

Morocco-Israel Normalisation:

A Geopolitical Shift with Far-reaching Consequences for the MENA Region

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(Jalal Morchidi - Anadolu Agency)

On December 10th, 2020, the United States announced that it would recognise Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. This policy shift, a product of years of covert diplomacy, was to be exchanged for Morocco's 'normalisation' of ties with Israel. This quid pro quo, a signature of the Trump administration's foreign policy, has far-reaching consequences that will continue to unfold in Israel, Palestine, Morocco, and throughout the MENA region. This policy outlook analyses some of the events that led up to this announcement and aims to establish what this crucial moment may mean for the future of Western Sahara, Morocco-Israel relations, and the role of 'normalisation' as a tool in regional diplomacy.

Background

On December 10th, President Donald Trump announced via [Twitter](#) that the United States publicly supported the Kingdom of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. In an age in which major moments in diplomacy are sometimes debuted on social media, this public declaration still made waves in the international diplomatic and media communities. Up until now, Washington has [remained](#) decidedly silent on the status of Western Sahara since the region became a disputed territory in 1975. Moreover, President Trump's remarks not only [indicated](#) that the United States intended to back Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara but also shared that it had played a principal role in re-establishing diplomatic ties between Morocco and Israel. At the same time, the White House [informed](#) Congress of an upcoming \$1 billion arms deal between the United States and the Kingdom, which primarily focused on the purchase of drones and precision-guided weapons.

Amid these rapid and public updates, the governments of Morocco and Israel both scrambled to officially comment on the changes to their relationship. While the two states were not fully estranged, they had cut off public ties in 2000, following the onset of the Second Intifada. On the same day as President Trump's Twitter announcement, the Moroccan Royal Cabinet released an official [statement](#) outlining that "the two states will resume partial diplomatic ties in the near future, establish direct flights, and promote economic and technological cooperation". While the proclamation of official relations between Israel and Morocco, as well as the update on Western Sahara, could be [con-](#)

[strued](#) as being hasty or even unclear — particularly for the citizens of Morocco — the reality behind this geopolitical shift was anything but. Rather, both the normalisation of relations and the American declaration of support for Morocco in Western Sahara are a product of several years of cautious and nuanced diplomacy carried out among a small group of American, Moroccan, and Israeli leaders.

In a [report](#) for Axios, journalist Barak Ravid reported that President Trump's advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner and special envoy Avi Berkowitz had been involved in ongoing negotiations with Moroccan leadership to normalise ties between the Kingdom and Israel for over two years. According to the article, the concept of exchanging American recognition of Western Sahara for diplomatic relations was originally put forth by Ram Ben Barak, former deputy director of Mossad, and his business associate Yariv Elbaz, a top Moroccan businessman with close ties to the Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita. Discussions between these figures, as well as several other senior members of the three governments, progressed slowly until about a year ago when Kushner, Berkowitz, and Bourita allegedly reached a deal. However, Ravid recounts that Senator Jim Inhofe and former National Security Adviser John Bolton dissuaded President Trump from agreeing to the proposed exchange.

While Bolton is widely recognised as a once highly influential figure within President Trump's foreign policy team, Senator Inhofe played the most influential role in stalling these particular negotiations. At the time, the Republican Senator from Oklahoma was a close ally of President Trump. Senator Inhofe, who is also the ranking member of



U.S. Presidential Adviser Jared Kushner (R), Israeli National Security Council Head, Meir Ben Shabbat (C) and US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman (L) are seen as they prepare for lift-off in the first commercial direct flight from Tel Aviv to Rabat following a normalisation deal between Israel and Morocco, at the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel on December 22, 2020. (GPO/Amos Ben Gershom - Anadolu Agency)

the Senate Committee on Armed Services, is well [known](#) on Capitol Hill as a vocal opponent of Morocco's claims to sovereignty over Western Sahara. The Senator, over the course of his career, has met with leaders from the Frente Polisario in Algeria and developed a reputation as one of the few adamant supporters of their movement from within the United States government. As a result, Senator Inhofe, after gaining the support of John Bolton, was successfully able to dissuade the President from making this exchange.

