed Omar, declared, however, that “France, a permanent member of the Security Council, gives unconditional support to the other party [Morocco].”

A communiqué issued Monday by the Cabinet of the Royal Palace in Rabat announced Israel's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the former Spanish province, which the UN lists among the territories still pending decolonization. King Mohamed VI received a letter from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in which the Israeli government undertook to “reflect in all its acts and documents” Moroccan authority over the Saharawi territory.

Netanyahu also stated to the sovereign of the Alaouite dynasty that, in the framework of the decision on the sovereignty of the Sahara, that the state of Israel anticipates the “opening of a consulate in the city of Dakhla” — formerly Villa Cisneros under the Spanish administration — situated 530 kilometers (329 miles) south of Laâyoune. In December 2020, Washington also pledged to establish consular representation in Western Sahara. Democratic President Joe Biden's administration has not backed out of Trump's decision, but neither has it taken the step of opening a consulate in Dakhla or Laâyoune. U.S. diplomatic sources in Rabat have indicated that this is a measure that is not on the table.

The sustained promotion of its interests in Western Sahara has concentrated the bulk of Rabat's foreign policy, which is also [trying to play its trump card in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#). “There is a dynamic in relations between Israel and some Arab countries [following the signing of the so-called Abraham Accords], including Morocco, which can contribute to giving a new impetus to the peace process,” Palestinian analyst Nadir Mjalli, quoted by the Moroccan agency MAP, states from Cairo.

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen has also asserted that the decision “will strengthen the continuation of cooperation to deepen regional peace and stability.” In recent months, the Moroccan Foreign Ministry has condemned Israel's successive military operations in the Jenin area (northern West Bank), in which dozens of armed Palestinian militants and several civilians have been killed.

The president of the Moroccan Center for Strategic Studies, Mohamed Benhamu, trusts that the turn taken by Israel will have an effect on countries in Europe and America which are in “a grey zone” on the Sahara and which, as he maintains, must adopt “more realistic and pragmatic positions,” according to declarations reported by the state agency MAP. The crux of this foreign policy, which unites the Moroccan political class and wider population in a national cause, was crystallized in a speech delivered by Mohamed VI in August last year, in which he laid down a sharp diplomatic doctrine: “The Sahara issue is the prism through which Morocco observes its international environment, and the measure of the sincerity of the friendship and the effectiveness of the partnerships that the kingdom has established.”

Population and investment flows

Morocco is in Western Sahara to stay. It has controlled the territory after Spain left almost 43 years ago, in the death throes of the dictatorship of General Franco. His regime was threatened by the consequences of the so-called Green March, a mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Moroccans on the desert border instigated by King Hassan II at the end of 1975.

In a census carried out in the Sahara in 1974, the Spanish National Institute of Statistics had registered about 75,000 Saharawis alongside 30,000 Spaniards. Spanish sources familiar with the former colony point out that the [United Nations Mission for the referendum in Western Sahara \(Minurso\)](#) counted some 130,000 potential voters between 1991 and 2007, when drawing up of the census for a planned referendum [to decide on annexation, autonomy, or independence] after the cessation of hostilities in 1991. It was, however, interrupted because of disputes between Morocco and the Polisario. The ceasefire broke down in December 2020, giving way to a semi-covert low-intensity conflict. It is currently estimated that about one million people live in Western Sahara, almost half of them in the Laâyoune area.

Since effectively taking control of the former Spanish colony, Morocco has invested huge sums in the territory. Since 2015, and especially after Trump's declaration of sovereignty, it has launched an economic development and infrastructure program amounting to 77 billion dirhams (more than €7 billion, or \$7.9 billion). These include the 550-kilometer (342-mile) coastal highway to Dakhla, where the €1.14 billion (\$1.28 billion) mega-port Dakhla Atlantic is being built, and a project for a new international airport is taking shape.

The construction of a university hospital complex is also underway in Laâyoune, as well as the expansion of a large vocational training center, which is already attended by students, given scholarships by Rabat, from African countries that have opened consulates in the former Spanish colony. Rabat has invested in infrastructure in the Saharawi territory, while projecting the control it exercises over the territory internationally. It now aspires to establish a venue for the 2030 FIFA World Cup, with a new stadium in Dakhla that meets international competition standards, if its joint bid with Spain and Portugal is successful.

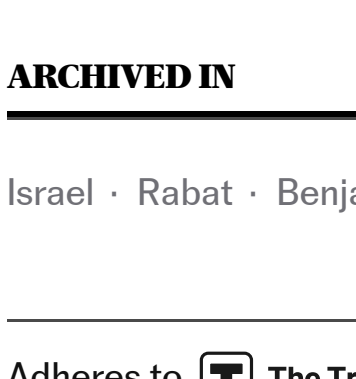
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