



## A Paradigm Shift in the Recognition of Moroccan Sovereignty Over Western Sahara

Safwaan Zamakda Allison

Lews Castle College, University of The Highlands and Islands, Stornoway, Scotland, United Kingdom

[20009746@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:20009746@uhi.ac.uk)

### ABSTRACT

**Abstract.** Since the independence of Morocco from France in 1956, the area known as Western Sahara has been in dispute between several parties including Morocco, Spain [who previously administered it], Algeria, Mauritania, and the Saharawi Arab Republic. In recent years, Spain and Mauritania have relinquished claims. Recent political maneuvers by Morocco, the USA, Jordan and other states have given rise to the proposition that a Paradigm shift is taking place, and that Moroccan sovereignty over the entire region is becoming the norm and accepted by the international community. The issue of sovereignty has been a highly contentious issue since the Green March in 1975, but recent developments indicate that this is likely to no longer be the case in the near future.

### To cite this article

[Allison, S. Z. (2021). A Paradigm Shift in the Recognition of Moroccan Sovereignty Over Western Sahara. *The Journal of Middle East and North Africa Sciences*, 7(05), 20-23]. (P-ISSN 2412- 9763) - (e-ISSN 2412-8937). [www.jomenas.org](http://www.jomenas.org).3

**Keywords:** Morocco, Western Sahara, Moroccan Sahara, Sovereignty, Opinion.

### 1. Introduction:

Since the 1975 Madrid Accords, the territory known as Western Sahara has been administered by the Kingdom of Morocco. Morocco has administered the overwhelming majority of the territory, and the vast majority of inhabitants are Moroccan and identify themselves as such. This is especially the case since the Green March of November 1975. On the 10th of December 2020, the USA recognised full Moroccan sovereignty of the entire territory. This has heralded renewed efforts by the Kingdom of Morocco to obtain the recognition of the international community to recognise Western Sahara as an integral part of the Kingdom.

### 2. The Current Position

Since 1975, few countries have accepted Moroccan sovereignty over the entire territory. However, in recent time, there has been a concerted effort by the Kingdom of Morocco to convince the international community to recognise its sovereignty over the entire territory of Western Sahara.

On the 10th of December 2020, the USA recognised full Moroccan sovereignty of the entire territory. This was considered to be a huge win for King Mohammed VI. The Trump administration set the ball rolling by stating that the USA accepted “Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and reaffirms its support for Morocco’s serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory”. The

administration could not have been more unequivocal. This was compounded by the fact that the USA then promised to open a diplomatic mission in the territory.

Subsequently, there was an outcry from various countries, such as Algeria, who robustly decried the decision to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over the entirety of Western Sahara. Algeria called the move “destabilising” for the region.

Notwithstanding this, the efforts of the Kingdom of Morocco have not been in vain, and numerous countries have jumped onto the bandwagon and recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the region. In testament to the diplomatic dexterity shown the by Moroccans, over 15 consulates have been opened in the Western Sahara region. The most notable of which is the opening of the Jordanian Consulate in Laayoune and accredited to the Kingdom of Morocco, by the Jordanian and Moroccan Foreign Ministers. This is the third Arab consulate in the region. This demonstrates a turning of the tide in respect of the Arab nations.

Conversely, NGOs around the world have expressed their dismay, but, as President Trump stated, it is manifest that the tide has turned and that “Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution”. This is further highlighted by the fact that very few countries diplomatically recognise any entity other than Morocco as sovereign over the territory, most of which are impoverished African nations. The list is swiftly dwindling. El Salvador and Cape Verde have both withdrawn their recognition of independence movements in recent years.

The persuasive influence of both Jordan and the USA recognising Moroccan sovereignty is likely to hold sway with other countries. Both the King of Morocco and the King of Jordan enjoy high regard with Muslims around the world, and both have a high degree of authority arising from the fact that they are both descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Accordingly, there is the possibility that the Muslim ummah (community) around the world are likely to see that both of the “Commanders of the faithful”, who hold both spiritual, legal and political legitimacy have reached a consensus for the faithful to follow. This facet cannot be underestimated.

The Moroccan government has worked tirelessly to promote the notion that it is the only lawful authority in the region. This has included before the High Court of New Zealand, which decided in favour of the Kingdom of Morocco in its ability to export natural resources from Western Sahara. Further, Israel has shown a strong willingness to recognise the legitimacy of the Moroccan territorial claims.

