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Trump's Lesser-Known Deal of the Century? Resolving the Western Sahara Conflict

Sarah Yerkes and Natalie Triche

Just weeks before President Donald Trump left office in 2020, he upended U.S. policy in North Africa by [proclaiming](#) U.S. support for Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, a disputed territory claimed by Morocco as well as by the native Sahrawi people. Trump's statement coincided with a [tripartite agreement](#) between Israel, Morocco, and the United States to normalize relations between Israel and Morocco that is considered part of the Abraham Accords. While Joe Biden's succeeding administration chose not to implement Trump's policy toward Western Sahara, U.S. recognition in 2020 paved the way for numerous other countries to follow suit, making it far more difficult for the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) to establish an independent state.

Nevertheless, with Trump in the White House for his second term, the world is directing little attention toward this fifty-year-old dispute, which is being drowned out by Trump's attempts at [ethnic cleansing](#) in Gaza and dismantling democracy at home. While it is unlikely Trump and his team will be able to reach a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—an outcome

he called the "[Deal of the Century](#)" during his first term—the combination of Trump's close relationship with Moroccan King Mohammed VI, Europe's shift over the past four years toward recognition of Morocco's 2007 autonomy plan as the most realistic path forward, and a significant decrease in international support for the Polisario Front (a Sahrawi resistance group) could all align during the second Trump administration to bring about a solution to the conflict in Western Sahara. As one of the more influential actors in Morocco, there is an opportunity for the Trump administration to assist in ending the conflict in a lasting and humane way that acknowledges the rights of the Sahrawi people to oversee their own affairs, allows for the return of Sahrawi refugees to their homeland, and builds trust between the Moroccan and Sahrawi residents of Western Sahara.

Furthermore, making progress toward a diplomatic and peaceful solution in the coming year is even more important as on November 6, 2025, Morocco will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the [Green March](#), during which the late King Hassan II threatened to send 350,000 Moroccans into the Sahara to claim the



land as Moroccan. Marking this event will likely draw the attention of Moroccans, Algerians, and the Polisario to Morocco's occupation of the territory in 1975—and raise the temperature of the conflict.

Background on the Conflict

Western Sahara is located along the Atlantic coast of Africa, north of Mauritania. Spain colonized this section of Africa in 1884 and designated it as a Spanish province, the Spanish Sahara, in [1958](#). The Polisario Front (a name derived from the Spanish acronym for Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro) was established in 1973 and [declared](#) SADR's creation in [1976](#). SADR's population today is [estimated](#) to be around half a million Sahrawis, who identify as Muslims and speak a combination of Hassaniya Arabic (a dialect common in Saharan communities), Spanish, and French. In response to SADR's formation, in December of 1974, Morocco requested an International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision on control of the Sahara. While Morocco awaited the ICJ's ruling, it engaged Spain and Mauritania in negotiations over ending Spanish colonization of the Sahara. After several months of deliberation, in October 1975, the ICJ came back with a ruling that was unfavorable to Morocco's position: "The Court finds that neither the internal nor the international acts relied upon by Morocco indicate the existence at the relevant period of either the existence or the international recognition of legal ties of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and the Moroccan State." Despite the ICJ's opinion, the Spanish-Moroccan-Mauritanian negotiation manifested in the [Madrid Accords](#), declared on November 14, 1975, with the goal of ending Spanish colonization. Spain granted Morocco and Mauritania split control of the Sahara without regard for the wishes of the Sahrawi population or international law. The UN did not view the Madrid Accords as fulfilling the obligations of self-determination mandated by international law, opting instead to support the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination.

The territorial dispute to the south was not Morocco's only challenge in the 1970s. Hassan II was a victim of several coup attempts throughout his reign, including the infamous 1971 [Skhirat Coup](#) attempt by rebel military leaders. As military coups shook the traditional authority of countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (in Libya, Syria, and Yemen), Hassan grew determined to double down on his authority. Hours after the ICJ released its decision on the Sahara, Hassan called for a peaceful march into what he considered the southern provinces of Morocco to reclaim the territory. In his view, the march would serve as a unifier of the Moroccan people around his family's historic leadership of the Kingdom of Morocco. He formally announced the march by [proclaiming](#) on November 5, 1975, "Tomorrow Inshaa'Allah [God willing], you will break through the borders . . . Tomorrow, Inshaa'Allah, you will step on a part of your territory and you will touch the sand of your sands and you will embrace a land of your beloved country." The Green March, however, was a largely symbolic measure. Although 350,000 unarmed Moroccans did heed the call to march south, few reached the actual Saharan territory. Rather, Hassan allowed only a small number of Moroccans to symbolically enter Western Sahara, and then return home, as a way to appease Spain (which was still in negotiations with Morocco over the future of the territory).

