

US Administrations and Morocco from 1974 to 2021: The Double Standards of a Political Machine in Regard to the Western Sahara Conflict

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Abstract

The United States has been instrumental in the Western Sahara conflict through their continuous support to the Kingdom of Morocco and its military occupation of Western Sahara. Even though the support was not always public, given that international law is clear on the status of Western Sahara as Non-Self-Governing Territory, the public USA image, and what we can infer from its confidential correspondence and secret meetings, demonstrate a double standard since 1975, in terminology, speech, and even action. This is further demonstrated by the various presidents' fickle positions, not always being in accordance with the US Senate and the American Personal Envoys of the Secretary Generals of the United Nations. The goal of this paper is to show the different political stances of the US and their active contribution to the stalemate existing in Western Sahara, by analyzing and synthetizing the political support to Morocco and the influence in the United Nations. Financial and military support will however be excluded from this analysis.

Keywords: Morocco, Western Sahara, US politics, US Presidential Office.

 DOI: 10.21747/21846251/jour2a2

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Introduction

This paper tackles the issue of the public vs concealed policies and statements done by the US Administrations throughout the years, regarding Western Sahara, from 1974 to 2022. This will be attained by opposing public statements with internal communications and private letters/documents that have been published or/and declassified over the years, as analyzed by Ohaegbulam the US “... *could have supported instead of obstructing UN efforts to organize a free and fair referendum in the Western Sahara. [...] The policy has betrayed not only U.S. realism but also U.S. moral values and principles*” (Ohaegbulam 140). And yet they choose to support an illegality, and a violation of International Law that only resulted in a stalemate (Ohaegbulam 138-139) of the conflict and recently the return to armed conflict, putting in danger the stability of the entire region.

Since President Richard Nixon the support of the US to the Moroccan military invasion of Western Sahara has had various aspects. The “long lasting” relation with Morocco, allegedly since 1777, is often invoked to justify the commercial, military and friendship ties between the Kingdom and the United States. What we can attest is that, in 1777 Sultan Sidi Muhammed Ben Abdullah sent a letter to George Washington, though he had to wait a considerable amount of time for an answer from the later, according to Mary V. Thompson: “*On December 1, 1789, George Washington sat down to write a letter to an old friend from his country. Ironically, however, the letter’s recipient was someone Washington had never met.*” (Thompson).

The territory of Western Sahara was one of the two Spanish territories in the African continent after its colonial distribution following the Berlin Conference in 1885. In fact, Spain named its colony, Province 53 of Spain, making the Saharawi population, Spanish nationals by default.

Until today Spain remains administrator *de jure* of the territory, since the decolonization process was never finished, even though the United Nations urged Spain to hasten the process and to enable the Saharawi population to exercise their right of self-determination, through a referendum, as established in Article 73 of the United Nations Charta and UN General Assembly Resolution 1514.

“According to scholar Stephen Zunes, based on interviews with former Saharan colonial officials in 1990, the US government had threatened to cut off all military aid and technology assistance to Spain, and even threatened to impose a broader embargo if Spain confronted Morocco militarily.” (Neutrality or complicity? The United States and the 1975 Moroccan takeover of the Spanish Sahara 303)

Instead, Morocco started its military invasion of Western Sahara on the 31st October 1975 and on the 6th of November, under the name “Green March”, a propaganda move, composed by 350.00 of Moroccan settlers (and of dozens of thousands of military personnel), that entered Western Sahara, chanting the Moroccan anthem, and carrying the Coran in one hand and the Moroccan flag in the other (Bertolozzi 2) There were also flags from Jordan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia.

This move was orchestrated in order to allow Spain to exit the territory, leaving the Saharawi population unprotected and at the hands of the Moroccans, who immediately started a genocide (Sumario 1/2015), with bombings and attacking Saharawi civilians including by using napalm and white phosphorus which led to a mass exodus mainly of older men, women, and children to the Algerian desert (Beristain, Torres and Villa).

Few days after the March, on 14 November 1975, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania signed an illegal treaty, the “Madrid Accords”, to divide the Western Sahara and share its resources. Mauritania would however withdraw from the territory in 1979 and recognized the SADR (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic) (Pereira 22). Spain continued to have

commercial benefits from the Natural Resources and Morocco occupied almost 80% of the territory. The Polisario front that had already fought for independence during Spanish ruling, and without major support. In fact, Algeria never supported Polisario in any ways before October-November 1975. Polisario's main support during the Spanish era came from Libya. Kaddafi started supporting the Saharawi movement after Martyr El Wali made his first visit to Libya in 1972 few months before the official foundation of Polisario. In the period of 1970-1973 a group of Saharawi activists were already seeking support from Libya. Basiri had in fact already sent a letter to Kaddafi before 1970 to ask for support and weapons. Undermanned and with extremely weak military means Polisario was able to confront the Moroccan army and win important battles to the surprise of the Kingdom and its allies. The US did not want any confrontation between Spain and Morocco (Pereira) and was convinced that Polisario could develop into another socialist state, like other ex-colonies, and also underestimated the resistance of the Saharawi people, their organization, unity, and political resilience. As for Algeria, the formative years of its leaders along with their political socialization have shaped their stance towards the cause (Elaggoune and Aty 36). This stance is a form of commitment to the principle of self-determination (Elaggoune and Aty 37).

Although the military invasion took place during the Cold War, the Soviet Union never recognized the SADR or the Polisario Front (Zunes 430), in fact the only two European States to recognize the SADR were former Yugoslavia (November 28, 1984) and Albania (December 29, 1987).

