

# Opinion: Trump's deal on Morocco's Western Sahara annexation risks more global conflict

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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

December 15, 2020: By [Stephen Zunes](#), a professor of politics at the University of San Francisco and is co-author, with Jacob Mundy, of "[Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution.](#)"

Last week, President Trump [formally recognized Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara](#) as part of a deal to get Morocco to normalize relations with Israel.

But Morocco's claim on Western Sahara is rejected by the [United Nations](#), the [World Court](#), the African Union and a broad consensus of international legal scholars that consider the region a non-self-governing territory that must be allowed an act of self-determination. This is why no country had formally recognized Morocco's takeover — until now.

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*U.S. and Moroccan flags next to a map of Morocco recognizing the territory of Western Sahara. (Str/AFP/Getty Images)*

At the time of the Moroccan takeover of the former Spanish colony in 1975, the [U.N. Security Council](#) unanimously called on Moroccan forces to immediately withdraw from the territory and allow the people of Western Sahara to determine their own destiny. However, both France and the United States prevented the Security Council from enforcing its mandate.

The Moroccan government insists that the territory is inherently part of Morocco and that independence should not be an option for the Indigenous population, known as Sahrawis, who embrace a distinct history, dialect and culture. Now Trump has joined the Moroccan monarchy in insisting that allowing for a limited degree of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only practical way forward.

[Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#) and other reputable human right groups have documented widespread suppression of peaceful pro-independence activists by Moroccan occupation forces, including torture, beatings, detention without trial and extrajudicial killings. [Freedom House](#) has ranked Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara as among the “worst of the worst” in the suppression of political rights and civil liberties. Foreign journalists and visiting international delegations are routinely denied entry or are kept under strict supervision.

As a result, Morocco's plan not only falls well short of the legal definition of autonomy, the ongoing repression raises serious questions regarding what it would look like in practice.

There would be no problem if the Sahrawis chose incorporation into Morocco in an internationally supervised referendum. However, as a non-self-governing territory, they must also have the option of independence, which Morocco and now the United States have categorically ruled out.

The Polisario Front, the leading nationalist movement that initially emerged in the anti-colonial struggle against Spain, engaged in an armed struggle against Moroccan occupation forces until agreeing to a 1991 ceasefire in return for a referendum on independence. However, Morocco never followed through. After 29 years of broken promises, continued occupation and a series of Moroccan violations of the cease-fire, the Polisario recently [resumed the war](#). Since the Polisario proclaimed the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976, 84 countries have recognized Western Sahara as an independent state (though some have since withdrawn recognition.) The SADR remains a full member state of the African Union, the [charter](#) of which prohibits unilateral changes in colonial borders. The SADR currently governs roughly [one-quarter](#) of Western Saharan territory and about 40 percent of the population, mostly in Polisario-administered refugee camps in western Algeria.

What Trump has done, therefore, is recognize the takeover of one legally recognized African state by another, which not only seriously damages the U.S. reputation on the continent but even encourages other countries to believe they could also get away with territorial expansion.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 under similarly dubious claims that its southern neighbor was historically part of Iraq, the international community united in opposition to this flagrant violation of the U.N. charter. While there were disagreements as to whether war was the best means to reverse the Iraqi takeover, the United States led the international community in its determination that such aggression must not stand.

Now, under Trump, the United States has effectively taken the opposite position.

This puts President-elect Joe Biden in a dilemma when he comes into office next month. While he could rescind U.S. recognition of the Moroccan annexation with the stroke of a pen, Morocco could then renounce its recognition of Israel. Biden therefore could find himself under considerable pressure to not undermine what many see as an important breakthrough.

But even strong pro-Israel members of Congress have expressed concerns. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman [Eliot L. Engel](#) (D-N.Y.), while welcoming the news of Morocco's recognition of Israel, has noted how U.S. recognition of Moroccan territorial expansion "upends a credible, internationally supported U.N. process ... which successive administrations of both parties have supported." Similarly, Sen. [Jim Inhofe](#) (R-Okla.), chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, also praised the normalization of relations, but stated that he was "saddened that the rights of the Western Saharan people have been traded away," calling the move "shocking and deeply disappointing."

The inadmissibility of any country expanding its territory by force is a long-standing principle of international law. Though normalizing relations between Israel and predominantly-Arab states is a worthy goal, it cannot come at the price of undermining such a fundamental international legal principle.

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