War then ensued between the Algerian-backed Polisario Front and Morocco as the Sahrawi resistance attempted to defend its territory and Morocco pressed into the land. Algeria has officially backed SADR and the Polisario since 1976, claiming it supports the Sahrawi right to self-determination. Importantly, Algeria has never made a territorial claim to Western Sahara. Algeria also had reason to oppose Moroccan plans, as its [relations with Morocco were fraught](#) following the colonial period, including a brief 1963 war over disputed land between the two countries. The war between the Polisario and Morocco persisted for sixteen years; Morocco occupied the territory and a significant percentage of Sahrawis fled to [Tindouf](#), Algeria, as refugees. Mauritania [conceded](#) its share of the territory in Western Sahara

(the southern third) to SADR in 1979 and officially recognized the Western Saharan state, but Morocco eventually occupied that territory too.

To maintain the annexed land, the Moroccan military built the world's [second-largest wall](#), called the Berm, around the border of the Moroccan-controlled portion of the territory to keep Polisario fighters out. Today, the wall is [manned](#) by more than 100,000 Moroccan soldiers and surrounded by land mines. In 1991, the UN [called](#) for a ceasefire, established the Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara ([MINURSO](#)) with the objective of allowing the Sahrawi people to determine whether they wanted independence or inclusion in the Moroccan state, and authorized MINURSO to establish a peacekeeping force at the border.

Throughout the 1990s, the UN tried to hold the referendum vote, but to no avail. The involved parties continuously [changed](#) the rules and delayed voting, especially challenging the voter identification rules. Former White House chief of staff and secretary of state James Baker III served as the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy for Western Sahara from 1997 to 2004. In a [2004 interview with PBS](#), Baker said, "When I first took the job on I was led to believe that the conflict was ripe for some sort of autonomy-based solution where the Moroccans would give self-government to the Sahrawi, the conflict would be resolved, the people from the camps would move back into the territory itself, and they would be given a liberal degree of self-government. I worked very hard on that for the seven years. We were never able to accomplish that." The referendum failed in part because of the difficulty in determining who qualified as a Sahrawi and could vote, which was a result of Morocco actively settling the territory and incentivizing Moroccans to move south in order to help increase the share of pro-integration voters. Despite the failed referendum, the ceasefire largely held, and the conflict shifted toward a cold war for the next few decades.

The ceasefire fell apart at the end of 2020, and by late 2021, Algeria severed relations with Morocco. Although the conflict remains mostly cold, occasional spats of [violence](#) continue to occur between the two sides. Today, the Polisario [maintains](#) a Soviet-era military arsenal with capabilities that include portable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and grenade launchers, although the Polisario has not used SAMs or grenade launchers against Morocco, instead largely relying on artillery. The Polisario's military capabilities have [degraded](#) over the past several years, with Russia occupied in Ukraine (and thus less engaged with Algeria) and only a handful of states (Mozambique, Nicaragua, South Africa, and Venezuela) continuing to support the Polisario materially.

Beyond the importance of the Sahara to the monarchy's legitimacy, the Moroccan government views the Sahara as an economic opportunity. The Sahara has significant phosphate deposits along with a long coastline that boasts ample fishing grounds. This is often cited as the primary reason for Morocco's insistence on controlling the Sahara, but the Moroccan government refutes that charge. Even without Western Sahara, Morocco has plentiful phosphates. In 1975, it was the world's ["preeminent exporter"](#) of phosphates. Morocco has, however, [developed](#) the Bou Craa mine in Western Sahara greatly since it got the territory under control. The possibility that oil could be discovered in Western Sahara, especially after it was first found in Mauritania in [2001](#), presents potential for further economic opportunity. Nevertheless, the conflict is largely ideological for Morocco.

The Sahara dispute is also the primary—and some would say only—driver for Moroccan foreign affairs. [King Mohammed articulated the importance of Western Sahara to Moroccan foreign policy as](#) "the prism through which Morocco considers its international environment and the yardstick that measures the sincerity of friendships and the effectiveness of partnerships established by the kingdom." Morocco's relationship with Algeria has been challenging since their war in 1963



and has continued to deteriorate since Algeria backed the Polisario Front in 1975 and hosted Sahrawis in Tindouf. But beyond Algeria, Morocco has long sought international recognition of its territorial claims to the Sahara, and until recently was isolated in its pursuit. The tide of international support shifted to favor Morocco in 2020, when the first Trump administration [recognized](#) Morocco's [2007 plan](#) for autonomy over the Sahara.