Morocco was losing the war. So, in order to regain control, it started in the 1980's the construction of a military wall that has become known as "The Berm" (Mundy 221), which currently is almost 3000km making it the longest heavily armed military wall in the modern world and turned Western Sahara into one of the most mined territories on the planet (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor). In 1991 under the auspices

of the United Nations and the African Union, of which the SADR is a founding member, a cease-fire agreement was signed by Morocco and Polisario, with the holding of a *referendum* as one of the principal points of the agreement. To date no *referendum* was held, since Morocco never accepted, after the cease-fire, any of the several solutions presented by the UN mediators (Soroeta). In November 2020 after a serious violation by Morocco, which attacked Saharawi civilians that made a non-violent protest in the Buffer zone, the cease-fire ended, and the second war started between the Moroccan army and Polisario Front (CEAUP).

MINURSO (Mission of the United Nations for the Referendum in Western Sahara) was not able to enforce its mandate which consists in the monitoring of the cease-fire and the implementation of the *referendum*. The inclusion of a human rights component in its mandate has been denied by France that threatens with a veto if it is ever proposed (Besheer; Bolopion)

The US also integrates a so called “Group of Friends of Western Sahara”¹. This group was initially created to help MINURSO implement the Settlement Plan. However, France, the US, and Spain (a non-U.N. Permanent Security Council Member) – which is unwilling to risk its bilateral relationship with Rabat over the issue – generally support Morocco, with notable differences in the vehemence with which they do so, France is more open in its support and the US more discreet. Being this group one of the major roadblocks of the Peace Process. Russia, the fifth member of this group has been standing alone in defense of a more balanced position towards the resolution of the conflict.

President Gerald R. Ford (1974-1977)

It was during President’ Fords Administration that the invasion of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania took place, as well as the rushed and

¹ Composed by France, Spain, Russia, the US, and the UK

unilateral withdrawal of the Spanish forces, ignoring the UN resolutions (that counted with the positive vote of the USA) and the opinion issued in October 1975 by the International Court of Justice at the Hague, that was clear stating that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had any ties that would constitute legal sovereignty over Western Sahara (International Court of Justice). Morocco was neck deep in social and economic problems (Hodges) and King Hassan II, who suffered two successive coup attempts (1971 and 1972), intended to divert the attention of the infernal problems (Gari), the plunder of the natural resources of Western Sahara (Western Sahara Resource Watch), and create jobs for the huge mass of Moroccan unemployed citizens that led to civil unrest. The Madrid Accords, signed by Spain, Mauritania and Morocco is illegal and was never recognized neither by the OAU nor the UN, nor the US as a state or by the UN security council. In fact, the UN Security Council adopted resolution (S/RES/380 (1975)), condemning the invasion and calling on Morocco to withdraw from the Territory. The USA, as a permanent member with veto power in the Security Council, had therefore to vote this and all following resolutions. (United Nations Security Council).

“In 1975 Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told President Gerald Ford that he hoped for “a rigged U.N. vote” affirming Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.” (Smith).

King Hassan II had written two letters on the Western Sahara issue, one year prior to the invasion of the territory, one to US President Nixon delivered on August 6th, 1974, and a second to President Ford on August 13th, 1974. President Nixon never answered the letter since it arrived shortly before the end of his term in the White House. It has fallen, therefore, on President Ford to answer both letters. The content of the reply, however, was not a settled issue in the administration. On the 5th of September 1974 a *memorandum* by Rosemary Niehuss, of the National Security Council Staff, to the Secretary of State Kissinger, stated that she had a problem with the recommendation that the letter of King Hassan

should be answered focusing heavily on responding in substance on the Spanish Sahara issue.

Mrs. Niehuss added that she did not see the merit in using the answer in order to raise the Spanish Sahara issue along the lines that State has suggested in the draft reply. Mrs. Niehuss further strongly recommend avoiding raising this issue at the highest level unless absolutely essential and there was a natural way of doing so by confining President Ford's reply to a response to the congratulatory message.

"I have problems with this recommendation. In principle, I do not believe that President Ford needs to respond to the letter to President Nixon. In particular, I do not see the merit in using that peg in order to raise the Spanish Sahara issue along the lines that State has suggested in the draft reply. It seems to me that we want to avoid raising this issue at the highest level unless absolutely essential and there is a natural way of doing so by confining President Ford's reply to a response to the congratulatory message.

5th of September 1974 a memorandum by Rosemary Niehuss" (Niehuss 2)

The advice of Mrs. Niehuss was taken in account and the answer to Hassan II was circumstantial without substance and not making any remarks on Western Sahara (Niehuss 3).

