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UK-Morocco Relations: Recognizing Moroccan Sovereignty Over the Western Sahara

3 JULY 2024



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Table of Contents

Background.....	4
About the Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum.....	4
About the Author.....	4
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction.....	8
Historical Overview and Current Policy Concerns.....	10
UK Foreign Policy Priorities in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Western Sahara.....	15
Morocco's Autonomy Plan.....	15
Countering Russian Influence in North Africa and the Sahel.....	17
Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean.....	18
Migration Management Between Africa and Europe.....	20
Trade & Economic Development in an Era of Global Britain.....	23
Conclusion.....	26
Geopolitical Risks for the UK.....	26
Summary and Policy Recommendations.....	27
Bibliography.....	30

Background

About the Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum

The Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum (MENAF) is an independent, non-partisan think-tank and registered charity based out of the academic community of the University of Cambridge. The Forum is dedicated to encouraging original, intelligent, and constructive dialogue about the Middle East and North Africa, and to developing and advancing policies that secure Britain's role in it.

In addition to its publicly-available projects and publications—especially *Manara Magazine* and the weekly *Strategic Brief*—the Forum provides independent analysis and recommendations to policymakers in Parliament, Whitehall, and around the world. The Forum hosts regular roundtables and Track II dialogues for London's business, policy, and diplomatic communities.

About the Author

Joseph Hammond is an award-winning journalist and fellow with the Center of Media and Peace Initiatives.

Joseph is the moderator of the Commonwealth Africa Initiative and is also a member of the African Union's iDove initiative – a grassroots youth effort to counter violent extremism on the continent. A former Cairo correspondent for Radio Free Europe during the Arab Spring, Joseph has also reported from four continents on issues ranging from the Arab Spring to the M23 rebellion in the Eastern Congo. His writing has been published by a number of publications including *Economist*, *Al-Arabiya*, *Monocle*, *U.S News and World Report*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Forbes*, *International Business Times*, *The Diplomat*, and international editions of *Esquire*, and *Rolling Stone*.

As a consultant, Joseph worked for the Politico Focus, Oxford Business Group, Global Integrity, and has also worked on international aid projects related to conflict issues. In these roles and others, he has worked in Qatar, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, Bahrain, Jordan, Ghana, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere. He was a 2014–2015 Fulbright public policy fellow with the government of Malawi. He has also completed fellowships and leadership programs with the Commonwealth of Nations, National Endowment for Democracy, Atlantic Bruecke, the Atlantic Council of the United States, Hollings Center for International Dialogue, International Centre for Journalism, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung North America Foundation and other institutions.

Executive Summary

This paper analyses the policy issue of the official recognition of the Kingdom of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara by His Majesty's Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the implications of the potential implementation of Morocco's 2007 Autonomy Plan for the territory, seeking to lay out the benefits for UK foreign policy interests in the short, medium and long term.

- The Western Sahara has been integral to the territorial evolution that the Kingdom of Morocco has undergone since its foundation. The vast Sharifian Empire extended as far south as the Senegal River. Morocco signed the Treaty of Madrid in 1880, formalising French and Spanish power over the territories they seized in the country in the 1800s. The treaty is the first legal document that implicitly recognised Morocco's territorial integrity over the Sahara region. Notwithstanding, Spain declared the Sahara region as one of its overseas territories, effectively colonising it in 1884.
- The end of the Sahara region's time under Spanish colonial rule in 1975 marked the beginning of a now nearly 50-year-long period of contestation over the legal status of and sovereignty over the territory. After both Moroccan and Mauritanian forces entered the Western Sahara in 1975, their treaty was nullified by the United Nations (UN). An armed group called the **Polisario Front** was formed in 1976 out of part of the Western Sahara's Sahrawi population, who claimed sovereignty over the territory. The group declared the foundation of the **Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)** in the Western Sahara, which gained support from the People's Democratic Republic of **Algeria**.
- Tensions between Morocco and the Polisario turned into violent confrontation in the form of a guerrilla war between 1976 and 1991. Following the end of the Cold War, the UN shepherded a ceasefire between the conflicting parties in 1991, considering the Polisario Front to be a form of legitimate representation of the Sahrawi people, but not officially recognizing the SADR as a sovereign state.
- To facilitate the resolution of the dispute, Morocco submitted the "initiative for negotiating an autonomy statute for the Sahara region", or the **Autonomy Plan**, to the UN Security Council in 2007. This plan proposes that Morocco would establish sovereignty over the Western Sahara and grant the Sahrawi people autonomous status with the right to form their own government through democratic elections. The proposal enjoys widespread support among members of the African Union and the Arab League, as well as Spain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. More than 71 of the 193 UN member states support the Autonomy Plan in total.
- The Polisario resumed armed conflict in 2020, after 29 years of ceasefire. The Western Sahara continues to be divided between the Polisario and Morocco, separated by the so-called "Berm" militarised boundary line. The Moroccan government administers the territory as the primary provider of employment, social spending, and infrastructure development. Meanwhile, Algeria has hosted 100,000–173,000 refugees in five camps near Tindouf in the west of the country, under the authority of the SADR.
- **UK governments** have neither expressed interest in officially recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara nor endorsed Morocco's 2007 Autonomy Plan, despite the fact that the provisions of the latter are in full compliance with the UK's declared policy position of supporting "UN-led efforts to achieve a lasting and mutually acceptable political solution."
- Participation in the **Abraham Accords** set Morocco aside from the majority of its allies in the Arab League. The UK government has endorsed the Abraham Accords and committed to working with Israel "to both deepen and expand these developments".

UK foreign policy goals of making “deep and abiding contributions to regional security through diplomacy and security cooperation” would benefit from a more integrated approach towards policy issues aimed at fostering peace and international development in the Middle East and North Africa region, including the case of Morocco and the Western Sahara.

- **Russia’s expanding sphere of influence** in North Africa and the Sahel should be taken seriously by London. Bilateral ties between Algeria and Russia reach beyond joint training exercises. Russia has found other friends in the region, notably Libya’s east-based Libyan National Army (LNA) and its chief, General Khalifa Haftar, who close in on a ‘defence agreement’ with PMC Wagner. Moscow’s sphere of influence also extends to the Sahel region through the Wagner Group and similar Russia-backed mercenaries operating in Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Russia is also eyeing natural resources found in North Africa and the Sahel, the Western Sahara being no exception.
- Morocco is at the forefront of **counterterrorism** efforts in North Africa, actively engaged in eliminating violent extremism and terrorist groups. In 2022, the European Commission considered evidence that the Polisario was fostering close ties with terrorist groups, supplying them with weapons and fuel. In 2018, the overt cooperation between the Polisario and Lebanon-based Hezbollah were also revealed. Iran’s past actions of supplying multiple African military groups, including a transfer of arms to Yemen’s Houthis via Somalia and a shipping of kamikaze drones to the Polisario, are alarming.
- Morocco is an important partner in **mitigating migratory pressure** and countering illegal migration from the African continent to Europe. Fighting illegal migration goes hand in hand with anti-human trafficking and anti-narcotics efforts. The cooperation between Moroccan and Spanish coast guards managed to reduce the volume of migration by 31% in 2022. January 2024 alone saw more migrant arrivals to the Canary Islands than the entire first half of 2023. In contrast, the lack of capacity of the Libyan government to achieve similar outcomes has resulted in the country remaining as one of the most popular departing points for migrants to cross the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe. The Western Sahara is a common point of departure for migrants who are looking to cross the Atlantic waters to reach European soil. The Western Sahara remains a hub for human trafficking and migrant smuggler networks, which thrive in the absence of sovereign authority, and in a vast and sparsely populated territory.
- Existing infrastructure such as Africa’s largest port, Tanger Med, can play a crucial role in Morocco serving as a gateway to the African continent in the future. While exports from Africa are projected to rise from their current 645 billion USD (509 billion GBP) to 952 billion USD (751 billion GBP) by 2035, intra-African trade in West Africa is set to have grown by 13.2% by 2035. New seaports both within Morocco and a stabilized Western Sahara presents a lucrative **economic opportunity**. Countries in the Sahel convened in Marrakech in late 2023 to discuss Atlantic access for the region through Morocco, in which Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso have all expressed an interest.
- The UK’s position on the path forward is consequential. As one of the five permanent members of the **Security Council**, the UK’s endorsement of Morocco’s Autonomy Plan would shift the balance to three for (with the United States and France) and two against (Russia and China), with the plausible prospect of influencing additional UN member states so far undecided on the matter to declare their position publicly.
- Taking an official stance in favour of Morocco in this longstanding territorial dispute is likely to raise tensions in diplomatic relations with some the countries devoted to supporting the Polisario Front, including Algeria and Libya’s eastern-based authority in North Africa, as well as South Africa. In addition to this, a number of prominent members of the **Commonwealth of Nations**, including Nigeria, Kenya, and

Tanzania, recognize the SADR. The deeply integrated ties that the UK maintains with the latter are vital, as they rest on trade and investment relations as well as notable cultural linkages by means of diaspora communities living in the UK. Notwithstanding, UK support for Morocco's Autonomy Plan is unlikely to upset these long-standing bilateral relationships.