The U.S. Position

Prior to 2020, the U.S. position on Western Sahara could be described as deference to the UN process; the United States regularly [called on](#) the parties to negotiate a “mutually acceptable political solution” to the conflict and prioritized the stability of the Moroccan regime. The United States had attempted to take a neutral stance, not recognizing SADR or Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. During the administration of former president Barack Obama, the [official U.S. position](#) was: “While recognizing Morocco’s administrative control of Western Sahara, the United States has not endorsed Morocco’s claim of sovereignty.” Even through the early years of the first Trump administration, the United States used careful language to acknowledge Morocco’s [2007 autonomy proposal](#) as *one* possible solution to the conflict. In 2018, for example, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations [stated](#), “We continue to view Morocco’s autonomy plan as serious, credible, and realistic, and it represents one potential approach to satisfy the aspirations of the people in Western Sahara to run their own affairs with peace and dignity.” This language is also [consistent](#) with the Biden administration’s approach.

During the Obama administration, the United States got into hot water with Morocco when it [recommended](#) including a human rights monitoring mechanism in MINURSO’s mandate as a way to address some of the [accusations](#) of human rights violations in Western Sahara. The Moroccan government [accused](#) the United States of intervening in Moroccan sovereignty and the

matter was dropped. However, despite the United States backing down on its demand, Morocco retaliated and [cancelled](#) its planned 2013 African Lion joint military exercise with the United States.

The First Trump Administration

Throughout the bulk of the first Trump administration, the United States largely respected previous U.S. policy, deferring to the UN on the issue. However, as the administration began to advance its broader Abraham Accords initiative, it began to shift its position on Western Sahara as a *de facto* carrot for Moroccan normalization of relations with Israel. Importantly, the Moroccan government does not consider itself part of the Abraham Accords and does not publicly draw a connection between its normalization agreement with Israel and U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. However, the United States consistently includes Morocco alongside Bahrain, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates on [documents](#) describing the accords.

On December 4, 2020, the United States issued the [Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara](#), upending U.S. policy on the disputed territory. The proclamation, signed by Trump, affirmed the Moroccan autonomy plan as the “only” basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over Western Sahara. This was an important shift from the previous U.S. position: that the autonomy plan was one possible basis for a solution, but not the *only* solution. The proposal also promised that the United States would open a consulate in Dakhla, Western Sahara. This has not come to fruition. On December 24, 2020, then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announced](#) the inauguration of a [Virtual Presence Post](#) for Western Sahara. However, throughout the Biden administration, the U.S. government did nothing with the post, which is managed by the U.S. embassy in Rabat. Following the U.S. declaration on Moroccan sovereignty, on December 22, 2020, Israel, Morocco, and the United States signed a joint

declaration normalizing relations. This agreement was similar to the agreements signed between [Israel and Bahrain](#) and [Israel and the United Arab Emirates](#).

While the United States has tilted more toward Morocco's position than the Polisario's, even prior to the Trump administration's announcement, some key U.S. players have advocated for a more pro-Polisario position. In Congress, former senator James Inhofe was a vocally pro-Polisario advocate before his death in July 2024. Inhofe [led](#) a congressional delegation to the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, in 2019 meeting with Polisario leader Brahim Ghali. Inhofe also unsuccessfully [attempted](#) to sway Trump away from recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and, as ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2022, attempted to [persuade](#) the Department of Defense to move the massive African Lion military exercise from Morocco as a way to protest Morocco's policies.

Another major critic of Trump's decision was his own onetime national security adviser and ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton. Bolton [penned an op-ed](#) in *Foreign Policy* in December 2020 titled "Biden Must Reverse Course on Western Sahara," in which he criticized his former boss's decision. Bolton, who had previously served in the United Nations and informally advised Baker during his attempts at negotiating an end to the conflict, [accused](#) the Trump administration of "throw[ing] the Sahrawi people under the bus."