This blockade in Morocco-Israel 'normalisation' negotiations appeared to be impenetrable until December of 2020. As [reported](#) by the *Washington Post* and [confirmed](#) by John Bolton himself in an article for Foreign Policy, the normalisation negotiations were jumpstarted early last month when Senator Inhofe and President Trump swiftly went from political allies to opponents over a disagreement regarding the contents of the National Defence Authorisation Act, a standard military funding bill. Senator Inhofe apparently refused to include several articles in the bill due to concerns that they were irrelevant to the overarching purpose of the Act, which angered President Trump. This dividing of a once-strong alliance represented a crucial opportunity for Kushner, Berkowitz, and others, one that ultimately resulted in the President signing off on the normalisation deal and announcing his support for Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara within several days.

In response to the news of the treaty, Foreign Minister Bourita, in an [interview](#) with *Yedioth Ahronoth*, countered descriptions of the agreement as a 'normalisation' of ties. He described the recent announcement as "re-formalising the [existing] relations" between the two countries. Minister Bourita's remarks play into two talking points coming from the Moroccan government. The first is, as Minister Bourita indicated, that Morocco and Israel have always had a unique relationship, one that distinguishes this recent announcement from the recent normalisation of ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, or Sudan. This relationship will be explored further throughout the policy outlook. The second is that, largely because of this existing nuanced dynamic between the two states, the recent announcement represents a diplomatic victory for the Kingdom. While there have been some details provided by the three parties with respect to the specific obligations of the treaty, this agreement is largely vague in nature. As Israel and Morocco already have existing relations across a variety of sectors and industries, the Kingdom believes that the changes they are expected to make in response to the announcement will be minimal. At the same time, Morocco gains Washington's recognition of Western Sahara, a feat with potentially far-reaching diplomatic and financial consequences. On top of that, the Kingdom has secured a \$1 billion [arms deal](#) from the United States, a transaction that mirrors the exchange between Washington and the UAE during their own normalisation of ties with Israel.

On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Netanyahu, in a phone call with King Mohammed VI, [reportedly](#) quoted a line from the film *Casablanca*, stating that "I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship". Israel has already sent delegations to the Kingdom to further discuss the terms of the agreement, particularly liaison offices and the launch of commercial flights, and also appears to be in high spirits with regards to the deal. However, many facets of this relationship are yet to be determined. This policy outlook further analyses the Morocco-Israel relationship and attempts to outline the potential consequences of Washington's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara.

From Secrecy to Publicity: The Israel-Morocco Security Relationship

While the novelty of full and official diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel is notable, the two states have a unique security partnership that has existed relatively covertly for decades. As a [report](#) published through the *Atlantic Council* indicates, "the Moroccan intelligence services have had an unofficial relationship with Israel through its intelligence agency, Mossad, for almost sixty years." This relationship was not simply nominal, nor one-sided: Israeli intelligence [allegedly](#) assisted in organising the Moroccan intelligence services during the reign of the late King Hassan II and supplied weapons and other surveillance technologies to the Kingdom.

Years [later](#), in 1965, Moroccan intelligence services allowed Mossad to bug rooms in Casablanca in which several Arab leaders were meeting. Shlomo Gazit, who later became the chief of Israeli military intelligence, said in a 2016 interview that this action provided Mossad with major insight into the plans of some of these leaders. Now, it is important not to exaggerate the nature of the relationship between Mossad and Moroccan intelligence, nor to suggest that Morocco is the only Arab [nation](#) to engage in covert relations with Israel or its closest ally, the United States. However, these examples do offer insight into the reality that a somewhat consistent covert relationship has existed between the two states for decades, and that Morocco has particularly engaged in this complex dynamic in matters relating to Israel and Palestine.

Normalisation, therefore, represents less of a genesis of security ties between the two states, and more of a moment of public acknowledgement of their past strategic relationship, as well as a decision to shift some of these future exchanges into the public eye. There was subtle evidence of this movement prior to the official announcement of ties: At the start of 2020, Morocco and Israel agreed to a \$48 million [arms deal](#) that included the sale of Israeli reconnaissance drones. While the two states, like many in

the region, have historically engaged in some level of arms dealing, this deal was certainly large enough to stir up media attention, particularly for the inclusion of drones in the sale.

