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By Jean Shaoul
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US recognizes Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara

President Donald Trump has hailed Morocco's agreement to begin normalizing relations with Israel in return for US recognition of Morocco's illegal annexation of the Western Sahara, which Morocco has long demanded.

Ending years of official US support for a UN-brokered resolution of the long-running conflict, Trump tweeted December 10, "Today, I signed a proclamation recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal is the ONLY basis for a just and lasting solution for enduring peace and prosperity!"

Separately, he added, "Our two GREAT friends Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations—a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East!"



A Polisario tank division, 2012 (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

The US became the first country to formally recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, the former Spanish colony with considerable mineral and phosphate deposits, as well as rich Atlantic fisheries and potentially significant offshore oil reserves.

Trump's tweet follows his recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Syria's Golan Heights, seized during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and his decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This time he has recognized the annexation of an entire country in defiance of several UN Security Council resolutions.

All three instances constitute flagrant violations of international law, which outlaws the acquisition of territory by force. Such annexations were declared illegal under the Geneva Conventions enacted in the wake of the Second World War to prevent the repetition of actions like those carried out by Germany's Nazi regime. Trump has thumbed his nose at the entire post-World War II international order and the international rule of law, and signaled that militarism, territorial expansion, and colonialism are the order of the day.

In 1975, Morocco forcibly annexed the vast but sparsely populated territory of Western Sahara in contravention of an International Court of Justice ruling and without consulting the local Sahrawi people. This followed secret talks between Madrid, the occupying power, Rabat and Washington in which Spain agreed to cede control to Morocco. The Polisario Front, the military wing of the self-proclaimed national-bourgeois Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), declared independence for Western Sahara and fought a 16-year war with support from Libya and Algeria against Morocco and Mauritania.

Mauritania also laid claim to part of the territory but withdrew its claims in 1979. The war ended with a 1991 ceasefire, dividing the country, with Morocco holding 80 percent of the territory.

In 1991, the UN mission to Western Sahara was established to resolve the dispute via negotiations and organize a referendum on the territory's future—to remain a part of Morocco, become an autonomous province or become independent. It dragged on for decades without ever holding a referendum, leaving the territory under the de facto control of Morocco.

Since then, there have been several UN Security Council resolutions supporting Western Sahara's self-determination. In 2007, Morocco announced its Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara that proposed making Western Sahara a semi-autonomous region under Morocco's sovereignty, which the Polisario rejected in favor of a referendum for an "independent Sahrawi state" in Western Sahara. The UN mission's mandate was renewed by the Security Council less than six weeks ago on October 30, with US support.

Last month, fighting broke out between Moroccan military forces and the Polisario after Rabat sent troops to reopen a highway linking Morocco, the Western Sahara and Mauritania that was occupied by protesters. This brought an end to the 1991 ceasefire—a move that had the potential to lead to a renewed outbreak of hostilities with Algeria, which has supported the Polisario and is home to 175,000 Sahrawi refugees.

While Algeria adopted a relatively muted stance over the outbreak of hostilities, Prime Minister Abdulaziz Djerad has denounced Trump's decision, saying it was designed to destabilize his country, which borders the Sahel that has become a powder keg after the US and European-led wars in Libya and Mali.

The African Union—which 30 years ago recognized Sahrawi independence, prompting Morocco to leave the organization until rejoining recently—adopted a notably disinterested stance on Rabat's military operation, merely calling for restraint. Several Gulf Arab states publicly backed Morocco.

Hours after Trump's tweeting of US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, including the Polisario-controlled areas of the territory, Washington announced a \$1 billion arms sale to Morocco including the sale of at least four large aerial drones and precision guided weapons.

The announcement of the normalization of relations between Israel and Morocco, reportedly brokered by the United Arab Emirates, comes after over six decades of backroom talks between the two countries on issues ranging from trade and security to intelligence-sharing. In the 1950s, King Hassan II permitted the mass emigration of Jews to Israel—Moroccan Jews now form one of the largest Jewish communities in Israel—and bought weaponry and surveillance technology from Israel. Morocco also shared intelligence with Israel, to the

extent that in 1965 the king sought Mossad's help in locating and disposing of the anti-monarchist, nationalist leader Mehdi Ben Barka, whose tortured body was never found.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu celebrated Trump's announcement as "another great light of peace," predicting "a very warm peace" given Israel's longstanding relations with Morocco. At pains to keep his Blue and White coalition partners out of the discussions, who only heard the news from US officials, he is seeking to bolster his position in the face of criminal proceedings, a disintegrating coalition, and potentially fresh elections.

King Mohammed VI, who controls much of Morocco's economy and its wealth through a complex web of companies, speaks for the Moroccan elite at the expense of the broad mass of its largely youthful population, with social discontent over unemployment and poverty rising. It is this that determines his orientation towards US imperialism and the Gulf petro-monarchies.

Trump's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara was the quid pro quo for Morocco's formal recognition of Israel, following the path laid by the UAE, Bahrain—a de facto colony of Saudi Arabia—and Sudan. Like Bahrain, Morocco, which has had close relations with Saudi Arabia and sent troops to support its war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, will have received a green light from Riyadh.

Notwithstanding King Mohammed VI's call to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas professing the contrary, another Arab regime has very publicly signaled that the Palestinian issue is no longer of any consequence. Saudi Arabia's Arab Initiative, endorsed by the Arab League in 2002, that made normalization of relations with Israel dependent upon its full withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, a "just settlement" of the Palestinian refugee problem based on UN Resolution 194, and the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, the so-called "two state solution," is a dead letter.

The fate of the Palestinians, which for decades defined the Arab states' attitude towards the Zionist state, has been unceremoniously dumped.

The agreements have nothing to do with peace—none of the four states that have agreed to normalize relations with Israel have ever been at war with the country. They are bound up with the Trump administration's broad anti-Iranian axis, being formed in preparation for a potentially catastrophic war aimed at regime-change in Tehran, rolling back Chinese and Russian influence in the region and reinforcing US hegemony over the resource-rich Middle East and North Africa. Morocco severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in 2018, accusing it of backing the Polisario.

To this end, Trump has offered the necessary bribes and sweeteners: F35 fighter jets for the UAE, US protection for Bahrain, and the removal of Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism that will enable the country's rulers to access international finance.

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