The Biden Administration

Upon taking office, the Biden administration studied the Trump administration's approach and chose a middle path—neither reneging on the Trump administration's position nor implementing it. While official U.S. maps continued to show Western Sahara as part of Morocco without any delineation between the two, and State Department reports treated Western Sahara as part of Morocco, U.S. officials reverted to Obama-era language about the Moroccan autonomy plan as *one* potential

option to end the conflict rather than the only option. Additionally, the Biden administration made no effort to establish any sort of consulate in Western Sahara, and the FY 2025 State Department budget request did not include any funding for a physical presence in Western Sahara.

Inhofe and then senator Patrick Leahy led an effort in Congress in February 2021 to pressure Biden to reverse Trump's policy decision, coauthoring a letter signed by twenty-seven senators that described Trump's decision as "misguided," [arguing](#), "the abrupt decision by the previous administration . . . was short-sighted, undermined decades of consistent U.S. policy, and alienated a significant number of African nations. 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." Leahy, as chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, also oversaw an effort to [prevent](#) any U.S. funding for the establishment of a consulate in Western Sahara.

Options for the Second Trump Administration

As Trump begins his second term, there are several ways his administration may engage on the Western Sahara issue and move forward with the policy he put in place in 2020. The most obvious step the Trump administration could take to implement U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara is to open a physical consulate in the territory. While the first Trump administration promised it would open a consulate in Dakhla, the amount of money and planning required to carry this out—let alone the security challenges that would accompany it—make such a step unlikely. However, there are other ways for the U.S. administration to put teeth into its statement recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara, such as by increasing U.S. official visits to Western



Sahara, including Western Sahara in the African Lion military exercise, or holding the U.S.-Moroccan strategic dialogue in Western Sahara. Additionally, the State Department could increase the role of the Virtual Presence Post to something more substantial and symbolic than a placeholder website. The United States could also pressure some European countries, which tend to be less risk-averse than the United States, to establish their own physical presences in the region. In December 2019, Comoros became the [first](#) nation to open a diplomatic post in Western Sahara. Since then, [twenty-eight additional countries](#) (primarily African and Arab states) have opened consulates in Western Sahara.

Additionally, prior to Trump's announcement that the United States would recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, U.S. policy had prevented bilateral U.S. assistance from being spent in the region. The [FY 2014 Appropriations Bill](#) included language for the first time that allowed some bilateral economic assistance to be "made available for any region administered by Morocco, including the Western Sahara." However, as a matter of policy, both the Obama and Trump administrations [chose](#) not to spend bilateral assistance in Western Sahara to avoid tacitly acknowledging Moroccan sovereignty there. While foreign aid spending is currently [in limbo](#), should the administration resume a more regular pattern of foreign assistance, it is possible that the Trump administration will reverse course and spend bilateral assistance in Morocco's "southern provinces" as a way to reinforce the U.S. position on Moroccan sovereignty. Furthermore, the U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement (which came into effect in 2006) and its [implementing legislation](#) make clear that it only covers "trade with and investment in the territory of Morocco as recognized by the United States, which does not currently include the Western Sahara." However, with Trump's policy shift, goods produced in Western Sahara could be eligible for the same benefits as the rest of Moroccan territory.

Another possible path for the United States in the coming years involves increasing pressure on Morocco to

implement the tripartite agreement. Israel inaugurated a liaison office in Rabat in August 2021, and while the Israeli delegation in Morocco left the country following the start of the war between Israel and Hamas, Israeli diplomats returned to the country quietly in August 2024. Morocco similarly opened a liaison office in Tel Aviv and Israeli press [reported](#) in July 2023 that Morocco was "in the process" of converting the office to a full-fledged embassy following the Israeli government's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, although those efforts have been delayed in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war. Should Israel and Hamas reach a deal to end the war, the Trump administration could work with both Morocco and Israel to upgrade their diplomatic posts as a signal of the ongoing cooperation between the two countries.

The Trump administration will need the support of other global actors to implement recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara in a way that addresses the conflict fully. His administration could work alongside other nations' diplomats to affirm the land and maritime borders as well as create a [power-sharing](#) arrangement between the semiautonomous Sahrawi government and Morocco. To set the borders, governments that have used the Sahara as a bargaining chip, like the Trump administration, should work alongside Moroccan and Sahrawi counterparts to engender a territorial power-sharing agreement that will allow Morocco to fully realize its territorial aspirations while simultaneously granting the Sahrawi people the right to permanent homes and an end to the war.