The Kingdom, which has always been a strong advocate for the Palestinian cause, has used its covert relationship with Israel in an effort to mitigate the conflict, including an [effort](#) to facilitate peace between Egypt and Israel. The United States' role in this partnership is not a coincidence either, as Washington has publicly close ties with Israel, a long history of a strategic regional alliance with Morocco and has been a facilitator of covert cooperation between the two states for decades.

Thus, the formalisation of diplomatic, economic, and security ties between Morocco and Israel — with the United States in the middle — has a well-documented precedent in the security sphere.

However, King Mohammed VI and the Moroccan leadership have been quick to assure the public that they have not abandoned their support of the Palestinian people. In contrast to the swift and all-encompassing public announcement of the agreement from the United States, the Kingdom has issued a variety of [statements](#) emphasising that there are still significant portions of the deal that have yet to be fully fleshed out and that the agreement stops short of full and close relations. For [example](#), Morocco has discussed opening up a liaison office in Israel and establishing commercial flights, but, for now, has failed to go much further. Moreover, following the normalisation announcement, King Mohammed VI placed a call to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in which he [stated](#) that "Morocco's work to consolidate its sovereignty will never be, neither today nor in the future, at the expense of the Palestinian people's struggle for their legitimate rights." Most importantly, King Mohammed VI has been adamant that the Moroccan position on Palestine has not [changed](#), and that it "continues to support a two-state solution and to promote negotiations between both sides that would lead to definitive peace." The Kingdom also continues to stand by the Arab League Initiative that was issued in 2002 and reiterated in both 2007 and 2017, which [outlines](#) a united commitment across the Arab League to normalisation of ties with Israel in exchange for the withdrawal from lands it had taken over since 1967. Morocco's Justice and Development Party has [echoed](#) the King's comments, reiterating that sovereignty over Western Sahara was the focus of this deal, not the abandonment of the Palestinian cause.

Morocco's public portrayal of the agreement showcases that, while Israel and Morocco have a long history of security cooperation, this latest announcement is far more complex than either the 'going public' of secret ties or drastic shift in one of Morocco's most defining policies. Rather, it marks the beginning of a complex dynamic between the two states, the full intentions of which either remain unclear or have yet to be made fully public.

Palestine and Western Sahara

Amid global debate over what the normalisation of ties between Morocco and Israel may mean for future Morocco-Palestine relations, the Kingdom has insisted that the deal is, in fact, primarily focused on securing American support of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. It is undeniable that the United States' recognition of Morocco's claims to Western Sahara is a major victory for the Kingdom. However, the nature of the quid pro quo exchange of the establishment of official ties with Israel for this recognition is less of a certainty. In other words, while this transactional diplomacy has come to [define](#) the Trump administration's foreign policy, the trading of these two particular policies has introduced a strange dichotomy in regional relations. And while the actors most involved in the formation of this agreement may have grown accustomed to this exchange over the years it took to come to fruition, its sudden public announcement has somewhat [perplexed](#) the Moroccan public.

The Moroccan public categorically opposed the previous normalisation treaties between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain. According to one study, only 9% of the [surveyed](#) Moroccan public supported these deals. As previously mentioned, Morocco and Israel's previous relationship has involved extensive cooperation in the security field for decades. While this relationship has not always been publicised, it was also not a strict secret. However, the attitudes of the public — which have always mirrored the support of the Palestinian people vocalised by King Mohammed VI — do not align with the historical security measures taken by the Moroccan state. Nevertheless, popular opinion of the treaty aside, this normalisation deal has perplexed the Moroccan public because it introduced the idea that international recognition of Western Sahara is a topic that is somehow connected to the Israel Palestine conflict. This concept — created as an exchange by the diplomatic leadership of the US, Morocco, and Israel — has left the Moroccan public surprised that the fate of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara could somehow be tied to their country's relationship with Israel. Rabat has responded to this by focusing on the idea that this diplomatic deal is a landmark victory for claims over Western Sahara, and that the sentiments of the public should reflect that. While the positive benefits of this announcement for Morocco's claims to Western Sahara is, as previously stated, quite clear, the idea of exchanging two fundamentally unrelated, yet very public components of Morocco's policy framework set an unusual precedent, particularly with regards to regional stances on Israel. The idea that foreign powers like the United States can orchestrate deals between states in the MENA region based on their own goals could lead to a harmful disconnect between their transactional-based diplomacy and the reality of these 'bargaining chips' on the ground. Of course, the consequences of this particular

exchange remain uncertain, but the potential implications of the United States' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara will be explored later in the policy outlook.