- Algeria's investment in the territorial dispute is one to monitor as the country's defence budget is consistently growing, while its forces simultaneously perform military exercises with live ammunition near the border with Western Sahara. Algeria is backed militarily by Russia, and there is a strong **Wagner Group** presence in the country. Notwithstanding, with the continuous heavy demands that the war in Ukraine places on the Russian military, Moscow can reasonably be expected to remain primarily focused on the Eastern European battle arena.

The brief concludes that a revision of UK foreign policy by declaring support for Morocco's sovereignty with regard to the Western Sahara in the framework provided by the Autonomy Plan would benefit the UK's regional and international interests in the short-to-medium term. Closer cooperation with Moroccan and United Nations stakeholders and working towards the implementation of the Plan would provide opportunities for reaping significant additional security, economic and development-related benefits in line with the UK's foreign policy goals for the long term.

Introduction

The Western Sahara dispute concerns a now nearly 50-year-long period of contestation between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front (El Frente Polisario) with regard to sovereignty over the territory.

The United Kingdom supports United Nations-led efforts to negotiate a lasting political solution to the dispute and provide for the self-government of its indigenous Sahrawi people, but has not endorsed specific policy proposals to this effect, including Morocco's 2007 Autonomy Plan.

This brief follows the publication of a comparative international legal study authored by Professor Marc Weller, Chair of International Law and International Constitutional Studies at the University of Cambridge, which concluded that the UK's support for Morocco's proposed Autonomy Plan for the Western Sahara would not undermine the UK's claim to sovereignty over its overseas territories of the Falkland Islands.¹ The Autonomy Plan would recognise Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara on the one hand and grant the territory's Sahrawi population the right to form an autonomous government in line with the principle of self-determination on the other hand.

Professor Weller's study refutes the long-standing and prevalent perception in UK parliamentary and foreign policymaking circles that by endorsing Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara and establishing self-government for the Sahrawi people in what is currently categorised by the United Nations as a 'non-self-governing territory', the UK would provide the Argentine Republic with a case to lay similar claims to the Falkland Islands, which are also on the UN's list of Non-Self-Governing Territories since 1946.² Argentina's official position on the matter is that its dispute with the UK over the Falkland Islands concerns competing territorial claims rooted in colonial history rather than the application of the self-determination principle.³ When it comes colonialism, the case of the Western Sahara is fundamentally different from an international legal perspective, however. It was Morocco's longstanding historical legal ties to the Western Sahara and its population that Spain's colonial administration breached, while the UK's discovery and possession of, and continuous sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, which had no indigenous population, did not coincide with an Argentinian presence or legitimate legal claims over these territories, undermining arguments based on colonialism.

This brief will look at the policy issue of HM Government's potential endorsement of Morocco's Autonomy Plan for the Western Sahara through four lenses with consideration for the UK's short, medium and long-term foreign policy priorities, including countering Russian influence in North Africa and the Sahel, security cooperation in the Mediterranean, migration management between Africa and Europe, and trade and economic development in an era of Global Britain.

¹ Weller, M. (2024). "Western Sahara and the Falkland Islands: Similarities and Differences in their International Legal Status", April 2024.

² United Nations (2022). "The United Nations and Decolonization—Falkland Islands (Malvinas)", 10 May 2022, retrieved from: [https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/content/falkland-islands-malvinas#:~:text=The%20Falkland%20Islands%20\(Malvinas\)*,Charter%20of%20the%20United%20Nations](https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/content/falkland-islands-malvinas#:~:text=The%20Falkland%20Islands%20(Malvinas)*,Charter%20of%20the%20United%20Nations).

³ Weller. "Western Sahara and the Falkland Islands".

Countering the notable and ever-expanding influence of the Russian Federation in North Africa and the Sahel is key for these regions' stability, and crucial for the protection of the UK and its Western allies' broader geopolitical interests. Fostering the long-standing alliance between the UK and Morocco is of major strategic importance to the UK when it comes to regional security. Morocco's role in effectively managing the flow of illegal migration towards Europe through the West African / Atlantic route is indispensable. The economic potential of a stable Western Sahara is immense. Enhancing the security of a potential new gateway of trade to the African continent while simultaneously bolstering the European-Asian sea (or Cape) trade route is an economically lucrative opportunity, especially considering the elevated security risks that have impacted the Suez trade route in recent months.

The authors of the paper recognize the longer path that would lead to the official sanctioning of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara by the international community, including certain barriers in front of such a prospect in the United Nations Security Council. This paper highlights the short-term benefits that the UK's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara would provide in addition to the geopolitical, economic and developmental policy advantages that are relevant in the medium-to-long term and in the context of the implementation of the Autonomy Plan. The prospect of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara carries the opportunities of stabilizing an area of longstanding volatility in the region, mitigating irregular migration and human trafficking through the territory, and fostering economic development. The paper will also consider the geopolitical risks associated with the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, including diplomatic tensions with certain members of the African Union as well as the Commonwealth of Nations, in addition to potential security risks emanating from Morocco's neighbour, Algeria.

Historical Overview and Current Policy Concerns

The Western Sahara (or Sahara region) has been integral to the territorial evolution that the Kingdom of Morocco has undergone since its foundation in 789 AD. Between the 8th and the 10th centuries, and again between the 16th and 19th centuries, Morocco developed under the leadership of *shurafa*⁴, or Sharifian dynasties (Idrisid, Sa'di and Alawi⁵), whose leaders descended from the Prophet Muhammad and gave an additional name to the polity used by Europeans, the Sharifian Empire. During the Alawi Sultanate, the vast Sharifian Empire extended as far south as the Senegal River.⁶ The 19th and 20th centuries brought a wave of colonisation to the territories driven by Spain and France. Following the Franco-Moroccan War (1844) and the Spanish-Moroccan War (1859-1860), Morocco and the European powers signed the Treaty of Madrid in 1880, formalising French and Spanish power over the territories they seized. Referencing the "territory of the Sultan" while discussing the rights of their representatives,⁷ the treaty is the first legal document that implicitly recognised Morocco's territorial integrity over the Sahara region. In 1912, the Spanish sphere of influence was formally established as a protectorate in two narrow strips of land covering the very north and south of today's Morocco. The French protectorate, also formed in 1912 and dissolved in 1956, took up the land between the two Spanish strips. In spite of the agreed-on provisions of the Treaty of Madrid and cooperation with the sultan, Spain declared the Sahara region as one of its overseas territories, effectively colonising it in 1884.⁸ From 1946 onwards, the territory was merged with the southern strip of the Spanish protectorate, creating a newly formed colony of Spanish West Africa.⁹

The end of the Sahara region's time under Spanish colonial rule in 1975 marked the beginning of a now nearly 50-year-long period of contestation over the legal status of and sovereignty over the territory. After both Moroccan and Mauritanian forces entered the Western Sahara in 1975, and subsequently established sovereignty through the Madrid Accords¹⁰, their treaty was nullified by the United Nations (UN) the same year. The UN assessed that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had legitimate reasons to claim sovereignty over the Western Sahara. An armed group called the Polisario Front (El Frente Polisario) was formed in 1976 out of part of the Western Sahara's Sahrawi population. The group claimed sovereignty over the territory with a largely Marxist liberation outlook.

In a largely concurrent action, the Polisario declared the foundation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in the Western Sahara, which was regarded by the UN as a legitimate authority at the time. While Mauritania recognized this newly formed polity in 1979, Morocco protests its legitimacy to this day.

⁴ Cory, S. (2020). "The Making of the Maghrib: Morocco (1510-1822)", *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, April 2020.

⁵ Miller, S.G. (2013). *A History of Modern Morocco*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Al-Nasiri, A.I.K. (1906). *Al-Istiqṣā li-akhbār duwal al-Maghrib al-aqṣā | Book of Investigations on News from the Maghreb Countries*, Paris.

⁷ "Right of Protection in Morocco" (1880). Retrieved from: <https://maint.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000001-0071.pdf>.

⁸ U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian (1974). "87. Intelligence Memorandum", retrieved from: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve09p1/d87#:~:text=The%20present%20day%20borders%20of,by%20armed%20tribesmen%20from%20Morocco>.

⁹ Campos Serrano, A., Gonzalez, I. and Correale, F. (2018). "Spanish Colonial Rule", *Oxford Bibliographies*.

¹⁰ UN Peacemaker (1975). "Declaration of Principles on Western Sahara (Madrid Accords)", 14 November 1975, retrieved from: <https://peacemaker.un.org/mauritania-morocco-spain-principles75>.

A decade-and-a-half of high tensions followed between Moroccan authorities and the SADR, who gained support from the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. SADR's main administrative tasks continue to be carried out from the Rabouni camp in Algeria. Despite Morocco's support for the Algerian liberation movement, the countries have had strained relations since their border war in 1963¹¹, which Algeria's backing of the Polisario Front exacerbated further. Tensions turned into violent confrontation in the form of a guerrilla war launched in 1976. That chapter in the conflict drew to a close in 1991 with the collapse of global communism.