### 3. The American Decision

On the 10th of December 2020, the USA recognised full Moroccan sovereignty of the entire territory of Western Sahara. This was considered to be monumental, especially given the standing of the USA, and the fact that the Kingdom of Morocco was the first state to recognise the independence of the USA in December 1777. It appears as if this recognition was in exchange for the formation of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Morocco and the State of Israel. Whilst this element of the agreement is somewhat controversial in Morocco, many citizens appear to reluctantly accept this in return for the USA’s assistance to help turn the tide in respect of recognition of the international community of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. The American support for the paradigmatic shift for supporting Morocco’s sovereignty of Western Sahara was proudly heralded by the visit of the American Ambassador who wrote that he was the “first U.S. ambassador to visit the Moroccan Sahara” and that “it is such an honor for me to visit this stunningly beautiful and critically important region of Morocco” upon his visit to Dakhla in Western Sahara. The position of the world’s most powerful country is manifest. The persuasive authority of this move is colossal.

Morocco has been known, for many years, to have an unofficial relation with Israel. Whilst many Moroccans feel that Israel lacks legitimacy or otherwise deals with Palestinians unfairly, with the establishment of diplomatic relations, this can be used to ensure that the rights of Palestinians are safeguarded. There is also the possibility of economic benefit to both Morocco and Israel owing to religious-based tourism, and the fact that a large number of Israeli citizens trace their roots back to Morocco. With the assistance of the USA, positive steps can be taken to safeguard the rights of Palestinians, greater trade and

cooperation will be possible, and that Morocco will be in a position to address issues with the frankness and openness required, rather than simply behind the scenes and on an unofficial basis.

### 4. The Jordanian Decision

Whilst the American decision was in the pipeline, on the 20th of November 2020, King Abdullah II of Jordan and King Mohammed VI of Morocco spoke at great lengths in a telephone call. This cemented the friendly and cordial relationship between the two Muslim Kingdoms, especially after the warm state visit of Abdullah II to Morocco in 2017. As mentioned above, both monarchs enjoy a high degree of respect and esteem both their respective populations and Muslims around the world. This has been heightened in regard to the Jordanian Monarch by virtue of his concerted efforts to bring unity to the Muslim global community, as evidenced by the Amman Message 2004, which demanded respect, unity and tolerance amongst the Muslim world, and holds the status of a fatwa issued by over 200 of the most highly respected scholars from in excess of 50 different countries. Moreover, the academic efforts of the Jordanian Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre and the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, headed by Prince Ghazi bin Mohammed, have spearheaded the issue of Islamic unity. Therefore, the Jordanian decision is likely to have a profound impact on the Islamic world. An example of this was the visit of Prince Ghazi to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, which provided greater impetus for other Muslims around the world to do the same, and to support the beleaguered Palestinian community.

The Moroccan Foreign Minister, Mr Bourita, has stated that the “the Palestinian cause... [is] on an equal footing with the Sahara issue”. By conflating the two, the Kingdom of Morocco seeks to harness the impetus within the Muslim community to resolve the Palestinian issue to also resolve the issue of Western Sahara in favour of Morocco, and for the Muslim and Arab worlds to see the issue of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as a religious cause. To labour this point further, Bourita reiterated “the historical Hashemite [Jordanian] custodianship of Christian and Muslim holy sites in Al-Quds Asharif.” By placing both issues on an equal footing, it is likely that Jordan is an influential partner of Morocco in securing a paradigmatic shift in favour of the international community recognising Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Whilst the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has not explicitly stipulated that it accepts and recognises the sovereignty of Morocco over the entirety of Western Sahara, it has unequivocally implicitly done so, by virtue of opening a consulate in the province and by King Abdullah II sending his Foreign Minister to open the consulate along with the Moroccan Foreign Minister. This is a clear and unwavering endorsement of Moroccan

sovereignty over the region. It is therefore likely that other Muslim countries will follow suit.

### 5. On the ground

Since 1975, the population of Western Sahara has remained exceptionally low. Of approximately 500,000 individuals living in the region, less than 85,000 have roots in the territory predating the Green March. Very few individuals in the region support independence.

In 2002, King Mohammed VI issued a decree which instituted the Agency for the Development of the Southern Provinces. As a result, investment has poured into the territory from Morocco- especially in the form of infrastructure, poverty alleviation and economic support. This has further entrenched the region is distinctly Moroccan, especially in light of the fact that regional development has been at the behest of Rabat. More than 70 billion Moroccan Dirhams [approx. \$8 billion USD] have been invested in the region in recent years. This has brought about a tremendous level of development.

