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POLICY BRIEF

MOROCCAN SAHARA: CAN THE INTERNATIONAL CONSENSUS AROUND THE AUTONOMY PLAN TRIGGER A NEW UN DYNAMIC?



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This Policy Brief explores the potential evolution of the United Nations' stance on the Moroccan Sahara issue in light of recent diplomatic developments. It builds on the reaffirmed U.S. support for Morocco's proposed Autonomy Plan, which has played a key role in broadening international consensus in favor of a pragmatic resolution.

Despite positive signs within the Security Council, the UN-led process remains stalled, largely due to persistent divisions among member states and the inertia of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). In this context, a new UN approach—centered on realism and compromise—appears necessary. The UN is thus called upon to abandon its passive stance and actively support a political solution based on autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. Its capacity to remain a central and credible actor in resolving regional disputes is at stake.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the Moroccan Sahara remains one of the most enduring regional disputes on the United Nations agenda. After five decades of deadlock, the United States' explicit reaffirmation—on April 8, 2025—of its support for Morocco's proposed Autonomy Plan appears to be reshaping the diplomatic landscape. Against this backdrop, a central question arises: can Washington's renewed commitment, and the convergence it is generating among a growing number of states, trigger a genuine revival of the UN-led process? In other words, can American support—now echoed by a broader international consensus—help shift UN doctrine and unblock political negotiations under the Organization's auspices?

This Policy Brief explores the current window of opportunity for a UN inflexion point. It examines three key dimensions: the positive signals within the UN system and the persistent obstacles in the current situation; the “domino effect” of U.S. backing, which could pave the way for a multilateral plan; and, finally, the imperative to act rather than wait—the possible contours of a renewed UN doctrine on the Sahara.

The aim is to highlight the need for an evolution in the UN's position, while underscoring Morocco's constructive role in promoting a realistic, peaceful and lasting resolution to the conflict.

POSITIVE SIGNALS OR PERSISTENT STALEMATE? A REALISTIC READING OF THE CURRENT SITUATION AT THE UN

Fifty years after the onset of the conflict over the Moroccan Sahara, the current UN landscape presents a striking contrast between encouraging signs of progress and a persistent deadlock in the political resolution process. On the positive side, the UN Security Council has gradually adopted a more realistic posture, increasingly favoring the Autonomy Plan. The Council now emphasizes the need for a “realistic, pragmatic, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution” based on compromise.¹ This change of tone implicitly acknowledges the viability of the Autonomy Plan as a basis for settlement. Similarly, several Council member states—from Africa and the Gulf—have explicitly voiced their support for Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara and for the autonomy initiative, describing it as “solid, serious and in conformity with the United Nations Charter.”² These stances, unthinkable just a few years ago, are positive diplomatic signals that suggest a gradual shift in the UN consensus toward the Moroccan proposal.

However, despite this rhetorical shift, the operational reality at the UN remains one of stalemate. In practice, the UN-led political process has yet to make a decisive breakthrough towards a settlement. Several factors explain this continued deadlock. First, on the ground, the breach of the 1991 ceasefire agreement in November 2020—triggered by the Guerguerat incidents—underscores both the fragility of the status quo and the pressing need for a

1. United Nations. (29 October, 2021). *Resolution 2602 (2021) adopted by the Security Council at its 8881st meeting*. [https://undocs.org/fr/S/RES/2602\(2021\)](https://undocs.org/fr/S/RES/2602(2021)); United Nations. (27 October, 2022). *Resolution 2654 (2022) adopted by the Security Council at its 9169th meeting*. [https://undocs.org/fr/S/RES/2654\(2022\)](https://undocs.org/fr/S/RES/2654(2022)); United Nations. (30 October, 2023). *Resolution 2703 (2023) adopted by the Security Council at its 9432nd meeting*. [https://undocs.org/fr/S/RES/2703\(2023\)](https://undocs.org/fr/S/RES/2703(2023))