While the Soviet Union indirectly supported the Polisario Front, Morocco was staunchly in the camp of the free world. Morocco was a member of the so-called "Safari Club" along with Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and France, forming a clandestine alliance between intelligence services in 1976 that coordinated with the United States and worked together to counter communism in Africa and the Middle East. The United Kingdom was set on a similarly staunch anti-communist path after World War II¹², and conducted its own secret operation against its Cold War enemies since as early as the 1950s.¹³

Following the end of the Cold War, the UN shepherded a ceasefire between the conflicting parties in 1991, hoping to improve the relationship between Morocco and Algeria too. It established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)¹⁴ under the authority of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General to monitor the ceasefire.

The approach of the international community to the Western Sahara has changed significantly over the past three decades. Although the UN considers the Polisario Front to be a form of legitimate representation of the Sahrawi people, it has not officially recognized the SADR as a sovereign state. The SADR does, however, have membership in the African Union as part of the latter's commitment to maintaining peace.

In an attempt to facilitate the resolution of the dispute, Morocco submitted the "initiative for negotiating an autonomy statute for the Sahara region"¹⁵, also referred to as the Autonomy Plan, to the UN Security Council in 2007. This plan proposes a long-term solution to the conflict as part of which Morocco would establish sovereignty over the Western Sahara and grant the Sahrawi people autonomous status with the right to form their own government through democratic elections based on the principle of self-determination,

¹¹ Bennis, S. (2024). "Algeria's Morocco obsession has killed reconciliation prospects", *Atlantic Council*, 6 June 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/algeria-morocco-reconciliation-western-sahara-sahrawi-polisario-front/>.

¹² Royal Historical Society (2023). "Anti-communism in Britain during the early Cold War", 13 April 2023, retrieved from: <https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2023/04/13/anti-communism-in-britain-during-the-early-cold-war-a-very-british-witch-hunt/>.

¹³ Burke, J. (2022). 'Secret British 'black propaganda' campaign targeted cold war enemies', *The Guardian*, 14 May 2022, retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/14/secret-british-black-propaganda-campaign-targeted-cold-war-enemies-information-research-department#:~:text=The%20British%20government%20ran%20a,reinforcing%20anti%2Dcommunist%20ideas%2C%20newly.>

¹⁴ MINURSO (2024). "Ceasefire Monitoring", retrieved from: <https://minurso.unmissions.org/ceasefire-monitoring>.

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council (2007). "Letter dated 11 April 2007 from the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council", 13 April 2007, retrieved from: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/MINURSO%20S2007206.pdf>.

appeasing critics arguing that Moroccan sovereignty could not guarantee the latter.¹⁶ This plan proposes a long-term solution to the conflict as part of which Morocco would establish sovereignty over the Western Sahara and grant the Sahrawi people autonomous status and the right to form their own government through democratic elections.

The proposal enjoys widespread support among member countries of the African Union and the Arab League, as well as from notable European Union member states, including Spain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. More than 71 of the 193 UN member states expressed support for the Autonomy Plan in total.¹⁷ 18 28 countries have already established consulates in the territory.¹⁹ Importantly, the plan is also supported by the U.S. since 2020, when the Trump administration recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara in the context of facilitating a normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel under the Abraham Accords. Notwithstanding, over 40 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America continue to support the SADR's sovereignty over the territory, including some of Morocco's North African neighbours, Algeria and Libya, in addition to Mauritania.²⁰

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, described the Western Sahara conflict as the oldest unresolved conflict on the continent.²¹ The statement is technically not true as the ongoing conflict in Katanga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo dates back to 1963, but the comment underscores the continued relevance of the dispute for African decisionmakers.

With few options and still heavily armed, the Polisario resumed armed conflict in 2020, after 29 years of ceasefire. Prior to the resumption of the conflict a United Nations report had warned of differences “observed between the order of battle and the number of heavy weapons held by Frente Polisario units in Agwanit, Bir Lahlou and Tifariti.”²² 23 Requests by MINURSO to remove them from the restricted area remained unaddressed.

The Western Sahara continues to be divided between the SADR and Morocco, separated by the so-called “Berm” militarised boundary line. The Moroccan government administers the territory as the primary provider of employment, social spending, and infrastructure development.²⁴ On the other hand, Algeria has allegedly hosted more than 173,000 refugees in five camps near Tindouf in the west of the country since as early as the outbreak of the

¹⁶ Laadam, J. (2024). “The Autonomy Plan: Is it the Endgame for the Moroccan Sahara?”, *Modern Diplomacy*, 18 June 2024, retrieved from: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/06/18/the-autonomy-plan-is-it-the-endgame-for-the-moroccan-sahara/>.

¹⁷ Weller. “Western Sahara and the Falkland Islands”.

¹⁸ Simpara, M. (2024). “Cote d’Ivoire Backs Morocco’s Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara”, *Morocco World News*, 19 June 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.morocccoworldnews.com/2024/06/363317/cote-divoire-backs-moroccos-autonomy-plan-for-western-sahara>.

¹⁹ United Nations (2023). “Petitioners lay out opposing visions of Western Sahara as Fourth Committee Decolonization Debate Continues”, 4 October 2023, retrieved from: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/gaspd777.doc.htm>.

²⁰ Iratni, B. (2018). “The Arab League and the Western Sahara Conflict: The Politics of a sheer neglect”, *Africana Studia*, No.29, 2018.

²¹ Hammond, J. (2020). “Polisario Front Renews War in Western Sahara”, *Small Wars Journal*, 21 November 2020, retrieved from: [Polisario Front Renews War in Western Sahara | Small Wars Journal](https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/polisario-front-renews-war-western-sahara).

²² Hammond, J. (2020). “Polisario Front Renews War in Western Sahara”, *Small Wars Journal*, 21 November 2020, retrieved from: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/polisario-front-renews-war-western-sahara>.

²³ UN Security Council (2019). “Situation Concerning Western Sahara”, 2 October 2019, retrieved from: https://minurso.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_english.pdf.

²⁴ Euractiv (2018). “Morocco pushes development in disputed Western Sahara”, 8 November 2018, retrieved from: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/morocco-pushes-development-in-disputed-western-sahara/>.

conflict between the Polisario and Morocco, although the exact number of refugees in the camps is difficult to assess as the Polisario Front and Algeria have resisted requests made by UN agencies to conduct a census.²⁵ The total number of refugees might be significantly smaller, as Moroccan authorities repeatedly pointed out. Under the Polisario's administrative responsibility, the UN has warned about the harsh conditions facing people in the camps, categorising them to be in need of constant humanitarian aid.²⁶ Based on recent estimates, 88% of those in the camps are at risk of food insecurity while a third of them live without any source of income.²⁷ The vast but mostly desert-covered area is c. 9% larger than the United Kingdom with a population of 598,000 people,²⁸ 200,000 of whom are estimated to be Sahrawi. The Western Sahara's Atlantic coastline stretches for 1110 kilometres (690 miles).

In light of the continued disputed legal status of the Western Sahara, despite recognition already afforded by many of the UK's strategic allies including the United States, and the security risks emanating from the territory, it is important for UK and Western policymakers to support initiatives that are capable of stabilizing and eventually resolving the conflict. Morocco's Autonomy Plan remains the most tangible and realistic proposal to date to bring stability back to the Western Sahara. The UK's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory would provide further much needed legitimacy of this plan, but would also further UK strategic interests in the region and globally as will be elaborated upon in this paper.

²⁵ United Nations Security Council (2022). "Resolution 2654 (2022)", 27 October 2022, retrieved from: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_RES_2654.pdf.

²⁶ United Nations (2024). "After 50 years, refugees from Western Sahara are still in camps", 12 March 2024, retrieved from: <https://unric.org/en/far-from-the-headlines-after-50-years-refugees-from-western-sahara-are-still-in-camps/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Worldometer (2024). "Western Sahara Population", retrieved from: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/western-sahara-population/#:~:text=Western%20Sahara%202023%20population%20is,of%20the%20total%20world%20population>.

Figure 1: Map of Western Sahara and surrounding territories



Source: UNMAS

UK Foreign Policy Priorities in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Western Sahara

British–Moroccan relations stretch back centuries. It is worth noting that from 1661–1684, Tangiers was an English colony. This and other historical ties between the two countries could justify Morocco’s interest in seeking membership of the Commonwealth of Nations, but no official declarations have been made to this effect, despite the fact that neighbouring Algeria already applied to join the grouping.²⁹

Today, shared values and principles between the United Kingdom and Morocco serve as the bedrock of the longstanding alliance between the two countries. A strong tradition of constitutional parliamentary monarchy and the constitutionally protected freedom of religion are prime examples of the above. Although the Moroccan constitution vests more power in the monarch than what is practised in the UK—including the power to propose legislation and exercise command over the country’s armed forces—Morocco’s dedication to liberal values is exemplary within its geographical context.