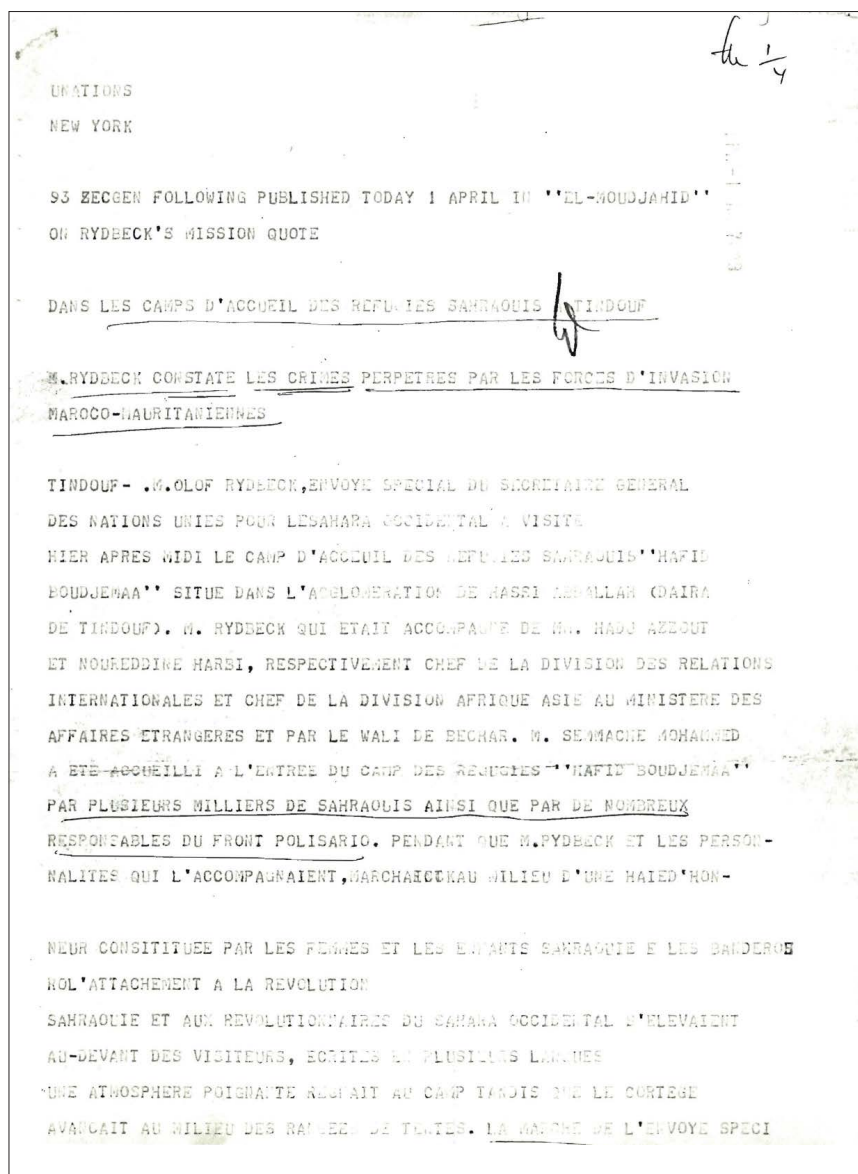
So, it is clear that, a public support of Morocco by the US on the issue of Western Sahara was avoided at all costs, although on the background the military training, advise and equipment sales was ongoing as well as lobbying in the international forums.

In 1976, a Special Representative concerning Spanish Sahara, was sent to Western Sahara, for the first time directly by Secretary General of the United Nations Kurt Waldheim (MINURSO). It was the Swedish ambassador Olof Rydbeck, who visited the Saharawi refugee camps and saw first-hand the atrocities committed by the Moroccan military against

the Saharawi civilians, namely the injured survivors of the Napalm bombings. (Waldheim). Only brief references in the Algerian press about his arrival and departure and some oral testimonies from Saharawi leaders that accompanied Ambassador Rydbeck reflect the horror at the sight of these victims.

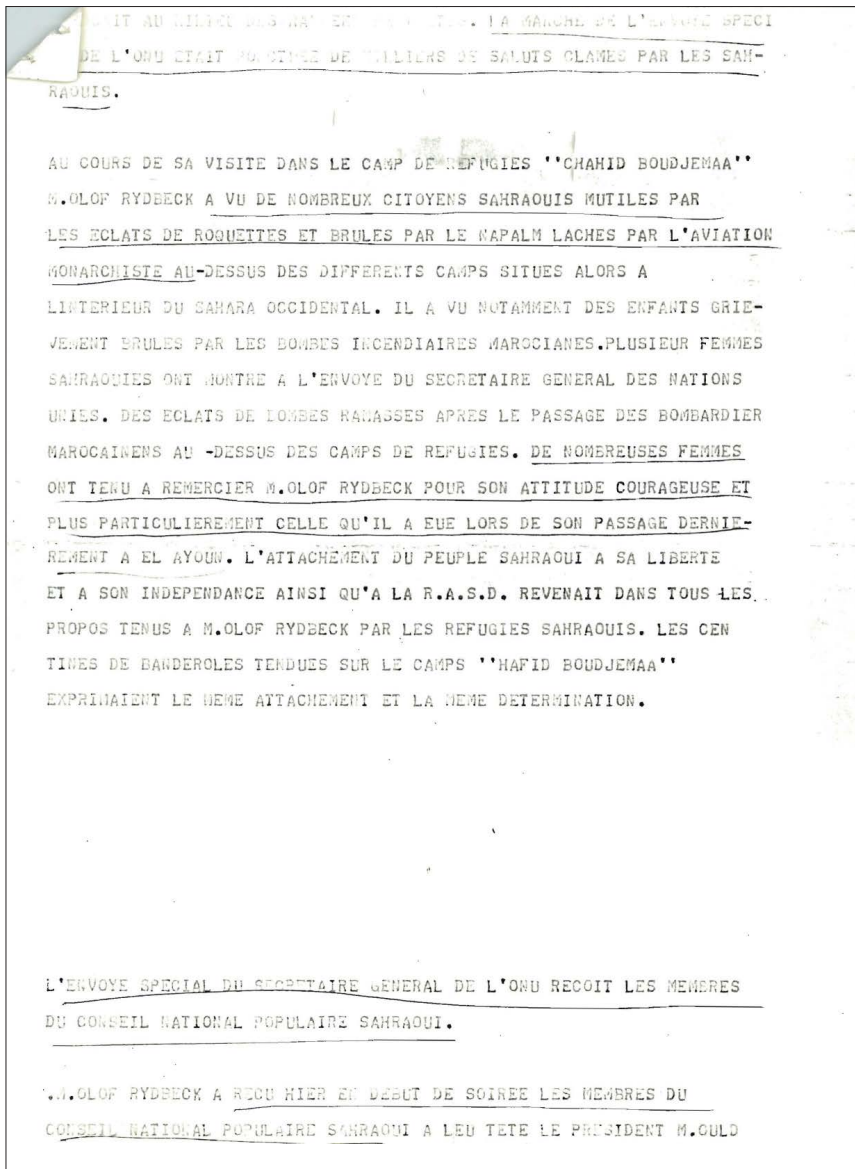
“Dans les camps d’accueil des refugies Saharaouis a Tindouf M. Rydbeck constate les crimes perpetree par les forces d’invasion Maroco-Maruitaniennes Tindouf–
..... Au cours de sa visite dans le camp de refugies « Chahid Boudjemma » M. Olof Rydbeck a vu de nombreux citoyens sahraouis mutilés par les éclats de roquettes et brûlés par le Napalm lâchés par l’aviation monarchiste au dessus des différents camps situés alors à l’intérieur du Sahara Occidental. Il a vu notamment des enfants grièvement brûlés par les bombes incendiaires marocaines. Plusieurs Femmes ont montré à l’envoyé du secrétaire général des Nations Unies des éclats de bombes ramassés après le passage des bombardiers marocains au dessus des camps des refugies.” (Waldheim).