Culture and Diplomacy: Other factors in the normalisation deal

In order to fully analyse the potential implications of future Moroccan-Israeli relations, one must not only understand the nature of their previous security partnership but also their common cultural history. Prior to the creation of Israel in 1948, Morocco was home to the largest Jewish population in the MENA region. In the 1940s, the Moroccan Jewish [population](#) made up roughly 10% of the total Moroccan population. Today, there are an [estimated](#) one million Jews of Moroccan origin living in Israel and thousands of Jews still living Morocco. Demographic connections between the two states are supplemented by touristic, cultural, and business ones; Moroccan and Israeli businesses have invested significant amounts of money and energy into promoting cultural events in Morocco that aim to foster connections between the Jewish Moroccan community and Israel. Each year, up to 70,000 Israeli citizens [visit](#) Morocco for vacation, despite the fact that there were no direct commercial flights between the two countries until the recent normalisation deal. Many of the tens of thousands of Israelis who visit Morocco each year participate in [heritage tourism](#). The Moroccan tourism ministry has funded and supported this trend. In 2010, King Mohammed VI announced a new [initiative](#) to restore Jewish cemeteries throughout Morocco. In addition to cemeteries, synagogues, tombs of saints and Rabbis, and historical Jewish quarters of cities (mellahs) have received funding for renovation and tourism initiatives. In 2016, the King also personally attended the rededication ceremony of the Ettehdgui Synagogue in Casablanca. Moreover, Casablanca is also home to the Moroccan Jewish Museum, which was founded in 1997 and is the only [museum](#) exclusively dedicated to Jewish culture and history in the Islamic world. These trends in funding and the public appearances of King Mohammed VI or his senior advisors — including Andre Azoulay, an advisor to King Mohammed VI and member of the Moroccan Jewish community — at these sites, shed light on Morocco's growing focus on the promotion of its Jewish heritage, and with it, the future connections found from its diaspora in Israel.

Meanwhile, AFP reported on December 13th, three days after the normalisation announcement, that the Moroccan school system would begin teaching about Jewish [history](#) and culture. Serge Berdugo, the Secretary-Gen-

eral of the Council of Jewish Communities of Morocco, explained how this decision is a first for North Africa and reflects an effort from the Kingdom to integrate its Jewish history into the national curriculum. This initiative closely involved two US-based Jewish organisations, the American Sephardi Federation (ASF) and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations (COP).

Moreover, the economic relationship between the two states is growing. Between 2014 and 2017, for [example](#), Morocco and Israel participated in over \$149 million worth of trade. That classifies Morocco among the top four of Israel's trading partners in Africa. These cultural and economic connections, in contrast to the aforementioned security one, have not existed in secrecy. The Israeli and Moroccan leadership have often referenced the cultural ties between the states, including in the recent normalisation deal. In fact, this commonality has emerged as a prominent rhetorical tool utilised particularly by the Moroccan monarchy to explain the shift in official policy. This connection differentiates the normalisation agreement between Israel and Morocco from the three other states with which Israel also recently established ties. However, the historical ties between Israel and the Moroccan Jewish population have not been alluded to solely to justify this deal, but rather, may be part of an overarching effort to paint Morocco as a logical arbiter in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. While Morocco's security and cultural connections to Israel have been outlined thus far in this paper, the Kingdom's longstanding connection to the Palestinian people and active role in the mediation of the conflict should also be emphasised.

In addition to decades of officially supporting the Palestinian people and leadership, Morocco has played an active role on the international diplomatic stage as an advocate for the Palestinian cause. For example, King Mohammed VI is the Chairman of [Al Quds Committee](#) in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. The Al Quds Committee was organised to support the Palestinian people, specifically in relation to rights over the holy city of Jerusalem and the Al Aqsa Mosque. Thus, as Morocco and Israel move forward in their relationship — despite the fact that the details have yet to be finalised — questions will emerge with regards to how the Kingdom will navigate its nuanced position, and if it will use its unique relationship with both communities to centre itself as a principal actor in any future resolutions. At the heart of this decision is King Mohammed VI. As the public and practical head of Morocco's foreign policy, the King's future actions will shine light on if and how normalisation with Israel will impact the future of Morocco's role in the conflict. Yet, understandably, there is no clear road map for operating within this new dynamic, and so relevant parties will have to wait and see if the Kingdom's future actions confirm or dispute this intention.