Issues to be Addressed

To resolve the issue of the Sahara, the involved parties will need to answer many questions. Chief among them is the question of borders. Today, Morocco [controls around 75 percent](#) of the territory of Western Sahara. If Morocco achieves full sovereignty, how will the remaining 25 percent be administered? Will SADR remain independent and operate in the 25 percent

as a nation-state, or will Morocco come to manage the whole territory, seemingly the only option the Moroccan state will approve? The other border that must be clarified is the maritime border. In January 2020, the Moroccan parliament [passed](#) legislation that incorporated the former maritime borders of Western Sahara into the Moroccan maritime borders. The legislative change provoked Spain, which felt threatened by a potential incursion into its maritime borders surrounding the Canary Islands. Spain and Morocco have [ongoing disputes](#) over the borders that can only be negotiated when the status of all related actors' borders is made clear. Additionally, the EU Court of Justice has consistently rejected the application of Morocco-EU trade deals in Western Sahara. Squaring the political and legal frameworks of Morocco's role in Western Sahara is necessary to move forward.

A further issue for negotiation is how the Sahrawi people will establish a government in an autonomous zone within Morocco. While Morocco has been promoting its autonomy plan for several decades, the plan itself is largely theoretical with few details. It is so far unclear who will lead the government, and what the SADR leadership's role will be. Other unresolved questions include: How will Morocco respect the autonomy of the Sahrawi government while maintaining Moroccan sovereignty? What parties will be responsible for ensuring Moroccans respect Sahrawi autonomy and what will the punishment be should Morocco begin to disregard that autonomy? How will taxes work? Will trains come to connect the land with the rest of Morocco to facilitate domestic trade and movement of people?

The delimitation of borders is not the end, but the beginning, of resolving the conflict in the Sahara. Another critical issue is the role of the 170,000 Sahrawi refugees residing in camps in Algeria. Morocco, Algeria, and the Sahrawi people will need to determine what refugee return and reintegration will look like and any potential options for those refugees who do not wish to return to Morocco. Morocco must consider what it would be willing to concede to incentivize the

Sahrawis beyond an autonomous government within Morocco. Similarly, the parties will need to address the demilitarization of the Polisario security forces. The practicalities of forming a new power-sharing arrangement are complex and not immediately clear and will require negotiation among the various parties, likely overseen by outside actors—an area where the United States could support. Additionally, one of Morocco's preconditions for a ceasefire is for Algeria to take part in negotiations. Algeria has long insisted that it is not a party to the conflict between Morocco and SADR, and therefore would not sit at the negotiating table, but Morocco refuses to accept that stance.

Furthermore, international governments and institutions must intervene to ensure that the parties develop and implement strong systems of power-sharing governance. The United States, France, and Spain have all pledged investment in the Sahara. Investment will elevate the economy of Morocco, including in the Sahara. If, before investment, a strong system of shared governance within the Moroccan state is established and monitored by global actors, the benefits of investment in the Moroccan economy will include the ethnic Sahrawi, newly Moroccan people. Peace in the Sahara and a secure Morocco is a strong strategic goal that the second Trump administration can strive toward, as Morocco's strategic geography along both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts makes it a key partner in international alliances. The international community must decide on the legality of investment in the Sahara before such investment can occur.

The United States is also entering the second Trump administration with historically positive relations with Algeria, which could allow the U.S. government to work with Algeria to pressure the Polisario to accept some sort of deal. A first step could be a cessation of hostilities, rather than a ceasefire, which would be both easier to implement and less painful a pill for the Polisario to swallow.

Conclusion

Trump's policy shift at the end of his first administration has had significant implications for foreign policy globally. In his congratulatory call to Trump following the 2024 election, Mohammed hearkened back to Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty, [saying](#) that the recognition reflects "the true depth of the special, longstanding relationship which holds the promise of even greater cooperation and a broader strategic partnership." In the same call, the king acknowledged the existence of "an array of increasingly complex regional and global challenges." Much like Hassan II in the 1970s, Mohammed may be hopeful that Trump's second term will bring a major win for Morocco that will bolster the people's support of their king at a time when his [popularity is waning](#).

It is possible that Trump will pursue an alternative path to that outlined in this article. The Trump administration could continue the approach of the Biden administration—failing to implement the policy while simultaneously not reversing it. Another possibility is that the administration brush aside and forget the Western Sahara issue as a remnant of a distant first term that was not challenged with several regional wars and global instability of the same scale as today. However, following Trump's re-election, Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump took a late-November [vacation](#) to Dakhla, a beachside city in the Sahara. While few actors in the world are paying attention to this issue, their vacation indicates at least some level of near-future attention on the issue from the second Trump administration.