Illustration 01 – 1st April in the newspaper «El-Moudjahid»



Source: (Waldheim)

Illustration 02 – 1st April in the newspaper «El-Moudjahid»



Source: (Waldheim)

President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981)

The Moroccan Kingdom started to build the longest military defense wall in the world, during the Carter Administration, adding extensions to it during all US Presidencies that followed him. According to Stephan Zunes *“As a result of initiatives by the United States ... a ten-foot-high, 400-mile-long sand barrier with land mines and sophisticated electronic devices was built. Since then, with U.S. assistance Morocco has gradually expanded the wall to include much of Western Sahara...”* (Zunes 424).

President Carter also had some correspondence with Algeria and Morocco as we can see below.

*“Letter From President Carter to Algerian President Boumediene
Washington, June 29, 1978*

Dear Mr. President:

Thank you for your letter of May 20. I attach great importance to our relations with Algeria and am glad for this opportunity to renew our dialogue. I was pleased too that Secretary Vance and Foreign Minister Bouteflika were able to have such a useful discussion, when the Minister delivered your letter.

I completely understand your concern about events in the Sahara. The United States is in the fortunate position of enjoying good relations with all three governments involved in this question. While maintaining a position of neutrality ourselves, we will continue to urge our friends in each country to seek a peaceful settlement. I was encouraged to learn that there have been some discussions, and I earnestly hope these eventually will prove successful, for we would like to see peace restored in North Africa.” (64. Letter From President Carter to Algerian President Boumediene)

*“Letter From President Carter to King Hassan II of Morocco
Washington, December 13, 1979*

Your Majesty:

I would like to take the occasion of Ambassador Duke’s arrival in Rabat to reiterate our interest in a continuing close relationship with a strong Morocco at peace with its neighbors.

Now that we have begun the process of notifying Congress of our intentions to provide Morocco with new forms and quantities of military equipment, I hope that you will move boldly toward the achievement of a negotiated settlement of the dispute in the Western Sahara. Such an initiative would be particularly useful to us as we proceed with the process of Congressional consultations on specific sales. I hope an occasion will arise soon which will provide the opportunity for a tangible step toward negotiations.

The volatile nature of current world events makes it all the more important that the Western Sahara dispute be resolved peacefully before it can be exploited by other interests. I was particularly pleased when Deputy Secretary Christopher reported to me that you have a plan for negotiations in 1980 that you will communicate to me at the appropriate time.²

Ambassador Duke has my full confidence and I hope you will speak to him as you would to me personally. In particular, I hope you will feel free to convey to him your views on how a peaceful settlement of the Western Sahara dispute might be achieved.

Sincerely,

Jimmy Carter” (250. Letter From President Carter to King Hassan II of Morocco)

In these examples we can see the double standards of the US political machine. To the Algerian president Boumediene he conveyed the “neutrality” on the Western Sahara Conflict, while in the Letter to King

Hassan II, President Carter informed that the US would provide Morocco with new forms and quantities of military equipment and, hoped that Hassan II would move boldly toward the achievement of a negotiated settlement to the dispute in the Western Sahara. The transfer of military equipment that could “help a negotiated settlement” and, at the same time, encouraging Hassan II to be “bold”, represented a clear US hazard to Polisario and a clear support to Morocco.

In December 1980, President Carter contacted the Polisario Front, and sent Mr. Edmund Hool, a State Department Official to the refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria. The goal of this visit was to present a proposal of the Carter Administration regarding a solution for the conflict through a form of autonomy for Western Sahara within the Moroccan Kingdom (Bender, Coleman and Sklar) This proposal was rejected by the Saharawi leaders.

President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989)

When the Reagan Administration took office, the official contact initiated by President Carter with Polisario Front were immediately cut. President Reagan let it clear that his support of Morocco was untouchable (Liebenow 100). Morris Draper, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the State Department’s Bureau for Near-eastern and South Asian Affairs addressed the Congress in January 1981 stating that: *“Morocco is important to broad American interests and occupies a pivotal strategic area. We intend to maintain and re-enforce our historically close relationship with reliability and consistency as our watchword”*. (Daramola)

Polisario Front was winning the war, despite of the military capacity of the Moroccan Armed Forces. President Reagan sent not only General Vernon Walters to reassure King Hassan II of the US support but also the Assistant Secretary of Defence Francis West, who made a reconnaissance tour on board of a Moroccan helicopter in order to assess the situation. As a result, 30 US military instructors were sent to Morocco (Bender, Coleman and Sklar).