The 2011 Arab Spring toppled regimes and sparked chaotic transitions in many countries. In Morocco, the protests saw the implementation of a successful reform program driven from within by the King—a veritable White Revolution. Morocco continues to implement ambitious governance reforms in order to modernize its public sector to this day.

Morocco's Autonomy Plan

Democratic standards and progressive values are also key to Morocco’s Autonomy Plan for the Western Sahara, which envisions the establishment of a “modern, democratic society, based on the rule of law, collective and individual freedoms, and economic and social development.”³⁰ The 35-point plan provides for the political empowerment of the Sahara autonomous region via its own governing bodies, including a Parliament, Government, Courts and a High Regional Court, and an Economic and Social Council. To safeguard and guarantee the autonomy of these bodies, an autonomy statute would be incorporated into the Moroccan Constitution. In the framework of the Autonomy Plan, the populations of the region would enjoy executive powers over local administration; a local police force and jurisdictions, the region's budget, taxation and public utilities; the region's social sector, including education, healthcare, employment, and social security; as well as economic development and planning, investment, trade, industry, tourism and agriculture. The Moroccan state would allocate a share of proceeds from the exploitation of natural resources located in the region.

The Autonomy Plan proposes the approval of its own provisions through a free referendum for the self-determination of the Sahrawi people³¹, in compliance with the Charter of the United Nations, and the resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council

²⁹ Massiah, A. (2012). “Commonwealth of Nations: ‘The Club of the 21st Century’”, 12 March 2012, retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-17283505>.

³⁰ United Nations Security Council (2007). “Letter dated 11 April 2007 from the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council”, retrieved from: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/597424?ln=en&v=pdf>.

³¹ Ibid.

relevant in the matter. Indeed, the contents of the Plan would be subject to negotiations with the populations of the region.

A notable component of the Autonomy Plan concerns the repatriation of people originally from and currently living outside the Western Sahara. The Plan proposes blanket amnesty to and assistance with the repatriation, demobilisation and disarmament of currently armed groups wishing to return to the territory.

UK governments have neither expressed interest in officially recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara nor endorsed Morocco's 2007 Autonomy Plan, despite the fact that the provisions of the latter are in full compliance with the UK's declared policy position of supporting "UN-led efforts to achieve a lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara."³² This is in addition to the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara and/or support for Morocco's Autonomy Plan by some of the UK's most important strategic allies, including the United States, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and Israel.

Widening the scope of analysis, the North Africa and Sahel regions were referenced as the UK's third geographic priority in the Integrated Review Refresh published in 2023. This foreign policy strategy document placed emphasis on the UK's wider neighbourhood, "where developments have direct consequences for our home region, from migratory flows to transnational security threats [...] and where there is significant competition for influence in the context of geopolitical shifts."³³

In this context, the Abraham Accords is directly relevant as a geopolitically ambitious plan to plant the seeds of long-lasting peace in the Middle East by normalising relations between Israel and Arab-majority states that formerly had no official ties with the Jewish State. Launched by U.S. President Donald Trump's administration in 2020, Morocco's inclusion in the Abraham Accords was important not only because of the country's long history of its Jewish minority³⁴, but also its outsized role in the politics of the Mediterranean Basin, the African Union, and beyond. Moroccans represent an influential diaspora in many European countries as well, particularly in France.

Participation in the Abraham Accords set Morocco aside from the majority of its allies in the Arab League—who have officially resisted calls to negotiate and establish diplomatic ties

³² Gov.uk (2024). "Western Sahara and the UK: Our Mission", retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/world/western-sahara/news#:~:text=We%20support%20the%20UN%20led,the%20British%20Embassy%20in%20Rabat>.

³³ HM Government (2023). "Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world", March 2023, retrieved from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf.

³⁴ Boudra, M. (2022). "Morocco is building bridges to connect its youth with its Moroccan Jewish cultural heritage", *Atlantic Council*, 2 December 2022, retrieved from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/morocco-is-building-bridges-to-connect-its-youth-with-its-moroccan-jewish-cultural-heritage-heres-how/>.

with Israel since the 1967 Khartoum Declaration³⁵—but granted Rabat U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara.³⁶

The UK government has endorsed the Abraham Accords and committed to working with Israel “to both deepen and expand these developments”³⁷, guided by the assessment that peace between Israel and a growing number of Arab states will also facilitate the negotiation of a long-lasting peace agreement between Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, expected to reverberate across the entire Middle East and North Africa region.

UK foreign policy goals of making “deep and abiding contributions to regional security through diplomacy and security cooperation”³⁸ would benefit from a more integrated approach towards policy issues aimed at fostering peace and international development in the Middle East and North Africa region. Closer cooperation between the UK and its key regional allies, including Morocco, should be a key part of this strategy.

Countering Russian Influence in North Africa and the Sahel

Russia’s expanding sphere of influence in North Africa and the Sahel should be taken seriously by London. By means of a longstanding partnership with Algeria that involves trade, energy collaboration as well as military cooperation, an indirect Russian presence on the Western Sahara’s eastern border reaches back to the 1960s. In the militarily sphere, bilateral ties between Algeria and Russia reach beyond joint training exercises. Russia has supplied Algeria’s military with an estimate of nearly 70% of its modern military equipment between 2018 and 2022³⁹ and has been a key ally of Algeria for decades. Its relationship with Morocco is of more recent vintage and carefully limited.

Russia has found other friends in the region, notably Libya’s east-based Libyan National Army (LNA) and its chief, General Khalifa Haftar, who close in on a ‘defence agreement’⁴⁰ with PMC Wagner, Russia’s state-sponsored private military group. Russia was eager to capitalize on Libya’s internal insecurity in the wake of its civil war following the fall of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in 2011. Losing out on billions of dollars of arms export contracts, Russia and the Wagner Group were quick to move to bolster Haftar in his fight against the Government of National Accord (GNA)⁴¹, Libya’s UN-recognized government. Wagner continues to keep bases and troops inside Libya to further Russian interests in the region.

³⁵ Masters, J. and Sergie, M.A. (2023). “The Arab League”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 May 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/arab-league>.

³⁶ U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Morocco (2020). “Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara”, 10 December 2020, retrieved from: <https://ma.usembassy.gov/proclamation-on-recognizing-the-sovereignty-of-the-kingdom-of-morocco-over-the-western-sahara/>.

³⁷ Brown, T. (2023). “Abraham Accords: UK government policy”, *House of Lords Library*, 5 September 2023, retrieved from: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/abraham-accords-uk-government-policy/>.

³⁸ HM Government. “Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world”.

³⁹ Middle East Council on Global Affairs (2024). “Algerian-Russian Relations: Military Cooperation”, January 2024, retrieved from: <https://mecouncil.org/publication/algerian-russian-relations-military-cooperation/>.

⁴⁰ Bobin, F. (2023). “Libya: The security relationship between Khalifa Haftar and Moscow is intensifying”, *Le Monde*, 11 October 2023, retrieved from: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/11/libya-the-security-relationship-between-khalifa-haftar-and-moscow-is-intensifying_6162923_124.html.

⁴¹ Center for Strategic and International Studies (2020). “Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya”, 23 September 2020, retrieved from: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya>.

Moscow's sphere of influence also extends to the Sahel region through the Wagner Group and similar Russia-backed mercenaries operating in Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso.⁴² Russia's interests, in the region are fourfold: supporting pro-Russian leaders to establish long-lasting relationships and lessen U.S./Western influence, establish economic collaboration to strengthen the Russian economy, expand its military (primarily naval) reach beyond the Black Sea, and assert and enhance its own identity as a global political superpower.⁴³ Russian involvement in North Africa and the Sahel poses a challenge to UK and Western interests in a region important across a variety of domains, including energy, security, and migration [please find more details on this in the following sections of the paper]. Indeed, for the Trump Administration, the Abraham Accords were not aimed solely at fostering peace in the broader region but also at keeping creeping Russian influence at bay.

Russia is also eyeing natural resources found in North Africa and the Sahel, the Western Sahara being no exception. Past examples demonstrate that Moscow will not shy away from extracting resources unlawfully. The Wagner Group has gained control over Libyan oil fields in exchange for military support to the Libyan National Army (LNA).⁴⁴ The Western Sahara is home to notable phosphate reserves, but their significant size has so far proven to be somewhat of a Saharan illusion. According to a KPMG report conducted on behalf of mining company Phosboucraa in 2021⁴⁵, a total of approximately 1,300 million cubic metres (or 2.3 billion metric tons) of phosphate are economically recoverable at present at the Bou Craa mine (Figure 1).⁴⁶ Morocco is currently registered as the largest owner of phosphate reserves in the world, amounting to a staggering 50 billion tons.⁴⁷ In comparison to these large reserves, Morocco's yearly phosphate production is relatively more modest, but still the second-largest in the world. Notwithstanding the report from Bou Craa, it is likely that the overall mineral potential of the Western Sahara remains under-surveyed. In light of the wide variety of applications of phosphate in the agricultural, industrial, and food production sectors—critical in sustaining Russia's economy—the Western Sahara and its future is certainly on Moscow's radar.

Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean

Morocco is and should continue to remain a key partner to the UK and its Western allies in the security realm, particularly with regard to military cooperation and counterterrorism. A close relationship between the Moroccan monarchy and the United Kingdom and United States dates back to World War II.

⁴² Melville, A. (2024). "Russia Exploits Western Vacuum in Africa's Sahel Region", *Defense and Security Monitor*, 22 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/2024/04/22/russia-exploits-western-vacuum-in-africas-sahel-region/>.

⁴³ Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya".

⁴⁴ Unlacke, R. (2022). "Libya Could Be Putin's Trump Card", *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2022, retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/08/wagner-group-libya-oil-russia-war/>.

⁴⁵ KPMG (2021). "Phosboucraa Key Findings Document", December 2021.

⁴⁶ Western Sahara Resource Watch (2023). "The conflict phosphates – four decades of plunder", 11 May 2023, retrieved from: <https://wsrw.org/en/news/the-phosphate-exports>.

⁴⁷ Statista (2023). "Reserves of phosphate rock worldwide in 2023, by country", retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/681747/phosphate-rock-reserves-by-country/#:~:text=As%20of%202023%2C%20there%20were,approximately%2074%20billion%20metric%20tons>.

Today Morocco invests significantly⁴⁸ in the modernization of its military⁴⁹ using Western-produced armaments. With its ever-expanding fleet of F-16 fighter jets, Apache helicopters, and a range of Israeli and Turkish drones, Morocco is a regular participant in international peacekeeping missions. Besides ongoing on-the-ground operations in the Central African Republic and a peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)⁵⁰, Morocco has taken part in anti-Islamic State (IS) missions in Syria since 2014⁵¹ as part of the Global Coalition, as well as anti-Houthi airstrike operations in Yemen between 2015 and 2019⁵² as part of the Saudi-led operations. These operations are, in many ways, echoes of Morocco's involvement in the Shaba II conflict in then Zaire (today's DRC), fighting a Katangese separatist militia that attempted to achieve the secession of Shaba province from Zaire.

Morocco and the UK have also engaged in joint military training exercises, the recent example of which is Exercise 'Jebel Sahara', which took place in central Morocco in 2022.⁵³ The exercise was primarily aimed at Morocco's sharing of military expertise with the UK on operations in desert-like terrains. The fact that Morocco's military equipment is so explicitly acquired through Western-based manufacturing companies (with a recent arms deal concluded with the U.S. in the value of 500 million USD⁵⁴, or 394 million GBP, in 2023) shows the country's commitment to its long-term alliance with the United States, Europe and—more recently—Israel. This approach stands in stark contrast to those of Algeria and Libya, which to a great extent rely on Russian backing in the acquisition of military equipment⁵⁵ as well as personnel⁵⁶ (the latter often indirectly through the aforementioned Wagner PMC or other mercenary groups).

Morocco is at the forefront of counterterrorism efforts in North Africa. As a founding member of the multilateral Global Counterterrorism Forum (CGTF), a member of the U.S.-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), and participant state in the EU-African dialogue framework called the Rabat Process, in addition to UN and African Union counterterrorism frameworks, Morocco is actively engaged in eliminating violent extremism and terrorism. In an operation spanning the entire country in July 2023, Moroccan authorities arrested nearly 50 individuals suspected of supporting jihadist groups

⁴⁸ Cogbill, J.B. (2019). "Morocco as Exemplar for U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy", *America First ≠ America Alone*, retrieved from: https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-95/jfq-95_54-57_Cogbill.pdf.

⁴⁹ Simpara, M. (2023). "Record Defence Deals Boost Moroccan Military's Capabilities", *Morocco World News*, 12 December 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2023/12/359496/record-defence-deals-boost-moroccan-militarys-capabilities>.

⁵⁰ Rahhali, L. (2022). "UN Praises Morocco's Efforts in Peacekeeping in Congo", *Morocco World News*, 27 May 2022, retrieved from: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/05/349347/un-praises-moroccos-efforts-in-peacekeeping-in-congo>.

⁵¹ Cogbill, J.B. "Morocco as Exemplar for U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy".

⁵² Reuters (2015). "Morocco backs Saudi Coalition in Yemen", 27 March 2015, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN0MN19I/>.

⁵³ Kasraoui, S. (2022). "Morocco, UK Armies Hold Joint 'Jebel Sahara' Military Exercise", *Morocco World News*, 11 November 2022, retrieved from: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/11/352337/morocco-uk-armies-hold-joint-jebel-sahara-military-exercise>.

⁵⁴ Reuters (2023). "U.S. approves potential sale of HIMARS rockets to Morocco for estimated \$524.2 mln", 12 April 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-approves-potential-sale-himars-rockets-morocco-estimated-5242-mln-2023-04-12/>.

⁵⁵ Dworkin, A. (2022). "North Africa Standoff: How the Western Sahara conflict is fuelling new tensions between Morocco and Algeria", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 April 2022, retrieved from: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/north-african-standoff-how-the-western-sahara-conflict-is-fuelling-new-tensions-between-morocco-and-algeria/>.

⁵⁶ Inwood, J. and Tacchi, J. (2024). "Wagner in Africa: How the Russian mercenary group has rebranded", *BBC News*, 20 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-68322230>.

and terrorist organizations⁵⁷, many of which could be closely linked to the Polisario Front.⁵⁸ In 2022, the European Commission considered evidence that the Polisario was fostering close ties with terrorist groups, supplying them with weapons and fuel.⁵⁹ In 2018, the overt cooperation between the Polisario and Lebanon-based Hezbollah were also revealed, prompting Morocco to sever diplomatic ties with Iran.⁶⁰ Iran's broader strategy of multiple African military groups to transfer arms to Yemen's Houthis via Somalia and ship kamikaze drones to the Polisario rang alarm bells among foreign ministers of Arab League member states too.

Morocco's armed forces stand as the seventh largest in the MENA region in terms of personnel⁶¹, slightly behind Algeria. Egypt in which the military is also heavily involved in the economy tops that list. This includes nearly 250,000 troops, divided between the Royal Army, Royal Guard, Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, and the Royal Gendarmerie. Morocco's strong position on the African continent in terms of military capabilities and counter-terrorism has granted it the position of Presidency of the African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC).⁶² Following previous stints on the PSC, including two earlier presidencies in 2019 and 2022, Morocco will serve a third term presiding over the council since it rejoined the African Union in 2017. In a time that is characterized by conflicts in and around the European continent, as well as by international terrorism, the importance of fostering strong and friendly relationships with reliable allies outside of Europe cannot be overstated. Morocco's influence in North Africa and the Sahel regions in this area is of significant strategic value to the United Kingdom.

Morocco calls for international attention to the destabilizing effect that the Polisario's presence in the Western Sahara has had over the years, emphasizing the militia's ties with terrorist organizations. Because of this connection too, expertise in counter-terrorism is an absolute prerequisite for restoring stability to the Western Sahara.

Migration Management Between Africa and Europe

Morocco is an important partner in mitigating migratory pressure and countering illegal migration from the African continent to Europe. In 2023 alone, Moroccan authorities stopped approximately 87,000 individuals from illegally migrating to the European

⁵⁷ Africanews (2022). "Morocco: nearly 50 suspected supporters of jihadist groups arrested", 27 July 2022, retrieved from: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/27/morocco-nearly-50-suspected-supporters-of-jihadist-groups-arrested/>.

⁵⁸ European Parliament (2022). "Links between Polisario and terrorist groups in the Sahel and Sahara", 5 December 2012, retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-003923_EN.html.

⁵⁹ European Commission (2022). "Links between Polisario and terrorist groups in the Sahel and Sahara", 5 December 2022, retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-003923_EN.html#:~:text=These%20links%20between%20Polisario%20and,Sahrawi%20camps%20controlled%20by%20Polisario.

⁶⁰ Salami, M. "Examining Iran's Geopolitical Goals in the Western Sahara Conflict", *Gulf International Forum*, retrieved from: <https://gulffif.org/examining-irans-geopolitical-goals-in-the-western-sahara-conflict/#:~:text=Their%20direct%20relationship%20appears%20to,and%20provided%20the%20front%20with%20E2%80%A6>.

⁶¹ World Bank Group (2024). "Armed forces personnel, total – Middle East & North Africa", retrieved from: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1?locations=ZO&most_recent_value_desc=true.