2. United Nations. (27 October, 2022). *Sahara occidentale : Le Conseil de sécurité proroge jusqu'au 31 octobre 2023 le mandat de la MINURSO (CS/15081)*. Meeting coverage and press releases. <https://press.un.org/fr/2022/cs15081.doc.htm>

resolution, while also complicating the UN's role. Second, MINURSO has failed to prove effective. Originally established in 1991 to organize a referendum on self-determination, the mission "has never fulfilled its mandate and has merely maintained a state of paralysis over the years."³ In this diplomatic impasse, MINURSO is increasingly perceived as an "obsolete and dysfunctional"⁴ mission, unable to overcome the inertia of the status quo or contribute meaningfully to a political resolution. Yet, despite its limitations, MINURSO's continued presence lends international legitimacy to the political process, symbolizing the international community's commitment to a peaceful solution.⁵ Furthermore, internal dynamics within the Security Council continue to pose a structural obstacle to the emergence of a consensus. Although a large majority (13 out of 15 members) have voted in favor of recent resolutions extending MINURSO's mandate,⁶ important divergences persist. Key members consistently abstain: Russia (a permanent member), as well as certain African member states aligned with Algeria's position (e.g. Mozambique in 2021-2022, and South Africa in 2023-2024). This situation highlights a lingering divide within the UN: on one side, a majority of states support a pragmatic solution under Moroccan sovereignty; on the other, a minority remain attached to the outdated referendum framework or systematically avoid placing real pressure on the Polisario Front—thereby contributing to the continued stalemate.

A final indicator of the current stalemate lies in the diplomatic impasse surrounding the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy for the Sahara. Appointed in 2021, Staffan de Mistura has so far been unable to revive direct negotiations between the parties. Despite multiple visits to the region and informal consultations, no round table has taken place since 2019. His margin of maneuver has narrowed further as positions have hardened outside the UN. In the face of rapidly shifting international dynamics since 2020, his role has become marginal—so much so that diplomatic sources have raised the possibility of his resignation at the end of 2024⁷ if no tangible progress is made.

In this context, a realistic assessment of the current situation at the UN leads to a nuanced conclusion: while positive signals are accumulating—particularly in terms of growing international recognition of the Moroccan solution, even within the Security Council—the UN-led process remains mired in deadlock. This is largely due to the intransigence of certain actors and the persistence of a negotiation framework that has yet to adapt to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

FROM AMERICAN SUPPORT TO THE STRUCTURING OF A CONSENSUS

Against this mixed backdrop, it is clear that beyond the strict UN framework, a major international diplomatic dynamic has taken shape in recent years in favor of the Moroccan

3. Zaaïmi, S. (9 April, 2025). *Why it's time to terminate the UN's dysfunctional mission in Western Sahara*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/why-its-time-to-terminate-the-uns-dysfunctional-mission-in-western-sahara/>

4. Rubin, M. (March 19, 2025). *To cut waste, eliminate failed UN peacekeeping operations*. Washington Examiner. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/fairness-justice/2951971/to-cut-waste-eliminate-failed-un-peacekeeping-operations/>

5. Elbasri, A. (20 April, 2025). *Le retrait de la Minurso, un piège dangereux pour le Maroc*. Médias24. <https://medias24.com/chronique/le-retrait-de-la-minurso-un-piege-dangereux-pour-le-maroc/>

6. United Nations. (27 October, 2022). *Sahara occidental : Le Conseil de sécurité proroge jusqu'au 31 octobre 2023 le mandat de la MINURSO* (CS/15081).

7. Zaaïmi, S. (9 April, 2025). *Why it's time to terminate the UN's dysfunctional mission in Western Sahara*.

position—one undeniably catalyzed by the renewed support of the United States.⁸ The domino effect initiated by Washington is evident in the successive endorsements of the Autonomy Plan by several influential states, including France and Spain, thus opening the door to the possible elaboration of a multilateral settlement plan under UN auspices.

Beyond the former European colonial powers, a broader international coalition is emerging in support of the Moroccan solution. In the Arab world, Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait have expressed their clear backing of Morocco. Notably, the UAE became the first country to open a consulate in the Moroccan Sahara in 2020—a move subsequently followed by some fifteen Arab and African nations. In sub-Saharan Africa, several countries have established consulates in Laâyoune or Dakhla, effectively signaling their de facto recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.

Simultaneously, a growing number of African and Latin American countries have withdrawn or suspended their recognition of the Polisario's self-proclaimed "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" (SADR). Since late 2024 alone, Ghana, Panama and Ecuador have publicly declared they no longer recognize the SADR.⁹ As of early 2025, more than "85% of UN member states do not recognize the separatist entity"¹⁰ of the Polisario. This striking figure reflects the steady, and arguably irreversible, erosion of international support for the Polisario's separatist project.