Western Sahara

Morocco has claimed official sovereignty over Western Sahara since Spanish colonial forces withdrew from the territory in 1975. Following Spain's exit from the region, the Kingdom and the Frente Polisario (Polisario Front) engaged in violent conflict over claims to the territory until a 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire that, at the time, also called for a referendum within the territory. This official UN stance has since changed. Today, Morocco has de facto control over about 75% of the territory known as Western Sahara, with the remaining land largely a UN buffer zone, which has been used by the Frente Polisario to mount attacks. The United States' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the entire territory marks a significant moment for the Kingdom for several reasons. First, it officially supports the historical claims the Kingdom has made over the territory, and with it, the promise of future American diplomatic presence. Second, it offers a green light for Morocco to further invest in the region and utilise some of the natural resources and economic potential that it has to offer.

Washington's recognition of Morocco's claims to Western Sahara supports a major effort to advance Morocco's economic position in the region and throughout the world by becoming an invaluable player in global trade. There is a strong foundation for this role, prompted by both Morocco's strategically advantageous geographic location and the previous openness of the Kingdom to global financial partnerships. For example, Tanger-Med port, the creation of which was largely funded by Chinese investment, is already the [largest](#) port in the Mediterranean and in Africa. However, specific projects planned by the Kingdom stand to specifically benefit from American diplomatic support, including a \$1 billion effort to build the Dakhla port, which is located in Western Sahara. The focus on investment in ports, particularly the latter, emphasise the Kingdom's push to build infrastructure around natural resources, [namely](#) phosphate and shale gas, that are located in the waters off the coast of Western Sahara. While the full extent of these resources has, up until now, been relatively unexplored due to the disputed claims over the territory, the United States' recognition of Moroccan sovereignty could signal a future opening to both exploration and investment.

However, the Kingdom's development of its ports is only one part of an overarching effort aimed at attracting a diverse set of foreign investment, an effort that could stand to benefit not only from Washington's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara but also from Morocco's normalisation of ties with Israel. The latter-prompted investment could stem largely from an increased global financial appetite, particularly from GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states such as the UAE and Bahrain, to invest in Morocco following their own normalisation of ties with Israel. An almost symbolic example of Morocco's foreign investment profile comes from its [al-Boraaq high-speed](#)

[rail](#). While Morocco [contributed](#) 27% of the financing for the project itself, France offered 51% of the required funds, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait endowed the rest. The idea of collective investment in key infrastructure projects throughout Morocco reflects both the Kingdom's openness to development projects and the overwhelming outside interest in these endeavours. However, from both an investor standpoint and a trade-route focus, there are three main focuses of Moroccan foreign investment, all of which stand to benefit from Washington's recognition of Western Sahara and the normalisation of ties with Israel.

The first and most advanced point of investment is the West-African to Western Europe trade route. France has provided the vast majority of foreign financing along with this route, a reality reflective of the significant investment the country has made in Morocco. This economic corridor is the most advanced and well-funded in the region and a significant amount of its success, according to a [report](#) published by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, stems from the unique level of investment — both foreign and domestic — in modern infrastructure, namely trains and ports. For example, the Kingdom's [Rail Maroc 2040](#) initiative aims to update existing rail infrastructure and build an additional 1,500km of rails across the country. Projects like these are significantly more advanced in both extent and funding than comparable plans in the region, a reality that signals the extent of global interest in an Africa-to-Europe industrial chain that heavily includes Morocco. However, these investments are included within the parameters of this report because they not only shed light on the Kingdom's immediate investment priorities but also showcase how this investment has notable strategic implications. Included in the Rail Maroc 2040 plan is the establishment of rail lines that connect Tangier to Lagouira, the latter of which is located in the south of Western Sahara region. Washington's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, therefore, can only stand to support Morocco's development goals. The public backing of the United States in advance of the actual construction of this line could encourage further financial support and diminish future public opposition to the project.