In May 1982 King Hassan II visited the US and had an official meeting with President Reagan. In the published Remarks after the meeting President Reagan said:

"I deeply value the depth of experience and breadth of vision that His Majesty brings to the issues of profound mutual concern. His Majesty briefed me on the latest developments in his efforts to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflict in the Western Sahara. And I expressed my admiration for his support of the OAU, Organization of African Unity, referendum." (Reagan)

Once again, the public speech of the US Administration, differs from the covert actions taken by the Administration, that consisted in a guaranteed support to Morocco, which did not have any goal of a peaceful solution.

"1 July 1985 – 11 August 1988

A joint effort of good offices UN-OAU culminates in the presentation to Morocco and the Polisario of the 'Settlement Proposals' for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. These proposals are reiterated in the Secretary-General's Report S/22464, of 9 April 1991, and adopted by Security Council Resolution 690 of 19 April 1991. It would know as 'Settlement Plan'.

"30 August 1988

The two parties agreed on the UN "settlement proposals," which pushed for a ceasefire (effective in 1991) and the holding of a referendum to enable the people of Western Sahara to choose between independence and integration with Morocco." (MINURSO)

President George H. W. Bush (1989-1993)

George H. Bush's Presidency took a step back in the support of Morocco's claim. President Bush had no interest to have problems with Algeria due to the economic interest of the US at that time (Daramola). We can, therefore,

see a more neutral approach from the Bush Administration, which stated clearly to the Moroccan King, that the conflict was to be solved under the auspices of the United Nations and in their framework to obtain a peaceful settlement of the conflict (Daramola).

It was also during this administration that the United Nations, seemed to finally take action in regards of the Western Sahara issue. With the US as penholder of the UN resolutions on Western Sahara and permanent member of the Security Council, the UNSC Resolution 690 established UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in 1991 with the mandate to implement the settlement proposals during a transitional period in which the referendum would be organized. The plan also created the IDC (Identification Commission) to determine the voters (Resolution 690 (1991))

On the 1st of September 1991 the first contingent of 100 MINURSO military observers arrived in El Aaiun, capital of occupied Western Sahara.

On the 6th of September 1991, in the wake of an agreement with the parties (Morocco and Polisario Front), Javier Pèrez de Cuèllar, UN Secretary-General announces the cease-fire. Both sides suspend the military operations.

President Bill Clinton (1993-2001)

During most of President Clinton's two terms, U.S. policy continued to be that of an apparent neutrality but in fact the Bill Clinton Administration encouraged Morocco to abandon the idea of a referendum in Western Sahara and "opt for a negotiated solution through direct talks with the Polisario.". (Berger 4)

The first US Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary General was appointed during Clinton's presidency. James Baker III, a former US Secretary of State. He was able to conduct a round of talks between Morocco and Polisario Front, which led to the adoption of the Houston Accords and

restart of the identification process that had been suspended in 1996. (MINURSO)

The declassified documents, released on May 2, 2020, reflect the strength of US support for Morocco, in the Western Sahara question.

In the memoranda, dated July 25, 1999 penned by security advisor Samuel Berger, he emphasizes that there is no future in the plans for a referendum in Western Sahara and that Morocco will not “countenance any outcome under which it would lose sovereignty over the area.”

President George W. Bush (2001-2009)

Similarly, to the previous administration, and on the contrary of his father’s administration, George W. Bush’s presidency, maintained its “neutral” stance on the Western Sahara. Although, it is clear that, this apparent neutrality favored the autonomy plan of Morocco. Nevertheless, the White House changed its stance on two separate occasions. The first, when John Bolton (former US ambassador to the UN) threatened with the withdrawal of MINURSO and the second occasion when the administration suggested to change the Western Sahara issue from chapter VI to VII of the UN, which would mean that the UN resolutions would be enforced and had to be respected by the parties (Slimi).

In June 2001, James Baker presented a “Framework Agreement” (‘Baker’s Plan I’), in which the *referendum* would be replaced by a vote on limited autonomy. Morocco would control the territory, while the Saharawi would have an exclusive competence over local issues (MINURSO). The framework was accepted by Morocco but rejected by the Polisario. The plan presented did not comply with International Law nor with the UN resolutions, nor was autonomy a realistic approach due to the Moroccan constitution which does not foresee autonomy.

Two years later in 2003, James Baker proposed another plan (Baker Plan II) which provided for a *referendum* in four to five years’ time and offered

the inhabitants a choice between independence, autonomy, or complete integration with Morocco. The plan was accepted by Polisario, Algeria and the Security Council but was rejected by Morocco, a sign that Morocco was not sure of the outcome of the *referendum*. (MINURSO)

In July 2003 James Baker presented a revised version which included safeguards that won Algerian and Polisario support. In this revised version Moroccan settlers were able to vote, but Morocco rejected the plan again, not trusting the voting intentions of its own Moroccan settlers. (MINURSO).

The Bush Administration released a statement supporting the Baker plan II. President Bush, however, was cautious and reiterated that nothing would be “imposed” on Rabat, once again the US double standard concerning Western Sahara was apparent.

In 2007, U.S. Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns stated that Morocco’s 2007 autonomy plan was “a serious and credible proposal,” (Aljazeera) and the State Department in 2008, urged the parties to focus on the possibility of establishing a mutually acceptable autonomy regime in their negotiations.

As the penholder on the Western Sahara issue in the UN Security Council, the US introduced and changed, more and more, the terminology of the resolutions in order to approach the autonomy proposal and avoid words like occupation and occupied Western Sahara, referring to the territory as west or east of the Berm (Moroccan military wall).