This international convergence is also increasingly reflected within the UN system itself—most notably in the work of the Special Committee on Decolonization (Committee of 24, C24). There, a growing number of African and Caribbean delegations have begun to welcome Morocco's efforts and advocate for a compromise-based solution, in contrast to the long-defunct referendum option.¹¹

The scale of this diplomatic domino effect is creating favorable conditions for the emergence of a multilateral settlement plan under UN auspices. The key challenge now lies in translating the bilateral support of numerous states into a collective dynamic within the UN framework.

Firstly, at the level of the Security Council, the consolidation of a broad pro-autonomy front is increasing pressure for future negotiations under UN auspices to focus exclusively on the autonomy framework. When 60% of the world's countries—including several influential Council members—consider autonomy the only viable solution, it becomes increasingly untenable for the UN to continue presenting the prospect of an independent state as an equivalent option. It is therefore conceivable that the next Security Council resolution could go further in defining the parameters of the political process: rather than merely acknowledging the Moroccan proposal, it could explicitly establish it as the central reference point.

Recent U.S. statements support this trajectory, affirming that the Autonomy Plan is "the only basis for a just and lasting solution" and urging the parties to engage in discussions

8. Lyammouri, R., & Ammari, F. (16 April, 2025). *Sahara marocain : l'appui américain renouvelé et ses implications régionales*. Policy Center for the New South. <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/sahara-marocain-lappui-americain-renouvele-et-ses-implications-regionales>

9. La Rédaction. (20 April, 2025). *Sahara marocain : un consensus international croissant autour de l'initiative d'autonomie*. Infos27. <https://infos27.cd/2025/04/20/sahara-marocain-un-consensus-international-croissant-autour-de-linitiative-dautonomie/>

10. *Idem*.

11. Oukerzaz, H. (3 October, 2022). *Sahara : les évolutions un an après l'adoption de la résolution 2602 du Conseil de sécurité*. *Le Matin*. <https://lematin.ma/express/2022/sahara-marocain-evolutions-an-ladoption-resolution-2602/381543.html>

“without delay” within this framework.¹² With such substantial backing from Western powers (USA, France, Spain, the UK) as well as from Arab and African states, this orientation could achieve majority support in the Council—even if some members continue to abstain, which would not prevent the adoption of a more assertive resolution.

Ultimately, the domino effect triggered by American support for Moroccan sovereignty in the Sahara has fostered a growing international consensus in favor of autonomy. This trend creates an unprecedented opportunity to multilateralize the solution: the UN can capitalize on the momentum generated by the United States and the successive endorsements to advance a comprehensive plan for resolving the crisis. The many supportive voices within the international community are already sending “a clear message to the United Nations”: it is time to “move beyond the fixed positions of the past” and embrace a pragmatic solution that respects Morocco’s territorial unity.¹³ The key question now is whether the UN will be able to translate this diplomatic momentum into concrete action. This is the core challenge: shifting from the de facto recognition of a solution to its formal adoption within the UN framework.

TIME TO ACT: TOWARD A NEW UN DOCTRINE ON THE SAHARA?

Given the favorable yet potentially volatile context, the international community now faces a critical responsibility: to act, rather than remain passive. For the United Nations, this necessitates the development of a new doctrine—or at least a revised strategic approach—toward the Moroccan Sahara. The objective would be to move away from the entrenched wait-and-see attitude that has characterized the process thus far and adopt a more proactive stance that reflects with the current realities on the ground and the growing international consensus. What could the key elements of such a renewed UN doctrine on the Moroccan Sahara look like?

Firstly, adopting the principles of realism and compromise would serve as guiding frameworks for UN action, aligning with the terms increasingly emphasized by the Security Council in recent years. In concrete terms, the Secretary-General and his Personal Envoy, with the backing of the Security Council, could refocus the negotiation process on the only realistic path identified: autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. This would involve clearly and decisively stating that the option of a binary referendum on self-determination (independence or integration) is no longer viable, as it would be unworkable in practice.

While this recognition has been implicit in recent resolutions, the UN could formalize this stance more openly in its communications. Former UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuellar also suggested in the late 1980s that negotiated autonomy could be the most feasible solution for the Sahara.¹⁴ Continuing in this direction would mean that the UN updates its approach: instead of passively monitoring a fragile ceasefire while waiting for an unattainable consensus on independence, the UN would take a more active role as facilitator of a compromise centered on autonomy, which has already garnered widespread validation from member states.

