

U.S. Western Sahara Stance Emboldens Putin

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The threat of further Russian aggression against Ukraine is very real. Unfortunately, the Biden administration is in a weak position to lead an international response.

In light of Russia's illegal [2014 annexation of Crimea](#) and threats of further aggression against Ukraine, President Joe Biden has [emphasized how](#) "any use of force to change borders is strictly prohibited under international law."

The Moroccan regime — emboldened by the U.S. recognition — insists that independence is completely off the table and is at most willing to offer a limited degree of "autonomy" under Moroccan rule.

This should not even be a question anymore. Preventing a country from expanding its territory by force was a founding principle of the United Nations, and it is embedded in its [charter](#). It was this very principle, in fact, that led the United States to fight the 1991 Gulf War following Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait.

Unfortunately, there are serious questions as to whether the Biden administration actually supports this bedrock international legal standard. Maps of North Africa from the United Nations, National Geographic, Rand McNally and elsewhere depict the nation of Western Sahara on the Atlantic coast wedged between Morocco and Mauritania; U.S. government maps, however, [depict](#) the country as part of Morocco, with nothing delineating the two.

Western Sahara — formally known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) — has been [recognized](#) at various points in time by 84 countries and is a full member state of the African Union. Morocco [invaded](#) that nation, then known as Spanish Sahara, just prior to its scheduled independence from colonial rule in 1975.

The United Nations Security Council, the U.N. General Assembly, and the International Court of Justice have all gone on record asserting Western Sahara's right to self-determination. For decades, no international body or foreign governments have recognized Western Sahara as part of Morocco.

However, in his final weeks in office, former President Donald Trump [formally recognized](#) Moroccan sovereignty over the occupied country, including roughly 25% of Western Sahara still under the control of the SADR government. The Biden administration has rejected [bipartisan calls](#) to reverse Trump's decision and the United States remains an international outlier.

Despite giving lip service to a moribund U.N.-sponsored peace process, the United States is effectively agreeing with the Moroccan monarchy that independence should not be an option for the Indigenous population, known as Sahrawis, who embrace a distinct history, dialect and culture. The Moroccan regime — emboldened by the

U.S. recognition — insists that independence is completely off the table and is at most willing to offer a limited degree of “autonomy” under Moroccan rule.

[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 second only to Syria in its suppression of political rights.

As a result, Morocco’s U.S.-backed “autonomy” plan not only fails to allow the Sahrawis any real act of self-determination, the ongoing repression raises serious questions regarding what it would look like in practice.

Biden’s recognition of Morocco’s illegal annexation of Western Sahara is a gift to Russia’s autocratic president Vladimir Putin, who can now portray U.S. opposition to Russian claims on Ukrainian territory as simply rooted in geopolitical rivalry rather than principled opposition to illegal territorial expansion.

For the sake of the people of Western Sahara and U.S. credibility in the growing crisis over Ukraine, Biden must immediately rescind U.S. recognition of Morocco’s conquest.

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