

## Trump Recognized Morocco's Illegal Occupation to Boost the Israeli Occupation

*Women wearing face masks carry a Saharan flag and a placard that says Free Sahara during a demonstration to demand the end of Morocco's occupation in Western Sahara on November 21, 2020, in Granada. Fermin Rodriguez / NurPhoto via Getty Images*



**Trump's affirmation of Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara was a reward for Morocco's formal recognition of Israel.**

**Part of the Series: [Struggle and Solidarity: Writing Toward Palestinian Liberation](#)**

On December 10, the United States became the only country to formally recognize Morocco's illegal annexation of Western Sahara, the former Spanish colony forcibly seized by Moroccan forces in 1975. Trump's proclamation is directly counter to a series of UN Security Council resolutions and a landmark World Court ruling calling for self-determination.

Trump's decision was a quid pro quo: a reward for Morocco's formal recognition of Israel, a country which is also an occupying power. Trump had previously broken precedent by recognizing Israel's illegal annexation of Syria's Golan Heights and greater Jerusalem. The U.S. recognition of the annexation of an entire country, which has been recognized as an independent state by no less than 80 countries, is a particularly dangerous precedent. As with his earlier recognition of Israel's conquests, Trump is effectively renouncing longstanding international legal principles in favor of the right of conquest.

And, since Western Sahara is a full member state of the African Union, Trump is essentially endorsing the conquest of one recognized African state by another. It was the prohibition of such territorial conquests enshrined in the UN Charter which the United States insisted had to be upheld by launching the Gulf War in 1991, reversing Iraq's conquest of Kuwait. Now, the United States is essentially saying that an Arab country invading and annexing its small southern neighbor is OK after all.

Trump cites Morocco's "autonomy plan" for the territory as "serious, credible, and realistic" and "the ONLY basis for a just and lasting solution" even though it falls far short of the international legal definition of "autonomy" and in effect would simply continue the occupation. [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#) and other human right groups have documented the Moroccan occupation forces' widespread suppression of peaceful advocates of independence, raising serious questions about what "autonomy" under the kingdom would actually look like.

Western Sahara is a sparsely populated territory about the size of Colorado, located on the Atlantic coast in northwestern Africa just south of Morocco. Traditionally inhabited by nomadic Arab tribes, collectively known as Sahrawis, and famous for their long history of resistance to outside domination, their dialect, dress and

customs are distinct from most Moroccans. Spain occupied the territory beginning in the late 1800s and maintained its rule until the mid-1970s, well over a decade after most African countries had achieved their freedom from European colonialism.

In 1973, the nationalist Polisario Front launched an armed independence struggle against Spain and Madrid eventually promised the people of what was then still known as the Spanish Sahara a referendum on the fate of the territory by the end of 1975. Irredentist claims by Morocco and Mauritania were brought before the International Court of Justice, which [ruled](#) in October of 1975 that — despite pledges of fealty to the Moroccan sultan back in the 19th century by some tribal leaders bordering the territory and close ethnic ties between some Sahrawi and Mauritanian tribes — the right of self-determination was paramount. A special Visiting Mission from the United Nations engaged in an investigation on the situation in the territory that same year and reported that the vast majority of Sahrawis supported independence under the leadership of the Polisario, not integration with Morocco or Mauritania.

During this same period, Morocco was threatening war with Spain over the territory. Though the Spaniards had a much stronger military, they were at that time dealing with the terminal illness of their longtime dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco as well as increasing [pressure from the United States](#), which wanted to back its Moroccan ally King Hassan II and did not want to see the leftist Polisario come to power. As a result, despite its earlier pledge to hold a referendum with the assumption that power would soon thereafter be handed over to the Polisario, Spain instead agreed in November 1975 to grant administrative control of the territory to Morocco (and, for a time, Mauritania) pending an act of self-determination. It never happened, however.

As Moroccan forces moved into Western Sahara, close to half the population fled the country into neighboring Algeria, which was supportive of the independence struggle against its historic rival. Morocco rejected a series of unanimous UN Security Council resolutions calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces and recognition of the Sahrawis' right of self-determination. The United States and France, meanwhile, despite voting in favor of these resolutions, blocked the United Nations from enforcing them.