Secondly, adopting a new UN doctrine would entail expanding the UN’s involvement on the

12. Lyammouri, R., & Ammari, F. (16 April, 2025). *Sahara marocain : l'appui américain renouvelé et ses implications régionales*.

13. La Rédaction. (20 April, 2025). *Sahara marocain : un consensus international croissant autour de l'initiative d'autonomie*. Infos27.

14. Miyet, B. (22 May, 2012). *Autonomy: The Optimal Political Solution*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/autonomy-optimal-political-solution>

ground, supporting the implementation of autonomy once it has been politically approved. This shift would move the UN from its current role as a military observer (with MINURSO monitoring the ceasefire) to a more active political and institutional presence, assisting in the solution's implementation. In this plausible and achievable scenario, the UN holds a significant moral and political lever: international legitimacy. If the UN unequivocally affirms that autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the preferred solution, it would become increasingly difficult for Algeria and the Polisario to justify their intransigence, risking the perception that they are responsible for prolonging the conflict.

Thirdly, acting rather than waiting requires the UN to adapt to the region's new geopolitical dynamics by fully acknowledging Morocco as a central actor in regional stability and development. Through its Autonomy Plan and its significant investment in the development of its Saharan provinces, Morocco has demonstrated a clear and sustained commitment to achieving a peaceful and lasting resolution. It also promotes a broader vision of regional integration, particularly through its African policy and the Royal Atlantic Initiative, which aims to create shared growth opportunities across the Maghreb and West Africa¹⁵. In this context, resolving the Sahara conflict in line with the Moroccan approach generates wide-reaching benefits—not only for Morocco, but also for its neighbors and partners—by unlocking blocked avenues for cooperation. A renewed UN doctrine should therefore recognize Morocco's constructive role and support tangible development initiatives that directly benefit local populations in the region.

Acting now also means sending a strong signal to the populations concerned—both those residing in the southern provinces and those confined to the Tindouf camps—that a stable and beneficial political resolution is within reach. This requires acknowledging a widely shared perception: that the Polisario leadership appears increasingly disconnected from the evolving realities on the ground, trapped in a rigid discourse that no longer aligns with current expectations. Their continued calls for separatism fail to address the tangible needs of the populations, who are often left without prospects or meaningful opportunities.

In contrast, Morocco is actively implementing a structured development strategy in its southern provinces, grounded in sustainable development, social inclusion and regional cooperation. It is therefore essential to propose innovative solutions—anchored in the autonomy framework but extending toward broader regional integration—that reconnect the Sahara with its natural geographical and human ecosystem: West Africa and the Atlantic space. Such a proactive shift by the UN would echo recent declarations and alignments by major international actors. In short, the UN's credibility is on the line. It now has a unique opportunity to demonstrate its capacity to adapt to the realities on the ground and respond effectively to the aspirations of those directly affected.

CONCLUSION

The reaffirmation of U.S. support for Morocco's proposed Autonomy Plan for the Sahara comes at a pivotal juncture. It has helped solidify a broad international coalition around a realistic and compromise-based solution, increasingly isolating proponents of the status quo. This momentum has opened the door to a renewed UN dynamic, already visible in the evolving language of the Security Council and in the growing mobilization of member states. To make this dynamic a reality, the UN must step out of its posture of cautious neutrality and acknowledge the new geopolitical landscape: a settlement without reference to the

15. Lyammouri, R., & Ghoulidi, A. (2024). *Morocco's Atlantic Initiative: A Catalyst for Sahel-Saharan Integration*. Policy Center for the New South. <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/moroccos-atlantic-initiative-catalyst-sahel-saharan-integration>

Autonomy Plan is no longer viable, and maintaining outdated ambiguities only postpones the inevitable.

By adopting a renewed strategic posture—one that could be described as a doctrine of realism—the UN would be able to channel the momentum generated by Washington and other capitals into tangible progress towards lasting peace. Such an approach serves the interests of the populations concerned, who aspire to turn the page on this protracted conflict. Morocco, for its part, is ready to cooperate fully within the UN framework. Its conciliatory attitude and autonomy initiative offer the UN a rare opportunity to resolve this long-standing dispute through a win-win solution for all stakeholders. Seizing this opportunity means activating a new dynamic—one that restores hope and unlocks a future of stability and integration for the wider region.

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