As per Singh and Chudusama (2020) “in order to eradicate poverty one needs to provide micro-finance through high-quality community organisations, enhance capabilities of the poor while providing social safety nets to the poor and vulnerable, ensure good governance within community organisations and institutions supporting them, continue to diversify livelihood options, and provide market linkages to small producers.” This is evidently the approach taken by the Kingdom of Morocco. Problems relating to poverty have been tackled head-on, with infrastructure, access to markets and social security projects, which are key elements of good governance.

Although Morocco has made substantial investments in Western Sahara, the region is still without a university. This means that students from this region have no choice but to move to the north if they wish to pursue higher education and is an issue that the Kingdom of Morocco ought to address in the most urgent manner. One proposal could be the introduction of a federal university taught at pre-existing colleges or academic partner institutions within the region, as is done with the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland (which has a regional university structure). Furthermore, given the fact that the COVID-19 crisis has brought much of the education system online, the possibility to having an online university such as the Open University cannot be discounted. There are ‘open universities’ in many countries, including the Arab Open University, which already exists in three Arab countries and is expanding into the Palestinian territories. Universities would bring the region a great deal of prestige, and by utilising local knowledge, teaching the history of the region and its cultures, as well as traditional subjects, an influx of students may very well bring in money to the region.

With the rapid inauguration of numerous consulates, it is likely that Western Sahara will be an important forum

for diplomacy. The USA, Jordan, Swaziland [Eswatini], the UAE, Zambia and other countries have recently inaugurated consulates in Laayoune and Dakhla in Western Sahara. Accordingly, Western Sahara is punching well above its weight in respect of diplomacy and the consular and diplomatic missions there, especially given that the region is one of the most sparsely populated on earth. The Swazi Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that it “had the honor to... recognize the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the entire territory of the Sahara”. The Moroccan Embassy to South Africa proudly boasted of the paradigmatic shift in favour of recognition of Western Sahara as an integral part of Morocco in the fact that “the city of Laayoune has witnessed a strong diplomatic dynamic with the inauguration of the consular representations of the Union of the Comoros, Gabon, the Central African Republic, Sao Tome and Principe, Burundi, in addition to Côte d'Ivoire.”

Morocco has catered for food security, employment, housing, social security, education and other needs of those in Western Sahara. This has shown that Morocco has shown a *bona fide* intent with respect to the territory, both in terms of its push to obtain the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty from the international community, but to also develop the region and bring it to a par with every other Moroccan region. In fact, even the trusty Moroccan postman, working for the state post office (Barid Al Maghrib), delivers mail across Western Sahara. With increased urbanisation, literacy levels have improved drastically, health indicators have improved, and even COVID-19 resilience has been achieved by the Moroccan state. Thusly, it is evidently the case that it is firmly within the best interests of Western Sahara to remain and loyal and integral territory of Morocco.

### 6. Conclusion

If the current rate of development is sustained, and that Morocco continues to score political and diplomatic points as well as it has done over the course of the past few months, it is apparent that the renewed push for the world to recognise Moroccan sovereignty of Western Sahara will succeed. Both the USA and Jordan are pivotal allies, whose assistance is likely to bring about a paradigmatic shift in the international order in favour of recognising Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. The USA, being an UN Security Council permanent member, and Jordan being an influential kingdom ruled by a monarch who derives substantial authority from being a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, will provide substantial assistance to the Moroccan renewed campaign. The paradigmatic shift is in full swing, diplomatically, socially, politically and economically.

It is also clear that the region will not only become a valued part of the Kingdom, but will also be a regional powerhouse for trade, natural resources and even diplomacy and politics. Recent developments show that

there is a strong indication that in future, the territorial dispute will be firmly settled, and that Western Sahara will inevitably be held by the community to be an integral part of the Kingdom of Morocco.

#### Conflict of Interest

All authors declare no competing interests.

#### Corresponding Author:

Safwaan Zamakda Allison,  
Lews Castle College, University of The Highlands and Islands, Stornoway, Scotland, United Kingdom  
E-mail: [20009746@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:20009746@uhi.ac.uk)

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Received March 24, 2021; reviewed April 12, 2021; accepted April 19, 2021; published online May 01, 2021