The Polisario continued to resist the Moroccan takeover and by 1982 had driven Moroccan forces out of nearly 85% of the territory. Over the next four years, however, the tide of the war was reversed in Morocco's favor thanks to the United States and France dramatically increasing their support for the Moroccan war effort, with U.S. Special Forces providing important training for the Moroccan army in counter-insurgency tactics and Saudi Arabia contributing financially to the war effort. In addition, the Americans and French helped Morocco construct an 800-mile "wall," primarily consisting of two heavily-fortified parallel sand berms, which eventually shut off more than three-quarters of Western Sahara — including virtually all the territory's major towns and natural resources — from the Polisario.

The Moroccan government, through generous housing subsidies, tax breaks, and other benefits, successfully encouraged tens of thousands of Moroccan settlers to move into the parts of Western Sahara under the kingdom's control. These Moroccan settlers now outnumber the remaining Sahrawis indigenous to the territory by a ratio of more than 3:1. The Moroccan government also invested heavily in infrastructure development along with internal security to suppress pro-independence activists.

While rarely able to penetrate into Moroccan-controlled territory, the Polisario continued regular assaults against Moroccan occupation forces stationed along the wall until 1991, when the United Nations ordered a ceasefire to be monitored by a UN peacekeeping force known as MINURSO. The agreement included provisions for a return of Sahrawi refugees to Western Sahara followed by a UN-supervised referendum on the fate of the territory, with the Sahrawis native to Western Sahara being given the choice of voting in favor of

either independence or integration with Morocco. Neither the repatriation nor the referendum took place, however, due to the Moroccan insistence that Moroccan settlers and other Moroccan citizens whom it claimed had tribal links to the Western Sahara also be allowed to vote.

A compromise referendum plan put forward by the United Nations in 2003 under the secretary general's special envoy James Baker was accepted by the Polisario but rejected by Morocco, which has instead put forward its controversial plan for limited autonomy for the region. Though the Bush and Obama administrations expressed a willingness to seriously consider Morocco's proposal, they did not see it as the only option nor did they formally withdraw their support for a referendum.

After waiting 29 years for a referendum that never came and following a series of Moroccan ceasefire violations and other provocations, the Polisario [resumed its armed struggle](#) just last month.

Disturbingly, within hours of Trump's December 10 announcement, word came of a U.S. decision to sell at least [four sophisticated large aerial drones](#) to Morocco. U.S. laws prohibit such weapons sales to invading armies. However, with the U.S. recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, including the Polisario-controlled segments of the territory, the occupation has become, in the eyes of Washington, a civil war between a recognized government and a secessionist movement, which could also pave the way for further U.S. intervention.

In both the Israeli and Moroccan occupations, there has been bipartisan support for the occupiers, but previous administrations recognized the dangerous legal precedent of formal recognition. Trump, in both Palestine and Western Sahara, has essentially made official what was essentially U.S. policy anyway. For decades, both Republican and Democratic administrations have insisted that neither Morocco nor Israel was obligated to withdraw their occupying forces, instead allowing the occupying powers to engage in an endless "peace process" with those under occupation who have no leverage to change the equation. In this way, the U.S. has allowed both occupiers to continue colonizing their occupied territories and consolidating their control.

As a result, Trump's insistence that the Golan Heights, greater Jerusalem and Western Sahara are no longer negotiable simply codifies what the occupying powers had been saying for decades, while receiving no pressure from the United States to do otherwise.

Once he becomes president, Biden could reverse Trump's recognition of the Moroccan annexation. However, since this would probably mean that Morocco would then renounce its recognition of Israel, Biden will likely find himself under considerable pressure not to do so.

Trump's dangerous act of recognition highlights the fact that there are two major occupations in the Arab world. The Sahrawis, like the Palestinians, deserve their freedom. Given the critical role the United States is playing in making these occupations possible, Americans have a special obligation to force a change of policy. Such activism in the 1990s played a key role in ending U.S. support for Indonesia's occupation of East Timor. Americans must once again pressure our government to cease supporting brutal occupations.

*Related Story: [What Can We Expect From Trump on Morocco's Occupation of Western Sahara?](#)*