Second, as the example of al-Boraaq high-speed rail indicates, GCC states have also turned their attention to investment in Morocco. In recent years, several GCC countries, including the United Arab Emirates, have ramped up investment in North Africa. However, amid a variety of projects across the region that could represent sound investments for the GCC states' goals, including ongoing development in Algeria and Egypt, Morocco has drawn particular attention. One reason for this financial focus in the past was the aforementioned favourable investment conditions in Morocco given the advanced stage of these projects relative to comparable nations. However, moving forward, the aligned timing of the UAE and Bahrain's establishment of formal economic ties with Israel with Morocco's own pivot to Israel could stand to make the coun-

try a more appealing site of investment. In other words, as certain states decide to normalise ties with Israel — a decision heavily influenced by the United States — they form a growing group of regional actors with similar financial and strategic goals. Support from GCC states such as the UAE and Bahrain could aid the infrastructural and financial development associated with the natural resources located off of the Western Saharan coast in a globally competitive manner.

Third, the financial benefits from international recognition of Western Sahara, as well as the normalisation of ties with Israel, assists Morocco in its efforts to secure advantageous positioning with respect to the African continent. Over the last few years, the Kingdom has made a public shift towards involvement in African economic, diplomatic, and cultural institutions. For example, in 2017 Morocco [re-joined](#) the African Union. It is worthy to note that the Kingdom originally left the African Union — or as it was called at the time, the Organisation of African Unity — because the institution recognised Western Sahara as an independent entity. As Morocco re-joins the institution now, with the external backing of its claims to Western Sahara from the United States, it may do so with the leverage of being an active member in these circles in order to secure economic and diplomatic advantages, while remaining confident that its sovereignty over Western Sahara is supported by a powerful foreign power. Moreover, Morocco is currently aiming to join the [Economic Community of West African States](#), an organisation headquartered in Nigeria. Membership in organisations such as these, alongside the potential future foreign investment outlined above, may position the Kingdom not only as a regional player in Africa but as a political and economic leader.

UN Action in Western Sahara

The 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire between Morocco and the Frente Polisario initially called for a referendum in Western Sahara to determine its future political status. However, in the thirty years since the internationally mandated end to the fighting, no referendum has taken place — as the Kingdom has consistently expressed concerns over alleged inflation of the reported number of refugees in the territory — with relatively few external actors exerting substantive pressure to do so. In contrast— as some Moroccan [media](#) and political outlets have suggested — recent events may indicate that this official policy has changed, or at the very least, been removed from the UN's priorities.

In early November, the Frente Polisario [announced](#) a formal end to the 1991 ceasefire after Moroccan troops launched an operation towards the southern border of Western Sahara. The incident sparked momentary concern of wide-spread or violent escalation. Both the Moroccan government and Frente Polisario were also incredibly quick to condemn the other and reiterate their respective

policies on the territory. However, one body that was notably absent was the United Nations. Despite the fact this event marked the termination of a major UN-brokered ceasefire, the UN failed to offer any significant public reaction. Moreover, the United Nations found itself once again notably silent following the announcement of the United States' recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Saharan territory, an unquestionably consequential policy shift. Sources in the Moroccan media have been quick to notice this and have drawn attention to the UN's silence not as a moment of quiet negligence, but rather, as a resounding statement in and of itself. While some analysts may feel that the UN's absence from recent events was a reflection of a deliberate change in policy in favour of Morocco, others simply believe that the silence reveals that the UN has settled into an acceptance of Morocco's de facto control over the territory.

This shift, of course, did not come out of nowhere. As political analyst Samir Bennis noted in a [piece](#) for *Morocco World News*, at several points in the past 30 years the UN Security Council has passed updated resolutions that have clarified the UN's position on Western Sahara. The most recent resolution pertaining to Western Sahara was actually adopted on October 30th, 2020, [Resolution 2548](#), which officially contains the most updated UN language on the situation, reaffirms support for past UNSC resolutions. However, Resolution 2548 notably lacks explicit calls for a referendum in Western Sahara, and instead favours a peaceful and diplomatic solution that addresses the needs of all relevant parties. While not a momentous shift in public attitude, these subtle changes in the UN's stance on Western Sahara — particularly at a time when momentous events regarding the territory are occurring — indicate a gradual inclination towards Morocco's de facto sovereignty over the territory in the long run.