“The 2007 Western Sahara Country Report on Human Rights Practices by the US Department of State also noted that political rights for residents in Western Sahara remained circumscribed. It added that “international human rights groups and Sahrawi activists maintained that the Moroccan government subjected Sahrawis who were suspected of supporting either Western Saharan independence or the Polisario to

various forms of surveillance, arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, and in many cases, torture.”” (MINURSO)

President Barack Obama (2009-2017)

In January 2009, the second US Personal Envoy for Western Sahara of the Secretary General of the UN was appointed, the former United States diplomat Christopher Ross.

“After taking up his post, Ross held talks in New York and then in February headed to the region for consultations with Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario. He visited Madrid and Paris and met the new US administration in Washington. While still in listening mode, he made clear that he would try a new approach and not call a fifth negotiation round (Van Walsum held four) until the ground had been prepared sufficiently to make some progress possible.” (MINURSO).

Christopher Ross held talks, visited the neighboring countries, and held meetings with the two parties, yet he did not achieve any momentum nor solution, due to the stern refusal of Morocco to accept any proposal that would not be the autonomy plan.

“Successive administrations of both parties have supported the Kingdom, which has since 2019 purchased billions of dollars’ worth of American weapons. The Clinton Foundation has secured \$12 million in donations from King Mohammed VI and private Moroccan corporations, after which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton encouraged Morocco to abandon the U.N.-sponsored referendum in favor of a negotiated settlement with the POLISARIO. Doing so would have had the effect of relegating Sahrawi leadership to a Moroccan puppet regime, as many Palestinians now view the Palestinian Authority as pandering to Israel post-Oslo.” (Smith).

During the Obama Administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Morocco in November 2009. During the visit, Mrs. Clinton, stated that there had been “no change” in U.S. policy on Western Sahara, meaning that the United States supported the UN led mediation effort and, would not stake out positions about how the UN mediation might best resolve the issue (Voice of America)

This statement is awkward, in the sense that the US are the penholder and permanent member on the UN Security Council and, therefore, are the element with most power on the Western Sahara issue and on the UN proposals.

Hillary Clinton reaffirmed in 2011 in a meeting with Moroccan Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri, that Morocco’s autonomy plan was “*serious, realistic, and credible – a potential approach to satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity.*” And reiterated U.S. support for the UN backed talks with the goal to “*resolving this issue.*” (Congressional Research Service 8)

In January 2012 meeting Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci, Clinton stated, “*We continue to support efforts to find a peaceful, sustainable, mutually agreed upon solution to the conflict. We support the negotiations carried out by the United Nations, and we encourage all parties, including Algeria, to play an active role in trying to move toward a resolution.*” (Congressional Research Service 8). In several other occasions this support to the Autonomy Plan was voiced not only by Clinton, but also, by other members of the Administration, as was the case of a joint statement following President Obama’s meeting with King Mohammed VI at the White House in November 2013.

“The Issue of the Western Sahara

The President pledged to continue to support efforts to find a peaceful, sustainable, mutually agreed-upon solution to the Western Sahara

question. U.S. policy toward the Western Sahara has remained consistent for many years. The United States has made clear that Morocco's autonomy plan is serious, realistic, and credible, and that it represents a potential approach that could satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity. We continue to support the negotiations carried out by the United Nations, including the work of the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy Ambassador Christopher Ross, and urge the parties to work toward a resolution. The two leaders affirmed their shared commitment to the improvement of the lives of the people of the Western Sahara and agreed to work together to continue to protect and promote human rights in the territory." (Office of the Press Secretary)

For the first time the US tried in 2013 that the resolution of the UN Security Council on MINURSO would include a Human Rights Component, the pressure from several US high ranking politicians and US NGO's like the Kennedy Foundation denounced the brutal human rights violations against the Saharawi population in the occupied territories. But the final text did not mention the inclusion since Morocco and France blocked the US attempt.

"This year, the question of the violation of human rights was at the core of discussions. The United States' initial draft resolution attempted to include a proposition to install UN observers to monitor human rights violations and abuses in the occupied Western Sahara. However, in response to fierce resistance from the governments of Morocco and France at the UN Security Council (UNSC), Washington dropped its demand." (Abderrahmane)

President Donald J. Trump (2017-2021)

President Trump did the unthinkable and recognized the Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in a personal tweet:

Illustration 04 – *Donald Trump tweet recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara*



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump

...

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!

8:09 AM · 12/10/20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

29.7K Retweets 4,244 Quote Tweets 178K Likes

Source: (Trump)

“Proclamation on Recognizing The Sovereignty Of The Kingdom Of Morocco Over The Western Sahara

FOREIGN POLICY/Issued on: December 10,2020

The United States affirms, as stated by previous Administrations, its support for Morocco’s autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory. Therefore, as of today, the United States recognizes 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 United States believes that an independent Sahrawi State is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution. We urge the parties to engage in discussions without delay, using Morocco's autonomy plan as the only framework to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution. To facilitate progress toward this aim, the United States will encourage economic and social development with Morocco, including in the Western Sahara territory, and to that end will open a consulate in the Western Sahara territory, in Dakhla, to promote economic and business opportunities for the region.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, DONALD J. TRUMP, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim that, the United States recognizes that the entire Western Sahara territory is part of the Kingdom of Morocco.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this fourth day of December, in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and forty-fifth.

DONALD J. TRUMP” (Trump)

Why did President Trump do this? The response could lie in a diplomatic move in favor of Israel, by gaining the favor of Morocco. However, neither did the deal advance as he wished nor did his unilateral proclamation have any legal basis.