⁶² Zouiten, S. (2024). "Morocco Assumes Presidency of African Union Peace, Security Council for 3rd Term", *Morocco World News*, 1 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2024/02/360517/morocco-assumes-presidency-of-african-union-peace-security-council-for-3rd-term>.

continent⁶³; a figure up from just over 70,000 in 2022.⁶⁴ The cooperation between Moroccan and Spanish coast guards managed to reduce the volume of migration by 31% in 2022.⁶⁵ The Moroccan Gendarmerie Royale and the Spanish Guardia Civil have been working together since 2004 and the start of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Morocco created the Migration and Border Surveillance Directorate and the Migration Observatory within its Ministry of Interior in 2014 to bolster its migration mitigation measures. More than 250 trafficking networks were dismantled in the area in 2021 as a result of Moroccan and regional cooperation efforts.⁶⁶

Due to its geographical position, Morocco's efforts against illegal migration span both the Western Mediterranean Route and the Western African Route⁶⁷ (West Africa to the Spanish Canary Islands). The Western African Route is gaining in popularity.⁶⁸ January 2024 alone saw more migrant arrivals to the Canary Islands than the entire first half of 2023⁶⁹, following an already notable increase in the traffic of this route by 161% between 2022 and 2023 (Figure 3).⁷⁰ In this regard, Morocco distinguishes itself from other states in the MENA region, many of which are to various degrees involved in (bilateral) agreements with European states to reduce migration solely over the Mediterranean.

As opposed to serving as a transit country on the abovementioned migratory routes, Moroccan policies have aimed to transform the country's legal landscape to transform it into an appealing destination country for some migrants, contributing to the socio-economic development of the region. The National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum has provided over 45,000 migrants with residence permits and access to healthcare, education and labour market integration services.⁷¹

The case of Libya illustrates the importance of controlling illegal migration to Europe, as its authorities have failed to mitigate it. The lack of capacity of the Libyan government to do so has resulted in the country remaining as one of the most popular departing points for migrants to cross the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe.⁷² Over 32,000 people cross the

⁶³ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2024). "EU External Partners...", 26 January 2024, retrieved from: <https://ecre.org/eu-external-partners-mass-expulsions-continue-six-months-into-eu-tunisia-deal-morocco-europes-gatekeeper-libya-continues-to-be-hell-f/#:~:text=Morocco%20is%20taking%20the%20role,between%20January%20and%20August%202022.>

⁶⁴ Reuters (2024). "Morocco foils 75,184 illegal migration attempts to Europe in 2023", 23 January 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/morocco-foils-75184-illegal-migration-attempts-europe-2023-2024-01-23/>.

⁶⁵ Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco (2022). "The wave of small boats and uncontrolled migration: A mutually beneficial partnership".

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ European Council (2024). "Migration flows on the Western routes", 11 January 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/western-routes/#mediterranean>.

⁶⁸ ReliefWeb (2024). "West and Central Africa – Irregular Migration Routes to Europe", 21 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/canary-islands-spain/west-and-central-africa-irregular-migration-routes-europe-west-african-atlantic-route-january-december-2023>.

⁶⁹ Euronews (2024). "Canary Islands sees surge of migrant arrivals via West African route", 10 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.euronews.com/2024/04/10/canary-islands-sees-surge-of-migrant-arrivals-via-west-african-route>.

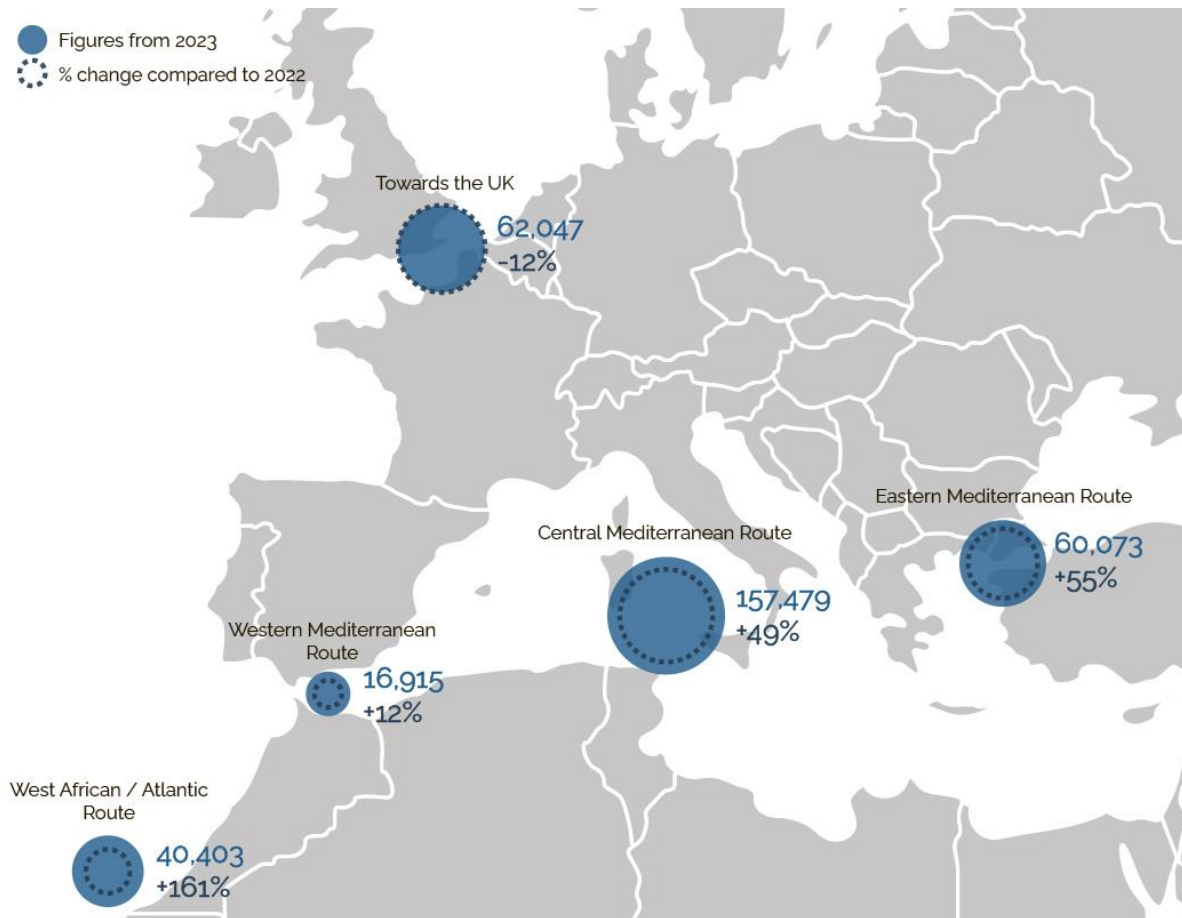
⁷⁰ Frontex (2024). "Significant rise in irregular border crossings in 2023, highest since 2016", 26 January 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/significant-rise-in-irregular-border-crossings-in-2023-highest-since-2016-CogGpm>.

⁷¹ Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco. "The wave of small boats and uncontrolled migration: A mutually beneficial partnership".

⁷² Mohnblatt, D. (2022). "Libya is deadliest launching pad for illegal immigration to Europe", *The Medialine*, 29 November 2022, retrieved from: <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/libya-is-deadliest-launching-pad-for-illegal-immigration-to-europe/>.

Mediterranean each year⁷³, and over 3,000 people ended up drowning in 2023 alone.⁷⁴ Besides, instead of Libya controlling the stream of migrants effectively, European authorities are charged with the task of stopping and returning tens of thousands of migrants each year. In 2023, an estimated 210,000 people attempted to cross the Mediterranean, including migrants and refugees. Considering that the Western Sahara is a common point of departure for migrants who are looking to cross the Atlantic waters to reach European soil, settling legal disputes over the territory is important an important consideration for the UK in addition to its European partners.

Figure 3: Irregular border crossings per migration route in 2023



Source: Frontex

Morocco's will and vigour in countering illegal migration are noteworthy. This includes participation in the Rabat process to continue Euro-African dialogue on migration, participation in the Joint Valletta Action Plan (JVAP), commitment to the UN's Global Compact for Migration (GCM), and several bilateral partnerships with European states like France and Spain to regulate migration. Telling is the fact that the UN's GCM was adopted during a UN conference held in Marrakech, which shows Morocco's commitment to positioning itself—and indeed recognition by the international community—as a leading

⁷³ UNHCR (2021). "Arrivals in Europe from Libya—2021 in Review", *UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe*.

⁷⁴ Medecins Sans Frontieres (2023). "In 2023, 3,041 people died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea", retrieved from: <https://www.msf.org/mediterranean-migration-depth>.

authority when it comes to countering migration by means of international dialogue and policymaking.

Fighting illegal migration goes hand in hand with anti-human trafficking and anti-narcotics efforts. Although some progress is left to be made⁷⁵, the government of Morocco is fighting the former on several fronts. New legislation grants authorities the necessary power to expose and break up criminal human trafficking networks. Morocco, on the other hand, is also increasing its on-the-ground capacities to support such operations. Attesting to the success of these initiatives is that Morocco's National Security Directorate (DGSN) was able to shut down 92 criminal networks⁷⁶ and arrest 566 individuals associated with human trafficking in 2022 alone, in a significant increase compared to the year before.