If Trump decides to tackle the Sahara, his administration will face several challenges. Granting Morocco sovereignty over the entire Sahara would require the United States to ignore international law and reject the UN process, which would mark a stark departure on this issue (although it would line up with the U.S. approach toward the Israel-Hamas conflict). Furthermore, other global powers like China and Russia (which have

historically been closer to Algeria than Morocco) do not currently back the Moroccans in the conflict, but the international status of Western Sahara will not be fully settled until they affirm it.

Additionally, the U.S.-Algerian relationship, which is currently in a state of growth and expansion, will be tested should Trump move forward with implementing U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty. The United States and Algeria have, historically, had a much less robust relationship than the United States and Morocco—in large part because of Algeria's guarded foreign policy and non-alignment in foreign policy more broadly. However, during the Biden administration, which coincided with a new political era in Algeria following the removal of longtime leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2019, Washington and Algiers recalibrated their relationship, expanding their ties in the economic and cultural spheres. The United States has also been attempting to expand [security](#) ties with Algeria, particularly in the counterterrorism and intelligence spaces, in an effort to counter Algeria's more robust security relationship with Russia. The U.S.-Algeria relationship still pales in comparison to the U.S.-Morocco relationship, however, and any forward movement on U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara is likely to anger the new Algerian government under Abdelmadjid Tebboune and could damage further expansion of U.S.-Algeria ties. Transparency with Algiers will therefore be crucial as a way to both acknowledge Algerian concerns and preempt significant blowback.

As the second Trump administration enters the White House, with the Middle East and North Africa in many ways central to the president's foreign policy responsibilities, the Trump administration and global partners should seek to implement their policy with a vision that extends beyond the immediate present. They should strive to bring a lasting peace beneficial to all involved actors, that acknowledges both the facts on the ground and the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination (as difficult as squaring those two objectives may be). Specifically, should the regular

appropriation of foreign aid resume, the U.S. Congress could earmark some bilateral assistance to Morocco for people-to-people programming to help bridge the gap between the native Sahrawi and Moroccan populations in Western Sahara and encourage lasting peace. The Trump administration could also work with Europe to fund infrastructure development in Western Sahara, including improved healthcare and education for the Sahrawi population as well as permanent homes to help improve the daily lives of the Sahrawi people. The international community could also engage in a robust demining effort to remove the numerous dangerous land mines in the territory.

Failing to adopt a responsible and long-term approach toward ending the conflict risks escalating the violence as the occupation turns fifty years old. Open conflict could not only bring about more misery and economic cost to both sides but also threaten the broader economy and stability of what is already a volatile region. And, as others have argued, an intensified conflict [could](#) “threaten the oil and gas supply from Algeria to Europe, reduce the two countries’ ability to control irregular migration across the Mediterranean and even imperil merchant vessels passing through the Strait of Gibraltar. Finally, a conflict could disrupt trade with adjacent countries, such as Mauritania and Mali, pushing up the prices of basic commodities.” To avoid such an outcome, the United States should also work with Europe to discourage further military escalation. Here, MINURSO plays an important role in monitoring the buffer zone and should continue its role even if autonomy moves forward, as fully fleshing out and implementing Morocco’s autonomy proposal would take several years.

The Trump administration’s unilateral declaration of support for Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020 did not make the conflict easier

to solve. Conversely, it opened the door for a rise in hostilities and the end of the ceasefire that had held since 1991. Thus, it is not surprising that the people with the most direct knowledge of the conflict have made clear that Trump’s decision was “[rash](#)” and ill-advised. Nevertheless, the current Trump administration has an opportunity to both advance its policy from 2020 and responsibly and effectively help bring about an end to this decades-long conflict. The United States under Trump is no longer a neutral player, having shifted its policy so clearly in Morocco’s favor. But the U.S. government could support Europe’s efforts to both deescalate the situation on the ground and help broker a return to negotiations for Morocco, Algeria, and the Polisario.

Finally, the Sahrawis, who have been fighting for their independence for decades, refusing to abandon their right to self-determination, are destined for disappointment in any arrangement that sees their nationality become Moroccan. But an arrangement that sees Sahrawi governance over local issues within the structure of the Moroccan state, as Morocco’s autonomy plan suggests, could benefit the Sahrawi population if carried out humanely and with an eye to improving Sahrawi lives.

About the Authors

Sarah Yerkes is a senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Her research focuses on democracy and governance, U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa, and political and economic reform in Tunisia.

Natalie Triche a James C. Gaither Junior Fellow in the Middle East Program.