Furthermore, regardless of the nuances of official resolutions, it is important to highlight that the reality on the ground in Western Sahara has favoured a de facto state of Moroccan sovereignty with significant levels of autonomy. This is where the United States re-enters into the discussion. While President Trump is the first American President to publicise support for total Moroccan sovereignty over the region, Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama have all expressed varying degrees of [support](#) for Morocco's push to make Western Sahara a semi-autonomous region. These policies were based on the growing belief that they represented the most viable method for any UN-led peace process. Moroccan policymakers, therefore, also grew to expect this pattern from US policy and could act accordingly. This starting point — supplemented by the negotiations described earlier in the policy outlook and the sudden nature of President Trump's change in opinion — offers far greater insight into the motivations and outcomes of the US policy on Western Sahara.

Of course, prior to the United States, [several](#) governments outwardly supported Morocco's claims to the region. Yet,

potentially of greater note are the examples certain states' quiet acceptance of Morocco's sovereignty over the territory as the de facto norm, and the subsequent deals they have made with the Kingdom based on that acceptance. In other words, over the years, several states have launched economic ventures with Morocco that may contradict their official stances on Western Sahara. In 2019 the European Parliament officially consented to a [Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement](#) between Morocco and the EU. Included in the contents of the [partnership](#) are waters off the coast of Western Sahara, coastline previously deemed non-Moroccan waters. Many EU countries have expressed opposition to Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in the past, however, their most recent actions seem to suggest that the economic benefits of supporting Morocco's claims to the territory and investing in a Moroccan Western Sahara far outweigh the benefits of refuting its claims. The United States' official endorsement of Morocco's sovereignty in Western Sahara, therefore, can only serve to further Morocco's claims to the territory and the silent economic support that will come with it.

In contrast to the subtleties of the positions of some of its European counterparts, France has been a long-term ally and a major foreign investor in Morocco, a reality drawn largely from the nation's colonial past. While France does not officially endorse Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, it has significantly contributed to long-term projects — including the Kingdom's train line that they hope to build through Western Sahara — that acquiesce Morocco's de facto control over the territory. These investments have a long historical precedent. For example, during the 1975 Western Sahara War, France officially remained neutral but covertly supplied Morocco with large arms shipments.¹ At the time, this support for the Kingdom was far from a well-kept secret; outside parties knew that France clearly favoured Moroccan forces over the Algerian-backed Sahrawi forces. France backtracked on this favouritism in the following years over increased financially motivated interests in forming closer relations with Algeria. However, the country's stance on Western Sahara has waxed and waned in accordance with its relations with both of the formerly colonised states. Today, France claims neutrality on the matter, but, like the United States, has also been a proponent of Morocco's proposal for autonomy in the region. Thus, the greatest evidence of its stance can be drawn from investments in the area and its deep stakes in a number of significant projects — including ones that take place in Western Sahara — that promise to bring Morocco to the forefront of regional development.

Conclusion

Washington's announcement that it would publicly back Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara sent waves through the international diplomatic community. This policy shift, a product of years of covert diplomacy, was to be exchanged for Morocco's normalisation of ties with Israel. This quid pro quo, a signature of the Trump administration's foreign policy approach, has far-reaching consequences that will continue to unfold in Israel, Palestine, Morocco, and throughout the MENA region. However, as Morocco now wields a strong international backer in its claims to Western Sahara, a new \$1 billion arms deal, and the promise of future economic cooperation with a number of countries, including France, the UAE, and Israel itself, the Kingdom has undoubtedly secured a major victory. Yet, the formal normalisation of ties also raises questions with regards to Morocco's future role in relation to Israel and the Palestinians, a conflict that the Kingdom has played an active role in for decades. While many facets of Morocco's political and economic future look bright, it will have to carefully navigate its newfound position with respect to Palestine and the Palestinian people it has publicly supported for so long. Thus, much remains to be worked out in the nuances of the new Morocco-Israel relationship, the consequences of which will likely influence the future proliferation of normalisation throughout the MENA region.

¹ Naylor, Phillip. "Spain and France and the Decolonization of Western Sahara: Parity and Paradox, 1975-1987". *Africa Today*, Vol 34, No. 3. (7-16). 1987