Morocco has also made significant efforts to combat narcotics trafficking into Europe, a topic which falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Suffice to say the Western Sahara remains a hub for human trafficking and migrant smuggler networks, which thrive in the absence of sovereign authority, and in a vast and sparsely populated territory facilitating illicit operations. Morocco arguably possesses both the political will and the institutional means to address this policy issue in the Western Sahara.

Trade & Economic Development in an Era of Global Britain

As a policy consideration for the longer term, stability in the Western Sahara would provide a number of economic and developmental opportunities, also in line with the UK's trade and international development initiatives.

The trade relationship between the UK and Morocco goes back centuries as mentioned above. Today, it is defined by an association agreement that features negotiated tariffs aimed at increasing the volume of trade between the two countries.⁷⁷ Following Brexit, bilateral trade between the UK and Morocco has increased spectacularly to a total of 3.1 billion GBP in 2022, up from less than half of that in the year before the UK's departure from the EU.⁷⁸ Today one can practically find Moroccan grown produce in nearly every grocery store in the United Kingdom.

According to the OEC, as of early 2024, the UK is Morocco's sixth largest export partner, accounting for 4.06% of the latter's total exports, and 1.75% of total imports.⁷⁹ Vice versa, only 0.26% of the UK's exports are destined for Morocco and only 0.25% of its imports are sourced from the country.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ U.S. Department of State (2023). "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Morocco", retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/morocco/>.

⁷⁶ Kasraoui, S. (2023). "US Report Recognizes Morocco's Efforts Against Human Trafficking", *Morocco World News*, 16 June 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2023/06/355977/us-report-recognizes-moroccos-efforts-against-human-trafficking>.

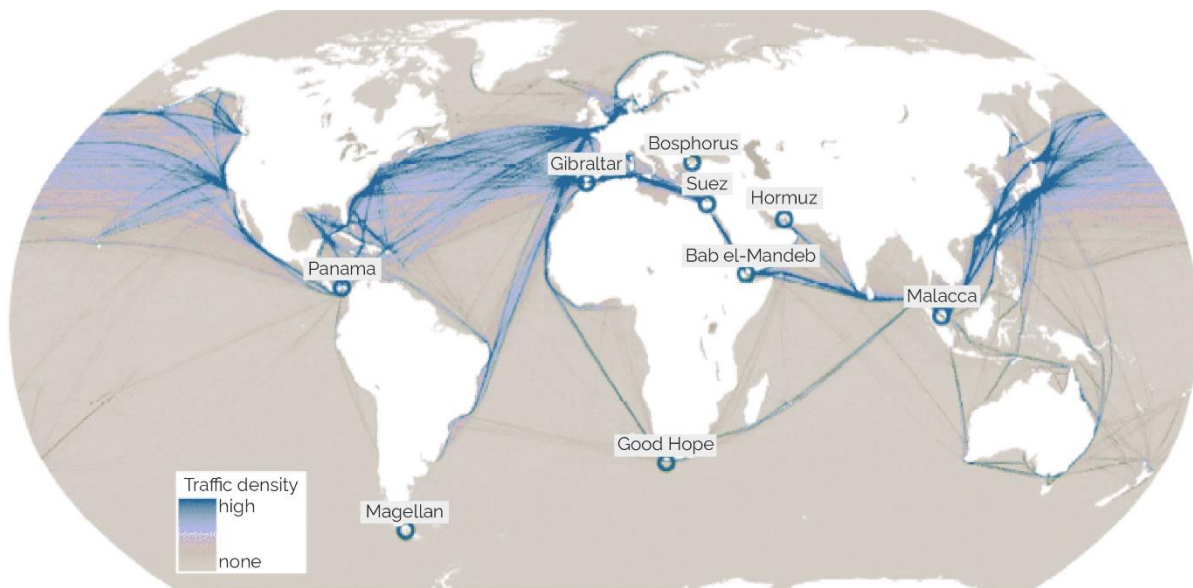
⁷⁷ Gov.uk (2022). "Trade with Morocco", 1 January 2022, retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/summary-of-the-uk-morocco-association-agreement>.

⁷⁸ Duddridge, J. (2023). "Boosting trade with Morocco is a big Brexit benefit", *The House*, 26 July 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/morocco-trade-is-a-big-brexite-benefit>.

⁷⁹ OEC (2022). "Morocco", retrieved from: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/mar>.

⁸⁰ OEC (2022). "United Kingdom", retrieved from: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/gbr>.

Figure 2: Contemporary Global Trade Routes



Source: Sea News

Existing infrastructure such as Africa’s largest port, Tanger Med, can play a crucial role in Morocco serving as a gateway to the African continent in the future. With a booming population and some of the world’s highest economic growth rates⁸¹, as well as the 2018 West Africa Trade Facilitation (TFWA) agreement⁸², which streamlines cross-border trade in West Africa, the economic potential of the region is massive.⁸³ While exports from Africa are projected to rise from their current 645 billion USD (509 billion GBP) to 952 billion USD (751 billion GBP) by 2035⁸⁴, intra-African trade in West Africa is set to have grown by 13.2% by 2035 in the same period⁸⁵, a figure that will likely outperform the global average of 4.2% growth. The construction of various new seaports both within Morocco and a stabilized Western Sahara presents a lucrative economic opportunity.

With the primary seaports in West Africa being located in the Gulf of Guinea⁸⁶, Morocco is aiming to increase its own prominence along a vital international sea trade route (see Figure 2) with its 2030 National Port Strategy.⁸⁷ This initiative attracted a massive 30 billion USD (23 billion GBP) investment from the United Arab Emirates recently.⁸⁸ In addition to this,

⁸¹ IMF (2024). “Real GDP Growth”, retrieved from:

https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD.

⁸² USAID (2023). “West Africa Trade Facilitation (TFWA)”, retrieved from: <https://www.usaid.gov/west-africa-regional/document/west-africa-trade-facilitation-tfwa>.

⁸³ USAID (2024). “Economic Growth and Trade”, retrieved from: <https://www.usaid.gov/west-africa-regional/economic-growth-and-trade>.

⁸⁴ Standard Chartered (2023). “Future of Trade: Africa”, retrieved from: <https://av.sc.com/corp-en/nr/content/docs/SC-Future-of-Trade-Africa.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Thukwana, N. (2023). “Africa’s Exports Could Soar Close to \$1 Trillion Under Trade Deal”, *Bloomberg*, 12 October 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2023-10-12/supply-chain-latest-outlook-for-africa-s-exports-and-trade>.

⁸⁶ Okaform C. (2024). “Top 10 most important seaports in Africa”, *Business Insider Africa*, 4 January 2024, retrieved from: <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/markets/top-10-most-important-seaports-in-africa/yb06boj>.

⁸⁷ ANP (2024). “Port Strategy”, retrieved from: <https://www.anp.org.ma/en/publications/strategieportuaire>.

⁸⁸ Faouzi, A. (2024). “Morocco Attracts \$30 Billion in UAE Investments as Economic Ties Flourish”, *Morocco World News*, 26 March 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2024/03/361622/morocco-attracts-30-billion-in-uae-investments-as-economic-ties-flourish>.

France⁸⁹ and the European Union as a whole⁹⁰ are also getting ready to invest in the region. Although Algeria continues its boycott of Moroccan ports⁹¹, the proposed Port Strategy has even convinced Mauritania, a formal supporter of the SADR's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, to seek road connections and port cooperation with Morocco in 2024.⁹² Other countries in the Sahel convened in Marrakech in late 2023 to discuss Atlantic access for the region through Morocco⁹³, in which Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso have all expressed an interest. The construction of the 1.2 billion USD (947 million GBP) Dhakla Atlantic Port has already commenced⁹⁴ and is expected to be finished by 2028. In combination with significant improvement in road and railway networks, Morocco and the Western Sahara's Atlantic coastlines can become key assets in regional and global supply chains, potentially forming an export hub of the resource-rich region.

⁸⁹ The Arab Weekly (2024). "France to fund Western Sahara projects in sign of closer ties with Morocco", 8 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://theArabweekly.com/france-fund-western-sahara-projects-sign-closer-ties-morocco>.

⁹⁰ Schutte, A. (2024). "EU's Global Gateway keeps focus on investments in Africa", *Science Business*, 1 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/eus-global-gateway-keeps-focus-investments-africa>.

⁹¹ North Africa Post (2024). "Algeria feels impact of its Morocco port boycott", 1 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://northafricapost.com/74927-algeria-feels-impact-of-its-morocco-ports-boycott.html>.

⁹² North Africa Post (2024). "Morocco, Mauritania launch roadmap to bolster cooperation in road & port infrastructure", 21 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://northafricapost.com/75333-morocco-mauritania-launch-roadmap-to-bolster-cooperation-in-road-port-infrastructure.html>.

⁹³ Yade, R. and Bassou, A. (2024). "Behind Morocco's bid to unlock the Sahel", *Atlantic Council*, retrieved from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/behind-moroccos-bid-to-unlock-the-sahel/>.