Trump's decision was as illegal as was the Spanish retreat from Western Sahara without ending the decolonization process. It is simply not legal to hand over, sell or deliver a territory and its people. International Law does not allow to transmit the sovereignty of a Non-Self-Governing Territory without the acquiescence of its People, this is also the basis that makes

the Madrid Tripartite Agreements radically null and void, and for this reason alone, Spain continues to be the Administrative Power *de jure* of the territory and Morocco is only an occupying power as indicated in resolutions 34/37 of 1979 and 35/19 of 1980, although often Morocco is mentioned as Administrative Power *de facto* which is a realpolitik terminology.

Trump seemed completely unaware of all the above, as well as his legal advisers who did not know the legal nature of the territory of Western Sahara, although the USA attends the sessions of the 4th Committee of decolonization of the United Nations and is a Permanent Member of the Security Council. Or, we even worse, they are aware but simply discard International Law when it doesn't suit them, which is a dangerous precedent for all countries and peoples in the world. Donald Trump also said that he would open a consulate in Western Sahara, another illegal action, but to this day no US consulate was opened nor a “virtual online version” that was presented by his Ambassador to Rabat, at the time, as an alternative.

The comments by diplomatic, academics and US elected politicians were swift to condemn Trump's “recognition”:

The United States of America Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Jim Inhofe, also one of the most influential members of the Republican party, expressed “sadness” and “disappointment” at the decision of President Trump, pointing out that such a step will never change the positions of the international community on the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination,” stressing that the White House' announcement alleging Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara is “shocking and deeply disappointing.” (Inhofe)

For his part, senator Patrick Leahy affirmed that Donald Trump “can't ignore the international law and the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination.” (Leahy)

The democrat Congresswoman of Minnesota Betty MacCollum said that the actions of Trump, who will leave the White House on 20 January

2021, render “dangerously legitimate the illegal annexation of the Sahrawi territory.” (McCollum)

Former US national security advisor John Bolton also reacted in many occasions to the decision of Trump who abandoned, according to him, “thirty years of American policy on Western Sahara.”

“Trump was wrong to abandon thirty years of US policy on Western Sahara just to score a fast foreign policy victory,” he lamented.” (Bolton)

Head of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, democrat Eliot Engel, warned that this decision threatens the efforts of international diplomacy to resolve long-standing conflicts. “[...] *I am concerned this announcement upends a credible internationally supported UN process to address the territorial dispute over Western Sahara which successive administrations of both parties have supported,*” he added. (House Foreign Affairs- Committee)

Former Secretary of State James A. Baker, III Personal Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Western Sahara from 1997 to 2004, who has been out of the radar for decades, released the following statement on the issue:

“While I strongly support the Abraham Accords, the proper way to implement them was the way it was done with the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan, and not by cynically trading off the self-determination rights of the people of Western Sahara. I agree with Senator James Inhofe when he characterized this development as ‘shocking and deeply disappointing.’ It would appear that the United States of America, which was founded first and foremost on the principle of self-determination, has walked away from that principle regarding the people of Western Sahara. This is very regrettable.” (Baker III).

Also Mr. Christopher Cross who served as Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Western Sahara from 2009 to 2017 made a public statement on Facebook.

“This foolish and ill-considered decision flies in the face of the US commitment to the principles of the non-acquisition of territory by force and the right of peoples to self-determination, both enshrined in the UN Charter. It’s true that we have ignored these principles when it comes to Israel and others, but this does not excuse ignoring them in Western Sahara and incurring significant costs to ourselves in terms of regional stability and security and our relations with Algeria.

The argument that some in Washington have been making for decades to the effect that an independent state in Western Sahara would be another failed mini-state is false.”

Ross clarified that the Polisario Liberation Front of Western Sahara has demonstrated in setting up a government-in-exile in the Western Saharan refugee camps in southwestern Algeria that it is capable of running a government”. (Cross).

The former UN Personal Envoy highlighted that the US has always expressed support for both the UN facilitated negotiating process and, since 2007, for Morocco’s autonomy plan as ONE possible basis for negotiation.

“The word ONE is crucial because it implies that other outcomes might emerge and thus ensures that the Polisario stays in the negotiating process instead of retreating into a resumption of the open warfare that prevailed from 1976 to 1991. It was in that year that Morocco and the Polisario agreed to a UN settlement plan that promised a referendum in exchange for a ceasefire. Thirteen years were spent trying to reach agreement on a list of eligible voters, the last seven of them under the supervision of James Baker. In the end, these efforts failed because Morocco decided that a referendum was contrary to its (claims of) sovereignty and, in doing so, got no push back from the Security Council. In 2004, this caused Baker to resign.” (SPS)

Referring to the resignation of the most recent envoy in 2019, former German President Horst Koehler, Ross (SPS) said that the official reason for his resignations was “for health reasons” however, Ross thinks that it is “more likely out of disgust for Morocco’s lack of respect and efforts to impede his work (as they did with me), the UN Secretary-General is looking for yet another envoy. Those approached to date have demurred, probably because they recognize that Morocco wants someone who will in effect become its advocate instead of remaining neutral and that, as a result, they would be embarking on “mission impossible”. (SPS)

Ross is very clear regarding the consequences of Trump’s decision

“President Trump’s decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty weakens any incentive for the Polisario to remain in that process. It also threatens US relations with Algeria, which supports the right of Western Saharans to decide their own future through a referendum and undercuts the growth of our existing ties in energy, trade, and security and military cooperation. In sum, President Trump’s decision ensures continued tension, instability, and disunion in North Africa.” (SPS)

President Joseph R. Biden (2021-)

So far, Biden’s administration isn’t clear concerning Western Sahara. Although the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory was not seconded by the Biden administration, the approach seems to be not to anger Morocco and therefore to say as little as possible on the subject. It is still too soon to draw conclusions since the end of the cease fire and resumption of armed conflict in November 2020 has still not reached its peak. However, in the recent African Lion maneuvers, Morocco adopted an aggressive tactic. The Moroccan press said that part of the joint military exercises with the US would take place in Western Sahara. But this was revealed to be false and simply propaganda. Below are the press statements regarding the Western Sahara issue by the Biden administration.