⁹⁴ Lewis, N. and Prager, J. (2024). "'We're constructing an ecosystem': How a small windy city could become a gateway for trade", *CNN World*, 28 May 2024, retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/world/africa/new-atlantic-port-of-dakhla-africa-trade-spc-intl/index.html>.

Conclusion

The implementation of Morocco's Autonomy Plan for the Western Sahara—the most credible and widely-endorsed proposal for the solution of the legal, political and military impasse that has inflicted the territory for over 50 years—would require sanctioning from the United Nations, but such a prospect appears to be more closely within reach with a growing number of UN member states supporting it. While the UK continues to support the UN General Assembly and the Security Council's decision to extend the mission of MINURSO and the Special Representative's work towards a long-term resolution to the conflict in the Western Sahara, its position on the path forward is consequential. As one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, the UK's endorsement of Morocco's Autonomy Plan would shift the balance to three for (with the United States and France) and two against (Russia and China), with the plausible prospect of influencing additional UN member states so far undecided on the matter to declare their position publicly. The geopolitical circumstances necessary for a shift in tides within the Security Council itself on the matter would serve as the topic of a much-needed and intellectually stimulating policy analysis project.

Geopolitical Risks for the UK

Recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara is, of course, not entirely without certain geopolitical risks. Taking an official stance in favour of Morocco in this longstanding territorial dispute is likely to raise tensions in diplomatic relations with some of the countries devoted to supporting the Polisario Front, including Algeria and Libya's eastern-based authority in North Africa, as well as South Africa. In addition to this, a number of prominent members of the Commonwealth of Nations, including Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania, recognize the SADR. The deeply integrated ties that the UK maintains with the latter⁹⁵ are vital, as they rest on trade and investment relations, as well as notable cultural linkages by means of diaspora communities living in the UK. Notwithstanding, UK support for Morocco's Autonomy Plan is unlikely to upset these long-standing bilateral relationships.

Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Algeria amounts to 2.4 billion GBP, with Algerian export to the UK making up the great majority, c. 2 billion GBP.⁹⁶ Natural gas made up a little more than 10% of the UK's imports from Algeria in 2023. Algerian sources represent a minority of the UK's well-diversified total gas imports from the U.S., Norway, Qatar, Peru, and other states.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Vickers, B. et al. (2023). "Deepening Intra-Commonwealth Trade and Investment between the UK and Africa", *Commonwealth Trade Hot Topics*, 2071-9914, retrieved from: <https://www.thecommonwealth-ilibrary.org/index.php/comsec/catalog/book/1111>.

⁹⁶ UK Department for Business & Trade (2023). "Trade and Investment Factsheets: Algeria", 21 September 2023, retrieved from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1185438/algeria-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-09-21.pdf.

⁹⁷ Heaton, A. (2023). "Natural Gas", *EnergySecurity.gov.uk*, retrieved from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64f1fc589eef2000db7bdd7/DUKES_2023_Chapter_4_Gas.pdf.

Algeria's investment in the territorial dispute is one to monitor as the country's defence budget is consistently growing⁹⁸, while its forces simultaneously perform military exercises with live ammunition near the border with Western Sahara.⁹⁹ As highlighted beforehand, Algeria is backed militarily by Russia, and there is a strong Wagner Group presence in the country.¹⁰⁰ Notwithstanding, with the continuous heavy demands that the war in Ukraine places on the Russian military¹⁰¹, Moscow can reasonably be expected to remain primarily focused on the Eastern European battle arena. In addition to this, the presence of Wagner mercenaries proves to be a double-edged sword for Russia, as Algerian-Russian relations recently became more tense over Algiers' perceptions of the threat to national security that the presence of larger groups of Russia-backed mercenaries in neighbouring Libya present. Algiers repeatedly called for the exit of these armed groups from the country.¹⁰² Without full-on Russian backing, Algeria continues to prefer the diplomatic stage¹⁰³ on which to express its dissatisfaction with the status quo in the Western Sahara dispute. Growing African support for Morocco's presence in the Western Sahara, demonstrated by over 20 African countries opening consulates in the territory since the U.S. recognized Moroccan sovereignty over it¹⁰⁴ further tampers any Algerian inclinations to engage in the dispute militarily.

Summary and Policy Recommendations

This policy brief has provided an overview of the potential short, medium and long-term advantages that the United Kingdom's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara could present. It is clear that Russian influences in the North Africa and Sahel regions have gained in strength, particularly through a strong military partnership with Algeria and the Moscow-backed Wagner Group's presence in Libya. In light of the Western Sahara being naturally endowed with phosphate reserves, Moscow will continue to play a long game to potentially get ahold of these resources. As past examples in the region have shown, Russia will not withhold from unlawful practices to reach such goals. Steps made towards supporting Morocco's establishment of sovereignty over the Western Sahara would allow Morocco to prepare for providing the territory with the necessary security arrangements to these Russian attempts at advancements, which, in turn, would fit into the UK and its Western allies' grand strategic preferences for the region.

⁹⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce (2023). "Algeria – Country Commercial Guide", 31 January 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/algeria-defense>.

⁹⁹ MEMO (2021). "Algeria holds military exercises using live ammunition on borders with Morocco, Western Sahara", 20 January 2021, retrieved from: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210120-algeria-holds-military-exercises-using-live-ammunition-on-borders-with-morocco-western-sahara/>.

¹⁰⁰ The New Arab (2023). "Russian general with Wagner ties reappears in Algeria", 15 September 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.newarab.com/news/russian-general-wagner-ties-reappears-algeria>.

¹⁰¹ Glantz, M. (2024). "Ukraine war takes a toll on Russia", *United States Institute of Peace*, 11 March 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/03/ukraine-war-takes-toll-russia>.

¹⁰² The Arab Weekly (2024). "Algeria hits back at Russia and Turkey by calling for exit of 'mercenaries' from Libya with Mali in mind", 7 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://the arabweekly.com/algeria-hits-back-russia-and-turkey-calling-exit-mercenaries-libya-mali-mind>.

¹⁰³ Africanews (2023). "Algeria, Morocco spar over Western Sahara at UN", 27 September 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/09/27/algeria-morocco-spar-over-western-sahara-at-un/>.

¹⁰⁴ Blenkinsop, P. and Eljehtimi, A. (2021). "EU court annuls EU-Morocco trade deals over Western Sahara consent", *Reuters*, 29 September 2021, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-court-annuls-eu-morocco-trade-deals-over-western-sahara-consent-2021-09-29/>.

The United Kingdom can play an influential role in the international community and as a trusted partner of Morocco in promoting concrete steps that would support Morocco's establishment of sovereignty over the Western Sahara, including but not limited to:

1. Promoting and reaffirming dialogue with the Moroccan government, relevant bodies of the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League on the legal basis for future arrangements relating to the Western Sahara as an integral part of the sovereign state of Morocco.

The UK's public support for Morocco's Autonomy Plan would shift the balance of power within the UN Security Council, potentially prompting a number of additional UN member states to openly endorse the proposal.

2. Facilitating new and bolstering existing policy mechanisms in order to further empower capable authorities that can continue to adequately address irregular migration and its related security issues emanating from the region.

Settling legal disputes and establishing stability in the Western Sahara are vital for mitigating illegal migration from Africa to Europe. With the migration route from the Western Sahara to the Canary Islands becoming increasingly popular, it is important to empower capable authorities that can adequately address these policy issues. Dismantling human trafficking networks is an integral part of this prospect, and something Morocco has proven to be capable of, contrary to other states in North Africa.

3. Commencing and promoting a deeper security cooperation relationship between London and Rabat on issues relevant to the Western Sahara and the broader North Africa region.

Morocco is a significant player in the region when it comes to protecting security. In a North Africa characterized by Russian military involvement in both Algeria and Libya, and a Sahel deeply permeated by Moscow-sponsored mercenary groups, the UK should aim to strengthen ties with Western ally Morocco. Through a wide range of international agreements and policy frameworks, Morocco has demonstrated its commitment to maintaining order in the region, as well as beyond the region's boundaries by participating in international peacekeeping missions. With its prominent military force combined with the diplomatic strides it is making as president of the African Union's Peace and Security Council, Morocco is an essential partner to the UK in the security realm.

4. Encouraging the UK and its partner countries' investment and business partnerships in Western Sahara across a range of sectors.

5. Supporting the economic progress which would follow the establishment of a more integrated Western African region with a focus on the development of Western Saharan infrastructure, aiming to establish a new regional trade hub and offsetting negative foreign influence.

Economic progress would follow the establishment of a more integrated Western African region. The development of Western Saharan infrastructure (particularly of seaports, for which Morocco already presented concrete plans) would establish a new trade hub along a key international maritime trade route, positioning the Western Sahara as an important gateway between Europe, the Atlantic, and the African continent.

6. Developing policies to engage more closely with the Moroccan diaspora in the UK.

The Autonomy Plan and its provisions provide a fast track to securing the human and political rights of the Sahrawi people as well as other peoples living in the Western Sahara. Moroccans, including the diaspora, have been closely involved in facilitating progress towards this outcome.

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