“Question: As the administration continues to condemn and take action against Russia’s invasion on Ukraine, are there any plans to revisit, review, revoke the Trump administration’s recognition of Israel’s annexation on the Golan Heights and Morocco’s annexation of Western Sahara? MS. PSAKI: I don’t have any updates on that front. I’d point to the State Department.” (The White House).

Finally, on Morocco and Algeria and the conflict in Western Sahara: We now have a U.N. Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, one of the world’s most experienced diplomats. We worked closely with the parties and with the Moroccans to ensure Staffan was appointed to that post. And he is now hard at work, which we think is quite important for keeping that conflict in check and trying to find a political resolution.

(Background Press Call on Broad Middle East Regional Year-End Discussion)

“Question Western Sahara – also, President Trump, as you know, recognized sovereignty – Morocco’s sovereignty of the Western Sahara region. Now Spain is asking for a U.N. resolution or U.N.-brokered solutions. Spain is a former col- – colonizer of Western Sahara, asking for a U.N. – brokered solution on this issue. Has the administration completed its review on this particular Trump deal? Because it does, you know, deal with the overall Abraham Accords policy. And what is your position on it?

MS. PSAKI: As you know, we are reviewing all of the – many Trump positions, including the Abraham Accords. But I don’t have an update today for you on it.” (The White House)

“Question: And second and lastly, how is the U.S. following the current tension between Morocco and Spain over a couple of issues – Western Sahara immigration, some enclaves there? And in this regard, can you update us about the review towards the Western Sahara recognition, the U.S. recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan land? And does this

administration plan to honor the previous recognition of the Western Sahara as Moroccan land? Thank you so much.

Answer: When it comes to the relationship between Spain and Morocco and Western Sahara, we discussed this a bit yesterday. The United States is a partner to both countries. We are – don't have anything additional to say when it comes to our recognition of the Western Sahara, however.” (The White House).

On the 21st of July 2022, U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.), ranking member of Senate Armed Services Committee, questioned two key military nominees about U.S. national security priorities in Africa and an alternative site for the African Lion military exercise that previously had been hosted by Morocco. Lieutenant General Michael E. Langley, to be general and Commander, United States Africa Command, and Lieutenant General Bryan P. Fenton, to be general and Commander, United States Special Operations Command, both agreed with Senator Inhofe who already had the agreement of Secretary Austin.

“Inhofe: And Western Sahara – General Langley, as I mentioned in my office, I am deeply concerned about the plight of the people of Western Sahara. For more than five decades, the Sahrawi people have been subjected to repeated broken promises and vicious attacks by the Moroccan government. Morocco has done nothing to repair the damage that they've done to the Sahrawi people after all these years, and they've done nothing to show they're serious about resolving the crisis. Instead, they've misled multiple American administrations on their willingness to negotiate — or I'd say unwillingness to negotiate — a mutually agreeable outcome to that issue. That's why I've spoken to Senator Rounds and other members of this committee on this issue and why I have pushed DOD to look at the alternative locations for the annual African Lion military exercise that's been hosted in Morocco previously. I'm pleased that Secretary Austin is in agreement with me on this issue and so I'd ask each one of you to respond as to whether or not you are also in agreement.” (Inhofe).

Conclusion

The US administrations have always supported Morocco in Western Sahara conflict more or less publicly, more or less actively. The fact remains that the stalemate of the issue is largely due to the actions not only of the US administrations in support of Morocco as well as to its deceiving position in the UN Security Council.

The transcripts, letters and statements of the different administrations are proof of just that, on one hand, on the other hand all UN resolutions have been favorably voted by the US, certainly due to the fact that the US is the penholder and therefore introduces the changes it wishes to approximate the text to the desires of Morocco.

This political double standard, clearly demonstrate that the US, is playing a dangerous game, that ultimately could lead to complete erosion of the International institution's, like the UN Security Council, and potentially, void of power and especially meaning, everyone could question decisions of TIJ, ONU, EU, and others, creating a dangerous void where, extremisms could, once again, gain traction, dividing the world into polars and spheres of influences, not seen, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

The US Senate Appropriations Committee allocated to the State Department for its foreign operations and other related programs addressed the Western Sahara issue in August. In the explanatory memorandum of the budget bill the committee deals separately with the Western Sahara Issue without ever mentioning the Moroccan Kingdom. The Committee also urged the Secretary of State to promote the establishment of a monitoring and reporting mechanism on the issue of Human Rights within the MINURSO (UN Mission for Western Sahara) mandate. Regarding the possible opening of a consulate in the occupied territory of Western Sahara that had been announced by the Trump administration the committee is clear and recommends that none of the funds allocated or made available by the 2023

finance law or previous laws can be used to support the construction or operation of an American Consulate in Western Sahara.

“Western Sahara.—The Committee urges the Secretary of State to promote the establishment of a human rights monitoring and re- porting mechanism within the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. The Committee recommends not less than the prior fiscal year level, within funds provided for the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative, for programs to improve education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and for other assistance for the Western Sahara, and directs the Secretary of State to consult with the Committees on Appropriations on the planned uses of such funds.

None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by the act or prior acts may be used to support the construction or operation of a U.S. consulate in the Western Sahara.” (United States Committee on Appropriations 73).

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